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Revising the Islamic Feminism Thinking Norm on the Boundary of Islam and Modernity: Leila Ahmed's Reading on Islam and its Compatibility with Modern Gender Norms

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Abstract: **The post-colonial conditions provided a good opportunity for Muslim women to shift their strategic position from a unit of analysis for westerners to the agent of active knowledge production. For many, Islamic feminism is considered as an alternative knowledge to bring about an epistemological emancipation from Orientalist ideas. Nevertheless, the present study shows, this is not free of ambiguity and problems. This study focuses on a book entitled *Women and Gender in Islam* by Leila Ahmed (1992) as one of the most influential sources of Islamic feminism, which is considered as an international academic source and is part of the most frequent textbooks in syllabi in American universities for decades Regarding the issue of the current article, that is, the challenges of thinking on the boundary of Islam and modernity for Muslim women, the supremacy of presuppositions and modern gender ideas have been explored in Islamic feminism. This superiority of discourse is to the extent that by using the critical discourse analysis method and understanding intertextual connections with other first-hand Islamic historical and jurisprudential sources, Ahmad's reading can be much distorted. As such, the paper tries to unveil the necessity of re-considering internal ambivalences and discursive complications of the book, considering its logic in approaching early marriage, polygamy, and veiling through Ahmed's creation of complex binaries such as Jahiliah (ignorance) vs. Islam and the Prophet vis-a-vis his female counterparts.**

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism; Islamic Feminism; American Academia; Women and Gender in Islam; Critical Discourse Analysis.

Introduction

One of the most powerful myths that have prevailed since late 20th century has been the realization of the post-colonial world in the aftermath of the eradication of colonialism. This called upon Muslim women, as a historically silenced and marginalized group, to well grasp the 'utopian potentiality' of the present moment (JanMohamed, 1992), as it embraces 'resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, agency' (Appadurai, 1996).

For centuries, Muslim women were put under Western observers' 'gaze' and were represented as submissive to brutal Muslim males: oppressed, backward, childish, yet simultaneously hypocritical and erotic, or in one word, inferior (Weber, 2013).

The immediate function of the post-colonial moment for Muslim women, thus, is to counter this homogenous representation with encouraging Westerners to 'unlearn', to borrow from Spivak (Landry & MacLean, 2013), their 'radically limiting knowledge of Islam (Said, 1996). In other words, the post-colonial Muslim woman calls for her international partners to 'stop pursuing their obsession' with Islam and urges them to respect 'a Muslim woman of substance', as Afzal-Khan argues (2004).

Theorizing Islamic feminism is regarded by many critics as the major embodiment of this alternative Muslim feminism. Islamic feminism is a new school of thought that began to grow in some Islamic countries like Iran and Egypt in the late 1970s with the revival of political Islam. However, it did not become truly recognizable until the 1990s in the United States, where Muslim women scholars living in exile had become its major agents of knowledge production. As Aysha Hidayatullah (2014) argues: 'the structures and trends of US academia … have resulted in somewhat unique opportunities [for Muslim women] to conduct and publish their Qur'anic feminist interpretations'. Margot Badran (2013) confirms this, believing that 'English is the common language of the Islamic feminism'.

Assuming feminism simply as 'ways more favorable to women', as Badran signifies (1995), Islamic feminism is developed to account for Muslim women's needs and wishes in a globalizing social context that is permeated by the demands of a modern secular existence. Islamic feminists have struggled to create a third space with the synthesis between modern and Islamic values and norms, in order to bring reform both within Islam and within the secular arrangements.

Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* is acknowledged as an 'excellent example' of 'path-breaking' work in this regard (Towns,

2016; Hambly, 1998; Roded, 1999). Ahmed is well-known among the pioneers who distinguished between the real, egalitarian message of Islam, and the historical institutionalization of the andocentric laws and outlook in Muslim societies. She puts specific emphasis on the historical phases in which the imported ideologies from different regional geographies such as the Sassanid Empire in Iran or the Abbasid Dynasty in Iraq infected Muslims' interpretations by disseminating negative attitudes toward women, leading to the decline of their social status (Ahmed, 1992). *Women and Gender in Islam* explores Islamic gender politics in its own civilizational context and juxtaposes Arabia after the rise of Islam with its contemporaneous neighboring Byzantine and Sassanid empires in Rome and Iran. It simultaneously sketches new 'civilizational boundaries' to challenge both the colonizer and the colonized, and reconsiders the hierarchies and the ways in which 'boundaries between 'Islam' and 'West' could be outlined' (Ahmed, 1992).

After a quarter of a century, *Women and Gender in Islam* remains highly referred, as the Yale University Press affirms that its

paperback version has been reprinted for the 18th time in February 2017, following its first hardcover publication in 1992 (Personal Communication, September 29th, 2017), and its online downloads render its circulation wider still.

Women and Gender in Islam is still considered an academic textbook that affects new generations of students: exchanges of about 100 emails with professors teaching at the departments of Women's and Gender Studies and Middle Eastern Studies indicates that *it* is among the most widely circulated academic textbooks[1], and is mentioned in more than 50 percent of their syllabi at the top universities in the United States[2].

