ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER:
BETWEEN LIBERATION AND NON-WESTERN NEOCOLONIAL DOMINATION

by

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(Under the Direction of Christine J. Cuomo)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation critically examines the discourse of Islamic feminism by analyzing its theological, epistemological, and political foundations, ultimately arguing that Islamic feminism operates less as a liberatory feminist project and more as a religious-political ideology complicit in neocolonial domination. While Islamic feminism claims to offer a progressive reinterpretation of Islamic texts to advocate for gender justice, it often relies on patriarchal epistemologies rooted in *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), sharia, and Arabized cultural norms. These frameworks constrain feminist potential by anchoring women's rights in religious doctrine rather than in historical, material, and indigenous epistemologies.

The dissertation is organized into four interrelated papers. The first paper, “What is Islamic Feminism?” critiques Islamic feminism’s foundational premises, questioning its assumptions about identity, morality, and liberation. It challenges the framing of Muslim women's emancipation within an Islamic identity that is itself shaped by postcolonial religious revival movements. The second paper, “Between Scriptural Authority and Gender Equality,”

analyzes feminist *tafsīr*, revealing internal inconsistencies between claims to gender equality and continued reliance on divine authority. This chapter argues that feminist interpretations of the Qur'an remain entrapped in apologetic hermeneutics that limit critical ethical inquiry.

The third paper, "The Epistemology of Modesty," explores how the moral concepts of *ḥayā'* (modesty/shyness) and *taqwā* (fear of God) are instrumentalized in pious female subject formation. Drawing on affect theory and psychology, it argues that these traits are cultivated not as free moral choices, but as affective controls rooted in fear, gender norms, and social coercion. The final paper, "Rethinking Gender Equality in Egypt," proposes an alternative decolonial feminist framework grounded in Egypt's indigenous, pre-Arab, agrarian history. It advances a land-based, eco-agrarian epistemology that challenges both Western liberal feminism and Islamic identity politics, advocating for a historically rooted vision of gender justice.

Collectively, the dissertation calls for a radical epistemic-moral shift beyond religious identity frameworks, urging a feminist politics grounded in land, labor, and historical memory. It critiques both Western and Arabized patriarchies, proposing de-Arabization as a necessary decolonial feminist step in North Africa.

INDEX WORDS:

Islamic feminism, feminist *tafsīr*, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, Gulf politics, *hijab*, fear-based morality, eco-agrarian feminism, Egypt, Islamic revival, cultural imperialism, feminist epistemology.

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Dissertation Introduction

This dissertation presents a comprehensive philosophical and political critique of Islamic feminism, examining its claim to be a liberatory movement within the context of postcolonial, religious, and neocolonial structures. Although Islamic feminism presents itself as a reformist project that reconciles feminist values with Islamic ethics, I argue that it ultimately functions as a religious-political apparatus that reinforces patriarchal authority, suppresses feminist dissent, and sustains neocolonial relationships—particularly through the ideological influence of the Islamic revival movement and the financial-cultural dominance of Gulf states. Rather than seeing Islamic feminism as a progressive force, I demonstrate that it constitutes a form of apologetic feminism whose core epistemic and political commitments undermine the very ideals of gender justice and liberation it purports to uphold.

To support this argument, the dissertation is structured as four interlinked but distinct papers, each addressing a different dimension of the problem. The papers form a cumulative argument, moving from conceptual critique to theological analysis, from moral-psychological evaluation to historical-material alternatives.

The first paper, **"What is Islamic Feminism?"** provides a foundational critique of Islamic feminism as a theoretical and political project. It argues that Islamic feminism is not a genuine feminist movement but rather a religiously framed discourse that rearticulates patriarchal norms through the language of empowerment. The paper identifies two main strategies of Islamic feminism: the use of feminist *tafsīr* to reinterpret Islamic texts in egalitarian terms, and the appeal to women's "free choice" as evidence of agency—even when that choice

reinforces harmful gender norms. Drawing on thinkers like Fatima Seedat, Saba Mahmood, and Asma Barlas, the paper shows how Islamic feminism performs a contradictory balancing act: it mimics liberal feminist ideals while reaffirming religious hierarchies. Politically, it aligns itself with the Islamic revival movement and functions as a vehicle for moral conservatism rather than feminist transformation. Through this dual critique—epistemic and political—I expose Islamic feminism as a strategic apparatus that substitutes theological accommodation for structural change.

Building upon the conceptual tensions revealed in the first chapter, the second paper, **"Between Scriptural Authority and Gender Equality: The Hermeneutical Tensions of Islamic Feminism,"** delves into the internal contradictions of feminist *tafsīr*. Here, I focus on the impossible position Islamic feminism occupies, it must uphold the Qur'an as divinely infallible while simultaneously reinterpreting it to conform to feminist ethics. This paradox renders its hermeneutics selective and incoherent, especially when it attempts to reconcile verses that assert male authority with contemporary ideals of gender equality. I show how Islamic feminism becomes a form of scriptural apologetics, masking contradiction through strategic translation, selective citation, and moral overinterpretation. More dangerously, I argue that this textual strategy is easily co-opted by authoritarian regimes, such as the Egyptian state, where Islamic feminist rhetoric is deployed to offer the illusion of reform while leaving patriarchal structures untouched. In privileging textual reinterpretation over political transformation, Islamic feminism reduces feminism to a symbolic discourse, largely divorced from material outcomes. This chapter thus links theological incoherence with political complicity, further undermining the emancipatory claims of Islamic feminism.

The third paper, **"The Epistemology of Modesty: How Fear-Based Morality Limits Women's Moral Agency,"** shifts focus from textuality to embodiment, analyzing how Islamic feminism internalizes and reproduces moral ideologies that psychologically constrain women. I examine the discourse of *ḥayā'* (modesty) and its ethical justifications within Islamic feminist writings, arguing that modesty is not an expression of moral agency, but a disciplinary mechanism rooted in fear—fear of God, of community judgment, of failing moral expectations. Drawing on feminist ethics, affect theory, and psychological research, I argue that Islamic feminism's embrace of modesty, veiling, and gendered virtue reproduces fear-based moral systems that inhibit autonomous moral reasoning. The *hijab*, in this framework, becomes not just a symbol of faith, but a mechanism of affective regulation that enforces social conformity. While Islamic feminism celebrates such practices as forms of spiritual strength, I argue they often function as emotional technologies of control that displace responsibility for structural injustice onto individual women. This chapter deepens the critique by showing how Islamic feminism not only fails to challenge patriarchal norms but actively reinforces them at the level of moral psychology.

The fourth and final paper, **"Rethinking Gender Equality in Egypt: De-Arabization and Eco-Agrarian Identity as Epistemic-Moral Shifts,"** offers a constructive alternative to both Islamic and secular-liberal feminist frameworks. I argue that a genuine feminist decolonization in Egypt requires an epistemic and moral rupture from the Arabized, revivalist Islamic identity imposed in the postcolonial era. Drawing on historical, anthropological, and ecological sources, I show how Arabization—supported by Gulf-funded religious imperialism—functioned as a neocolonial project that erased Egypt's indigenous agrarian and gender-egalitarian epistemologies. This erasure was not merely cultural but ontological, restructuring

Egyptian identity through the desert-based patriarchal norms of the Islamic revival movement. I propose two epistemic-moral shifts to counter this legacy: first, de-Arabization as a feminist and decolonial practice of recovering Egypt's pluralistic and matrilineal past; second, the reconstruction of a neo-eco-agrarian identity that centers land, labor, and care as the ethical foundations of gender justice. Rather than grounding feminism in scriptural fidelity or liberal individualism, this alternative framework emphasizes ecological survival, historical continuity, and collective autonomy. It redefines liberation not as freedom within religious or cultural boundaries, but as the reclamation of material and epistemic sovereignty.

Together, these four papers dismantle the intellectual and political architecture of Islamic feminism. Rather than asking whether feminism can coexist with Islam, I ask what it costs feminism to be articulated only in religious terms. I argue that Islamic feminism, far from offering a decolonial liberation project, remains deeply entangled in the very patriarchal and neocolonial structures it claims to resist. My alternative vision calls for a feminist praxis grounded not in the politics of scripture or the moralism of modesty, but in history, land, and the lived material realities of women whose freedom can only emerge from breaking epistemic dependency—not reaffirming it

What is Islamic Feminism?

Introduction:

Islamic feminism is often described by its proponents as the foundational feminist project for Muslims and even for non-Muslims, offering a model that claims to integrate Islamic ethics with feminist ideals across both private and public spheres. According to historian Margot Badran, Islamic feminists are those who strive to rescue Muslim women and men from Westernization and simultaneously protect the Qur'an and Hadith from patriarchal misreadings (Badran 2013, 122). This dual mission—preserving religious authenticity while claiming feminist legitimacy—has positioned Islamic feminism as both a moral and intellectual project, promising a "native" alternative to secular feminism. At first glance, the project appears noble and inclusive, seeking to reclaim interpretive agency for Muslim women and reframe Islam as a religion of justice and equality. However, feminist thought across history teaches us that any political or theoretical movement that claims to universally represent all women is inherently exclusionary. Projects that attempt to speak for all women—particularly across divergent historical, geographic, and sociopolitical contexts—tend to reproduce the very hierarchies and forms of silencing they claim to challenge. Islamic feminism, despite its claims to represent the "authentic" experience of Muslim women, often universalizes a specific religious and political vision at the expense of the diversity of Muslim women's lives. Muslim women living in Western contexts face drastically different challenges compared to those in North Africa or the Middle East, yet Islamic feminism tends to homogenize their experiences under one banner of moral and spiritual return. Moreover, not all scholarship produced by Muslim women should be categorized as feminist, and not all feminist arguments rooted in Islamic discourse promote

emancipation or equality in practice. What many Islamic feminists advocate as “free choice” and “religious agency” can often serve to justify restrictive social norms and gender hierarchies, especially when deployed in support of political Islam or revivalist agendas.

This paper critically analyzes Islamic feminism not as a genuine feminist project, but as a religious-political initiative that emerged within the historical and ideological framework of the Islamic revival movement. I argue that Islamic feminism is not concerned with the transformation of oppressive structures affecting Muslim women, but rather with preserving and legitimizing religious authority through the language of feminist empowerment. In doing so, the project of Islamic feminism functions—whether intentionally or not—as a neocolonial discourse that reproduces patriarchy through culturally relativist and epistemologically conservative means.

To develop this argument, I divide the paper into three major sections. The first section investigates foundational definitions of Islamic feminism offered by key scholars such as Margot Badran, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, tracing how their work frames Islamic feminism as a project of reinterpretation (*ijtihād*), moral reform, and political resistance. The second section applies feminist critical methods to analyze the theoretical underpinnings of Islamic feminism, particularly its reliance on religious hermeneutics, its use of "free choice" as a shield against critique, and its ideological overlap with revivalist movements. Here, I show that Islamic feminism performs a balancing act: it mimics secular feminist language while reinforcing the very moral systems that constrain women's autonomy. The final section analyzes the political function of Islamic feminism within postcolonial Muslim-majority societies, particularly in relation to the Islamic revival movement, Gulf-funded cultural imperialism, and the epistemic strategies used to erase national identity in favor of religious conformity. I argue that Islamic

feminism serves a broader Islamization agenda that is embedded in both academic discourse and grassroots mobilization, particularly in the Egyptian context.

Ultimately, I contend that Islamic feminism is best understood not as a feminist movement striving toward gender liberation, but as a strategic extension of political Islam. Its moral appeals, theological arguments, and emphasis on culturally authentic feminism obscure its function as a project of ideological control. What is framed as empowerment often masks accommodation, and what is described as reform often reinforces the very structures feminist thought aims to dismantle. This paper offers a deconstructive account of Islamic feminism's theoretical claims and political entanglements, arguing that its core objective is not to liberate women but to fortify a religious moral order under the guise of feminist legitimacy.

What is Islamic feminism?

Islamic feminism is a diverse intellectual and political movement that seeks to establish women's rights within an Islamic framework. While most Islamic feminists challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam, their methodologies, epistemological commitments, and relationships with secular feminism vary significantly. Some scholars argue for absolute gender equality within an Islamic paradigm, while others critique the very notion of equality as a Western imposition. These differences reflect broader debates on whether feminist reforms should be achieved through religious reinterpretation or through structural legal transformation. Additionally, Islamic feminism operates on multiple levels, ranging from academic engagements with Islamic legal traditions to grassroots activism that seeks to reform gender policies within Muslim societies. Distinguishing between activist-oriented Islamic feminism and feminist *tafsīr*

is essential for understanding how gender justice is framed differently depending on whether the audience is scholarly, religious, or policy-driven.

Islamic feminists can be categorized into three broad approaches. The first, represented by scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, consists of Islamic legal reformists who argue that gender justice is an intrinsic Qur'anic value that has been obscured by centuries of male-dominated exegesis. They rely on *ijtihād*[1] through hermeneutics to uncover what they claim is the Qur'an's egalitarian message. Wadud proposes a hermeneutics of *tawḥīd*, asserting that "the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts" and that a coherent reading requires prioritizing gender-egalitarian verses over hierarchical ones (Wadud, 1999, xii). Barlas takes a similar stance, arguing that "the Qur'an, when read without the biases imposed by centuries of patriarchal exegesis, does not support male authority over women" (Barlas, 2019, 263). However, their approach raises a question: if gender equality is naturally embedded within the Qur'an, why has its true message been so elusive, requiring extensive reinterpretation? Moreover, this reformist approach often operates within a legalist framework that privileges Qur'anic discourse while sidelining traditional jurisprudential methodologies, particularly those developed within the four Sunni schools of law (*Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali*) and Shi'i *Figh*. The tension between feminist legal reformists and classical Islamic legal structures underscores a deeper epistemological question: can Islamic feminism achieve gender justice without engaging with the methodologies of Islamic legal theory (*usul al-figh*)?

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[1] - In Islamic legal tradition, *ijtihād* refers to the process of independent reasoning or critical thinking used by a qualified scholar to interpret the sources of Islamic law—primarily the Qur'an and Hadith—especially in cases where there is no clear text or consensus.

A second group of scholars, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, and Margot Badran, can be classified as historical contextualists who analyze how Islamic law and gender norms evolved in response to political power structures rather than being dictated purely by divine revelation. Mernissi argues that gender hierarchies in Islam were the result of political developments after the Prophet's time, stating that "whenever the Muslim order is threatened, the first target of oppression is women" (Mernissi, 1991, 65). Similarly, Ahmed examines how colonialism shaped Muslim gender norms, arguing that both Islamic and Western discourses have been used to regulate women's roles (Ahmed, 1992,149). Unlike legal reformers, these scholars do not directly establish an egalitarian Qur'anic interpretation; instead, they reveal how political agendas have historically shaped religious interpretations. This approach shifts the debate away from scriptural exegesis toward a socio-political analysis of how gender relations have been constructed through both Islamic and colonial discourses. However, historical contextualists face the challenge of balancing critique with reform—if gender hierarchies are historically constructed, can they be deconstructed within Islamic legal frameworks, or must the legal tradition itself be challenged?

A third approach, associated with Saba Mahmood, rejects the assumption that gender equality is a universal feminist goal. As piety-feminine virtues proponents, Mahmood critiques both secular and Islamic feminist discourses for imposing a liberal notion of agency onto Muslim women. In her study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, she argues that "the desire for submission to religious authority can be as much an expression of agency as resistance" (Mahmood, 2005,16). This challenges the foundational premise of Islamic feminism, which assumes that empowerment must always take the form of resistance to patriarchal exegesis norms. Mahmood's approach complicates feminist discourse by emphasizing that Muslim

women's experiences cannot be fully captured by the binary framework of oppression and liberation. However, this perspective raises important concerns about how religious agency is negotiated within legal and political structures. While Mahmood's work provides a necessary intervention in feminist theory, it also risks reinforcing the status quo by legitimizing women's acceptance of patriarchal religious norms.

Despite their differing methodologies, these scholars share a common challenge: the tension between feminist goals and religious authority. While Islamic feminists seek to reclaim religious legitimacy, their discourse is often co-opted by states that use gender reforms to serve broader political objectives. For instance, in Malaysia, the government-supported feminist organization Sisters in Islam (SIS) has successfully advocated for some of the women's rights within an Islamic framework but remains constrained by legal restrictions that prevent direct challenges to Sharia law. Similarly, in Iran, state-backed Islamic feminism has been used to justify incremental reforms while preserving male guardianship laws. Ziba Mir-Hosseini warns that "state-sponsored Islamic feminism serves to domesticate feminist discourse, ensuring that gender justice remains subject to religious and political control rather than emerging as an independent force" (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, 112). These examples illustrate how Islamic feminism, despite its emancipatory aspirations, can become an instrument for reinforcing rather than dismantling patriarchal religious authority over gender norms.

The role of state power in shaping Islamic feminist discourse deserves closer scrutiny. In authoritarian or theocratic regimes, Islamic feminism is often tolerated only to the extent that it does not challenge state-sanctioned religious interpretations. In Saudi Arabia, for example, reforms such as lifting the driving ban and increasing women's workforce participation have been framed within an Islamic discourse that affirms male guardianship rather than dismantling

it (Al Rashed, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2019). Similarly, in Iran, feminist activists who operate within an Islamic framework have been allowed limited space for advocacy, while those who demand secular gender reforms face repression (Shirazi 2001; Najmabadi 2005; Mahdavi 2007; Human Rights Watch 2015). This shows that while Islamic feminism offers a practical political alternative to secular feminism, it also risks becoming integrated into state-led gender policies that ultimately maintain patriarchal structures. In contrast, countries with more pluralistic legal systems, such as Tunisia, have witnessed greater success in translating feminist discourse into legal reforms. The repeal of Tunisia's laws favoring male inheritance was achieved through a combination of Islamic feminist arguments and secular legal reasoning, illustrating that the most effective gender justice movements often operate at the intersection of religious and secular discourse.

Islamic feminism is not a monolithic movement but a dynamic and contested space where religious reform, historical critique, and feminine ethics[2] intersect. While it seeks transformative

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[2] - Feminine ethics and feminist ethics are often mistakenly conflated, yet they embody fundamentally different theoretical commitments and political consequences within moral philosophy. Feminine ethics centers on moral traits traditionally associated with women—such as empathy, relationality, care, and emotional sensitivity. These traits are often valorized as a corrective to the rationalism and individualism of traditional moral theories. However, the elevation of these characteristics can inadvertently essentialize women's moral identity, portraying care and self-sacrifice as innate virtues rather than socially imposed roles.

This essentialism risks reinforcing the very patriarchal structures it seeks to resist. By grounding moral worth in traits that have historically justified women's subordination, feminine ethics can end up legitimizing rather than challenging gender-based oppression. As Davion (1994) critically observes, "the feminine role fails to provide a genuine grounding for anything other than the continued oppression of women." She argues that even if care-based morality could offer something valuable, we must interrogate the origins of this role, the potential harm of inhabiting it, and whether it is even possible to extract such virtues from the patriarchal systems that produced them. In short, feminine ethics often remains complicit with the gendered moral order it aims to critique.

Carol Gilligan's influential work (*In a Different Voice*, 1982) is emblematic of this approach. Her research challenged male-centric models of moral development by highlighting women's emphasis on care and relationships. While groundbreaking, Gilligan's framing has also been criticized for reinforcing binary gender categories and for implying a moral superiority rooted in women's presumed relational nature. Rather than dismantling gendered moral hierarchies, such frameworks can inadvertently repackage them in more palatable terms.

change, its reliance on religious legitimacy raises critical challenges. If Islamic feminist hermeneutics remain bound by the necessity of religious validation, they risk becoming trapped in apologetic reinterpretation rather than driving structural legal reforms. To move beyond this limitation, deeper engagement with classical Islamic legal methodologies, intra-Muslim debates on gender justice, and the role of state power in shaping feminist discourse is essential. Only through this critical reckoning can Islamic feminism push past its constraints and enact meaningful change.

The Theoretical Basis of Islamic Feminism:

Particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Islamic feminism has gained both local and international attention in mass media and social media, especially in discussions of post-revolution Muslim women's rights and identities (Abdullatif 2013; Ahmad and Rae 2015; El-Husseini 2016). On platforms like Facebook, several polyglot groups actively engage with Muslim women's issues within Islamic discourse. Liberal feminists, including Mona Eltahawy, have critiqued the exceptional and often uncritical support Islamic feminism receives from Western institutions, particularly after the failure of the Islamic revival movement to establish Islamic states in countries like Egypt (Eltahawy 2015b). The prevalence of Islamic feminism is

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In contrast, feminist ethics offers a more radical critique of moral theory by centering its analysis on power, oppression, and structural inequality. Rather than affirming gendered traits as morally superior, feminist ethics interrogates the social, political, and historical conditions that produce them. It resists the romanticization of care and instead examines how gender roles are shaped by, and serve to maintain, systems of domination. As Held (2006) explains, feminist ethics "calls into question the assumptions of traditional ethics, identifies the ways in which these assumptions disadvantage women and other marginalized groups, and seeks to reconstruct moral theory on new, more inclusive foundations."