The present research, extracted from a PhD dissertation, thus, chooses to work on *Women and Gender in Islam* as an academic textbook since they are usually framed as the innocent delivery of facts when actually convey profound ideological differences and politico-cultural orientations. This paper addresses the discursive complexities of border thinking as Ahmed herself lies on the border between Islam and modernity. Assuming that knowledge is situated, the present study

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[1] Including *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* (Badran, 1995); *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Mahmood, 2005); *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Deeb, 2006); *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

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portrays how Ahmed confronts difficulties in order to present a balanced image of an 'ethical' Islam that prioritizes modern gender equality and favors women's full rights and empowerment. It conducts a critical discourse analysis to analyze the major binaries that Ahmed has portrayed between Jahilia (ignorance) vs. Islam and Prophet vs. his wife, verifying their historical probabilities and ideological consequences which sometimes bring the recirculation of Orientalist tropes as an inevitable byproduct.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical position of the present study is in the post-colonial stance of feminism, in particular Islamic feminism. As Leila Ahmed well indicates, the 'centerpiece' of Western (neo) colonial discourse since the 19th century has been the Muslim woman (Ahmed, 1992). The mistreatment of women by the patriarchal and misogynist Islamic culture, then, becomes the best instrument for the West to portray it as an inferior other, a 'special and threatening culture', and 'the most homogenized and the most troubling of the rest' (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

After centuries of silence and ignorance, post-colonial feminism, as a deconstructive strategy and transnational practice of resistance, is theorized as holding the optimistic view of transforming Muslim women's position from entities 'void of agency' and subjects 'without history and content' (Yegenoglu Cited by Eliassi, 2013) to full humans with differences and alternative differential knowledge that would illuminate the people's imaginations.

Islam has been the best starting point that grants Muslim women unique possibilities for constructing a 'territorialized transculture, but also oppositional identity' (Cooke, 2000). Islamic feminism consequently takes the role of that 'in-between stage' or 'hybridized third space', as Shahnaz Khan (2009) calls it, wherein Muslim women were expected to create both a rejection of Western gender dictates and restrictive tradition-bound constructs.

It soon became apparent, however, that the long-lived multiple and heterogeneous structures, be they colonial or local patriarchal, would not simply evaporate with the political or judicial independence of the postcolonial world. Aspiring for liberation, Muslim women, like many other colonized beings, understood that they were 'caught' between binaries such as patriarchy and imperialism, or tradition and modernization (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, et al., 2003). The hybridity and multiplicity they experience, thus, on the one hand,

'(dis)located' in colonial cultures, and on the other, filled with a 'sense of sel[ves]' 'that does not comfortably fit into originary narratives of identity' (Mohanty, et al., 2003).

Islamic feminism, which has taken a vital role as an anti-Orientalist, pedagogical and political project, is no exception to hold such instinctive ambivalence. Living in exile or as converts, as Lila Abu-Lughod indicates, those who write in English and French are particularly 'caught between the sometimes incompatible projects of representing [themselves] as complex agents'. They live in a web of infinite binaries: they struggle to release themselves from the restrictive native structures and advocate their rights at home while they are entrapped in negative and simplistic images that Western missionaries and feminists had already woven (Abu-lughod, 2001).

Islamic feminists question the universality of ideals and desires or declare that progress has no particular trajectory. Simultaneously, many of them suffer a perpetual internal sense of accountability to convince others that 'Islam is not sexist' (Ahmed, 1992), 'Islam is modern' (Deeb, 2006: 30), and that Muslim women are passing 'progressive change over time' toward modern-ness (Ibid).

Modern-ness and its enclosed gender roles and womanhood for this growing number of Islamic feminists is not demarcated in 'points of challenge or rejection' (Ibid); in contrast, it is constructed in 'points of ambivalence and negotiation' (Ibid). They identify their selfhoods in their 'historically and culturally specific' situations when providing sufficient proofs of being modern remains 'prevalent in meaning' (Mahmood, 2005).

To highlight the success of Islamic feminists, they have exposed that 'Other moderns and other pieties remain to be imagined' (Mahmood, 2005: 232); however, they maintain the ultimate and always-present objective of being 'selectively modern' (Deeb, 2006). The present study, then, is concerned with exploring and revealing some underlying aspects and complexities of 'selection' that bring the risk of creating a 'gendered Islam' (Ameli, 2012), that is to say, a mode of thinking of Islam, of evaluating it and of its approach to women, from a modern prism.

Methodologically, the present study uses critical discourse analysis, based on extracting the central signs and major signifiers through which Ahmed presents Islam and its original women-friendly approach. The paper prefers Laclau and Mouffe's conception of 'nodal points' who's specific composition make up 'a knot of definite meanings' (Torfing, 1999). Nodal points are basically the 'partially fixed' and 'privileged signifiers' (Nițoiu & Tomic,

2015) that are extracted and employed here to indicate *Women and Gender in Islam*'s specific ways of argumentation and modes of binary representation.

'Ethical Islam' Vs. 'Pragmatic Islam': Facing Gender Equality

The intersection between feminism and Islam occurs through a serious call for 'a gender-egalitarian, socially-just Islam' (Badran, 2013). Islamic feminist theoreticians normally raise this assumption that Muslim women have changed into modern beings with their emerging 'practical needs' or 'concerns of modern existence' in today's world (Mahmood, 2005). As Ahmed suggests, 'a consciousness of the equality of the sexes' (Ahmed, 1992), then, has appeared among Muslim women that encourages them to dismantle any forms of patriarchal laws and practices.

In crafting of a harmonious link between Islam and modernity, Ahmed refers to primary Islamic sources such as the Quran and hadith besides the Prophet's Sunnah[3], as she finally distinguishes between the two 'in tension' voices of Islam: the 'ethical' egalitarian Islam versus the 'pragmatic' Islam which implies

Muslims' male-dominated culture 'with the hierarchical relation between the sexes' (Ahmed, 1992).

Ethical Islam, for Ahmed, is identified in terms of its 'identicalness' of men and women: she selects the Quranic verses that prove this equivalence such as Sura Al- Nisǎa, Al-Mumtahanah, and Al-Imran. Ahmed also finds the highest manifestations of the sameness and equality in the moral and spiritual qualities of humans (be they male or female) in the Qur'an as it assertively declares:

> For Muslim men and women,- for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise,- for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward (Al-Ahzǎb, 35).

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[3] The Prophet's Sunnah implies his deeds, his own words and consents. Hadith, on the other hand, is the expressive narrative of the aforementioned, that is counted as the principal source of religious laws and moral conduct (Cragg, 2020). For Shia Muslims, however, the Hadith likewise includes the statements of words by the Prophet's household, the Imams and the Prophet's daughter. Therefore, Hadith can be implied as a component of Sunnah, with its further specialized implications (Al-Ameli, 2008).

Gender equality for Ahmed bears a modern implication of sameness and uniformity in all provisions and measures for men and women. Accordingly, the Prophet Muhammad is portrayed (Ahmed, 1992) as either having 'sanctioned' or 'prohibited' some old misogynist practices such as infanticide; as he brought a more 'positive' context toward women in the immediate years after the beginning of his prophethood (1992).

Ahmed's understanding of the rise of Islam and its gender discourse, however, has been developed through a chronology of womanhood between the pre-Islamic era (jahilia) vs. the post-Prophetic one, wherein she voiced her positive impressions on the former's conventions of women's supremacy in family structure and their social participation. *Women and Gender in Islam* makes an attempt for the re-appropriation of religious knowledge and revitalization of the original egalitarian essence of Islam, but, Ahmed's elaboration on masculine viewpoints in early Muslim society with her partial neglect of alternative narratives in classic Muslim historiography, on which we rely in the following sections, can be the subject of re-consideration. Accordingly, Ahmed's portrayal of jahiliah vs. Islam and the Prophet vs. his wife is being examined in a contrapuntal dialogue with other reliable sources in order to serve Islamic feminism,

diversifying its bases of understanding early Islam and its position on women.

Jahilia Vs. Islam: Traveling from Social Inclusion to Isolation

The Prophet (PBUH) is appreciated by Ahmed for his habit 'of listening and giving weight to women's expressed opinions and ideas … concerning matters of spiritual and social import' (Ahmed, 1992). His advent in jahilia Arabia, albeit, does not necessarily represent him as a savior for women: in Ahmed's view, the jahilia had been abundant with choices, occupational opportunities, and socio-political authority for women when the Prophet's 'new order' after the establishment of Islam is depreciated in her analytical reading for depriving women from 'participation' and 'independence' followed by the 'diminution of their liberties' (Ahmed, 1992).

As Ahmed says:

> Jahilia women were priests, soothsayers, prophets, participants in warfare, and nurses on the battlefield. They were fearlessly outspoken, defiant critics of men, authors of satirical verse aimed at formidable male opponents; keepers, in some unclear capacity, of the keys of the holiest shrine in Mecca; rebels and leaders of rebellions that included men; and

individuals who initiated and terminated marriages at will, protested the limits Islam imposed on that freedom, and mingled freely with the men of their society until Islam banned such interaction (Ahmed, 1992).

The recognition of jahilia is based on the assumption of women's full participation and inherently superior lifestyle in typical circumstances such as warfare, religious rituals, and marriage (Ahmed, 1992). This statement, though, stands opposite to major historical records which characterize jahilia with the precise application of androcentrism and explicit misogyny, infanticide, incest, the humiliation of women as potential war slaves, symbols of blame and disgrace, and different forms of economic discriminations like the lack of right to heritage, etc. (Al-Baghdadi, 859 AH/1455; Aloosi al-Baghdadi, 1996; Salim, 2004).

The 'patriarchal, patrilineal, [and] polygynous' family structure had been almost established in Arabia before the advent of Islam (Ahmed, 1992), nevertheless, this is Islam that is criticized for vesting 'the preeminence' 'to paternity' and the male's 'proprietary' rights over female sexuality, body and spirit,

> Islam placed relations between the sexes on a new footing. Implicit in this new order was the male right to control women and to interdict their interactions with other men. Thus the ground was prepared for … women's exclusion from social activities. … their physical seclusion and … submission as a woman's duty (Ahmed, 1992).

Therefore, Ahmed draws the image of Islam somewhere in-between jahilia and modern times. For her, Islam does not bear an essential priority or virtue over these two. Setting Islam aside its previous phase of history, jahilia, Ahmed constructs a legitimate position for Arabia as the focal geography of the rise of Islam. Arabia is recognized by her in terms of the well-treatment of women, their dominance in the family structure and their socio-political role of decision-making. Her approach to jahilia is significant in synthesizing modern ideas in a pre-modern era as her complex binary stands (Figure 1).

Prophet Vs. Aisha: the 'Pragmatic' Islam Reconsidered

Islamic feminism requires an entrance into the hybrid sphere of knowledge production, Al-Fartousi and Mogadime argue, to seize the 'Islamic epistemological foundations' as embedded in the sacred knowledge of the holy Qur'an, the historical narratives of the Prophet's conduct or hadith, and Islamic

jurisprudence (Fiqh) (Mitchell & Moore, 2012).

The child marriage, polygamy and harem, unequal heritage, lack of right to custody and divorce are part of the common concerns Islamic feminists have endeavored to address during their decades of struggle. They move on a borderline when they primarily explore the history of Islam and the Prophet's Sunnah in order to discover the potentials and possibilities of their modernizing. Accordingly, the problem of the spousal relationship between Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and Aisha, despite its undemanding face, can be a typical instance that deserves reconsideration.

Aisha is regarded as a central and prominent historical figure and is referred to by most Islamic feminists as the Prophet's popular wife and Mother of the Faithful. Aisha is taken into consideration as a medium for transmitting 2,210 hadiths while simultaneously serving as a 'political leader' after the Prophet's death (Ahmed, 1992). More importantly, Aisha is represented as an iconic character that as Margot Badran maintains she embodies the 'compatibility of feminism and Islam' for her whole manner of self-expression and much beyond her role as a hadith dispenser (1995).