Feminist ethics, then, is not merely an ethics that includes women—it is an ethics that challenges the very conditions under which moral discourse has been shaped. While feminine ethics tends to affirm women's traditional roles within the moral landscape, feminist ethics demands a transformation of that landscape itself. It shifts the moral gaze from individual virtues to systemic critique, from emotional traits to justice and autonomy, and from essentialist frameworks to historically situated understandings of gender and power.

perhaps most visible in Western academia.[3] Badran (2013) notes that Islamic feminism is primarily an academic project rooted in the West—remarkably flourishing despite the Islamophobic climate that pervades many elite universities. This contradiction raises a deeper question: how do institutions that structurally marginalize Muslim identities simultaneously endorse Islamic feminism as a legitimate reformist project? As Cainkar (2009) argues, post-9/11 Islamophobia has shaped public institutions, including universities, by selectively embracing Muslim voices that align with liberal reformist narratives while excluding those that critique structural injustice or Western imperialism. Yet despite this paradox, almost no research addresses the implications of supporting Islamic feminist movements within Islamophobic academic environments—where Muslim women's religious and political expressions remain under constant scrutiny.

I will divide my analysis of the project of Islamic feminism into two categories: theoretical and political. **The theoretical discussion** of the project examines the key arguments of Islamic feminism as found in two main areas of emphasis, which support one another**.** Firstly, there is the reinterpretation emphasis, which can be seen in the work of Margot Badran, Asma Barlas, Fatema Mernissi, and Amina Wadud. Second, there is the ultimate "free choice" emphasis as found in the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood. She aims to rationalize respecting women's choices, even if they are harmful.

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[3] - Asma Barlas is a professor at Ithaca College, Amina Wadud is a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, Saba Mahmood was a professor University of California, Berkeley, Kecia Ali is a professor at Boston University, and Margot Badran is a senior scholar at Georgetown University.

The political discussion examines how Islamic feminism emerged as a sub-project of the Islamic revival movement rather than a standalone feminist initiative. I will analyze its strategic opposition to secularism and its alignment with Gulf-funded religious institutions that reinforce patriarchal ideologies. This section argues that Islamic feminism functions as a neocolonial project that uses women's religious attachment to legitimize Islamization. Ultimately, I show that its political agenda is not centered on women's liberation, but on preserving religious authority and moral control.

Arguments for Reinterpreting Islam (feminist *tafsīr*)

In the reinterpretation emphasis, the main argument focuses on establishing "a coherent model of an egalitarian Islam" by reinterpreting religious texts (Badran 2013, 5). Islamic feminists challenge the idea that Islam is a religion of violence and inequality. Consequently, they dedicate their methodologies to eliminating ideas of violence and inequality that are associated with Islam and claiming that the Islamic doctrines demand justice for all (Keddie 1990; Wadud 1999; Mahmood 2011; Badran 2013; Barlas 2019). In the context of the notion that a husband has the absolute right to control his wife, Badran seeks to reinterpret it as simply indicating that everyone has a specific role to play. Thus, women give birth to children and men care for their families, and this should not be a source of violence (Badran 2013). Therefore, Islamic feminists focus on showing that Islam does not oppress women by reinterpreting Islamic doctrines and by advocating the abolition of the patriarchal system that controls the interpretation of Islamic texts. So Islamic feminists use hermeneutics to create a coherent form of egalitarian Islam by combining texts that support equality and excluding texts that support war, social hierarchy, and oppression against women (Barlas 2016; Wadud 1999) Thus, Islamic feminism is a contemporary reformation project which reinterprets Islam in light of modernity, the demise of

the Ottoman Empire, and colonialism. It is a religious movement with extraordinary political significance rather than a feminist political movement expressed in religious terms. Reforming religion is a means of manipulating political influence and serving the epistemological and political ends of the Islamic revival movement.

In addition to employing hermeneutics, Islamic feminists utilize the comparative method to advocate for egalitarian principles by drawing parallels between liberal feminist values and selected Qur'anic teachings. For example, they frequently cite Qur'an 16:97: "Whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer, We will give them a good life and reward them according to the best of what they used to do," as evidence that Islam upholds moral and spiritual equality between men and women. This verse is often interpreted in Islamic feminist *tafsīr* to support the argument that Islam inherently affirms women's rights, aligning with the liberal feminist principle of gender equality (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2019). Through this strategy, Islamic feminists attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam and feminism, suggesting that feminist ethics are already embedded in Islamic scripture and tradition.

However, the critical issue lies in the ideological balancing act that Islamic feminism performs. While claiming equivalence between Islamic values and feminist principles, it simultaneously insists on the unique ontological and cultural experiences of Muslim women as fundamentally distinct from those of Western women. As Fatima Seedat argues, this dual approach creates a conceptual contradiction: Islamic feminism seeks legitimacy by mirroring secular feminist ideals, yet positions itself as an alternative discourse rooted in religious and cultural specificity. This contradictory stance not only challenges the coherence of Islamic feminism as a feminist project but also exposes its strategic negotiation between two normative systems—secular feminism and Islamic orthodoxy (Seedat, 2013, 30). Thus, feminist principles

emerge from concrete social and political struggles; transplanting them into a religious framework without addressing their original emancipatory contexts risks reducing them to rhetorical affirmations devoid of transformative power. In her view, deriving feminist ethics from religious texts, without grounding them in lived realities, results in symbolic gestures rather than meaningful feminist praxis

Arguments for Muslim Women's Choices

Along with the method of interpretation, another premise of Islamic feminism is that Muslim women's ultimate freedom of choice is a sign of equality-regardless of whether this choice is harmful to them or to those who reside in their communities. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood argues for a rational explanation for the ontological inequality between men and women in Islam, which the mosque movement Muslim women strongly believe in (Mahmood 2011). This ontological inequality translates to the idea that biological differences between men and women require women and men to do substantially different mental, emotional and social tasks. Islamic feminists who argue for the rationality of ontological inequality within the Islamic context often ground their arguments in the intellectual current of decentralizing Eurocentrism—a movement that critiques the dominance of Western frameworks in defining key philosophical categories. Within this approach, the Western conception of rationality—typically associated with secular logic, individual autonomy, and objectivity—is challenged for its exclusion of spiritual and ethical forms of reasoning embedded in Islamic traditions. Similarly, the Western ontology of "being", which emphasizes self-contained, autonomous existence, is replaced with a conception of being rooted in submission to God and embedded in communal and ethical relations. The notion of self-determination, often equated with liberal individualism and personal sovereignty in Western thought, is redefined through a theocentric lens, where agency is

expressed through voluntary adherence to divine law rather than resistance to it. Finally, Islamic feminists interrogate the Western construction of the Muslim woman as the "Other," contending that this framing renders non-Western forms of subjectivity unintelligible or inferior. In response, they seek to articulate feminist ethics and political claims from within their own epistemic frameworks, thereby resisting both secular liberal assimilation and internal patriarchal constraints (Mahmood 2011). Islamic feminists often position themselves within the decentralizing Eurocentrism movement, which seeks to challenge the dominance of Western philosophical categories—particularly notions of freedom, agency, and rationality. They critique the liberal ideal of freedom as overly individualistic and detached from ethical and spiritual accountability. However, despite this critique, many Islamic feminist arguments paradoxically rely on the same Western dualistic frameworks they reject. In my view, this produces a logic of contradiction at the core of their project.

On the one hand, Islamic feminists argue for principles rooted in Islamic metaphysics, such as a biological and divinely ordained gender order, the man/woman dichotomy, the opposition of obedience and leadership, and the virtue of surrendering the self to others—particularly through roles marked by care, modesty, and deference (Mahmood, 2011). They often uphold a biconditional logic between veiling and virtue, asserting that covering the body is both a sign of and a means to moral integrity, and they claim the right to advocate for such practices as expressions of agency. On the other hand, they simultaneously critique Western dualisms—such as mind/body, self/other, and public/private—as incompatible with Islamic epistemologies. Yet their own reliance on binary oppositions (e.g., male/female, active/passive, leader/follower) reflects a reproduction of the very conceptual structure they seek to displace. Thus, while Islamic feminists seek to carve out a distinct space for feminist ethics within Islam, their reliance on both

Islamic tradition and liberal principles of freedom and agency often leads to an unresolved tension—where the critique of Western norms coexists with their partial assimilation (Mahmood, 2005, 2011). Free choice combined with the rejection of and resistance to Western understandings of ontological experiences provides Islamic feminism with a powerful framework from which academics can rationalize what was, at one time, regarded as 'oppression.' Thus, it is difficult to criticize Islamic feminism, but it is important to raise questions regarding its agenda.

In her book, *The Politics of Piety,* Mahmood uses ethical and epistemological theories of philosophers such as Aristotle and Judith Butler to create a rational paradigm to justify women's advocacy for religious patriarchy's enslavement of women in Egypt. Mahmood applies Aristotle's virtue theory of external practices as a necessary means to internalize virtue. She characterizes the *hijab* as a necessary external practice to transform oneself into a virtuous woman who fears God, using Aristotle's virtue theory to justify her position. Also, Mahmood argues, citing Butler's theory of agency, that agency is not only a form of resistance but also "a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Butler, 1990; Mahmood 2011, 17-18). According to Mahmood's analysis of the Mosque movement, Muslim women's voluntary submission to communal hierarchies is framed not as subjugation but as a deliberate and meaningful form of agency within a religious and ethical framework. Thus, Islamic feminists often promote what can be described as a "one-way freedom of choice"—a form of constrained agency in which women's choices are considered legitimate only if they align with traditional or religious norms. Within this framework, any departure from prescribed roles—such as questioning the *hijab* or patriarchal gender roles—is often dismissed as a symptom of Western influence. This ideological stance renders the notion of freedom conditional

and directionally biased: women are deemed free only when they choose submission, not when they resist it.

Uma Narayan critiques this logic in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* by arguing that treating any resistance to traditional systems as mere Westernization is itself an oppressive project. It denies the possibility that women in non-Western societies might independently arrive at ideas similar to those of Western feminists, thereby erasing their political and intellectual agency (Narayan, 2013).

Mahmood's ethnographic work in 1990s Egypt exemplifies this problematic framing. She interpreted the practice of veiling among women in the mosque movement as a form of ethical self-cultivation and resistance to secular authority. However, Mahmood's analysis is now historically outdated. Since 2007, and as of 2025, more than 90% of Egyptian women wear the *hijab*, often not as a conscious act of resistance but as a result of social coercion and early childhood enforcement. Many girls adopt the *hijab* due to family or community pressure, not as autonomous adult subjects engaging in moral agency. Thus, Mahmood's claim that *hijab*-wearing was a site of ethical agency loses relevance in the current socio-political context, where veiling is not a choice against the secular regime but a widespread norm aligned with a now largely Islamicized public sphere. Hence, they recognize freedom only in one direction—the freedom to conform, not the freedom to dissent.

Besides prompting these arguments for reinterpreting Islam and Muslim women's free choice, Islamic Feminism also puts forth a particular view about what it means to be a Muslim woman. Islamic feminists describe Muslim women as if they have a singular identity rather than a number of identities, representing Muslim women as one collective group rather than groups of diverse Muslim women (Mahmood 2005; Badran 2013). Therefore, when they discuss the

identity of this one collective group of Muslim women, they refer to it as a singular identity while neglecting to mention the fact that Muslim women actually have many identities, some of which are conflicting.[4] As a result of this reduction of Muslim women groups, the reader is led to believe they are all the same. Abu-Lughod critiques the homogenization of Muslim women by highlighting the lack of attention to differences in nationality, class, race, and education (Abu-Lughod, 2013), therefore, neglecting intersecting factors such as social luck, political luck, motherhood, and typical standards of beauty.

Islamic feminists emphasize the importance of reinterpreting religious texts (*re-tafsīral-dīn*) as a means to affirm Muslim women's moral and spiritual autonomy. They seek to challenge dominant Western feminist portrayals of Muslim women as uniformly oppressed by religion and patriarchy. Instead, these scholars argue that Muslim women across diverse contexts already exercise forms of agency that may not align with liberal, secular definitions of autonomy (Mahmood, 2011). Saba Mahmood, for example, recounts the story of an Egyptian woman who defied her husband's demand to cease attending mosque-based religious lessons. Although Islamic tradition generally encourages a wife's obedience to her husband, Mahmood interprets this woman's choice as an act of ethical self-cultivation: her refusal was not a rejection of religious norms but rather an affirmation of her duty to God's call for knowledge and piety (Mahmood, 2011).

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[4] - Currently, there is a debate regarding the definition of the words "Islam" and "Islamic." Each country has its own distinctive features of Islam and "Islam", so it is difficult to refer to any action or thought as simply Islamic or non-Islamic. Therefore, it is necessary to specify 'Islamic' according to *who*. The same applies to the term Muslims. Who are these Muslims, which political and social systems do they live in, which definition of Islam do they adhere to, etc. (Ahmed, 2016).

A prominent historical example of this kind of gendered religious agency is Zainab al-Ghazali (1917–2005), a pioneering Islamist activist who is often considered a key figure in the early development of Islamic feminist discourse. Al-Ghazali was the founder of the Muslim Women's Association and played a central role in the Muslim Brotherhood's *daʿwa* activities[5]. Her commitment to religious activism was so unwavering that she divorced her husband after he objected to her continued involvement in political and religious work (Mahmood, 2011; Badran, 2013). These examples are frequently cited to illustrate how Muslim women can assert autonomy from within an Islamic framework, even when such autonomy contradicts male authority or traditional gender expectations.

Although both women in these examples—such as the mosque participant in Mahmood's ethnography or Zainab al-Ghazali—defy conventional religious expectations of being "good mothers" and obedient wives, they are not socially penalized for doing so. Instead, their decisions are valorized precisely because they advance what is considered the authentic, uncorrupted Islam. Their public participation in *daʿwa* activities and religious education is interpreted as a sacrifice for the sake of the Islamic cause. In this framing, their autonomy is recognized only when it is expressed through forms of religious devotion that align with patriarchal expectations of virtue and piety. Thus, the boundaries of acceptable female agency are strictly regulated by socioreligious frameworks that prioritize collective religious goals over individual self-determination. The notion of obedient wives, while central to Islamic gender ideology, becomes negotiable only when it is displaced by a higher obligation to religious

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[5] - Mahmood explains *Da'wa* as follows; "*Da'wa* is the umbrella term under which the mosque movement, and the Islamist movement more generally, have organized many of their disparate activities. *Da'wa* literally means "call, invitation, appeal, or summons." It is a Quranic concept associated primarily with God's call to the prophets and to humanity to believe in the "true religion," Islam (Mahmood, 2011, 57).

activism. In this sense, these women are not seen as deviating from the ideal of the "obedient wives," but rather as redefining it through their contributions to religious revivalism—a reinterpretation permitted only under tightly controlled ideological terms.

What remains largely unaddressed in Islamic feminist scholarship are the experiences of women whose choices fall outside the sanctioned boundaries of Islamic virtue. What happens when a Muslim woman chooses not to wear or take off the veil, decides to live independently, or refuses to marry? These forms of agency—common among many women in both majority-Muslim and diaspora contexts—are rarely explored or affirmed in academic Islamic feminist texts. This silence reveals a critical limitation: commitments to women's rights are often scarce, qualified, and conditional on conformity to a socioreligious paradigm. Autonomy is only legible when it reinforces, rather than disrupts, the prevailing moral order. As a result, women who challenge or reject religious norms are rendered invisible or morally suspect within the very frameworks that claim to advocate for their empowerment.

This ideological selectivity is not coincidental but indicative of a deeper entanglement between academic Islamic feminism and political Islamic feminism. While academic Islamic feminists engage in textual reinterpretation, ethical debates, and epistemological critique, their work often mirrors the language and objectives of Islamist movements that seek to restore Islamic authority in public life. Both camps emphasize the compatibility of Islam with women's rights, while avoiding confrontation with the more repressive implications of patriarchal religious structures. Academic Islamic feminism often functions as a discursive shield that defends Islam against Western liberal critique, while simultaneously reinforcing many of the same gender hierarchies it claims to reinterpret. In doing so, it aligns with political Islamic feminism’s desire to present a unified, moralized image of Islam that leaves little room for

internal pluralism or feminist dissent. Thus, the autonomy it promotes is not a challenge to power but a reinvestment in existing religious authority. The overlap between the academic and political strands lies in their shared investment in preserving Islam's moral superiority rather than interrogating its role in subordinating women. This convergence renders Islamic feminism less a liberationist project and more a strategic apparatus within the broader politics of religious legitimacy.

If Muslim women already possess rights and are believed to be exercising them, the need for an Islamic feminist project becomes puzzling. Why build an entire intellectual and theological enterprise to prove what is already presumed—that Islam is just to women? One plausible explanation is that Islamic feminism is designed to convince Muslim women that they need not look beyond Islam to achieve gender justice, thereby preempting their engagement with other feminist traditions. Another rationale is that this discourse serves a diplomatic function, aimed at persuading Western scholars, policymakers, and human rights institutions that Islam is not inherently misogynistic. In both cases, the focus of the discourse shifts away from Muslim women's lived experiences and instead centers on the defense of Islam as a moral system. This results in a theoretical inversion where the religion becomes the primary subject of concern, while women's struggles become secondary illustrations used to support theological arguments. Women who do not see themselves as autonomous, or who seek rights not sanctioned by Islamic law, are sidelined or pathologized. Consequently, the foundational concern of Islamic feminism appears to be the vindication of Islam itself—not the transformation of unjust social structures affecting Muslim women. The result is a discourse that appears feminist in form but remains constrained in its ethical scope and liberatory vision.

The Political Basis of Islamic feminism:

In this section, I will first examine how Islamic feminism constructs its political legitimacy through a rejection of secularism, often framing it as a colonial threat to Muslim identity and values. I will then investigate how Islamic feminism strategically aligns itself with the objectives and ideological frameworks of the Islamic revival movement to gain religious authority and public influence. Through textual analysis and historical context, I will demonstrate how Islamic feminism borrows rhetorical strategies from revivalist discourse to frame its interventions as morally superior alternatives to Western feminism. Finally, I will argue that this convergence between Islamic feminism and revivalist politics repositions feminism as a vehicle for religious conservatism rather than gender liberation.

Secularism and Secular Feminism

As a starting point for my analysis, I examine how Islamic feminism and secularism relate on a political level. Most Islamic feminists use secularism and secular feminism interchangeably (Badran 1996, 2005, 2008, 2013; Barlas 2008, 2019; Mahmood 2011; Koç 2015). Islamist feminists base their political ideology on a critique of secularism. Badran claims that Islamic feminism achieved what secular feminists were not able to achieve, including discussion of both private and public women's rights, instead of limiting the discussion to public political rights[6] (Badran 1996, 2010). According to Badran, secular feminists exclude the private

[6] -"Islamic feminism extended secular feminism's Islamic modernist stand and made it more radical by affirming the unqualified equality of all human beings (*insan*). It affirmed the equality of women and men as *insan* across the public/private spectrum, and it grounded its assertions in new readings of the Qur'an. Secular feminism insisted on the full equality of women and men in public sphere but accepted a model of gender complementarity in the private or family sphere. Interestingly, it accepted the model of different and complimentary but also hierarchical gender roles in the family privileging male authority. Islamic feminism did not. Islamic feminism insists upon the practice of social justice, which cannot be achieved in the absence of full gender equality" (Badran 2005)

sphere, which is based on Islamic norms, from their discussions; hence, she argues that family, motherhood, wife-husband relationships, and familial Islamic norms are not considered essential parts of secular feminism. In contrast, secular feminists advocate for women's rights to vote, work, and obtain an education (Badran 1996,2013). Consequently, according to Badran and others, secular feminism's tendency to only focus on political rights creates a gap between feminist activists and everyday issues that affect ordinary women.

According to Islamic feminists, Islamic feminism's discussion of Muslim women's private lives makes it the only project that takes seriously Muslims' lives in both the private and public realms. However, by exploring women's movements and feminist writings in Egypt, for example, we find that the private sphere is always a part of the secular feminist's discussions as well as the public one, such as in the works of Huda Sha'arawi, Alifa Rifaat, Nawal El-Sadaawy and Mona Eltahawy[7]. The argument presented by Badran that Islamic Feminists should be considered as a starting point for discussing women's public and private rights together is easily challenged by providing examples of feminists who are considered secular. Therefore, Islamic

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[7] - In Badran's opinion, since these scholars are considered to be secular scholars, their works lack insight into the private lives of Muslim women. But infact, all they wrote their feminist views in some of their works by telling stories that dealt with Islam, gender, and the private lives of women. According to Huda Sha'arawi (1879-1947) "when I was nine years old, and had finished memorizing the Koran [Qur'an], my mother celebrated the event with a party, during which I recited verses from the Koran in the presence of my teacher"(Shaʿrāwī 1987, 40). According to Alifa Rifaat (1930-1996) "When we complained to my mother, Allah have mercy, upon her, she'd tell us 'when your father's gone, he'll [their brother] be the man in the family and what he says goes and so you'd better to get used to it"(Rifaat 1987, 7). According to Nawal El-Sadaawi (1931-2021) "The Islamic religious authorities have added one more contradictory position to a never-ending series in their attitude towards birth control and family planning. Some of them actually maintain that Islam approves of family planning and even abortion; yet others hold firmly to the position that Islam opposes not only abortion, but even the utilization of contraception"(Saadawi 2007, 130). According to Mona Eltahawy (1967-) "When I write or give lectures about gender inequality in the Middle East and North Africa, I understand I am walking into a minefield. On one side stands a bigoted and racist Western right wing that is all too eager to hear critiques of the region and of Islam that it can use against us. I would like to remind these conservatives that no country is free of misogyny, and that their efforts to reverse hard-earned women's reproductive rights makes them brothers-in-hatred to our Islamists"(Eltahawy 2015a, 19).

feminist political motivation to respond to secular feminism rests on a false premise: that Islamic feminism is the foundational feminist project for all Muslims and non-Muslims in relation to both their public and private lives.

Islamic feminists tend to base their political arguments on misconceptions regarding the secularist political agenda in majority Muslim countries. In post-colonial Muslim countries, there is a public fear of secularism because people tend to associate secularism with losing their cultures to Western hegemony. Barlas argues that, “what secular-/ feminist scholarship offers, then, are not new interpretive insights into the Qur'an but a denial of its authority and even its status as God’s word, along with a series of pejorative judgments about its teachings from the standpoint of secular modernity and feminism (Barlas 2019, 263). Promoting the fear of secularism and secular feminism is the core of Barlas’s work. In her argument, secular feminism aims to destroy Islam by saying that the Qur’an has verses that are anti-women. This is a misinterpretation of secular feminism. They present secular feminism in Muslim countries in one sense as a form of Westernized feminism that fails to engage in the private lives of Muslim women. They also characterize secularism as a form of Westernized politics and culture that seeks to eliminate Islam. Barlas asserts that “clearly, the secular hope is that Muslims will opt for secularism even if it involves gutting Islam” (Barlas 2019, 94).

Islamist feminists such as Barlas claim that both secular feminism and secularism are financially supported by the West, making both look like conspiracies against Islam. For Islamic feminists, this bold claim has served as the foundation for distancing Islam and Muslims from secularism and secular feminism. Barlas argues for the importance of grounding Islamic political thought directly in the Qur’an, particularly in response to what she identifies as the covert goals of US-backed secularism in Muslim-majority countries. According to her, “in effect, US-

sponsored secularism in Muslim countries today aspires not to guarantee religious freedoms, as [propagandized] secularism does in the West [appears to do], but to secularize the Qur'an itself. It seeks to do this by altering Muslim notions of the sacred by chipping away at the doctrine of the Qur'an's sacrality, thus hollowing out Islam from the inside" (Barlas, 2019, 94). In this view, secularism functions not as a neutral political framework but as a tool of epistemic and spiritual colonization aimed at undermining the foundational sources of Islamic authority.

From its early articulations to its more recent iterations, Islamic feminism has often prioritized the critique of secularism, portraying it as an existential threat to Islam rather than a distinct political or legal framework. Rather than isolating and reinterpreting Islamic principles—such as those related to gender justice—on their own terms, many Islamic feminists construct their projects in direct opposition to Western secular ideologies. This oppositional stance allows them to frame their work not only as feminist but as a moral defense of Islam itself. To gain political legitimacy, Islamic feminists often claim that secularism is financially and ideologically backed by Western powers, particularly the United States, and that it serves to undermine Islam from within. However, this framing reveals a contradiction: many of these same Islamic feminists openly acknowledge receiving funding and institutional support from Western organizations to advance their work. Scholars such as Barlas and Badran simultaneously argue that the West supports only secular feminism in the Muslim world, even as their own projects benefit from Western funding streams. If we accept their reasoning—that external support compromises ideological legitimacy—then we should also be suspicious of Islamic feminism, since it too is largely supported by the West. This inconsistency undermines their critique of secularism and reveals a deeper contradiction at the heart of their political argument: a

movement that discredits its rivals on the grounds of Western influence while remaining entangled in similar forms of dependency.

In addition, Islamic feminists often portray secularism as a belief system or quasi-religion—complete with its own values and norms—while simultaneously presenting Islam as a purely political system, thereby creating a framework in which the two can be directly and easily compared. However, they ignore the simple definition of secularism, which aims to isolate religion from controlling social and political institutions. Islamic feminists, by using the fear of secularism to defend their political legitimacy in Muslim majority countries that are ravaged by theocratic sociopolitical systems, create an oppressive ideology that ignores the real problems that Muslim women face today, especially Millennial Muslim women. Mona Eltahawy explains that by demeaning secularism in countries already damaged by theocracy, Islamic feminists create a climate of fear. Furthermore, when Islamic feminists identify this usage as a feminist project, they cause a misunderstanding of the goals of feminists. Eltahawy considers this form of feminism to be a masculinity-based feminism, and she affirms that a feminism that must respect 'culture' and 'religion' is a feminism that is confined to respecting principles of patriarchy (Eltahawy 2019, 22). This argument holds weight for two key reasons. First, when feminist activism is conditioned on maintaining religious or cultural norms, it inherently avoids challenging the patriarchal foundations embedded in those very traditions. In many contexts, religious doctrines and cultural customs have been historically interpreted by male authorities and structured around male dominance, leaving little room for genuine gender equality. Second, framing feminism around the obligation to "respect" culture and religion often results in selective silence—where issues like child marriage, forced veiling, or unequal inheritance laws are left unchallenged in the name of cultural sensitivity. In such cases, feminism becomes less a

movement for liberation and more a mechanism for legitimizing and preserving gender hierarchies under the guise of moral or communal values.

Islamic feminism's political agenda is clearly structured around resisting both secularism and secular feminist ideologies, favoring instead the establishment of theocentric political systems rooted in Islamic principles. To fully grasp the political orientation of Islamic feminism, it is essential to situate it within the broader historical and ideological context that gave rise to it—namely, the Islamic revival movement. This revival not only shaped the discourse of Islamic feminism but also provided its foundational political framework. Therefore, in order to understand the deeper political commitments of Islamic feminism, I will examine its entanglement with the Islamic revival, which I consider to be the second major pillar underpinning its political project.

The Project of the Islamic Revival Movement

Islamic feminist activism originated in North African countries as a political arm of the broader Islamic revivalist movement, not as a purely academic inquiry (Karam 1998; Gray 2012). Rather than beginning in universities or intellectual circles, Islamic feminism first took shape through grassroots political engagement aimed at reinforcing Islamic norms in public and private life. Islamic revival movements sought to hegemonize majority-Muslim societies by promoting patriarchal ideologies as sacred, positioning these gendered norms as integral to the divine order to which women must adhere. In this context, Islamic feminism emerged as a practical project designed to align women's roles with revivalist interpretations of Islam, not to challenge them. Islamist women played a crucial role in legitimizing this process. According to Mahmood, Badran, and others, the foundations of what would later be called Islamic feminism

can be traced back to the establishment of the **Muslim Women's Association** (*Jamaʿat al-Sayyidat al-Muslimaat*) by Zainab al-Ghazali—a figure closely tied to the male leadership of the Islamic revival (Sattar 1995; Badran 2005; L. Ahmed 2012; Al-Ghazali 2015; Mahmood 2011). Funded and controlled by Islamist leadership, the Association functioned as a strategic sub-project to advance the revivalist political agenda. At that time, these Islamist women were not labeled "Islamic feminists"; however, their activities laid the groundwork for the discursive strategies later taken up in academic Islamic feminism.

One of the primary mechanisms through which this political agenda was advanced was the deployment of *Dāʿiyāt*[8] —female Islamic preachers—into mosques, schools, universities, and workplaces. These *Dāʿiyāt* were tasked with teaching women the "true" Islam as envisioned by revivalist ideology, emphasizing obedience, modesty, and religious discipline. Their role was not only religious but epistemological: they worked to reshape Muslim women's psychological and cognitive frameworks to conform to revivalist doctrines (Ong 1996; Ottaway and Abtellatif 2007). The academic articulation of Islamic feminism that followed later in the 1990s and 2000s inherited many of these ideological assumptions. It retained the focus on religious legitimacy and the reaffirmation of Islamic values, while rebranding these political strategies as feminist thought. Thus, academic Islamic feminism cannot be fully understood without tracing its genealogy back to the political and ideological infrastructure of the Islamic revival movement that first institutionalized women's participation in religious activism under patriarchal terms.

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[8] - In modern Muslim societies—especially in the context of the Islamic revival movements in the late 20th century—*daʿiyāt* have become influential figures, particularly in female-only religious spaces, such as women's mosque circles or Islamic educational centers. Scholars like Saba Mahmood (2005) analyze the role of *daʿiyāt* in shaping gendered piety and ethical self-formation, especially in countries like Egypt. While male *daʿ* is often operate in mixed or male-dominated religious spheres, *daʿiyāt* typically preach to other women and emphasize women's religious responsibilities, modesty, and moral development.

In her work *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood focuses on Muslim women's participation in the mosque movement, which was a critical component of the Islamic revival movement. She declares that "the women's mosque movement is part of the larger Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening (*al- Sabwa al-Islamiyya*) that has swept the Muslim world, including Egypt, since at least the 1970s" (Mahmood 2011, 3). It is claimed that the Islamic revival movement represents a decolonial project that fights Western imperialism and attempts to reclaim the identity of Islam. Therefore, the project of Islamic feminists presents itself as a decolonial project.

Based on my theoretical description of Islamic Feminism, the Islamic feminists see in the decentralizing Eurocentrism movement, which is connected with the movements for self-determination among states which gained independence after World War II, a strong point supporting the objectives of demeaning secularism and supporting the Islamic revival movement. In the following section, I will analyze how Islamic feminism can provide political outcomes that serve the Islamic revival political agenda, and how it has provided the Islamic revival movement[9] with the resilient epistemic political ground to thrive and hegemonize Muslim-majority states.

Both the Islamic revival movement and the academic project of Islamic feminism emerged as responses to post-colonial and anti-neocolonial movements in the Muslim world. However, while they are often framed as emancipatory efforts—aimed at reclaiming Islamic identity from Western domination—their relationship to coloniality is far more complex. To understand the contemporary project of Islamic feminism, it is insufficient to describe it simply

[9] -"Islamic Revival" is a term that refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies (Mahmood, 2011, 3).

as decolonial. Instead, we must interrogate how it is itself rooted in and shaped by the structures of neocolonialism.

The concept of neocolonialism, introduced by Kwame Nkrumah, provides a useful framework for analyzing this paradox. In his landmark 1966 work, Nkrumah explains that neocolonialism allows newly independent states to appear sovereign, while their economic and political systems remain externally controlled: “The essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (Nkrumah 1966, ix). This definition has become foundational across disciplines.

While early scholarly discussions of neocolonialism—such as those by Kwame Nkrumah (1966)—focused primarily on external control over economic systems and geopolitical sovereignty, more recent studies have expanded this framework to include cultural, epistemological, and ideological domination (Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2011; Sayyid 2014). These scholars argue that neocolonialism persists not only through economic dependency but also through the export of Western norms, knowledge systems, and institutional structures. Within this broader understanding, it becomes necessary to question how Islamic feminism—often presented as a culturally grounded alternative to Western liberal feminism—may itself operate within neocolonial paradigms. This is particularly the case when Islamic feminist projects receive support from international development organizations, Western academic institutions, or state-aligned Islamic revival movements that aim to regulate women’s roles under religious authority (Mahmood 2005; Badran 2009; Abu-Lughod 2013). Although these projects are framed in opposition to Western domination, their entanglement with global funding structures and state politics may reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to resist. Therefore, a critical

assessment of contemporary Islamic feminism must go beyond surface claims of decoloniality to examine its embeddedness in the postcolonial-neocolonial matrix—a system that continues to shape Muslim societies not only economically and politically, but also at the level of thought, gender roles, and moral authority.

In my view, analyzing neocolonialism merely as a dualistic structure between Western colonizers and non-Western colonized states is insufficient to explain the current conditions of war, economic decline, and oppression against women in formally colonized states. As an example, Nkrumah's definition of neocolonialism does not explain Saudi Arabia's colonization of Yemen[10] because it limits the conception of colonization to a Western colonizer and non-Western colonized. It is, therefore, necessary to define neocolonialism in a new way that outlines the strategies by which multiple Western and non-Western colonizers control post-colonial states. In other words, we need a definition of neocolonialism that reflects the fact that non-Western countries, like 'the Neo-affluent Gulf countries,'[11] also use the new colonial methods against the postcolonial states. A new definition of neocolonialism can be understood through an examination of the shift from Western cultural imperialism to non-Western fundamentalist cultural imperialism. There are a few scholars who regard this non-Western conservative culture as local neocolonialism (R.J.C. Young 2016; Mosley 2017).

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[10] -The Yeman war started in 2014 in response to the conflict between Sunna and Shi'a. Saudi Arabi—as a representative of Sunna' political power in the Middle East—is the leader in the fights against Shi'a in Yeman, which gives the Saudi Arabian army some colonial and political control over Yeman land and oil.

[11] - Neocolonialism—that followed the second world war—has shaped these Neo-affluent Gulf countries' geopolitics. More importantly, the discovery and massive production of petroleum oil made these countries' economies increase rapidly such as in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait 'Gulf Area.'

Cultural imperialism generally refers to the exercise of dominance in cultural relations, where the values, practices, and meanings of a more powerful culture are imposed on one or more local or indigenous cultures (Tomlinson, 1991b). In most academic literature, cultural imperialism is discussed almost exclusively in terms of Western domination, particularly through the lens of Eurocentrism. These analyses often focus on the legacy of British and French colonial rule in the Middle East and North Africa, which imposed secular, liberal, and capitalist cultural frameworks on colonized societies. However, far less attention has been paid to how non-Western powers can also act as agents of cultural imperialism—particularly when they reproduce hegemonic values under the banner of religion, tradition, or regional solidarity.

In the postcolonial era—defined by Nkrumah as the beginning of neocolonialism—many decolonial movements have positioned themselves in opposition to the cultural imperialism of the West, rejecting Western ethical, aesthetic, epistemological, and political systems as inherently colonial. However, a significant contradiction is that instead of dismantling imperial structures entirely, many of these movements have simply replaced Western cultural authority with that of the neo-affluent Gulf states—particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. These states increasingly export their religious, gender, and social norms to postcolonial societies, where they are idealized as "authentic" alternatives to Western influence. As a result, what is often framed as decolonization in places like Egypt has in fact become a process of cultural substitution—preserving the dynamics of imperial control but shifting the center of power from Europe to the Gulf.

One might assume that the dominance of these Gulf cultures over postcolonial societies stems from a shared religion and language. However, this alone does not account for the structural power these countries now wield. As Tomlinson (1991a) explains, cultural imperialism

requires deep, daily influence over political, psychological, epistemological, and social life. It is therefore necessary to question how and why North African countries—particularly Egypt—have come to accept Gulf cultures as foundational to restoring their so-called "lost" identities after Western colonization. While religion and language offer points of cultural affinity, the decisive factor in this Gulf ascendancy is economic power. Through sustained financial support, these Gulf states have effectively redirected postcolonial state dependencies—altering even World Bank priorities—by funding Islamic institutions and movements. Most of this funding has been explicitly directed toward the Islamic Revival Movement, which has been framed as a decolonial project positioned against Western modernity (Farouk, 2014).

A clear example of this cultural imperialism is Saudi Arabia's influence on Egypt's postcolonial landscape. Following the withdrawal of British colonial power in the mid-20th century, Egyptian intellectuals and political actors competed to define a new national identity. Among the competing decolonial movements, a race emerged to forge a unified Egyptian identity that could symbolically undo the cultural damage inflicted by Western rule. In this ideological auction, Saudi Arabia—and later the UAE and Qatar—offered financial capital and ideological frameworks that positioned Islam, rather than Egypt's own indigenous pluralism, as the solution to colonial trauma. Saudi Arabia's extensive funding of the Islamic Revival Movement allowed it to dominate and redirect Egypt's decolonial trajectory—transforming epistemic, political, and social spheres in line with its own *Wahhabi*-informed cultural vision (Tartoussieh, 2007; Sharp, 2011; Kerschner et al., 2013; K.E. Young, 2017).

The ultimate aim of this Gulf-driven cultural imperialism has been to frame Egypt's colonial loss not as a loss of sovereignty or cultural diversity, but as a loss of Islamic purity. In doing so, Saudi Arabia's cultural project instilled a widespread desire to recover the Islamic

Caliphate, which formally ended in 1924. This redirection of decolonial energy serves to replace Western hegemony with religiously coded regional hegemony—presented as moral redemption but functionally reinforcing new forms of external control. Rather than liberating Egypt from the legacies of British and French colonization, Gulf cultural imperialism has re-scripted Egyptian identity into a theologically defined, externally imposed project that continues to obscure Egypt's own indigenous, historically complex, and pluralistic heritage.

Saudi Arabia's cultural imperialism has also contributed to the rise of Islamic women's activism, an achievement particularly relevant to Saudi Arabia's designated funding for Muslim women's organizations (Saadawi 2013). The project of Islamic feminism, which is part of this movement of Islamic revival, also started to strive for the recovery of this lost Islamic identity under the influence of the Neo-affluent Gulf countries (El Saadawi 2013). As a consequence, Islamic feminism has primarily aimed at replacing Western imperialism, which is seen to be embodied in secularism and secular feminist movements, with Saudi Arabian cultural imperialism. Saudi Arabia's cultural imperialism reflects the motives of Gulf Neo-affluent countries for spreading *Wahhabism*[12] in particular (Eltahawy 2015a).

The project of Islamic women's activism began as an explicit Islamist sub-project intended to serve the agenda of the Islamic revival movement, and its political agenda is still connected to the Islamic revival movement. Politically, the Islamic revival movement aims to

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[12] -*Wahhabism* refers to "the rise in a relatively unimportant part of northern Arabia in the eighteenth century of *Wahhābism*, an aggressively anti-Pre-Textual and anti-Con-Textual form of Islam, followed by the accession to power in the Arabian peninsula by the adherents of this movement in the early twentieth century, followed in turn by the discovery of copious quantities of the most strategically critical and financially lucrative modern commodity in the Arabian peninsula, the funds from which have entrenched the power of the Saʿūdī Wahhābī state and supported the propagation of this anti-Pre-Textual creed worldwide, is a series of events that (the early twentieth-century machinations in Arabia of the Great Powers notwithstanding) has little to do with the rise of modernity in post-Enlightenment Europe"(S. Ahmed 2016, 532).

directly enforce the traditional Islamic Sharia laws in every aspect of society, including social and political norms, economic norms, and Muslim relations with the land. In addition, this movement has encouraged violent protests against any government that is reluctant to adhere to Sharia laws, for instance by cutting off the hands of thieves; has restored and established perpetuation for gender hierarchies, and has urged the transformation of self-determining beliefs into blamatory beliefs[13] (S. Ahmed 2016; Ingram 2018; Bano 2020). For instance, this movement has transformed women's beliefs about their bodies, in terms of beauty, virtue and ontology, to make them ashamed of the body because it is a source of sins. Also, this movement has made a biconditional relationship between covering women's bodies and becoming virtuous women, which appears in women considering their bodies' beauty a source of self-blame as virtuous women should not be controlled by their body's beauty.

Islamic revivalists argue that the imposition of Islamist principles is intended to transform society from a morally corrupt state into a virtuous one. However, nearly five decades after the emergence of the Islamic revival movement, many Millennial Muslim women living in Islamic and semi-Islamic states have come to perceive this movement less as a religious or moral renaissance and more as a political apparatus that employs morality to justify social control and gendered subjugation. As Hafez (2014) observes, while earlier generations of Muslim women may have embraced the revivalist agenda as a form of religious empowerment, younger generations are increasingly critical of how it has been co-opted by authoritarian regimes and patriarchal institutions to suppress dissent and limit women's autonomy. The Islamic revival

[13] - As a result of religious indoctrination, blamatory beliefs are defined as beliefs that are conceived or reconstructed in response to a fear of God and evaluated from the Haram and Halal perspective. Among these beliefs are determination of gender and relationships with others and family and others.

movement has lost much of the moral legitimacy it initially claimed, particularly as Islamist-affiliated groups have committed acts of violence against Muslims—contradicting the claim that this movement represents a decolonial or anti-imperialist resistance. Furthermore, the proliferation of stories and social media content documenting the public and private abuse of Muslim women—often justified using revivalist moral rhetoric—has led many Muslims to denounce the movement's ethical claims altogether.[14] Contrary to Mahmood's interpretation, Islamic feminism cannot be viewed solely as a religiously grounded ethical project. Rather, it functions as a political movement that strategically uses morality and Muslim women's religious attachment to legitimize a culturally relativist model of social order. In doing so, it adapts women's rights to fit within a framework shaped by patriarchal interpretations of religion, rather than challenging those frameworks in the name of liberation.