For Ahmed, Aisha's character, as the prophet's 'undisputed favorite' wife, intersects with specific concepts that are highly contested such as child early marriage, polygamy, seclusion, women's leadership and socio-political participation, and a model of simultaneous piety and reform (1992). Aisha ultimately carries a hybrid identification, or state of being, for Ahmed. Her life story 'encapsulate[s] the kinds of changes that would overtake women in Islamic Arabia': 'she was born to Muslim parents, married Mohammad when she was nine or ten, and soon thereafter, along with co-wives, began to observe the new customs of veiling and seclusion'. She actually 'lived at a moment of transition' (Ahmed, 1992).

Reflecting on Aisha's symbolic capacity, Ahmed formulates her interactions with the Prophet by explaining that her status, in a complex power structure with him, represents the symptom of the absence of the gender equality and the 'crushing limitations' (Ahmed, 1992) imposed on Muslim women after the rise of Islam. The present study accordingly takes into consideration three main criteria Ahmed provides in her book as follows: A) the early marriage, B) polygamy and living in harem, C) veiling and seclusion (Figure 2).

Early Marriage

Early marriage is the first notion with which Aisha is associated. She is pictured as her marriage was utterly administered by her father in accordance with Arab Muslim patriarchy. Her father, Abu Bakr, is introduced as the one who decided that Aisha was to be divorced from her fiancé and married to the Prophet, without considering her consent. Aisha's innocent feeling is animated through storytelling: Ahmed conveys that she was around six years old at the time of her marriage proposal, about which she was not aware of,

> My mother came to me and I was swinging on a swing … She brought me down from the swing, … and led me till we stopped by the door, and I was breathless … She took me in and, the Prophet was sitting on a bed in our house with men and women of the Ansar and she set me on his lap … And the men and women rose immediately and went out, and the Prophet consummated the marriage in our house (Ibn Hanbal, Cited in Ahmed, 1992).

Aisha's portrayal as a playful child is the hub around which her other complicated interactions with the Prophet spoke. It is while many critics believe it would be totally different in terms of reflecting as the negative concept of the 'child' marriage today, while it would not be necessarily considered an 'early' one at the time. Aisha's early marriage and the portrayal of her childish reactions is not isolated in first generation Islamic feminists' narrative as e.g. George Braswell takes the same record in his book *What You Need to Know about Islam and Muslims* (2000: 74) and similarly does Begonius in his book *Hunt for Paradise* (Begonius, 2013: 114).

Meanwhile, the variety of alternative narratives that provide a different image of their marriage is suggested as follows:

Aisha is counted as a reference in describing the lifestyle, e.g. the types of marriage, during jahilia (Ahmed, 1992), and it is assessed that she was born in that era. Historians have estimated her age in comparison with her sister's, Athmặ. The latter, who is recorded as ten years older than Aisha, died in the year 73 AH when she was a hundred years old, meaning she was 27 when she left Mecca for hijrah[4]. Therefore, it is explicitly identified by references such as *Al-Isti'ab fi Ma'rifat al-Ashab* (1412 AH/1992); *Al-Wāfī b-il-Wāfeyāt* (2008, Vol.9) and *Al-Bidayah Wan Nihayah*

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[4] Referring to the migration of the prophet Muhammad and his followers in the year 622 from Mecca to Yathrib, which was later, renamed Medina.

(1408 AH/1988, Vol.8) that Aisha must have been about seventeen years old at the time of hijrah, three years before she got married to the Prophet. Second, it's stated that before the Prophet's proposal, Aisha had been engaged to Jobayr Ibn Mot'am (Ahmed, 1992); thus, based by simple logic, it can be concluded that she could not have been too young and innocent to have a sense of marital relations as judged in Ahmed's record.

Polygamy and Living in Harem

Polygamy and living in a harem are other nodal points that Aisha is identified with. After the unexpected entrance of the Prophet into Aisha's childhood, as Ahmed suggests, her experiences are shaped in a polygamous system. She, however, remained Mohammad's 'undisputed favorite, even when he had added beautiful, sought-after women to his harem' (Ahmed, 1992). This also bears some implications that deserve a delicate inquiry as follows:

First, Aisha is put as an antithesis to Khadijah, symbolizing the post and pre-Islamic episodes of Prophet Mohammad's life. Khadijah enjoyed a number of advantages like 'economic independence', 'marriage to a man many years younger than herself'[5], and

'monogamous marriage' which Ahmed claims, 'all reflects jahilia rather than Islamic practices'. On the contrary, Aisha is regarded in the post-Islamic era when,

> autonomy and monogamy were conspicuously absent in the lives of the women Muhammad married after he became the established prophet and leader of Islam, and the control of women by male guardians and the male prerogative of polygyny were thereafter to become formal features of Islamic marriage (Ahmed, 1992).

Regarding this binary, there are some remarks to raise: a) the collocation of jahilia with monogamy vs. Islam with polygamy is not historically supported. Many historians, Muslims and non-Muslims, consider the 'unlimited polygamy' as an ordinary habit in pre-Islamic Arabia (Nurmila, 2009; Esposito & DeLong-Bas, 2004). b) Moreover, polygamy is not an Islamic invention. Morteza Motahari (1979) maintains that Islam in fact regulated polygamy both in numbers and conditions of marriages.