It is possible to argue that Islamic feminism shares the political agenda of the broader Islamic revival movement; however, the methods it employs to realize its goals are more ideologically refined and strategically framed, which makes the project more resistant to direct criticism. A major challenge faced by scholars who critique Islamic feminism is the widespread presence of Muslim women who openly defend gendered hierarchies, endorse coercive norms of modesty, and insist on their right to adhere to revivalist moral expectations as autonomous choices. These women often affirm their voluntary participation in Islamist movements, their decision to wear the *hijab, niqab, chador,* or *burqa*, their acceptance of male guardianship structures, and their belief in the moral superiority of traditional gender roles. Islamic feminists

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[14] - This example can be found in many social networks that advocate for women who are victims of violence. Also, the Islamist groups are not limited to men but also women—who call themselves Islamic feminists—or masculinized women.

frequently frame such behaviors as self-directed and uncoerced, posing rhetorical questions such as: why would women adopt these practices if not by choice? These questions are often presented as inherently unanswerable within Western feminist paradigms (Mahmood, 2011; Badran, 2013; Slininger, 2014). As a result, in the project of Islamic feminism—as exemplified in the works of Mahmood and Badran—the primary function of discourse on Muslim women's rights is not to interrogate the structural roots of gender oppression, but rather to justify and normalize women's alleged choices to accept and reproduce revivalist moral codes.

The Political Epistemology of Islamic Feminism

In the following sections, I will analyze the epistemic tactics Islamic feminists use to establish and perpetuate the political agenda of the Islamic revival movement. In short, the Islamic revival movement's goal is to exploit and continue to control the majority-Muslim countries. From the 1950s to the 1970s, there was very limited social acceptance of Islamic revival leaders, such as the Muslim Brotherhood's association. Hence, these Muslim Brotherhoods tried various methods to achieve social and political acceptance; however, these earlier methods did not include employing Muslim women as spokespersons, which has proven to be the most effective method. Among these earlier methods was an attempt to persuade former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) to create a law requiring Muslim women to wear the *hijab* in public. In a public speech delivered in 1958, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser recounted a conversation he had with Mohammed Badie (b. 1943), a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, regarding the group's attempt to gain recognition as a political party. During the meeting, Badie requested that a law be passed requiring Muslim women to wear the *hijab* in public. Nasser responded sharply and sarcastically, saying:

"You have a daughter who is a medical student, and she does not wear *hijab*. So how can you ask me to force ten million Muslim women to wear it?" (Abdel Nasser, 1958).[15]

Nasser's tone, described as sarcastic, highlighted the perceived hypocrisy of the Brotherhood's demands and underscored how the *hijab* was being politicized by the group. His remark was met with laughter from the audience. Notably, a man in the crowd shouted, "Let him wear it!"—a sarcastic retort implying that Badie should wear the *hijab* himself if he was so insistent on imposing it. The man's accent suggested he was likely from southern Egypt, a region often described as more rural and conservative than Cairo. His reaction, however, reflects the broader sentiment at the time: the Muslim Brotherhood's vision for political and social reform, including gender policies, was widely rejected by Egyptians across the country, including many in the south (Wickham, 2015).

Muslim Brotherhood male leaders recognized that in order to dominate Egyptian society politically, they would have to encode Egyptian Muslim women with distinctive features. In addition, Muslim Brotherhood male leaders realized that they could not alone encode Egyptian Muslim women and obligate them to adhere to the Islamic revival movement's definition of Islamic identity (Wickham 2015; Mahmood 2011). Therefore, Muslim women were deployed—later referred to as the Muslim Sisterhood—to assist in the encoding of women by convincing these women to wear *hijab*. I stated earlier that the Islamic revival male leaders' project aimed to hegemonize society by using Muslim women who supported their movement. My view is that the Islamic feminists, collectively known as Muslim sisterhoods, have allowed the Islamic

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[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ah2r4pmIKi0&ab_channel=%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-AncientEgypt

revival movement to hegemonize society by transforming certain moral values from social and changeable to dogmatic and self-evident religious beliefs. I use James Lull's definition of hegemony, which states, "hegemony requires that ideological [identity] assertions become self-evident cultural assumptions" (Lull 2003, 34). To be a truly Muslim woman according to the type of Islamic feminists under discussion, many characteristics must be self-evident. These characteristics include exhibiting shyness, modesty, humility, and masochism, all of which are crucial to be the necessary condition for "their [Muslim women's] enhanced public role in religious and political life" (Mahmood, 2011, 6).

The purpose of Islamic feminists' political activities is to use their positions as Egyptian women and as Muslims to verbally and psychologically manipulate other women, men, girls, and boys into accepting their version of the "true Muslim identity." The first strategic step taken by Islamic feminists has been to isolate Egyptian women from any rational or critical resistance to the Islamic identity that the Islamic revival movement seeks to enforce. To eliminate potential opposition to their mission, Islamic feminists have concentrated on erasing these women's sense of national identity—specifically their connection to a secular, pluralistic Egypt—in order to replace it with a singular Islamic identity that aligns with the ideological goals of the Islamic revival movement. For instance, Islamic feminists have attempted to persuade Egyptian women that it is a great honor to belong to the transnational Islamic ummah—'*Aloma Aleslamia'*—rather than to be citizens of a secular Egyptian state (Mahmood 2011). Over the past few decades, this strategy has successfully reduced the identities of many Egyptian women to being exclusively Islamic, as defined by Islamist ideology. This reduction is achieved by degrading and demeaning Egypt's national heritage, civic values, and historical identities—thus generating a psychological void that demands to be filled. I interpret the methodology of Islamic feminists as unfolding in

two coordinated steps, each targeting a different generation of Egyptian women: the first, dismantling their national identity; the second, replacing it with a revivalist Islamic identity tailored to serve the hegemonic goals of the Islamic revival movement.

Islamic feminists argued that—during the Generation X[16] era—the national identity of women was a distorted form of identity that did not conform to God's will. Mahmood, for instance, worked closely with *Dāʿiyāt* from Generation X who devoted their lives to serving the Islamic nation by offering religious lessons in mosques to educate Muslim women in what they described as the true teachings of Islam—teachings that transcend geographic and national limitations (Mahmood 2005, 2011). According to Islamic feminists, Islamic identity was not only essential but also absent, and this absence had to be rectified through active reclamation. They claimed that colonization had created deep psychological and ontological crises in Muslim women's national identities, which could only be resolved through the recovery and reconstruction of a lost Islamic identity (Badran 2013; Mahmood 2011). The Islamic identity, as envisioned by Islamic feminists and Islamists alike, was thus positioned as the moral and epistemic solution to these postcolonial crises.

During this first stage of the Islamic revival movement, women of Generation X underwent what Islamic feminists described as an epistemic modification—they relinquished their Egyptian national identity and instead embraced the absence of Islamic identity as a

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[16] - Generation X: Born approximately 1965–1980. Generation X grew up during the aftermath of Nasserism, the rise of Sadat's Infitah policies, and the Islamic revival movement's early expansion. They witnessed the increasing Islamization of public life during the 1980s and 1990s. Generation X women were the first targets of the Islamic revival movement's cultural project. They were taught to abandon secular-nationalist Egyptian identity in favor of pan-Islamic identity. Many became *Da'yāt* (female preachers) or participants in mosque movements (Mahmood 2011). Gen X was more likely to initiate or join Islamic movements as a form of opposition to Westernization or secular nationalism.

necessary void to be filled. This shift altered their beliefs and feelings about belonging from being merely Egyptians, they began to identify as part of the transnational Islamic nation (*ʾAl-ʾUmma al-Islāmiyya*), which, according to revivalist ideology, surpasses Egypt (Mahmood 2011). In the moral logic of Islamic feminists, this epistemic reorientation was framed as essential for the formation of a virtuous society. In this framework, the *hijab* came to symbolize the external marker of this reclaimed Islamic identity and one of the most critical modifications Generation X women were required to undertake (Mahmood 2011). This *hijab* mandate was presented as an external act of piety—an initial reformation through which internal moral and spiritual transformation could begin, ultimately paving the way to reclaim what Islamic feminists described as a lost, divinely ordained self.

The Islamic Feminist Politics of *hijab*

The new discourse of Islamic revival leaders and Islamic feminists aimed at Millennial women can be summarized as the *hijab* survivorship fallacy.[17] More than 90% of Muslim women in Egypt wear the *niqab* or *hijab*. However, the discourse of the leaders of Islamic revival movements revolves around the retrieval of the absent Islamic identity. Yet, the situation has changed since this Islamic revival movement began; earlier, most Muslim women did not wear *hijab* or *niqab*, and social norms were not yet reduced to religious requirements, regardless of whether these religious requirements were in line with or contrary to universal ethical values. Now, society is mostly transformed into an Islamic state in all social aspects, such as language,

[17] - *Hijab* survivorship fallacy is an argument that states the *hijab* is good and does not hinder women from achieving success, using examples of women who wear the *hijab* and have achieved success. Consequently, women's success provides *hijab* legitimacy as a symbol of Islamic identity. Those who use the *hijab* survivorship fallacy do not mention the women who wear the *hijab* and who have been prevented from succeeding as a consequence of it.

politics, and social norms. Yet the perception that Islam is under threat is constantly renewed and must be protected by constantly searching for the lost Islamic identity. As part of a project of Islamic feminism to highlight Islamic feminists' achievements throughout history, the current Islamic movement on social media, in order to restore the lost identity of Islam, is highlighting Muslim females wearing *hijab* who have achieved success in politics, science, and athletics. The movement traces these women in order to argue that the *hijab* has a positive influence on Muslim women's success and should be preserved as a symbol of regaining Islamic identity. Among these examples of successful women are Ilhan Omar in politics, Elham Fadaly in science, and Feryal Abdelaziz in athletics. The purpose of providing such examples is to keep Muslim women attentive in finding and protecting their lost Islamic identity, and as they work towards achieving it, they will experience great success similar to those successful Muslim women who wear the *hijab*. In fact, this argument relies upon the survivorship fallacy. It appears that the popular discourse asserting that the *hijab* does not prevent Muslim women from achieving their dreams is primarily constructed for Millennial women living in Muslim-majority countries. This discourse serves a strategic purpose: to uphold and reinforce the self-evident moral claims of Islamic identity that were established during earlier revivalist movements. Rather than critiquing the systems that condition women’s roles, this narrative seeks to validate Islamic identity by showcasing examples of successful women who wear the *hijab*—framing their achievements as proof that Islamic morality is empowering. In reality, this framing obscures deeper structural issues by redirecting attention away from institutional constraints and cultural coercion. During the Generation X period (approximately 1965–1980), Islamic feminists focused on reshaping women’s belonging by encouraging them to abandon their national and regional identities in favor of a religious identity that governed every aspect of life through a revivalist Islamic lens.

They emphasized the primacy of Islamic doctrine over civic or cultural plurality, presenting it as a superior framework for shaping both public and private life. By doing so, they laid the ideological foundation for what would become the Millennial generation's internalization of Islamic identity as normative and self-evident.

In the discourse that emerged for Millennial women (born roughly between 1981 and 1996), Islamic feminists strategically shifted their epistemic framing. Rather than requiring women to actively transition into an Islamic identity, this generation was raised within an environment where Islamic identity had already become normalized as an unquestionable religious truth. In this stage, Islamic feminism emphasized that the Islamic identity—once absent—was now an inherent aspect of who Muslim women were and should remain. This framing not only eliminated space for questioning but also transformed cultural mandates into ontological claims. The *hijab*, once presented as an external reform, became an essentialized sign of internal virtue. This epistemic closure made it difficult to distinguish religious morality from structural oppression—particularly in areas where women's access to education, employment, or bodily autonomy remained restricted under religious justification. One can only conclude that Islamic feminism, in this formulation, functions not as a liberatory feminist movement, but as a political project that supports the goals of the Islamic revival movement by encouraging respect for and internalization of oppression—defined here as the normalization of gender inequality, surveillance, and moral coercion—as culturally authentic and religiously required aspects of life.

Conclusion:

This paper has critically interrogated the ideological foundations, historical emergence, and political functions of Islamic feminism, revealing it to be less a liberatory feminist movement and more a religiously grounded, culturally relativist project aligned with the broader

goals of Islamic revivalism. While proponents of Islamic feminism—such as Badran, Wadud, and Barlas—frame their work as both emancipatory and indigenous, the epistemological structure and moral imperatives of the movement expose a deep entanglement with revivalist ideologies that reproduce rather than dismantle systems of patriarchal authority. By examining Islamic feminism through a feminist critical lens, we have seen how the movement strategically legitimizes patriarchal religious norms under the guise of moral reform and religious authenticity. This legitimization is not merely symbolic; it exerts real psychological, ontological, and political influence over Muslim women, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Egypt, where religious identity has increasingly come to replace national identity as the dominant mode of selfhood.

The analysis of generational shifts—from Generation X to Millennials—has shown how Islamic feminists deploy nuanced discourses tailored to different historical moments. For Generation X, the Islamic identity was constructed as a remedy to the crisis of national belonging, framed as a path toward ontological coherence and decolonial virtue. For Millennials, the focus has shifted toward validating the compatibility of Islamic identity with personal success and global modernity, especially through narratives that champion the veil as both a marker of piety and a symbol of empowerment. Yet both stages reveal the same underlying mechanism: the displacement of national, secular, and feminist frameworks in favor of an Islamic moral order that upholds revivalist goals. In this way, Islamic feminism does not challenge the oppressive structures imposed by colonial modernity; rather, it replaces them with an alternative imperialism cloaked in religious legitimacy.

Moreover, this paper has demonstrated that the project of Islamic feminism is not inclusive of the diverse realities of Muslim women across different geographies, classes, and

ideological orientations. By universalizing a particular experience of religiosity and framing it as paradigmatic for all Muslim women, Islamic feminism reproduces the same totalizing tendencies it claims to resist in Western feminist discourse. It silences alternative expressions of Muslim womanhood that do not conform to revivalist norms and delegitimizes feminist approaches that prioritize structural critique, material conditions, and historical specificity. In this sense, Islamic feminism becomes a vehicle not for liberation but for regulation—disciplining the desires, bodies, and moral orientations of Muslim women in ways that serve broader revivalist and, at times, geopolitical agendas.

In conclusion, Islamic feminism must be recognized not as a feminist project in the fullest sense of the term but as a religious-political strategy that uses the language of feminism to sanctify and stabilize the broader project of Islamization. It does so by appropriating feminist rhetoric while evading feminist critique. This paper has aimed to deconstruct that appropriation, revealing the ideological operations beneath its moral surface. A truly decolonial and feminist approach must move beyond the binaries of East and West, religion and secularism, and instead attend to the concrete material and historical conditions of Muslim women's lives—conditions that Islamic feminism, as currently constituted, too often obscures or exploits. Only through such epistemic honesty and political courage can feminist thought and practice remain committed to justice, liberation, and inclusivity.

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Between Scriptural Authority and Gender Equality: The Hermeneutical Tensions of Islamic Feminism

Introduction:

Islamic feminism is a movement that aims to secure women's rights from within an Islamic framework. While this goal is significant and has inspired a wave of feminist thought in Muslim-majority societies, its internal coherence and its claim to legal legitimacy within Islamic jurisprudence remain subjects of intense debate. Pioneering scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Fatima Mernissi have sought to dismantle patriarchal readings of the Qur'an and Hadith, arguing that gender equality is compatible with Islam's ethical core. However, these scholars often employ interpretive strategies that rely on universal gender justice principles drawn from modern secular ethics, while simultaneously claiming theological grounding within Islam. This dual reliance creates methodological tensions, as it raises the question of whether their approach is rooted in Islamic legal reasoning or in contemporary moral theory. Conservative scholars argue that such feminist readings undermine the tradition by violating interpretive consistency, while secular reformers see the commitment to religious frameworks a barrier to genuine liberation. Thus, Islamic feminism's attempt to operate within and against Islamic tradition generates a crisis of both authority and coherence.

This tension becomes especially evident when Islamic feminists assert that gender justice is inherently embedded in Islamic texts, yet resort to external moral frameworks by using modern understandings of justice and morality to reinterpret those texts. In doing so, they often

downplay verses that reinforce hierarchical gender roles while elevating those that appear egalitarian—an interpretive strategy that has drawn criticism across the ideological spectrum. On one side, traditional Islamic scholars argue that these reinterpretations selectively ignore centuries of legal consensus (*ijmaʿ*), methodological tools such as *qiyās* (analogical reasoning), and the socio-historical context of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). On the other, secular feminists challenge the idea that a religion-based feminism can bring about structural change without confronting the foundational hierarchies entrenched in Islamic law. Islamic feminists are thus caught in a bind: if they remain loyal to traditional methods like *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, they risk replicating the very patriarchal norms they critique; but if they depart from these methods, they are accused of engaging in illegitimate innovation or *bidʿah*. This leaves their work open to charges of inconsistency, both internally in method and externally in practical application. As such, Islamic feminism struggles to establish a robust legal identity that is both Islamic and feminist.

Moreover, secular reformers in Muslim-majority countries frequently view Islamic feminism as politically ineffective. They argue that by staying within a religious paradigm, Islamic feminism fails to challenge the systems of epistemic and legal subordination that have historically positioned women as second-class citizens. These critics maintain that meaningful gender reform must be grounded in secular legal structures, free from the constraints of divine law. In contrast, Islamic feminists worry that fully embracing secularism would sever their connection to religious communities, thereby weakening their social legitimacy and grassroots influence. However, when they rely on traditional legal methods—methods that often codify male dominance—they inadvertently reinforce the very hierarchies they claim to oppose. This places Islamic feminists in an impossible position: they must either continue negotiating within

patriarchal religious structures or risk alienating the very audience they seek to influence. If this dilemma remains unresolved, Islamic feminism could shift from being a transformative movement into a defensive one—focused more on preserving credibility than enacting real change.

In this paper, I critically examine how Islamic feminists interpret religious texts and the implications of their interpretive strategies. Feminist exegetes often highlight Qur'anic verses that appear to affirm gender equality while reinterpreting or minimizing verses that suggest gendered hierarchies. This raises important theological and epistemological questions: are these scholars uncovering the original egalitarian intent of the Qur'an, or are they retrofitting its meanings to align with modern ideals? I also interrogate the logic of reinterpretation itself. My discussion does not focus on this question: is gender justice truly central to Islam or not? My question focuses on why Islamic feminist *tafsīr* argues that demonstrating justice in Islam necessitates extensive re-reading and the use of modern language regarding justice and morality for it to be recognized. Conversely, if the Islamic tradition is inherently hierarchical, can feminist scholars genuinely produce egalitarian readings without altering the core message of the text? These questions go to the heart of the Islamic feminist project and force us to consider the limits of reform within a sacred legal framework. My analysis is not aimed at discrediting feminist *tafsīr*, but rather at identifying the epistemic costs of its methodological choices.

To better understand these tensions, I compare Islamic feminist interpretations with both classical Islamic exegesis and contemporary hermeneutic theory. I treat the Qur'an, Hadith, and *tafsīr* not as fixed texts, but as interpretive fields in which meaning is constantly negotiated. My aim is not only to assess the content of feminist arguments but also to evaluate the interpretive assumptions on which they rest. Classical Islamic legal theory prioritizes consistency and

coherence through established methods, such as *tafsīr al-Qur'an bi-l-Qur'an* (interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an), as well as historical contextualization and analogical reasoning. Feminist interpretations, however, often prioritize ethical outcomes—especially gender justice—over fidelity to traditional interpretive structures. This divergence highlights a deeper tension: are feminist scholars participating in Islamic jurisprudence, or are they constructing a parallel interpretive paradigm that borrows selectively from tradition to justify ethical positions derived from outside it? This question has profound implications for how we assess the legitimacy and authority of feminist readings within Islamic legal discourse.

Furthermore, I analyze whether Islamic feminist hermeneutics mirror broader shifts in interpretive philosophy or constitute a distinct epistemic intervention. Drawing from modern hermeneutic theory, I ask whether feminist *tafsīr* represents a radical reconceptualization of scriptural authority itself. If feminist scholars redefine the Qur'an as a living, ethically evolving text rather than a fixed legal source, does this move position them outside Islamic jurisprudence altogether? Can these readings still claim Islamic legitimacy if they diverge significantly from centuries of interpretive tradition? These concerns are not just theoretical—they affect how such interpretations are received in courts, communities, and religious institutions. My goal is to explore these tensions without reducing Islamic feminism to either theology or ideology, and to understand what is truly at stake in the act of feminist reading.

Beyond textual interpretation, I incorporate a socio-political analysis of how Islamic feminism operates within legal and institutional frameworks in Muslim-majority countries. This is essential, as feminist *tafsīr* is not limited to the academy—it is deployed in legal debates on marriage, inheritance, and women's rights in states like Tunisia, Iran, and Malaysia. However, in many of these cases, feminist interpretations have been selectively adopted by state institutions

that continue to enforce patriarchal legal norms. This raises the question of whether Islamic feminism functions as a transformative movement or as a legitimizing discourse for state power. When states instrumentalize feminist *tafsīr* to present a progressive image while maintaining structural inequality, the liberatory potential of Islamic feminism is severely compromised. Thus, it becomes necessary to assess whether the discourse of Islamic feminism produces substantive change or if it merely offers symbolic inclusion within existing power structures.

Ultimately, I explore the broader question of whether Islamic feminism is best understood as a reinterpretation of tradition or a reconstruction of theological and legal foundations. If feminist hermeneutics selectively highlight verses that align with contemporary ethics, does this mean that gender justice was always embedded in the Qur'an but obscured by patriarchal scholars? Or does it suggest that feminist *tafsīr* is an externally motivated project that reconfigures Islam through the lens of modernity? This tension is central to the epistemological debate around Islamic feminism. To navigate this, I examine ideological selectivity, mitigated translations, and alternative frameworks such as post-Islamic feminism and intersectional legal feminism. These alternatives offer pathways that move beyond the apologetic mode of defending Islamic feminism's legitimacy and instead focus on structural reform. By addressing these issues, I aim to contribute to a more methodologically transparent and politically grounded critique of Islamic feminism—one that takes its goals seriously while remaining attentive to its contradictions.

What is Islamic feminism?

Islamic feminism is a diverse intellectual and political movement that seeks to establish women's rights within an Islamic framework. While most Islamic feminists challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam, their methodologies, epistemological commitments, and relationships

with secular feminism vary significantly. Some scholars argue for absolute gender equality within an Islamic paradigm, while others critique the very notion of equality as a Western imposition. These differences reflect broader debates on whether feminist reforms should be achieved through religious reinterpretation or through structural legal transformation. Additionally, Islamic feminism operates on multiple levels, ranging from academic engagements with Islamic legal traditions to grassroots activism that seeks to reform gender policies within Muslim societies. Distinguishing between activist-oriented Islamic feminism and feminist *tafsīr* is essential for understanding how gender justice is framed differently depending on whether the audience is scholarly, religious, or policy-driven.

Islamic feminists can be categorized into three broad approaches. The first, represented by scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, consists of Islamic legal reformists who argue that gender justice is an intrinsic Qur'anic value that has been obscured by centuries of male-dominated exegesis. They rely on *ijtihād*[18] through hermeneutics to uncover what they claim is the Qur'an's egalitarian message. Wadud proposes a hermeneutics of *tawḥīd*, asserting that "the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts" and that a coherent reading requires prioritizing gender-egalitarian verses over hierarchical ones (Wadud, 1999, xii). Barlas takes a similar stance, arguing that "the Qur'an, when read without the biases imposed by centuries of patriarchal exegesis, does not support male authority over women" (Barlas, 2019, 263). However, their approach raises a question: if gender equality is naturally embedded within the Qur'an, why has its true message been so elusive, requiring extensive reinterpretation?

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[18] - In Islamic legal tradition, *ijtihād* refers to the process of independent reasoning or critical thinking used by a qualified scholar to interpret the sources of Islamic law—primarily the Qur'an and Hadith—especially in cases where there is no clear text or consensus.

Moreover, this reformist approach often operates within a legalist framework that privileges Qur'anic discourse while sidelining traditional jurisprudential methodologies, particularly those developed within the four Sunni schools of law (*Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali*) and Shi'i *Figh*. The tension between feminist legal reformists and classical Islamic legal structures underscores a deeper epistemological question: can Islamic feminism achieve gender justice without engaging with the methodologies of Islamic legal theory (*usul al-figh*)?

A second group of scholars, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, and Margot Badran, can be classified as historical contextualists who analyze how Islamic law and gender norms evolved in response to political power structures rather than being dictated purely by divine revelation. Mernissi argues that gender hierarchies in Islam were the result of political developments after the Prophet's time, stating that "whenever the Muslim order is threatened, the first target of oppression is women" (Mernissi, 1991, 65). Similarly, Ahmed examines how colonialism shaped Muslim gender norms, arguing that both Islamic and Western discourses have been used to regulate women's roles (Ahmed, 1992,149). Unlike legal reformers, these scholars do not directly establish an egalitarian Qur'anic interpretation; instead, they reveal how political agendas have historically shaped religious interpretations. This approach shifts the debate away from scriptural exegesis toward a socio-political analysis of how gender relations have been constructed through both Islamic and colonial discourses. However, historical contextualists face the challenge of balancing critique with reform—if gender hierarchies are historically constructed, can they be deconstructed within Islamic legal frameworks, or must the legal tradition itself be challenged?

A third approach, associated with Saba Mahmood, rejects the assumption that gender equality is a universal feminist goal. As piety-feminine virtues proponents, Mahmood critiques

both secular and Islamic feminist discourses for imposing a liberal notion of agency onto Muslim women. In her study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, she argues that "the desire for submission to religious authority can be as much an expression of agency as resistance" (Mahmood, 2005,16). This challenges the foundational premise of Islamic feminism, which assumes that empowerment must always take the form of resistance to patriarchal exegesis norms. Mahmood's approach complicates feminist discourse by emphasizing that Muslim women's experiences cannot be fully captured by the binary framework of oppression and liberation. However, this perspective raises important concerns about how religious agency is negotiated within legal and political structures. While Mahmood's work provides a necessary intervention in feminist theory, it also risks reinforcing the status quo by legitimizing women's acceptance of patriarchal religious norms.

Despite their differing methodologies, these scholars share a common challenge: the tension between feminist goals and religious authority. While Islamic feminists seek to reclaim religious legitimacy, their discourse is often co-opted by states that use gender reforms to serve broader political objectives. For instance, in Malaysia, the government-supported feminist organization Sisters in Islam (SIS) has successfully advocated for some of the women's rights within an Islamic framework but remains constrained by legal restrictions that prevent direct challenges to Sharia law. Similarly, in Iran, state-backed Islamic feminism has been used to justify incremental reforms while preserving male guardianship laws. Ziba Mir-Hosseini warns that "state-sponsored Islamic feminism serves to domesticate feminist discourse, ensuring that gender justice remains subject to religious and political control rather than emerging as an independent force" (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, 112). These examples illustrate how Islamic feminism,

despite its emancipatory aspirations, can become an instrument for reinforcing rather than dismantling patriarchal religious authority over gender norms.

The role of state power in shaping Islamic feminist discourse deserves closer scrutiny. In authoritarian or theocratic regimes, Islamic feminism is often tolerated only to the extent that it does not challenge state-sanctioned religious interpretations. In Saudi Arabia, for example, reforms such as lifting the driving ban and increasing women's workforce participation have been framed within an Islamic discourse that affirms male guardianship rather than dismantling it (Al Rashed, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2019). Similarly, in Iran, feminist activists who operate within an Islamic framework have been allowed limited space for advocacy, while those who demand secular gender reforms face repression (Shirazi 2001; Najmabadi 2005; Mahdavi 2007; Human Rights Watch 2015). This shows that while Islamic feminism offers a practical political alternative to secular feminism, it also risks becoming integrated into state-led gender policies that ultimately maintain patriarchal structures. In contrast, countries with more pluralistic legal systems, such as Tunisia, have witnessed greater success in translating feminist discourse into legal reforms. The repeal of Tunisia's laws favoring male inheritance was achieved through a combination of Islamic feminist arguments and secular legal reasoning, illustrating that the most effective gender justice movements often operate at the intersection of religious and secular discourse.

Islamic feminism is not a monolithic movement but a dynamic and contested space where religious reform, historical critique, and feminine ethics[19] intersect. While it seeks transformative

[19] - Feminine ethics and feminist ethics represent two divergent approaches to moral philosophy, though they are often mistakenly conflated. Feminine ethics tends to valorize traits traditionally associated with women—such as care, empathy, and emotional responsiveness—but in doing so, it often reinforces essentialist assumptions about women's moral nature. Rather than challenging patriarchal structures, feminine ethics can end up legitimizing women's social submission by presenting care and

change, its reliance on religious legitimacy raises critical challenges. If Islamic feminist hermeneutics remain bound by the necessity of religious validation, they risk becoming trapped in apologetic reinterpretation rather than driving structural legal reforms. To move beyond this limitation, deeper engagement with classical Islamic legal methodologies, intra-Muslim debates on gender justice, and the role of state power in shaping feminist discourse is essential. Only through this critical reckoning can Islamic feminism push past its constraints and enact meaningful change.

Selective Hermeneutics in Feminist *Tafsīr:*

Selectivity Between Islamic Texts[20]

The emphasis on the Qur'an as the sole religious authority is crucial to the Islamic feminist movement, particularly for both Islamic legal-moral reformers and historical contextualists. This perspective, reinforced by scholars such as Badran, Wadud, and Barlas, treats the Qur'an as the undistorted word of God, while regarding other Islamic texts as historically contingent and susceptible to patriarchal bias. Barlas asserts that the Qur'an is "divine discourse, inimitable, inviolate, inerrant, and incontrovertible" (Barlas, 2019, 36),

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self-sacrifice as moral ideals rooted in biological or ontological difference. In this view, women's supposed moral distinctiveness becomes a justification for their continued marginalization under the guise of moral superiority (Gilligan 1982). By contrast, feminist ethics rejects these essentialist frameworks and instead critically examines how power, gender, and systemic inequality shape moral discourse. Feminist ethicists aim to dismantle the patriarchal foundations of traditional ethics and reconstruct moral theory around the lived experiences and struggles of marginalized groups. They prioritize justice, autonomy, and structural critique over the romanticization of gendered moral traits (Held 2006). In this sense, while feminine ethics affirms women's roles within an existing moral order, feminist ethics seeks to transform that order altogether.

[20] - The primary religious texts of Islam are: First, *the Qur'an,* which is considered the verbatim word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and is the ultimate source of authority and guidance in Islam. Second, *The Sunnah*, which includes the sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, serves as a model for applying Islamic principles in daily life. Third, *the Hadith*, which contains reports on the actions, sayings, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, offers further guidance and clarification on various aspects of Islamic teachings and practices.

implicitly positioning it as immune to the patriarchal distortions that feminist scholars attribute to Hadith and *figh*. This move of elevating the Qur'an while dismissing the Hadith disrupts the epistemological hierarchy of Islamic jurisprudence, which traditionally considers the Hadith and *Sunnah* as integral to legal and theological authority (Brown, 2009). Islamic feminists thus redefine the interpretative framework of Islamic law by isolating the Qur'an from its intertextual relationship with other sources, a departure from the classical tradition of *tafsīr*, which emphasizes the necessity of holistic interpretation (*tafsīr al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an*), wherein verses contextualize one another (Ibn Kathīr, 1373/1999).

This rejection of the Hadith arises from the belief that it is fundamentally patriarchal, a view exemplified by Mernissi's critique of the methods used to authenticate Hadith, which she argues have been historically manipulated to reinforce male dominance (Mernissi, 1987). Feminist scholars contend that Hadith, *figh*, and *Sunnah* enshrine misogynistic interpretations that cannot be disentangled from the interpretative biases of early male scholars. Wadud explicitly argues that these texts have functioned as tools to silence dissenting voices and reinforce patriarchal structures (Wadud, 2013). However, while rejecting the Hadith as a reliable authority, Islamic feminists paradoxically invoke it selectively when it serves their argument, particularly in cases where Hadith supports a more progressive reading of women's rights.

This contradiction is particularly evident in their treatment of *shahādah* (women's legal testimony). The Qur'an (2:282) states, "And get two witnesses out of your own men. And if there are not two men (available), then a man and two women, such as you agree for witnesses, so that if one of them (two women) errs, the other can remind her." Traditional readings interpret this as establishing a legal hierarchy in which a woman's testimony is valued at half that of a man. Instead of engaging in a fundamental reinterpretation of the verse itself, Islamic feminists

employ two mitigative strategies. First, as seen in Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman*, they attribute the directive to socio-historical contingencies, arguing that the verse merely reflected seventh-century Arabian social conditions in which women had limited financial experience (Wadud, 1999). By this logic, the verse does not represent an eternal legal principle but rather a temporary regulation that can be discarded in modern contexts. Second, they attempt to counterbalance the Qur'anic verse by invoking Hadith selectively. In *Believing Women in Islam*, Barlas paradoxically draws upon Hadith—despite rejecting its theological authority—to argue that Islam historically valued women's testimony. She defends this claim by noting that many Hadith narrators were women (Barlas, 2019), an argument that presupposes that Hadith can be authoritative when it aligns with feminist readings but can be dismissed when it contradicts them.

Barlas highlights the fact that a significant number of Hadith narrations were transmitted by women, suggesting that early Islamic tradition regarded women as reliable sources of religious knowledge (Barlas, 2019). One of the most notable female transmitters was Ayesha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, whose contributions to Hadith scholarship and Islamic jurisprudence remain widely acknowledged. Classical scholars, such as Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani in *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*, emphasized Ayesha's role as a legal and theological authority, stating that "her knowledge surpassed that of many of the male Companions" (Ibn Hajar, 1379/1960). However, Ayesha's exceptional status raises an important question: Was women's intellectual authority broadly recognized in early Islamic discourse, or was Ayesha an anomaly whose influence was uniquely tied to her proximity to the Prophet?

The prominence of Ayesha as a Hadith narrator is often cited as evidence that Islam values women's intellectual contributions. However, this argument requires further scrutiny.

Ayesha's credibility as a religious knower was directly linked to her position as the Prophet's wife, which afforded her a level of influence not accessible to other women. This specificity raises a methodological concern: does the recognition of Ayesha's contributions signify a broader trust in women's memory and intellectual agency, or does it merely establish an exception to the norm? The Qur'anic verse Al-Ahzab 32 explicitly distinguishes the Prophet's wives from other women: "O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any other women" (Q. 33:32). This differentiation suggests that Ayesha's religious and scholarly authority cannot be generalized to Muslim women at large but was rather a unique function of her status within the prophetic household. Moreover, while Ayesha's narrations were widely accepted, Hadith literature also contains accounts that undermine women's epistemic reliability, such as the widely cited report in Sahih Bukhari (304) and Sahih Muslim (80) stating that women's testimony is inherently deficient. This contradiction demonstrates that Islamic tradition is not monolithic in its treatment of women's knowledge, and feminist scholars must engage with this tension rather than selectively invoking Hadith when convenient.

The acknowledgment of female Hadith transmitters, while significant, does not resolve the broader tensions within gendered epistemology in Islamic thought. If women's credibility is established through their role as Hadith transmitters, then the selective engagement with Hadith by feminist scholars presents a methodological inconsistency. If, however, women's authority is only deemed legitimate in exceptional circumstances, such as Ayesha's unique proximity to the Prophet, then the implications for gender equality within Islamic hermeneutics remain contested. This tension reflects the core dilemma of feminist *tafsīr*: while attempting to construct a Qur'anic framework that affirms gender justice, its ideological selectivity introduces internal contradictions that challenge both theological coherence and interpretative consistency.

Islamic feminist *tafsīr*'s selective engagement with Qur'anic and Hadith sources raises significant epistemological concerns regarding its legitimacy as an Islamic legal method. While classical *figh* also employed selectivity, it did so through a structured synthesis of Qur'anic injunctions, Hadith, and juristic reasoning, ensuring that legal rulings were internally coherent and systematically derived (Hallaq, 2009). In contrast, feminist *tafsīr* tends to isolate the Qur'an, selectively excluding Hadith when it contradicts gender equality, while invoking it when it supports feminist interpretations. This approach differs from classical jurisprudential methods, where textual coherence and legal precedent guided interpretation. Abou El Fadl critiques this methodological inconsistency, arguing that Islamic feminism's prioritization of ideological coherence over epistemological rigor distances it from traditional Islamic legal thought (Abou El Fadl, 2001). Consequently, the dual-layered selectivity—rejecting Hadith that conflicts with feminist principles while embracing Hadith that aligns with gender-egalitarian ethics—ultimately undermines the hermeneutic legitimacy of feminist *tafsīr* within Islamic jurisprudence.

Classical scholars resolved tensions between Qur'anic verses and Hadith narrations by treating Hadith as a necessary supplement to the Qur'an, clarifying ambiguities and providing jurisprudential applications. For instance, Al-Shafi'i (d. 820 CE) argued that the Qur'an and Hadith are interdependent, stating, "Every legal injunction in the Qur'an finds its explanation in the *Sunnah*" (Shafi'i, *Al-Risala*). If Islamic feminists reject this interdependency, they must offer an alternative methodology for deriving Islamic law and ethics that does not rely on Hadith-based jurisprudence. However, no feminist *tafsīr* has successfully articulated a Qur'an-only legal framework that both preserves the core tenets of Islam while rejecting Hadith as a legal source. This contrasts with historical reformist movements—such as the Mu'tazilites and Muhammad Abduh—which engaged in systematic theological inquiry and rationalist reinterpretation of

Islamic texts. In contrast, feminist *tafsīr*'s exclusion of Hadith lacks a structured alternative epistemology, making its theological foundation unstable. This absence of methodological consistency raises critical questions about whether feminist *tafsīr* represents a genuine exegetical recovery of Islamic principles or an ideological reconstruction of Islamic discourse.

Selectivity Between Qur'anic Verses

Islamic feminism operates within a framework of ideological selectivity, rejecting non-Qur'anic sources while prioritizing certain Qur'anic verses over others. This interpretative strategy allows feminist scholars to construct a gender-egalitarian Islam that aligns with contemporary discourses on women's rights but distances feminist *tafsīr* from the traditional epistemic foundations of Islamic legal thought (Abou El Fadl, 2001). The approach carries profound theological implications. If "divine revelation is absolute and immutable" (Barlas, 2019, 46), then selectively recontextualizing Qur'anic verses to align with modern ethical standards raises fundamental concerns about theological integrity. Although Barlas maintains that the Qur'an is "self-sufficient in conveying gender justice" (Barlas, 2019, 35), she frequently classifies certain verses as historically contingent rather than engaging with their deeper theological meaning. This interpretive move raises a critical tension: while asserting that gender justice is inherent to the Qur'an, Barlas and other Islamic feminists often rely on external ideological frameworks—such as liberal equality or human rights discourses—to justify their readings. Such frameworks tend to override intra-textual analysis, suggesting that the hermeneutic process is shaped more by modern ethical commitments than by the internal logic of the Qur'anic text itself. While this dynamic is common in feminist scriptural reformations across religious traditions, it presents a particular problem for Islamic feminism. This is because Islamic feminists typically ground their project in a specific historical and cultural context, often treating

it as the authentic and authoritative basis for Muslim women's identities. If that identity is anchored in Islamic revelation, then importing external ideological priorities risks undermining the theological coherence and internal legitimacy of the project. In other words, using secular feminist ethics to reinterpret sacred texts while simultaneously claiming rootedness in divine revelation generates a methodological contradiction that is difficult to reconcile.

Islamic feminist interpretation is shaped by what Paul Ricoeur calls a "fore-conception," where pre-existing ideological commitments determine how scholars such as Wadud and Barlas approach the Qur'an. Ricoeur argues that "interpretation is shaped as much by the interpreter's presuppositions as by the text itself" (Ricoeur, 1976, 43), highlighting the extent to which meaning is contingent upon external frameworks. By emphasizing verses that appear egalitarian and reframing hierarchical ones as time-bound relics, Islamic feminists impose modern gender ideals onto the text. While claiming to "correct male-dominated exegesis" (Wadud, 1999, xii), the selective omission or reinterpretation of problematic passages undermines the claim to a hermeneutic firmly rooted in classical Islamic methodologies.

Wadud's hermeneutics of *tawḥīd*[21] provides the foundation for her interpretative approach, positioning divine unity as the organizing principle of Qur'anic exegesis. She states, "I propose a hermeneutics of *tawḥīd* to emphasize how the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts. Rather

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[21] - Amina Wadud's hermeneutics of *tawḥīd* is a theological method of Qur'anic interpretation grounded in the Islamic principle of divine unity, which she uses as both a metaphysical and ethical foundation for gender justice. Wadud argues that because *tawḥīd* affirms the absolute unity and justice of God, it inherently rejects all forms of human domination, including patriarchal authority. Therefore, men and women must be understood as equal moral agents before God. From this premise, Wadud contends that any interpretation of the Qur'an that legitimizes male superiority violates the essential message of divine justice. She thus advocates a holistic and coherent reading of the Qur'an, one that interprets verses in relation to one another (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān*) and prioritizes the text's overarching commitment to justice and reciprocity between genders. In doing so, she challenges atomistic or historically patriarchal readings and insists on the moral unity of the Qur'anic message. This approach, which she terms a hermeneutics of *tawḥīd*, is central to her effort to construct an egalitarian Islamic theology (Wadud, 1999).

than simply applying meanings to one verse at a time, with occasional references to various verses elsewhere, a framework may be developed that includes a systematic rationale for making correlations and sufficiently exemplifies the full impact of Qur'anic coherence" (Wadud, 1999, xii). According to Wadud, this approach seeks to balance the Qur'an's universal moral vision with its contextual specificity, recognizing that its seventh-century Arabian backdrop informs Qur'anic injunctions but does not confine its ethical imperatives. Through this framework, feminist *tafsīr* attempts to harmonize seemingly contradictory verses into a coherent egalitarian whole.