Second, by setting Khadijah and Aisha on two extreme ends of a spectrum, the book actually compares the Prophet at two very distinct and different times, one before and one

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[5] This also shall be considered with a serious lack of confidence as many early Islamic historians determine her age at the time of marriage with the prophet 25-28 years old which means almost the same age the Prophet himself (Al-Halabi, 1400 AH/1980; Bayhaqi, 1405 AH/1985; Ibn Sa'd, 1990).

after Islam. Ahmed's argument about the Prophet's spiritual experiences and moral constitution in these two stages of development is very complicated. Regarding the Prophet's polygamist way of life after Islam, the foundation of a 'harem' is suggestive of such a paradigm shift: 'the distance appropriate for the wives of the now powerful leader of a new, unambiguously patriarchal society' in order to preserve their purity and honor (Motahari, 1979). However, Ahmed can't expect to have been easily liberated from 'Harem's' multiple colonial paradigmatic stances when using it in the case of the Prophet. As affirmed by Lynne Thornton, 'Harem' as a sexual and erotic motif is 'the best known of all Eastern institutions' for the Western audience (Thornton, 1994) and it embodies the enclosure of the 'enslaved females' (Fedigan, 1982); 'a place of desire' or of 'abstract sensual desire' (Stam & Raengo, 2005) with plenty of attached mythical entertainments.

The variety of works which mirror the same erotic sense of the harem and the playfulness of his spouses in their romantic stories and jealousy against each other with prominence of Aisha in attracting her husband indicate the significance of shedding light on narratives such as Ahmed's. Such pectoral images of the Prophet's so-called harem very much resemble old Orientalist portrayal of the Muslims' sex culture as its continuity is traceable from Mernissi's *The Harem Within* (1994:134), or, Anwar Hekmat's *Women and the Koran: The Status of Women in Islam* (1997, p. 131) to recent productions such as *The Wives of the Prophet* (2006) by Bint Al-Shati, *The Lives of Muhammad* (2014) by Kecia Ali.

What a typical audience of the book is denied is a more coherent schema of the Prophet's life, especially his conjugal life. The Prophet had spent 25 years of his youth in monogamy with Khadijah. His marriages after his first with Khadija, then, occurred after her death, in cases with poor widows with the aim of taking care of their orphans and compensating their lack of social protection, or women from powerful Arab tribes with the intention of preaching Islam. He even married with female slaves to unveil their great humane position (Motahari, 1979; Ibn Hisham, n.d.). Therefore, the Prophet's experience of polygamy seems to have been more of a social mechanism and political strategy for the management of pre-modern Islamic society and spread of the message of Islam.

Third, such characterization of Khadija and Aisha, the Prophet's first and last wives, does not help the English-speaking audience in understanding the truth of the subject matter, Prophet's approach to his wives. Khadijah is portrayed in absolute terms, devoid of any

intrinsic properties or complexity of character, as she only enjoyed the inherent happiness of jahilia. On the contrary, Aisha is made out to be a high positioned, advantaged agent who is appreciated for her socio-political achievements, including her political leadership after the death of the Prophet (Ahmed, 1992). Her beauty and sensual attraction in addition to the intelligence taking her right amidst harem affairs are the attributes that are implicitly grasped by Ahmed (1992). However, Khadijah is historically acknowledged with her material superiority, distinguished sacrifices for Islam, the socio-political role she played in support of Prophet, her material and spiritual capacity that caused the prophet to willfully remain monogamous till the end of her life is neglected in an utter silence (Al-Ghoshayri Nishaburi, 1427 AH/2006, Hadith 2432; Al-Bukhari, 1407 AH/1987, Nishaburi, 1427 AH/2006, Hadith 2432; Al-Bukhari, 1407 AH/ 1987, Hadith 3609 & 38181; Ibn Hanbal, 2008, Hadith 2901).

The views of the Prophet himself also do not corroborate such a dual configuration. Considering how ordinary polygamy was, and keeping in mind the nobility of the Prophet's family that could have facilitated such a practice for him further still, it is never investigated by *Women and Gender in Islam*

what actually caused him to remain dedicated to Khadijah, feeling melancholy over her passing even in the final days of life when he still commemorated her high position. The Prophet, for example, is quoted to have thus described Khadija 'Khadija, and where is the like of Khadija? She acknowledged me when people denied me, aided me in God's religion, and spent all her money [on this way]' (Qomi, 1995). It is while other Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi re-echo Ahmed's outlook on differentiating between Aisha and Khadijah as in her other works, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991) and *Beyond the Veil* (1987), she maintains that Aisha should be the role model for new generations of Muslim women in active self-assertion, comparing Khadijah who symbolizes the self-determination, curtailed by Islam.

Veiling and Seclusion as Isolation

The other distinguishing feature of the Prophet's wife Aisha, in Ahmed's view, is her veiling and seclusion, which lasted until 'sometime after Mohammad's death', when she finally got a 'brief assumption of political leadership' and was granted her deserved position at the reoccurrence of the 'customs of her forebears' (Ahmed, 1992).

Highlighting Arab traditions' compatibility with the modern value of women's leadership, Ahmed's strenuous journey ends up in a

historically problematic situation: the praise of Aisha's taking command at the Battle of al-Jamal (the battle of the Camel), sitting on a camel 'while exhorting the soldiers to fight and directing the battle, like her jahilia forbears' (Ahmed, 1992).

The mentioned battle, however, is one of the most controversial events for Muslim historians, as the earliest field wherein the two armies embroiled in combat were Muslim, and was part of the conflict over the Prophet's succession when the Sunni/Shiite split appeared. Therefore, the prioritization of the element of gender over other elements, such as the political climate and historical evidences, would not necessarily make the researcher capable of making such judgments: it is, at least, legitimately expected to provide a wide spectrum of both schools of thought, the first being the one that appreciates Aisha's political presence and her inner capability of control and guidance (Ibn Hanbal, 2008), and the other which sees the battle in a negative light and consequently interprets her leadership as a form of manipulation, and her a political instrument misused by some Muslim males contesting over power (Al-'Abani, 1415 AH/1995; Shahidi, 1377/1998).