However, this hermeneutical principle leads to the marginalization of divine verses that explicitly establish gender hierarchy, such as those concerning inheritance (Q. 4:11), legal testimony (Q. 2:282), and male authority (Q. 4:34). By prioritizing universal moral themes over particular legal prescriptions, feminist *tafsīr* constructs an alternative interpretative hierarchy, where verses affirming gender equality are elevated as universal principles while hierarchical verses are reinterpreted as historical directives with limited contemporary applicability. Rhouni critiques this approach, stating that "the major flaw of Islamic feminism is its central assumption of recovering gender equality as a norm established by the Qur'an, ignoring the way Qur'anic discourse contains at least two competing voices regarding women, one egalitarian (ethical) and the other hierarchical (practical)" (Rhouni, 2009, 35). While Islamic feminists do not dismiss hierarchical verses entirely, their methodology often involves reframing, downplaying, or neutralizing their theological significance, privileging an egalitarian reading that may not align with the classical Islamic tradition.

Islamic feminist readings of Qur'an 2:282, which addresses the testimony of women in financial transactions, illustrate the strategic reinterpretation used to align Qur'anic injunctions

with contemporary gender discourses. The verse states: “if two men be (not at hand) then a man and two women, of such as you approve as witnesses, so that if the one errs (*tudilla*), the other can remind her.” Classical exegetes, including Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), understood this legal distinction as an intrinsic Qur’anic principle reflective of gendered roles in Islamic law. However, Wadud challenges this interpretation, arguing that the verse must be understood within the socio-historical context of pre-Islamic Arabia, where women had limited exposure to financial dealings. Fazlur Rahman (1982) extends this argument, suggesting that since women’s financial literacy has evolved, their testimony should now hold equal weight to men’s. However, this interpretation overlooks the fact that the verse’s legal structure is not framed as a temporary measure but as a divine injunction. The absence of internal Qur’anic abrogation (*naskh*) suggests that this ruling was not intended to be time-bound, making its dismissal problematic within an Islamic theological framework.

A similar strategy of reinterpretation is employed with Qur’an 4:34, which states, “Men have authority (*qawwāmūn*) over women because Allah has preferred some over others and because they spend from their wealth.” Classical *tafsīr* overwhelmingly interprets *qawwāmūn* as establishing male guardianship, wherein men are responsible for the financial and social well-being of women. Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) affirms that men’s financial responsibility legitimizes their hierarchical authority. However, Barlas challenges this reading, arguing that *qawwāmūn* does not imply male superiority but rather caretaking responsibility, reframing the verse as a moral duty rather than a hierarchical distinction (Barlas, 2019). The issue here is that Barlas’s reinterpretation is not grounded in an internal Qur’anic contradiction but in an external feminist framework, requiring a radical redefinition of *qawwāmūn* to fit an egalitarian reading.

Martin Heidegger's assertion that "Language is the house of Being" (Heidegger,1947) highlights the ontological crisis that arises from drastic shifts in Qur'anic meaning. For Heidegger, language is not merely a tool of communication but the medium through which reality is disclosed. When *tafsīr* radically alters Qur'anic meaning to align with ideological imperatives, it destabilizes the Being of the text itself, severing it from its historical and linguistic roots. This echoes what Heidegger calls "the forgetting of Being"—when a fundamental structure, such as language, is manipulated in a way that estranges it from its original essence.

Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) provides further insight into the ontological crisis inherent in radical Qur'anic reinterpretation. Sartre argues: "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre, 1943). Islamic feminists who selectively retain egalitarian verses while reinterpreting or dismissing hierarchical ones engage in bad faith by pretending that the Qur'an is inherently egalitarian while actively reconstructing its meaning. This is an act of self-deception, as it assumes that the Qur'anic text contains a latent egalitarian message that must simply be "retrieved," even as hierarchical elements are actively removed or reframed.

Jacques Derrida's concept of différance further exposes the instability of radically altering Qur'anic meaning. Derrida famously asserts: "There is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 1967). By claiming new meanings as the original intent, feminist *tafsīr* obscures the fact that meaning is being actively reconstructed, not merely "uncovered." This leads to an epistemological rupture: the Qur'an is no longer an anchor of meaning but instead becomes a text subject to perpetual revision. Derrida's critique suggests that such reinterpretations, while claiming to liberate the text, actually reveal the instability of the interpretive framework itself. If meanings can be

infinitely revised, then at what point does the Qur'an cease to be the Qur'an and become a discursive field shaped by contemporary ideological imperatives?

Mitigated-Altered Translations and the Theological Dilemma

Islamic feminists also employ translation—from Arabic to English—as a strategic tool to legitimize egalitarian interpretations of the Qur'an while linguistically modifying, softening, or recontextualizing verses that appear to support hierarchical gender roles. This selective process often involves interpretive bracketing, semantic reframing, and the insertion of explanatory language, which collectively reshape the Qur'an's textual meaning to align with contemporary feminist ethics. While such strategies are often justified as necessary to counter patriarchal misreadings, they also raise critical theological and epistemological concerns—particularly regarding the integrity of divine revelation and the authority to modify its linguistic form. These interventions challenge not only classical exegesis but also established Islamic epistemology, which refers to the traditional methods of knowledge production in Islam grounded in revelation (*wahy*), the Prophet's teachings (*Sunnah*), consensus (*ijmāʿ*), and analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) as preserved through centuries of juristic scholarship. Within this framework, the Qur'an is understood to be the immutable word of God, and its meaning is to be accessed through rigorous, historically developed methodologies that preserve its divine authority. If feminist translations undermine these epistemic commitments by prioritizing contemporary ideological goals over established modes of scriptural reasoning, then a fundamental question arises: does feminist *tafsīr* represent a reformed Islamic theology, or does it signify a departure from the very epistemological foundations that give the Qur'an its sacred status?

One of the primary mechanisms through which Islamic feminists reshape Qur'anic meaning is through selective translation. For example, the term *qiwāmah* in Qur'an 4:34, traditionally

understood to denote male authority over women, is frequently retranslated by feminist exegetes to mean "caretaking" or "financial responsibility" rather than leadership or superiority. Wadud and Barlas argue that *qiwāmah* linguistically means caretaking, and it is contingent on economic factors rather than an inherent male privilege. However, classical exegesis overwhelmingly supports the hierarchical linguistic meaning of the term, as seen in the interpretations of Ibn Kathīr (1373/1999) and Al-Ṭabarī (1987), who maintain that *qiwāmah* signifies male authority within the family structure. By modifying the translation of *qiwāmah*, feminist scholars do not merely reinterpret the verse; they alter its linguistic intensity, shifting its directive force to align with modern egalitarian ethics. This is problematic because it raises concerns about interpretive legitimacy—transforming a divine command into a negotiable moral suggestion may compromise the authority of the Qur'anic text itself. In doing so, such translations risk undermining the ontological weight of revelation by subordinating it to external ideological frameworks.

This issue is further complicated by the introduction of alternative feminist translations, such as Laleh Bakhtiar's controversial interpretation of Qur'an 4:34. The verse traditionally permits a husband to "strike" (*waḍribūhunna*) a disobedient wife as a final disciplinary measure. However, Bakhtiar translates *waḍribūhunna* as "go away from them," arguing that the root *ḍ-r-b* can also mean to separate or leave rather than to physically strike (Bakhtiar, 2007). While this translation attempts to neutralize the perceived endorsement of domestic violence, it diverges significantly from the mainstream linguistic and exegetical traditions. Some classical scholars, such as Al-Jassas (d. 981) and Ibn Ashur (d. 1973), contribute to the interpretation of the text by consistently explaining the linguistic meaning of "*waḍribūhunna*" as a form of corporal punishment. However, they *add* to the body of the text—which means it is not in the Arabic

version of the Qur'an—that there are restrictions in place to prevent excessive harm. The question remains: Is this an act of linguistic recovery or an ideological departure from the linguistic meaning of "*waḍribūhunna*"?

Beyond individual words, feminist translations employ interpretative strategies to shift the meaning of entire passages. The translation of *yufaddilu* in 4:34 serves as a compelling example. Classical readings translate it as "for some (men) are preferred by Allah over some (women)," reinforcing the hierarchical structure of gender roles in Islamic jurisprudence. Barlas acknowledges the hierarchical implications of the verse but attempts to justify them through a circular argument. She states: "What God preferred/bestowed on some of them over others and with what they spent of their money" (Barlas, 2014, 218). She argues that this preference is not inherent superiority but a reference to economic responsibilities: "Since a man gets twice a woman's share in inheritance in many cases, it is reasonable to assume that these are the resources to which the verse (*āyah*) is referring; and this may also explain why men in certain capacities (sons, brothers) are allowed to inherit twice a woman's share" (Barlas, 2014, 214). However, this reasoning is circular, as it presupposes that men are preferred because they spend their money, while their financial advantage itself stems from the fact that God has granted them double the inheritance share. In other words, Barlas' argument suggests that men are given economic responsibilities because they are preferred, and they are preferred because they have economic responsibilities, creating a self-referential justification rather than an independent theological explanation.

The issue of selective translation extends beyond feminist *tafsīr* and raises broader concerns regarding linguistic methodology. Traditional Arabic linguists and Islamic feminists differ significantly in their approach to Qur'anic translation. Classical scholars emphasize *tafsīr* al-

Qur'an *bi'l*-Qur'an (interpreting the Qur'an through itself), *asbāb al-nuzūl* (the context of revelation), and *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) to determine the meaning of contested words. In contrast, feminist scholars often rely on semantic flexibility and historical contextualization to reinterpret verses. This methodological divergence is crucial, as it determines whether feminist *tafsīr* is perceived as a legitimate form of Qur'anic exegesis or an ideologically driven reconstruction. Because of this particular problem—where sacred texts are reshaped to fit external moral frameworks—the tension between religion and feminism remains fundamentally unresolved. This impasse highlights either the epistemic conflict within feminist reinterpretation or the inflexibility of the religious text itself to accommodate modern conceptions of justice and morality, making true reconciliation between the two frameworks increasingly difficult.

The theological implications of feminist translation strategies are profound. If Qur'anic verses related to gender roles are retranslated to differ from historical linguistic meaning, does this imply that other legal injunctions—such as those on inheritance, testimony, and even ritual obligations—are equally mutable? If feminist *tafsīr* adopts historical evolution as a central principle, it challenges the notion of the Qur'an as a timeless, divinely revealed text, raising fundamental questions about the limits of translation of Islamic theology. The implications of these translational shifts are profound. If the Qur'an is treated as a divine text, then altering its linguistic intensity, directive force, or hierarchical structures compromises its function as a source of immutable guidance. However, if one argues that religious texts must evolve to remain relevant, then the divine authority of the Qur'an becomes contingent on human-ideologized translation, thereby shifting its epistemological status from a revealed scripture to a historically contingent text. This tension remains unresolved within feminist *tafsīr*, reflecting broader debates on the intersection of religious authority, linguistic accuracy, and ideological adaptation

in contemporary Qur'anic exegesis (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Sachedina, 2009). These debates question who has the authority to reinterpret sacred texts, how far interpretation can go before it becomes distortion, and whether ethical transformation is possible without destabilizing the textual sanctity of revelation. At their core, such debates reveal the difficulty of balancing fidelity to divine speech with the evolving demands of moral and social justice.

Imaginary Islam: The Construction of an Idealized Religious Framework:

Islamic feminists' construction of the linguistic meaning and interpretation of the Qur'anic verses what can be termed "Imaginary Islam" because it emphasizes egalitarian Qur'anic verses while downplaying or reinterpreting those that reinforce gender hierarchy. This process involves selectively highlighting historical contingencies, such as the Prophet's egalitarian ethos, while marginalizing the patriarchal norms that found their way into classical jurisprudence. Wadud asserts that "the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts" (Wadud 1999, xii), positing an intrinsic Qur'anic egalitarianism that selectively deemphasizes legal rulings on inheritance, testimony, and guardianship. These moves strive to present an idealized, modern-friendly version of Islam that deflects critiques of patriarchy. Yet they also introduce what Talal Asad calls "a strategic discursive shift" aimed at "making Islam speak the language of liberal modernity" (Asad 2003, 226).

This interpretive process extends beyond feminist movements and can be found in political and reformist discourses that align Islam with democracy, human rights, or individual freedoms. Proponents of so-called Islamic democracy frequently cite the Qur'anic concept of *shūrā* (consultation) as evidence of proto-democratic governance, overlooking that jurists like Al-Mawardi defended a hierarchical polity grounded in divine sovereignty rather than popular

consent. Similar selectivity appears in arguments for Islamic human rights, which highlight verses lauding human dignity but quietly neutralize rulings on apostasy or *ḥudūd* punishments[22]. Mahmood cautions that "recasting Islam into a form recognizable to Western liberalism risks erasing the very difference that Islamic practice embodies" (Mahmood 2005, 21), underscoring how this maneuver can inadvertently replicate the same Orientalist binaries it seeks to undermine. By reshaping Islam to fit liberal norms of autonomy, freedom, and equality, such efforts risk reproducing the binary opposition between a 'rational, emancipated West' and a 'backward, oppressive Islam'—a dichotomy historically used to justify colonial domination. In doing so, they obscure the complex, embodied forms of agency that exist within Islamic traditions and reduce Muslim subjectivity to a reflection of Western moral ideals.

When applied to legal rulings, Imaginary Islam affects the interpretation of marriage, inheritance, and testimony laws. In classical *figh*, a woman's testimony is often deemed half that of a man's in financial matters (Q. 2:282), while inheritance laws allocate men twice the share of women (Q. 4:11). Feminist *tafsīr* reinterprets these rules as "time-bound," arguing that they lack normative force in modern contexts. This approach allows for legal reform without openly rejecting the Qur'an. However, Fazlur Rahman critiques such piecemeal reinterpretation as "failing to formulate a coherent rethinking of the entire system of Sharia" (Rahman 1982, 45). Wael Hallaq describes this broader trend as an "epistemic rupture," insisting that "once Sharia is

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[22] - Ḥudūd punishments refer to fixed penalties in Islamic law that are considered divinely mandated, prescribed for specific offenses such as theft (*sariqah*), adultery (*zinā*), false accusation of unchastity (*qadhf*), consumption of alcohol (*shurb al-khamr*), highway robbery (*ḥirābah*), and, in some interpretations, apostasy (*ridda*). The term *ḥadd* (plural: *ḥudūd*) literally means "limit" or "boundary," indicating the limits set by God that should not be transgressed. Because these punishments are rooted in Qur'anic and prophetic texts, they are traditionally regarded as immutable and not subject to human reinterpretation. The penalties—such as amputation, flogging, or execution—reflect their theological gravity and symbolic function as markers of divine justice. As Wael Hallaq explains, *ḥudūd* occupy a central place in the structure of classical *Sharīʿah* due to their sacrosanct origin, yet their application has historically been tempered by strict evidentiary requirements and procedural safeguards (Hallaq, 2009).

removed from its holistic, discursive context, it ceases to function as an internally coherent moral-legal system" (Hallaq 2013, 210). Under these conditions, critics question whether the reinterpretation process aligns with legitimate Islamic reform or merely reconstructs Islam to match external ideological imperatives.

The postcolonial impetus behind Imaginary Islam is also significant. Scholars in Muslim-majority societies often struggle against Western hegemonic narratives that depict Islam as monolithic and authoritarian. Constructing an Islam perfectly compatible with modern liberal ideals counters these narratives, yet it can downplay problematic historical rulings that do not align with contemporary ethics. Muhammad Abduh's efforts at modernist *ijtihād*, for instance, sought to rationalize Qur'anic commands by focusing on *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* (higher objectives). But Abduh "did not dismiss the value of classical jurisprudence or the binding nature of fundamental Qur'anic ordinances" (Kerr 1966, 74), marking a contrast with some Islamic feminist approaches that confine patriarchal verses to historical irrelevance. The question thus emerges: Is Imaginary Islam a necessary tactic for Muslim reformers to assert agency in the face of Western cultural dominance, or does it constitute an epistemological break from historical Islam's theological and legal foundations?

Imaginary Islam can indeed serve emancipatory ends, especially in resisting authoritarian interpretations and advocating for women's rights, democratic governance, or universal human dignity. Yet its reliance on strategic omission and selective reinterpretation can generate theological instability: if certain verses are declared obsolete or contextual, one might ask whether the entire scriptural corpus is open to the same reconfiguration. Proponents of this discourse argue that "Islamic law has never been monolithic, and its adaptability is precisely its strength" (Wadud 1999, 66). However, skeptics respond that situating Islamic reform primarily

in external ideologies risks undermining the epistemic authority of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. The tension between these positions encapsulates the paradox of Imaginary Islam, wherein Muslim thinkers strive to maintain scriptural legitimacy while reshaping Islamic orthodoxy to fit contemporary moral frameworks.

Ultimately, Imaginary Islam underscores the challenge of balancing reinterpretation and authenticity. Postcolonial critics highlight that any shift away from inherited *figh* norms might be construed as capitulating to Western standards. On the other hand, ignoring the ethical demands of modernity can marginalize Islam from the broader global discourse on human rights and gender equality. Imaginary Islam becomes both an instrument of empowerment and a site of potential co-optation, reflecting "the precarious space Muslim reformers occupy between inherited tradition and modern exigencies" (Mahmood 2005, 38). Whether Islamic feminism and broader reformist movements can navigate this space without alienating the textual and juristic foundations that give Islam its distinctive identity remains an open question—one that will likely define the trajectory of Islamic thought in the twenty-first century.

Strategic Accommodation and the Limits of Islamic Feminism:

Islamic feminism's insistence on reinterpreting the Qur'an to establish gender equality as a religious norm rather than a socio-political ideal risks transforming into an ideological framework that stifles critical analysis and generates paradoxical narratives (Rhouni, 2009, 254). This approach often relies on selective exegesis, mitigation strategies, and emotional appeals rather than rigorous theological and historical analysis. (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002; Rhouni, 2009).

Emotional arguments are strategically deployed to bolster the case for gender equality within Islam. Emotional reasoning, as Groarke (2010) suggests, fosters an expectation that individuals maintain a positive outlook regardless of the complexities or contradictions they encounter. This places undue pressure on Muslim women to adopt an optimistic stance toward their rights while discouraging critical engagement with problematic aspects of the Islamic tradition. Without such emotional appeals, the Islamic feminist paradigm may be more open to critique from devout believers, who sometimes reject or criticize their perspectives. To circumvent this challenge, Islamic feminists frame their discourse around the existential threat of Westernization and the erosion of Muslim identity. This strategy is evident in the works of Badran (2005, 2008, 2013), Mahmood (2005), and Barlas (2013, 2016, 2019), who argue that secularism and Western hegemony have conspired to reshape Islamic societies in ways that necessitate an Islamic response to gender justice.

The Islamic revival movement, which gained momentum in the latter half of the twentieth century, has played a critical role in shaping the reception of feminist discourse in Muslim-majority societies. The widespread perception that critiques of gender inequality are inherently linked to secularist or Western agendas has become an entrenched belief, often wielded as a rhetorical weapon to discredit alternative feminist frameworks (Mahmood, 2005). Ironically, this discourse overlooks the political and financial support that Western powers, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, have provided to Islamic revivalist movements (Tibi, 2012; Roy, 2004). The West's support for figures such as Margot Badran, Saba Mahmood, and Asma Barlas in the establishment of Islamic feminist scholarship reveals a strategic alignment that complicates the anti-Western rhetoric often associated with these movements.

While Islamic feminists continue to frame their project as a resistance to Western hegemony, their institutional and intellectual legitimacy often derives from Western academic and political structures (Göle, 1996; Tohidi, 2003). The fear induced by the Islamic revival movement regarding secularism and Westernization has thus been internalized within the social consciousness of Muslim communities, to the extent that it functions as a dogmatic belief rather than a historically contingent reality.

This contradiction—wherein Islamic feminists simultaneously reject Western influence while benefiting from its institutional support—raises critical questions about the coherence and authenticity of the movement. If Islamic feminism is indeed an organic response to the conditions of Muslim women, why does it require the backing of Western institutions for its survival and legitimacy? And if gender justice is to be found within Islam, why does its articulation necessitate an extensive reconfiguration of traditional texts and doctrines? These questions point to a deeper issue: the extent to which Islamic feminism is a genuinely emancipatory project or merely a reformist endeavor that aligns itself with existing power structures rather than challenging them.