With this assumption that the truth about the battle is not our point of concern, and regardless of the fact that as the book confirms,

Aisha's 'leadership' was an utter failure as the army under her lost against the 'victorious Ali', Ahmed's feminist venture in the realm of history is a case of selecting and underscoring aspects benefiting her object of investigation while ignoring and understating the other ones.

The other blind spot in the historical exploration of women's upper hand by Women and Gender in Islam is identified in terms of putting Aisha in a binary against the male members of the Prophet's household, headed by Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Ali who, according to Sunni references, served Islam as the first to declare his faith immediately after Muhammad's prophethood and as the commander of his army in various battles (Ibn Hanbal, 2008; Ibn Sa'd, 1990), is undermined here in a frequent unfinished quarrel with Aisha (Ahmed, 1992). Therefore, Ali, is represented in various distortions, such as the annihilator of the unity of Muslims by leading the Shi'ite 'opposition movement', and a polygamist with 'nine wives and several concubines', despite alternative narratives stating otherwise (Ahmed, 1992).

The following decades after the Prophet's death, their historical plots, reported scenarios and set of complex interactions amongst diverse actors are basically difficult to grasp and describe. The portrayal of the most controversial character of the era, Ali Ibn Abi

Talib, vis-à-vis polygamy, however, is perplexing, as polygamy, according to Reina Lewis, stands as the 'central theme of Orientalist discourse' that signifies 'a male fantasy of the ownership and control of multiple women and a reason to condemn Islam as heathen and barbaric' (Lewis, 2013). Ahmed's engagement in the history of Islam, be it out of 'a position of faith' or 'a strategic … scholarly position' (Lewis, 2013), lies in her agency to discover Muslim gender norms, their historical contingency and cultural construction. This, though, would not eliminate her academic accountability in grasping identity nuances.

The frequent recycling and the emphasis of other Islamic feminists on the same historical leadership of Aisha as her gender advantage after the Prophet of Islam indicates the significance of such a narration prevalent in modern literature. Fatemeh Mernissi's (1993: 18 & 66) is an instance as she conceives Aisha's leadership as the first embodiment of Muslim women's political action after the Prophet (PBUH) whereas Mernissi stands critical against undermining Aisha's movement and capabilities by critics who acknowledge the Battle as Fitna and downplay the presence of women in power and political leadership. Abdel Hamid Al-Shawaribi (1987: 230-231) refers back to an identical appreciation of

Aisha's political agency, practice of political rights, engagement in public life and high social influence, though he accepts Aisha became regretful for the Battle due to her misjudgment taking one side.

Regarding the historical position of Ali in a gender construct, then, at the minimum two theories can be taken into consideration: first, he remained monogamous until the demise of his first wife, Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, in appreciation of her extraordinary advantages of piety and rationality. As his re-marriages had already been fully described by Muslim scholars as being with the wives of Muslim martyrs, in response to their orphans' lack of social and economic security, and in support of the freedom of female slaves, rather than 'concubines', which again bears a negative connotation in Western Orientalist literature, since these slaves would traditionally be treated as free women right after their marriage (Makarem Shirazi, 1995; Al-Majlesi, 1977). A second narrative is that Ali Ibn Abi Talib wished to remarry during his marriage to Fatima. Nonetheless, he is said to have been forbidden from polygamy by the Prophet, who sided with Fatima as a result of her complaint and sadness (Al-Bukhari, 1407

AH/1987, Vol.3; Ibn Hanbal, 1403 AH/1983, Vol.5)[6].

What makes Islamic feminists like Ahmed's investigation of the roots of misogyny in Muslim societies invaluable is providing 'a new consciousness', 'a new way of thinking' of the history of Islam in terms of 'feminist aspirations and demands' as Mir-hosseini shows (Mir-Hosseini, 2016, p. 70). This new discourse of Islamic feminism owes its authenticity to a rereading and reinterpretation of the first-hand and 'primary' sources (Fidan, 2019) in order to open a new horizon of understanding of the cultural history of early Islam and the necessities of a normal life during that period of time, accompanied by a balanced picture in comparison with the contemporary modern way of life.

Qur'an and hadith, accordingly, are more convenient 'primary' sources than a history with a very diverse number of historians and fundamentally different narratives, based upon then power structures. Therefore, putting these narratives and counter-narratives to grasp the counterpoints, or what Edward Said calls 'contrapuntal reading' (Said, 1994), is an efficient tool for crafting new knowledge, as Islamic feminists intend to. Furthermore, as Roshni Rustomji suggests (2012), for such a high emancipatory objective, it is inevitable for Islamic feminists to put their own narratives against the other's constructed ones, since we are never completely sure of the absolute rupture of the colonial chains of ideas, and our narratives are always at risk of being constructed 'by us around our own- personal or public- histories and experiences of colonialism' (Rustomji, 2012).

Women and Gender in Islam's scrutiny of four decades of the most critical episodes of Islam's history, from the death of the Prophet (11 AH) to the era of his grandson, Hassan Ibn Ali (50 AH), is based on its preponderant

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[6]. The reliability of this narrative, though, is questioned by some historians as follows: 1) According to Ibn Hajar Al-'Asqalani (Al-'Asghalani, 1412 AH/1992, Vol.6), the one and the only original source of this narrative is Miswar Mokhrama who was born in the year 2 AH, and his memory of Ali's proposal is supposed to have occurred in the year 8 AH, implying that he was recounting childhood memories that cannot be sufficiently reliable for scholarly purposes. 2) According to Quran 53 (3), it is confirmed that "Never does he [the Prophet] speak out of his desires [and inclinations]". Therefore, one can simply ask how the Prophet could prohibit the Ali's remarriage, with the excuse being merely his daughter's unhappiness, or his own overflow of anger (which are in contrast with his sacred personality), namely when polygamy was legitimate for other Muslim men. 3) Jowayriyah, Abu Jahl's daughter, whom Miswar claimed was proposed to by Ali, had not converted to Islam until the Conquest of Mecca by the Prophet in the year 8 AH. According to Ibn Sa'd, she then married Attab bin Usayd bin Abi al-Eis bin Umayyah who was assigned by the Prophet to be Mecca's governor (Ibn Sa'd, 1990). They lived together in Mecca until the time of the Prophet's death (Ibn Abd al-Barr Namari Ghortabi, 1412 AH/1992, Vol.3; Mezzi, 1400 AH/1980, Vol.19). The question then surfaces of how Ali, a prominent companion of the Prophet and his son-in-law, could propose to her despite her being married.

source, Nabia Abbott[7]'s *Aishah, the Beloved of Muhammad* (1942), as Scott Meisami (2010) indicates, it 'heavily, and largely uncritically' relies on 'secondary works, many of them classics of Orientalist scholarship such as Nabia Abbott's *'A'isha''*.

Neglecting hundreds of sources of Islamic history and their internal counterpoints has evidently become the reproducer of some stereotypical Orientalist images. A good example is the story of Hassan, the Prophet's grandson, and the tale of his marriage and divorce of 'one hundred women' (Ahmed, 1992). Meanwhile, critics such as Lebanese historian Hashim Ma'rouf argue (Ma'rouf Al-Hasani, 2003, Vol.1) that such anecdotal references were manufactured during the Umayyad (41-132 AH) and Abbasid Caliphates (132-638 AH), who are famous for their age-old enmity against the Prophet's family, and particularly due to the fact that many of the opponents against their repressive dictatorship were of the progeny of Hassan Ibn Ali.

In short, *Women and Gender in Islam* is examined here, in light of its consideration as a valuable and prominent incarnation of the egalitarian message of Islam and gender equality in the Qur'an and Sunnah from a different angle, which implies delving into its framed binaries of jahiliah vs. Islam and the Prophet vs. his female counterparts in particular Aisha. These binaries are indications of a discursive ambivalence and an uncertain stance between Islam and modernity: it drives one to inevitably fall into a comparison between the relative supremacy of modern values and norms, concerning early marriage, polygamy, veiling and seclusion. Ahmed sheds light on a new aspect of gender in the context of early Islam and Arab culture, and as the present study tried to reveal, the way her theorized Islamic feminism can be reconsidered as far as her historical framework and constructed narrative are concerned.

Conclusion

The present study stands at the center of an interactive field of dialogue between Islam and modernity. It concentrates on a pivotal and popular work of Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, as a masterpiece of Islamic feminism that has absorbed American academia with all the extensive international audience it has had for three decades.

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[7] Nabia Abbott is a Christian Arab, born in today's Eastern Turkey, whose entire scholarship, from school to college, was passed at the Isabella Thorbom College for Girls, under the British-administered educational system in India. She then continued her studies in the United States and became the first faculty member of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

Women and Gender in Islam is regarded as a pioneering work whose agency of production stands for a Muslim woman at the postcolonial moment. However, it appears that Ahmed's border-thinking is located in a hybridized genre of multi-layered interactions between binary structures and actors including, but not restricted to, jahilia vs. Islam, pragmatic Islam vs. ethical Islam, Muhammad vs. Prophet Muhammad, Prophet Muhammad vs. Aisha, jahilia Khadijah vs. Muslim Aisha, etc.

For Ahmed, 'ethical Islam' carries the original message of God, such as in Sura Al-Nisăa, Al-Mumtahanah, Al-Ahzăb, and Al-Imran, that entails the essential equality and similarity between men and women. The Prophet is also appreciated for giving a positive status to women and prohibiting some old misogynistic practices such as infanticide.

The portrayal of Islam and the Prophet in *Women and Gender in Islam*, however, is not simply constructive: jahilia is given partial prioritization over Islam, as the latter is suspect of replacing the matrilineal and monogamous family structures with patriarchy and polygamy, men's dominance over female sexuality, and adopting mechanisms of control and seclusion.

Juxtaposing the prophet with his wife, Aisha, is another complex binary that is created in terms of three key notions, including a)

marriage with Aisha in her early years of childhood and despite her being too young to be aware of the spousal matters, b) the imposition on her of living in a 'harem', and c) restricting Aisha by making her wear the veil and socially secluding the talented social and political leader that she is.

Islamic feminists like Ahmed normally criticize the Orientalist representation of Islam, while it remains vague that how they avoid resonating the same discourse of Muslim 'universal patriarchy' simultaneous with employing the same diction and images of the 'harem', polygamy and suppression of Muslim female protagonists who resist and transcend their limitations.