Their argument often hinges on the emotional appeal that Muslim women must safeguard their religious and cultural identities from Western influence. This creates an ideological framework in which pursuing gender justice outside the bounds of Islamic discourse is framed as an existential threat, overshadowing the structural inequalities Muslim women face. The consequence is that Islamic feminists engage in a form of toxic positivity, urging Muslim women to find solace in the egalitarian verses of the Qur'an rather than addressing the tangible socio-political challenges they face.

Barlas herself dismisses secular and feminist critiques of Islamic feminism as being rooted in "bad faith," stating, "And as for secular/feminist criticisms of Muslim and Islamic feminists, many of these reveal what I can only call bad faith" (Barlas, 2014, 242). However, this assertion amounts to an *ad hominem* fallacy—rather than engaging with the substantive critiques leveled against Islamic feminism, she discredits the intentions of secular feminists, thus discouraging critical engagement. Labeling critiques of religious texts as Islamophobic or as motivated by bad faith is an emotional tactic aimed at shielding Islamic feminism from scrutiny. This rhetorical strategy leads to a self-reinforcing ideology where any critique is dismissed as inherently biased, further entrenching toxic positivity within the movement.

The strategic use of emotional arguments, selective interpretations, and mitigation techniques constructs a manipulative and biased framework that sustains an oppressive narrative on women's rights. Many Muslim women struggle with conflicting emotions between their desire for equality and their religious convictions. Islamic feminists claim that their approach alleviates these dilemmas by offering a religiously sanctioned pathway to equality. However, in reality, their methods serve to stifle more radical feminist critiques that call for secular principles—such as freedom and equality—as the most justifiable foundations for women's rights. The insistence on remaining within an Islamic framework prevents Muslim women from critically examining whether religious doctrines themselves may be sources of gender-based oppression.

Islamic feminism provides ideological cover for the Islamic revival movement by helping it disassociate itself from religious extremism while maintaining its core theological commitments. By promoting the idea that women's rights are fully or must be fully realized within Islam, the revivalist movement can deflect criticism of patriarchal structures while simultaneously reinforcing its authority. Additionally, Islamic feminism bolsters the revivalist movement's

longstanding conspiracy narrative—rooted in its origins in the 1920s—that external forces, particularly secularism and Westernization, seek to dismantle Islam from within. This contradiction reinforces the perception that gender equality is a foreign imposition rather than an intrinsic Islamic principle. At the same time, it paradoxically upholds the claim that true gender equality—often equated with secular gender equality—is, in fact, a purely Islamic concept.

The consequences of this alliance between Islamic feminism and the revivalist movement are far-reaching. Not only does it obstruct genuine feminist efforts that challenge patriarchal norms, but it also legitimizes a framework that demands women's subjugation be accepted under the guise of religious identity. By framing secular feminism as a threat to Muslim identity and Islamic feminism as the only acceptable form of gender justice, this discourse limits the possibilities for Muslim women to engage in alternative feminist traditions that do not rely on theological justification. In doing so, Islamic feminism paradoxically strengthens the very patriarchal structures it claims to challenge.

Beyond the Islamic revivalist movement, Islamic feminism is used by the state to keep gender inequality as an intact political tool of oppression. Empirical case studies show how governments in Muslim-majority countries have strategically used Islamic feminism to promote state-controlled gender policies while suppressing more radical feminist critiques. Iran provides a striking example of this phenomenon. Under the Islamic Republic, the state has selectively integrated Islamic feminist rhetoric to justify incremental legal reforms while upholding male guardianship laws and restrictive family codes. In the 1990s and early 2000s, state-affiliated Islamic feminists argued that Islam permits women's participation in higher education, employment, and limited political representation—but within strict Islamic boundaries (Mir-Hosseini, 2011). While the Iranian government allowed women greater access to public life, it

simultaneously reinforced laws that restricted women's autonomy, such as mandatory *hijab* laws and discriminatory divorce rights.

This pattern of selective reform is not unique to Iran. In Malaysia, the state-backed feminist organization Sisters in Islam (SIS) has successfully advocated for some of the women's rights within an Islamic framework, leading to reforms in domestic violence laws and child custody rights. However, SIS operates under significant legal constraints, as Malaysia's Islamic legal system prevents any direct challenges to Sharia-based rulings. This creates a limited space for activism, where feminist discourse must conform to state-approved interpretations of Islam to remain politically viable (Tohidi, 2003).

In Saudi Arabia, similar patterns emerge. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has initiated Vision 2030, a state-led modernization project that includes lifting the driving ban and increasing women's participation in the workforce. However, these reforms were introduced without dismantling the male guardianship system, which still requires women to obtain male permission for marriage, travel, and certain medical procedures (Al-Rasheed, 2021). Saudi feminists who challenge state-sanctioned discourse continue to face imprisonment and exile, highlighting the limitations of state-backed Islamic feminism as a means for true gender justice.

These case studies demonstrate how, when co-opted by the state, Islamic feminism becomes both a tool for limited advancements in certain women's rights and a mechanism for state control, obstructing deeper reforms that challenge politically and religiously sanctioned frameworks. While state actors invoke feminist interpretations to modernize legal codes and appeal to international human rights standards, they simultaneously use religious authority to regulate the scope of reform, ensuring that gender equality remains a controlled and conditional process.

While state-led Islamic feminism operates within institutional constraints, grassroots feminist movements offer an alternative approach to gender activism within Islam. Unlike state-sanctioned reformists, independent Islamic feminists must navigate religious authority without state protection, often positioning themselves against both conservative religious elites and secular feminist movements.

In Tunisia, grassroots feminists successfully campaigned for the repeal of gender-discriminatory inheritance laws, arguing that Qur'anic verses on inheritance must be understood in their historical context. Unlike state-controlled feminist discourse, which remains cautious of provoking religious backlash, Tunisian activists engaged in community-based debates with religious scholars, gaining grassroots support for legal change (Charrad, 2020).

Similarly, in Egypt, women-led religious study circles have emerged as a site of feminist engagement with Islamic jurisprudence. Scholars such as Asmaa Lamrabet advocate for a participatory approach to *tafsīr*, where Muslim women actively contribute to reinterpretations of Qur'anic verses rather than relying on elite religious scholars. This movement challenges the traditional male monopoly on religious knowledge, but it also faces intense opposition from conservative institutions such as Al-Azhar, which seeks to maintain its authority over Islamic legal discourse (Lamrabet, 2016).

Grassroots Islamic feminists, therefore, face a dual challenge: establishing religious legitimacy while resisting both state co-optation and conservative backlash. Their work highlights the potential for Islamic feminism to exist beyond state-sanctioned limits, engaging directly with local communities rather than relying on institutionalized religious authority or being limited to academia.

Beyond Apologetics:

Islamic feminism, as it has evolved within both Western and non-Western academic and activist spaces, often operates within an apologetic framework—seeking to prove that Islam is inherently compatible with gender equality. While this approach has been instrumental in challenging orientalist narratives and advocating for some women's rights within Islamic discourses, it remains constrained by its dependence on an "equality-version" of Islam that must be defended rather than critically examined. This reliance on scriptural justification means that Islamic feminism often limits itself to reinterpretation rather than structural transformation. If feminist efforts are tied to proving that Islam is already egalitarian, does this prevent a deeper engagement with the material conditions that shape women's oppression in Muslim societies?

Post-Islamic feminism emerges as an attempt to move beyond this apologetic stance, shifting the focus from textual reinterpretation to structural critique. While Islamic feminism argues for gender justice within Islamic frameworks, post-Islamic feminism questions whether religious discourse itself can serve as an effective foundation for feminist struggles. This approach is not necessarily anti-religious, but rather disengages from the need to validate feminist arguments through scripture. Instead, it seeks to prioritize socio-economic and political realities over theological debates, focusing on issues such as legal reforms, labor rights, land ownership, and access to education.

The distinction between post-Islamic feminism and secular feminism in the region is often blurred, but there are key differences. Secular feminism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has historically been associated with state-led legal reforms, often implemented through top-down policies in countries like Tunisia, Morocco, and Turkey. These reforms, while

advancing women's rights, have often been instrumentalized by authoritarian governments to signal modernity while suppressing independent feminist activism. Post-Islamic feminism, by contrast, is not necessarily aligned with the state—it emerges from within Islamic feminist debates but argues that religious legitimacy should not be the primary concern of feminist movements. Rather than seeking reform through Qur'anic reinterpretation, it advocates for a broad-based feminist agenda that includes economic justice, environmental rights, and intersectional struggles that go beyond religious discourse.

This raises a critical question: If Islamic feminism moves beyond apologetics, should it abandon religious discourse completely, or does scripture still have a role in reform? While post-Islamic feminists critique the limitations of feminist *tafsīr*, they do not necessarily reject the importance of religious engagement altogether. Instead, they argue that scriptural discourse should not dictate the boundaries of feminist activism. For example, in Tunisia's inheritance law debates, both secular legal arguments and Islamic feminist reinterpretations were used to advocate for reform. This suggests that scripture can still serve as a reference point, but it should not be the sole or primary foundation for feminist struggles. A more pragmatic approach would recognize that while religious discourse can be strategically useful in conservative societies, feminist movements should also engage in secular legal activism, grassroots organizing, and economic advocacy.

One of the most frequent critiques of post-Islamic feminism is that it is a Western-centric concept that imposes secular feminist ideals onto Muslim societies. Critics argue that Islamic feminism is more authentic because it emerges from within the tradition, whereas post-Islamic feminism is seen as a rejection of Islamic identity in favor of Eurocentric feminist models. This critique, however, assumes that feminism itself must always be rooted in religious legitimacy to

be valid in Muslim societies. It overlooks the fact that many feminist movements in the Muslim world—including early anti-colonial women's movements in Algeria, Egypt, and Iran—were not necessarily framed in religious terms but rather focused on political sovereignty, economic independence, and legal reforms.

Moreover, the assumption that post-Islamic feminism is inherently Western overlooks the long-standing presence of post-religious feminist critiques across the Global South. Feminist movements in Latin America, for instance, have developed post-Catholic discourses that challenge the authority of religious institutions in shaping gender norms (Peña, 2007). Similarly, in South Asia, Dalit and Adivasi feminist activists have resisted Brahmanical patriarchy without limiting their efforts to Hindu reformist frameworks, instead articulating radical critiques grounded in their own socio-political realities (Rege, 1998; Menon, 2005). These examples demonstrate that feminist resistance to religious authority emerges organically within diverse historical contexts and is not exclusive to Western traditions of secularism or liberalism.

Instead of viewing post-Islamic feminism as an imported ideology, it may be more productive to see it as part of a broader decolonial feminist critique that seeks to disrupt hegemonic power structures—whether those structures are patriarchal religious authorities, authoritarian states, or neoliberal institutions. By refusing to limit feminist struggles to scriptural reinterpretation, post-Islamic feminism expands the scope of gender justice to include economic liberation, environmental justice, and transnational solidarity.

Ultimately, moving beyond apologetics does not mean rejecting Islam entirely, but rather questioning whether religious discourse should continue to define the parameters of feminist activism. Islamic feminism has played a crucial role in challenging male-dominated interpretations of Islam, but if feminist movements remain confined to religious legitimacy, they

risk reinforcing the very structures they seek to dismantle. A more expansive feminist approach would engage with historical materialism, intersectionality, and decolonial feminist strategies to address the root causes of women's oppression rather than continuously defending whether Islam is compatible with gender justice.

The challenge moving forward is to build feminist movements that can operate within and beyond religious discourse, recognizing that Islamic feminism and post-Islamic feminism are not mutually exclusive, but rather part of a larger, evolving feminist landscape that must adapt to changing political realities. Whether or not Islamic texts continue to play a role in feminist struggles should be a strategic decision rather than an ideological necessity—one that is shaped by local contexts, power structures, and the specific needs of women on the ground.

Possible Objections:

The first objection raised in defense of feminist *tafsīr* is that it does not erase verses that affirm gender hierarchy, but rather reinterprets them. Islamic feminists argue that their aim is not to ignore or dismiss inequality verses but to offer alternative readings that challenge centuries of patriarchal exegesis. They contend that the Qur'an, like any other religious scripture, is inherently open to human interpretation and that male scholars have historically imposed gendered readings that align with patriarchal social norms. Feminist scholars claim that their task is to correct these distortions by reading the Qur'an within its ethical, historical, and linguistic contexts. They emphasize that their hermeneutical approach seeks to recover the egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an that they believe has been overshadowed by androcentric commentaries. From this perspective, reinterpretation becomes an act of theological justice aimed at realigning the Qur'an with its intended moral message. However, this line of argument requires deeper scrutiny to

assess whether reinterpretation is a recovery of neglected meanings or a modern ideological reconstruction.

My counterargument acknowledges the interpretive nature of all textual engagement but highlights a crucial question: Is gender hierarchy in the Qur'an solely the product of patriarchal exegesis, or is it embedded in the text itself? The assumption that male exegetes distorted the original egalitarian message presumes that such a message existed in the first place and was deliberately overlooked. Yet the fact that feminist *tafsīr* often emphasizes certain verses while minimizing others raises concerns about selectivity and coherence. This leads to a fundamental theological and epistemological inquiry: is feminist *tafsīr* an act of recovery or one of ideological reconstruction? If the Qur'an's discourse on gender is internally hierarchical—present across multiple legal domains such as inheritance (Q. 4:11), testimony (Q. 2:282), and leadership (Q. 4:34)—then reinterpretation cannot simply claim to correct patriarchal readings. Even reformist scholars like Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida did not reject these hierarchies as later distortions but attempted to justify them through contextual pragmatism. Thus, feminist rereading risks altering not only the meaning of specific verses but also the broader epistemic foundations of Islamic law.

The methodological strategy of many feminist exegetes privileges contemporary ethical values—especially gender egalitarianism—over classical principles of Islamic jurisprudence. For instance, Wadud (1999) translates *qawwāmūn* in Q. 4:34 as "caretaking" rather than "authority," fundamentally shifting the verse's directive tone. Similarly, Barlas (2019) interprets the Qur'anic allowance of polygamy not as divine permission but as a reluctant concession, arguing that monogamy is ethically preferred. These interpretive moves, while aiming to advance gender justice, often depart from the established interpretive framework of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, which prioritizes

holistic coherence and internal consistency. Classical jurisprudence stresses that *tafsīr* must reconcile all relevant verses rather than privileging those that align with one's ethical predispositions. The feminist approach, in contrast, tends to isolate egalitarian passages and reinterpret hierarchical ones, creating an asymmetry in exegetical method. This leads to a theological paradox: if gender hierarchy is entirely a human imposition, why is it so prevalent across a wide spectrum of Qur'anic prescriptions? The issue is not simply about interpretation but about whether feminist *tafsīr* can offer a systematic hermeneutic rooted in Islamic epistemology rather than in external moral ideals.

A second objection from Islamic feminists is that *tafsīr* has always been historically contingent and responsive to its socio-political context. They argue that every generation of exegetes has interpreted the Qur'an through the lens of their own historical and cultural realities, and feminist *tafsīr* is just another step in that tradition. Classical *tafsīr*—they contend—was not static or monolithic but evolved over time to address new legal and social challenges. Islamic feminists thus position their interpretive efforts within this broader intellectual heritage, asserting that there is nothing inherently illegitimate about reinterpretation. By invoking the concept of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), they suggest that feminist exegesis is a continuation of Islamic interpretive dynamism rather than a deviation. Their claim rests on the idea that feminist *tafsīr* is not an imposition of Western ideals but a reclaiming of the Qur'an's ethical core in light of contemporary realities. However, this argument requires closer examination regarding the limits and methodologies of reinterpretation.

While it is historically accurate that *tafsīr* evolved across time, this defense does not adequately address the epistemological limits of reinterpretation. Historical examples of interpretive dynamism—such as the work of the Muʿtazilites—show that rationalism played a

critical role in classical Islamic thought. The Muʿtazilites employed *ʿaql* (reason) to reconcile Qur'anic revelation with ethical philosophy, particularly in issues of divine justice (*ʿadl*) and human accountability (Fakhry, 1997). Their theological model challenged literalist readings but remained committed to a coherent theological framework. Ibn Rushd (Averroes) similarly championed philosophical inquiry as a valid tool of *fiqh*, arguing in *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid* that legal rulings should be subject to rational analysis and not merely bound by traditional precedent (Ibn Rushd, 2001; Hourani, 1976). Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida later extended this rationalist tradition, attempting to reconcile Islamic law with modernity without dismantling its epistemological foundation (Kerr, 1966). These examples reveal that while reinterpretation has long existed in Islamic intellectual history, it was typically pursued through systematic reasoning, not selective reconstruction.

The distinction becomes sharper when comparing these historical models to contemporary feminist *tafsīr*. Thinkers like Ibn Rushd and Abduh engaged with both problematic and affirming texts to build internally consistent theological frameworks, whereas many Islamic feminists selectively emphasize egalitarian verses while reframing or minimizing hierarchical ones (Abduh, 1957; Ibn Rushd, 2001). This raises the question: is feminist *tafsīr* a legitimate continuation of Islamic *ijtihād*, or does it amount to a revisionist imposition of modern ideologies onto sacred text? Classical reformers typically sought to reinterpret Islamic ethics from within the tradition, maintaining respect for divine coherence and textual sanctity. In contrast, Islamic feminist hermeneutics often apply external feminist epistemologies to the Qur'an, framing justice through secular gender norms rather than through Qur'anic moral concepts. While feminist *tafsīr* may appear methodologically innovative, its reliance on external ethical standards blurs the line between Islamic reform and ideological reconstruction.

Furthermore, unlike classical reformers who affirmed the cohesiveness of divine revelation, many Islamic feminists implicitly challenge that coherence by classifying certain verses as incompatible with justice. This epistemological stance departs from historical reformists like Abduh and Ibn Rushd, who never questioned the ontological unity of Qur'anic law. Instead, they worked to reinterpret law while upholding the divine logic of scripture. Feminist scholars, on the other hand, often suggest that divine gender prescriptions are context-bound or ethically obsolete—thus requiring reinterpretation or rejection. This move shifts the discourse from hermeneutics to theological skepticism. If the Qur'an's ethical core is judged through an external feminist lens, the authority of the text becomes conditional upon its agreement with modern egalitarianism. Hence, while historical reinterpretation validates the existence of *tafsīr* pluralism, it also underscores the distinct methodological and epistemological tensions within Islamic feminist scholarship.

The third objection addressed by Islamic feminists is that the Qur'an's central message is justice (*ʿadl*), not literalism. They argue that divine justice should override literal readings of gender-differentiated verses. If some Qur'anic verses appear unjust by modern standards, then they should be reinterpreted to preserve the moral spirit of the text. Islamic feminists frequently assert that the Qur'an was revealed in a specific socio-historical context, and many of its legal rulings—such as those on inheritance, testimony, and marriage—should be treated as provisional responses to 7th-century Arabia rather than timeless mandates (Wadud, 1996). From this perspective, the pursuit of *ʿadl* requires reinterpreting verses that seem to endorse inequality in order to realize the Qur'an's ethical vision. However, this argument assumes an equivalence between justice and gender equality that is not universally accepted in the Islamic tradition.

My counterargument is that justice in Islamic theology (*ʿadl*) does not necessarily imply absolute equality (*musāwah*), but rather proportional fairness based on differentiated roles. Classical scholars such as al-Jaṣṣāṣ and Ibn Taymiyya viewed justice in gender relations as role-specific, where men and women had different but complementary responsibilities (al-Jaṣṣāṣ, 1994; Ibn Taymiyya, 2010). Their interpretations did not deny the ethical imperative of justice but rather rooted it in divine wisdom that assigned differential legal and social functions. Thus, to assert that justice entails modern gender equality requires demonstrating that this concept of *musāwah* is supported by Qur'anic ethics, not merely by contemporary norms. If feminist *tafsīr* equates justice with sameness, it risks projecting modern egalitarianism onto a scriptural tradition that traditionally emphasizes balance, complementarity, and proportional rights. Moreover, claiming that certain verses are "contextual" or "temporary" without applying the classical principles of *naskh* (abrogation) or *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* (objectives of law) further detaches feminist readings from established Islamic epistemology.

This brings us to a key theological problem: if some verses are dismissed as "temporary," what criteria are used to determine their temporality? Classical exegetes developed complex rules for *naskh* (abrogation) to determine whether a verse had been superseded by another, often through rigorous analysis of chronology, purpose, and jurisprudential necessity. Islamic feminist *tafsīr*, however, does not typically engage with this internal methodology; instead, it tends to categorize verses as context-bound based on contemporary ethical reasoning. While this may serve modern justice aims, it risks destabilizing the Qur'an's ontological authority by suggesting that its moral vision must be corrected rather than interpreted. If gender hierarchy is dismissed as a relic of historical patriarchy, what prevents other Qur'anic rulings—such as those related to *ḥudūd* punishments, inheritance, or ritual practices—from being similarly reclassified? Once

interpretive legitimacy is grounded in ideological alignment rather than theological consistency, the boundaries of Islamic legal reasoning become blurred. The challenge for Islamic feminism, then, is to distinguish between reform and revisionism without undermining the epistemological structure that grants the Qur'an its normative force.