Islamic feminists have no choice but to enter into other realms of knowledge of Islamic fiqh, interpretation and history to re-contextualize them within the modern contemporary understandings of women's rights and empowerment. This study, then, draws narratives from various Islamic sources and histories in order to shed skepticism on the contemporary evaluation of the most critical episodes of Islamic history –the four decades following the death of the Prophet (11 AH). Finding similar traces in other segments of the vast Islamic feminist literature is recommended for further studies to find the complexities of such a discourse and its

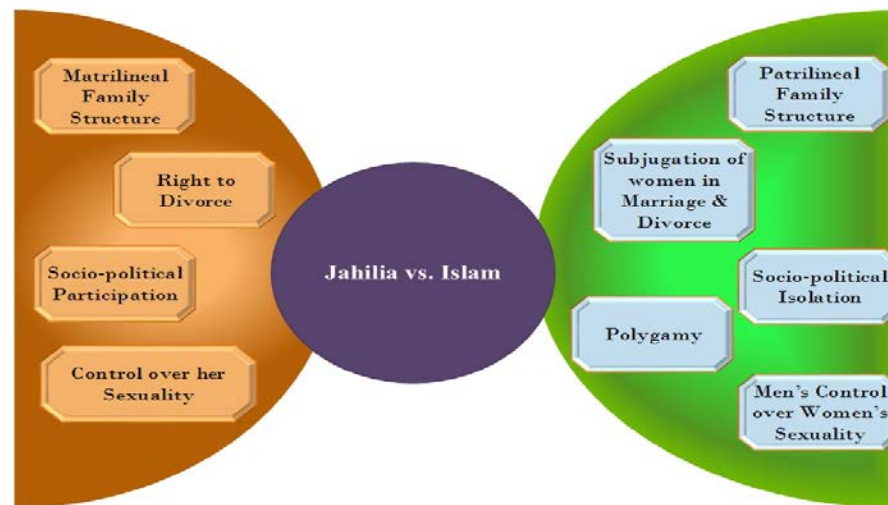discursive challenges vis-a-vis Islamic teachings and modern beneficial gender ideals.
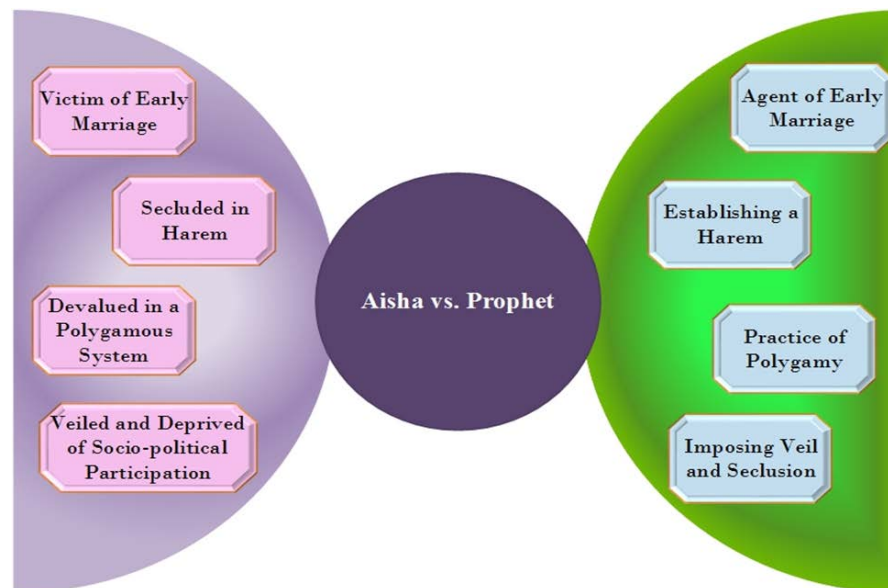

Fig. 1. Binary of Jahilia vs. Islam as Framed by Ahmed

Fig. 2. Aisha vs. the Prophet as Framed by Ahmed

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بازنگری مقوله تفکر فمینیسم اسلامی در مرز اسلام و مدرنیته: خوانش لیلا احمد از اسلام در تطبیق با مقولات جنسیتی مدرن

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چکیده: شرایط پسااستعمار برای زنان مسلمان فرصت خوبی فراهم کرد تا موقعیت استراتژیک خود را از یک واحد تحلیل برای غربیها به عامل تولید دانش فعال درباره خود تغییر دهند. برای بسیاری، فمینیسم اسلامی این دانش جایگزین به حساب می‌آید که توانسته نوعی رهایی معرفت شناختی از انگاره‌های شرق‌شناسانه ایجاد کند. هر چند، چنانکه مطالعه حاضر نشان می‌دهد این امر خالی از ابهام و اشکال نیست. مطالعه حاضر بر کتاب زنان و جنسیت در اسلام نوشته لیلا احمد (۱۹۹۲) به‌عنوان یکی از منابع بسیار اثرگذار فمینیسم اسلامی متمرکز شده است که یک منبع دانشگاهی بین‌المللی به حساب می‌آید و همچنان پس از دهه‌ها در دانشگاه‌های آمریکا از کتب درسی پربسامد در سیلابس‌ها به حساب می‌آید. با عنایت به مسئله مقاله؛ یعنی چالش‌های تفکر در مرز اسلام و مدرنیته برای زنان مسلمان، تفوق پیش‌فرض‌ها و انگاره‌های جنسیتی مدرن در فمینیسم اسلامی مورد کندوکاو قرار گرفته است. این برتری گفتمانی تا حدی است که با استفاده از روش تحلیل گفتمان انتقادی و دریافتن ارتباطات بینامتنی با دیگر منابع تاریخی و فقهی اسلامی دست اول، خوانش احمد می‌تواند بسیار مخدوش باشد. مقاله حاضر، با تصویر دوگانه‌های برساخته احمد اعم از جاهلیت در برابر اسلام و عایشه در برابر پیامبر اسلام (ص)، نحوه خوانش و پردازش مقولات مورد سوال در گفتمان جنسیتی مدرن مانند ازدواج زودهنگام، چند همسری و حجاب را مورد بررسی و تحلیل قرار داده است. این خود گویای ابهام و پیچیدگیهای هویتی و گفتمانی از منظر فمینیسم اسلامی است، به‌ویژه آنکه پژواک روایت احمد در دیگر فمینیست‌های اسلامی نیز مورد تأکید قرار گرفته است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: فمینیسم پسااستعماری، فمینیسم اسلامی، زنان و جنسیت در اسلام، سیاست تولید دانش.