The fourth objection in favor of Islamic feminism is that it serves as a necessary counterweight to the Islamic Revival Movement, which has reinforced patriarchal norms across many Muslim societies. Proponents argue that in an era where religious discourse is often monopolized by conservative ideologues, Islamic feminism offers an internal, culturally authentic means of advancing women's rights. By engaging religious texts from a feminist perspective, it avoids the pitfalls of secular feminism, which is frequently dismissed in Muslim contexts as a colonial or Western imposition. In this way, Islamic feminism constructs a narrative of resistance that operates within the symbolic boundaries of Islam, offering legitimacy while challenging exclusion. It provides women with theological tools to critique male authority without abandoning their religious identities. Strategically, this position allows feminist activists to mobilize within Muslim-majority societies where secular arguments may be politically untenable. However, while this pragmatic advantage is clear, it does not resolve the deeper epistemic contradictions embedded within the project.

My counterargument is that while Islamic feminism may function as a discursive alternative to revivalist orthodoxy, its emphasis on religious legitimacy often reaffirms the dominance of religion over gender discourse rather than liberating it. By insisting that feminism must derive its authority from Islamic sources, Islamic feminists risk narrowing the space of critique to what is theologically permissible—thereby excluding more radical feminist visions that challenge the religious framework altogether. This dynamic reinforces the epistemic

supremacy of religious law even when it is being challenged, creating a discursive loop where feminist critique remains subordinate to theological validation. Furthermore, this reliance on religious legitimacy has allowed authoritarian states—such as Iran and Saudi Arabia—to co-opt Islamic feminist language in order to promote limited reforms while maintaining broader patriarchal structures (Mir-Hosseini, 2011). In such cases, Islamic feminism becomes a tool of state legitimation rather than a force for systemic transformation. To be genuinely emancipatory, gender justice must extend beyond scriptural reinterpretation to confront legal, structural, and economic dimensions of inequality.

The fifth and final objection is that Islamic feminism has already contributed to tangible legal reforms. In countries like Tunisia, Morocco, and Malaysia, feminist activists and scholars have used Islamic arguments to challenge discriminatory laws and advocate for women's rights. These include reforms in areas such as polygamy, domestic violence, inheritance, and personal status codes. The success of these movements is cited as evidence that Islamic feminism is not merely a theoretical or apologetic project, but a practical and effective strategy for change. By grounding arguments in Islamic principles, these reforms gain cultural and religious legitimacy, making them more politically viable. Advocates argue that without Islamic feminism, such progress would not have been possible within the legal constraints of Muslim-majority societies. However, this practical success must be critically assessed in light of broader epistemological and political considerations.

My response is not to deny the legal advancements enabled by Islamic feminism, but to question whether these changes are deep and durable or merely incremental accommodations within a still-patriarchal legal framework. Many of these reforms have occurred in states with hybrid or secular legal systems, where constitutional law allows for the modification of religious

codes without theological consensus. In contrast, countries where Islamic law holds full legal authority—such as Saudi Arabia or Iran—have largely resisted feminist *tafsīr* arguments, despite their internal religious framing. This suggests that legal reform may depend more on political structures than on theological persuasion. Furthermore, even in cases where feminist-inspired legal changes have been implemented, they often remain vulnerable to reversal if they lack firm grounding in classical jurisprudential methods. If the ultimate goal is sustainable gender justice, then feminist *tafsīr* must demonstrate its ability to engage with the core epistemic tools of Islamic legal theory—not merely present alternative moral readings. Otherwise, Islamic feminism risks being viewed as a contingent strategy of reform, dependent on political climate rather than jurisprudential authority. In conclusion, Islamic feminist *tafsīr* represents a complex and often necessary intervention into patriarchal readings of the Qur'an, but it faces critical methodological and epistemological challenges. While reinterpretation is not foreign to Islamic tradition, it has historically been governed by systematic principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, rigorous *ijtihād*, and an internal commitment to textual coherence. Islamic feminist hermeneutics, by contrast, often rely on selective readings and external ethical frameworks that may conflict with foundational Islamic epistemology. The argument that justice must override textual literalism assumes a modern conception of justice not always shared by classical scholars, and it risks projecting secular liberal norms onto a sacred text. Moreover, the pragmatic utility of Islamic feminism—as a counter-discourse to revivalism or a tool for reform—does not resolve the tension between religious authority and feminist ethics. To establish itself as a legitimate reformist movement rather than an ideological accommodation, Islamic feminism must reckon with the very epistemic structures it seeks to transform. This requires moving beyond selective

reinterpretation toward a comprehensive engagement with Islamic legal and theological traditions—without which the promise of feminist *tafsīr* may remain unfulfilled.

Conclusion: The Future of Islamic Feminism and Alternative Trajectories

Islamic feminism has played a valuable role in challenging patriarchal exegesis and advocating for Muslim women's rights within religious frameworks. By invoking the ethical ideals of the Qur'an and questioning the legacy of male-dominated jurisprudence, Islamic feminists have contributed to incremental reforms and sparked broader conversations around gender dynamics in Muslim societies. However, the movement faces ongoing theological and epistemological dilemmas, particularly regarding its selective engagement with scriptural sources and reliance on modern feminist ethics that may not fully align with classical Islamic methodologies.

My analysis suggests that Islamic feminism must decide whether it is fundamentally a theological reinterpretation that can fit within classical *usul* al-*figh*, or an ideological reconstruction shaped predominantly by external egalitarian norms. If it pursues the former, it could engage more deeply with alternative frameworks such as *Muʿtazilite* rationalism or modernist *ijtihād*, thereby developing a coherent method for handling ostensibly hierarchical verses without defaulting to selective omission. If it leans toward the latter, it risks undermining its own religious legitimacy, particularly in contexts where states and conservative scholars monitor and limit any reform that strays too far from established orthodoxy.

Additionally, if the real goal is systemic change—beyond theological reinterpretation—Islamic feminism may need to embrace legal activism, economic empowerment, and secular policymaking as mandatory strategies. Relying solely on scriptural arguments in Muslim-

majority societies can lead to limited reforms that are easily reversed if political conditions shift. Nor does scriptural reinterpretation necessarily address class inequities, rural-urban divides, or the intersectional issues confronting Muslim women around the globe.

I conclude that Islamic feminism remains a pivotal movement precisely because it confronts two powerful discourses—Western feminist critiques of Islam and the Islamic revival movement—while attempting to ground gender justice in Islamic traditions. However, for this project to be fully transformative, Islamic feminists might consider adopting more holistic interpretive frameworks, greater precision in how they define key terms, and more direct collaboration with grassroots movements and secular legal advocates. A paradigm—post-Islamic feminism—that balances theological reinterpretation with structural reforms—informed by diverse models like modernist *ijtihād* or *Muʿtazilite* ethics—could offer a third path: one that neither apologetically reconfigures Islam to fit modern gender ideals, nor dismisses the rich legal and spiritual heritage of Islamic jurisprudence. Only through such a multi-layered approach might Islamic feminism fulfill its promise of achieving gender justice while retaining religious legitimacy in a rapidly changing world.

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The Epistemology of Modesty: How Fear-Based Morality Limits Women's Moral Agency

Introduction:

The Islamic revivalist emphasis on cultivating *ḥayā'* (shyness/modesty) and mandating the *hijab* as markers of female piety has profoundly shaped contemporary discourses on gender and morality in Muslim societies. Scholars like Saba Mahmood argue that *ḥayā'* is not merely an emotional state but a consciously cultivated moral virtue, one that women are encouraged to develop through religious training and practices like veiling. Within this framework, the *hijab* is presented both as a divine obligation and as the necessary external expression of internal piety. *Dāʿiyāt*[23] (female Islamic preachers) build upon this foundation by claiming that feminine morality depends upon two interdependent pillars: shyness and veiling. Women are taught that wearing the *hijab* is both a proof and a means of acquiring moral character, and that *ḥayā'* cannot emerge without cultivating fear of God (*taqwā*). As a result, the moral self becomes defined through compliance with gendered expectations that prioritize bodily modesty over critical ethical reflection.

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[23] -"*Dāʿiyāt*" (or *Dāʿiyāt*, plural of *Dāʿiyā*) refers to female Islamic preachers or religious instructors, particularly those involved in the Islamic Revival movement. They are often tasked with guiding other women toward pious conduct through religious teaching, emphasizing inner discipline, modesty (*ḥayā'*), and submission to God. *Dāʿiyāt* are not just transmitters of doctrine; they actively construct moral subjectivities by encouraging women to embody religious virtues through repeated bodily practices (e.g., wearing the hijab, lowering the gaze, avoiding mixed gatherings), emotional regulation (e.g., cultivating *taqwā*, or fear of God), and verbal discipline (e.g., avoiding gossip, controlling voice tone).

In Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005), *Dāʿiyāt* are shown to shape ethical selfhood through pedagogical methods that train women to become pious subjects by instilling religious affect and comportment. Importantly, Mahmood challenges liberal feminist notions of agency by showing that the actions of *Dāʿiyāt* —while conforming to patriarchal norms—can still be expressions of moral agency within their religious epistemologies. Thus, "*Dāʿiyāt*" are central to the moral infrastructure of Islamic revivalism, teaching that virtues like modesty, patience, and obedience are not inherent traits but are cultivated through rigorous training in fear-based morality and spiritual discipline.

This paper challenges the epistemic, psychological, and philosophical assumptions behind this model of virtue ethics. I argue that *ḥayā'* is not an authentic moral virtue but a preemptively imposed behavioral expectation rooted in coercion, fear, and epistemic submission. By relying on the fear of divine punishment—or more often, the fear of social surveillance—as a precondition for moral development, this model collapses virtue into obedience. Furthermore, it places an asymmetrical moral burden on women, falsely suggesting that public morality can be preserved through their bodily comportment alone. Drawing on Islamic feminist critiques, virtue ethics, epistemological theories of testimony and authority, and psychological research on fear and moral formation, I interrogate whether the traits promoted by revivalist discourse—*ḥayā'* and *hijab*—constitute genuine moral goods or instruments of gendered moral control.

The structure of the paper unfolds in five parts. First, I examine the concept of *ḥayā'* through psychological and feminist lenses, distinguishing between natural shyness and socially cultivated modesty. Second, I critique the foundational role assigned to fear of God (*taqwā*) as a motivational force in moral development, using philosophical and neuroscientific insights to assess whether fear can support stable moral agency. Third, I explore the phenomenon of third-hand moral knowledge, in which women adopt moral beliefs through inherited and mediated authority rather than through critical engagement. I argue that this epistemic structure undermines moral autonomy and reinforces obedience over reflection. Fourth, I analyze the *Dāʿiyāt'*s moral justification for *hijab* as a practical and religious safeguard, exposing the logical, ethical, and empirical flaws in the claim that *hijab* prevents sexual misconduct or fosters virtue. Finally, I present an alternative framework for understanding moral development—one that privileges autonomy, epistemic humility, critical reasoning, and justice over performative modesty and ritualized conformity.

By foregrounding the ethical and epistemic implications of how *ḥayā'* and *hijab* are taught and internalized, this paper contends that revivalist constructions of feminine morality fail to cultivate genuine virtue. Instead, they reproduce gendered hierarchies, suppress moral agency, and disguise social control as spiritual discipline. If morality is to be grounded in justice and ethical reflection, then it must be decoupled from fear, gendered obligation, and external signs of piety. True virtue must be cultivated through choice, not imposed as destiny.

The Meaning of Shyness and Acting Shyly:

The concept of shyness[24], particularly in its gendered form, has been shaped by religious, psychological, and social frameworks throughout history. Mahmood argues that *ḥayā'* (shyness or modesty) is a core virtue in Islamic feminine ethics, framing it not as a neutral personality trait but as an essential moral quality required of pious women. She asserts that "the virtue of shyness or modesty [*ḥayā'*] is a coveted virtue for pious Muslims in general and women in particular" (Mahmood, 2005, 158). Within this framework, *ḥayā'* is viewed as a spiritual disposition—manifested through humility, self-restraint, and a visibly modest demeanor. It is not something that arises naturally or incidentally, but rather something to be consciously cultivated through practice and discipline. Mahmood further argues that "all Islamic virtues are gendered," and that

[24] - Some common behaviors associated with shyness include hesitating before engaging in new activities, preferring to observe others before participating, taking longer to adjust to unfamiliar people and environments, and exhibiting quiet or introverted tendencies. Shy individuals often experience physiological symptoms such as blushing, sweating, rapid heartbeat, or gastrointestinal discomfort in social contexts (Leary, 1986). These symptoms may be accompanied by cognitive patterns involving heightened self-consciousness, fear of negative evaluation, and persistent self-monitoring (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Zimbardo, 1977). In more intense cases, shyness is linked to social withdrawal, low self-esteem, insecure body language, and a reluctance to initiate social interactions (Crozier, 2001). These behavioral and emotional responses may result in chronic social inhibition, which can impair daily functioning and contribute to comorbid conditions such as anxiety and depression (Henderson, Zimbardo, & Carducci, 2001; Pilkonis, 1977).

modesty and shyness are “moral imperatives in the cultivation of pious femininity” (Mahmood, 2005, 158). This implies that the process of becoming a moral woman is contingent upon internalizing these traits, which are disproportionately demanded of women compared to men. However, this understanding raises a deeper question: Is shyness genuinely a cultivated moral characteristic, or is it simply an emotional temperament that some are born with and others are not?

To begin answering this, we must differentiate between the psychological construct of shyness and its socioreligious interpretation. From a psychological standpoint, shyness is generally characterized as “an emotional state of feeling anxious and inhibited in social situations” (Cheek & Briggs, 1986, 31). This includes discomfort during interactions with unfamiliar people, heightened self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation. Studies indicate that such forms of social anxiety are most pronounced in situations involving power dynamics or public scrutiny—such as dealing with authority figures, strangers, or evaluative tasks like public speaking or job interviews (Leary, 1986; Crozier, 2000; LeDoux, 1996). If this is the core of what we mean by shyness, then it seems largely involuntarily shaped, more by environmental stimuli and personal psychology than by deliberate moral development. This complicates the notion that shyness can be freely and intentionally embraced as an ethical practice. If it is largely a response to external conditions or internal temperament, how can it be prescribed as a universal virtue for women?

Psychological research further challenges the claim that shyness can be reliably cultivated through moral or religious training. According to Cheek and Briggs, shyness is often conditioned through fear: “a fear stimulus is coupled with one that was formerly neutral; this fear stimulus results in avoidance behavior, which in turn is reinforced through operant conditioning

based on fear reduction" (Cheek & Briggs, 2000, 210). In other words, shyness may emerge when an individual begins associating social interaction with threat or punishment, leading to behaviors aimed at self-protection and withdrawal. Within this framework, shyness is not a freely chosen virtue but a fear-conditioned response to perceived danger. Mahmood's interpretation of *ḥayā'* suggests that the initial fear stimulus is *taqwā* —the fear of God—which *Dāʿiyāt* describe as the core mechanism by which women develop moral selfhood (Mahmood, 2005, 159). But this brings us to an important and often overlooked issue: can a moral trait built upon fear—whether social or divine—still be considered virtuous in the classical ethical sense? Or does it instead resemble a form of behavioral inhibition that limits agency and spontaneity?

Mahmood draws from Islamic revivalist movements to argue that pious women actively cultivate traits such as *ḥayā'* (shyness or modesty) as expressions of religious virtue. While I can appreciate her emphasis on agency within pious subjectivities, I also find Nawal El-Saadawi's counterargument persuasive. El-Saadawi critiques modesty not as a reflection of women's moral integrity but as a social instrument for male control, stating that a moral society "does not start with the veil; it starts with justice, freedom, and equality" (El-Saadawi, 1980, 214). Even when modesty appears to be voluntarily embraced, it often emerges within systems that reward compliance and punish deviation. This calls into question whether such moral choices are truly autonomous or merely internalized responses to structural coercion. In this light, even the celebration of "feminine virtues" such as modesty becomes problematic, as these virtues are often upheld in ways that limit women's full moral and political agency. The issue of shyness becomes more ethically and psychologically complex when we distinguish between naturally occurring shyness and socially cultivated shyness. Some individuals may have an inherent predisposition toward shyness, stemming from biological temperament and neuropsychological

patterns that shape their responsiveness to social stimuli (Bruch, 1989; Crozier, 1990). However, psychological and sociological research shows that shyness can also be exacerbated or instilled through early experiences of trauma, chronic anxiety, or social rejection (Crozier, 1990, 157; Crozier & Alden, 2001, 67–68, 48). These factors may not only reinforce an individual's reticence but also reshape their sense of self in relation to others. Studies in psychosocial development reveal that hyper-surveillance, emotional invalidation, and constant correction during childhood lead to heightened internalized self-consciousness and excessive concern about others' perceptions (Cheek & Briggs, 1986, 2000). In this light, shyness appears less like a freely chosen character trait and more like a defensive adaptation to environmental stressors. This raises a critical ethical question: if shyness emerges from trauma or coercion, can it still be regarded as a moral virtue, or should it be understood as a psychological coping strategy rooted in fear and vulnerability?

When shyness is socially imposed or shaped by oppressive conditions, it becomes difficult to regard it as a legitimate moral disposition. Wadud addresses this complexity by warning against the imposition of traits like modesty and shyness through political, economic, or gendered pressures. While she acknowledges that modesty may hold moral value when practiced voluntarily and rooted in faith, Wadud emphasizes that its imposition undermines its ethical legitimacy (Wadud, 2006, 10). This distinction reflects a broader feminist concern: when certain character traits are disproportionately demanded of women, they are no longer ethical ideals shared by all but become instruments of gendered regulation. Even when women seem to embrace these traits willingly, it is worth interrogating whether their choices are truly free or the result of internalized control mechanisms. In societies where deviation from modesty results in shame, exclusion, or punishment, the line between agency and coercion is blurred. Under these

conditions, traits like shyness and modesty lose their ethical weight and instead function as tools for maintaining social hierarchies and gender inequality.

Modesty, often conflated with shyness, introduces another layer of ambiguity and ethical tension. Sheila Jennett defines modesty as "a style of dress or behavior that intentionally avoids encouraging sexual attraction in others" (Blakemore & Jennett, 2001, 47). This definition, however, is problematic in both scope and substance—it assumes a shared standard for what incites sexual attraction and suggests that individuals bear the responsibility for managing others' responses. Feminist scholars have long critiqued modesty discourses for reinforcing the idea that women must regulate their appearance and behavior in order to protect men from distraction or moral failure. As Fatima Mernissi observes, "Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties" (Mernissi, 1991). Such framing shifts the moral burden from men to women and enforces modesty as a gendered practice of social control. If shyness is conceptually linked to modesty, and modesty functions as a disciplinary mechanism, then cultivating shyness may likewise perpetuate gendered subordination rather than promote moral virtue. In this light, what appears to be a personal ethical stance may in fact be a product of institutionalized surveillance and control.

Proponents of Islamic revivalist morality, including *daʿiyāt*, argue that shyness—when cultivated through the fear of God—transcends social constructs and becomes a form of ethical intentionality. They maintain that such shyness is not born from trauma or gendered control but is instead an epistemic tool that enables women to act with moral discernment and spiritual dignity (Mahmood, 2005, 159). Yet this argument assumes a universal and homogenous experience of shyness among women, which obscures the sociopolitical contexts that shape such emotional dispositions. Ayesha Chaudhry directly challenges this notion by emphasizing that

religious virtues are embedded in historical and cultural systems that define and enforce gender roles (Chaudhry, 2014, 11). What one community understands as modesty or moral propriety may differ drastically from another, revealing that these values are contingent rather than innate. Thus, internalizing shyness as a moral ideal cannot be disentangled from the cultural structures that make certain traits more socially acceptable or valuable than others. If religious modesty is historically situated and culturally constructed, then its ethical legitimacy depends on context—not on any inherent moral quality.

Asma Barlas deepens this critique by drawing attention to the interpretive frameworks through which Islamic virtues like modesty and shyness are understood. She contends that patriarchal readings of the Qur'an have historically emphasized gender hierarchy, often under the guise of moral instruction (Barlas, 2002, 2016, 2019). While the Qur'an itself does not mandate women's subjugation, the interpretive practices that have dominated Islamic legal and social thought have selectively emphasized verses that reinforce male authority. If the cultivation of shyness is informed by these patriarchal frameworks, then it cannot be separated from the structures of control they sustain. This raises critical questions about empowerment: can shyness, when derived from or reinforced by patriarchal interpretations, ever truly serve as a liberatory virtue for women? Or does it simply reflect the limited choices available to them within constrained systems of meaning and power? These questions point to the need for a critical feminist approach that examines not only the values being promoted but also the interpretive systems that shape and justify them.

Ultimately, the central question remains: Is shyness an expression of genuine agency, or is it a socially sanctioned limitation masquerading as virtue? For a trait to qualify as a moral virtue, it must be chosen freely and developed through conscious ethical reflection. If, however,

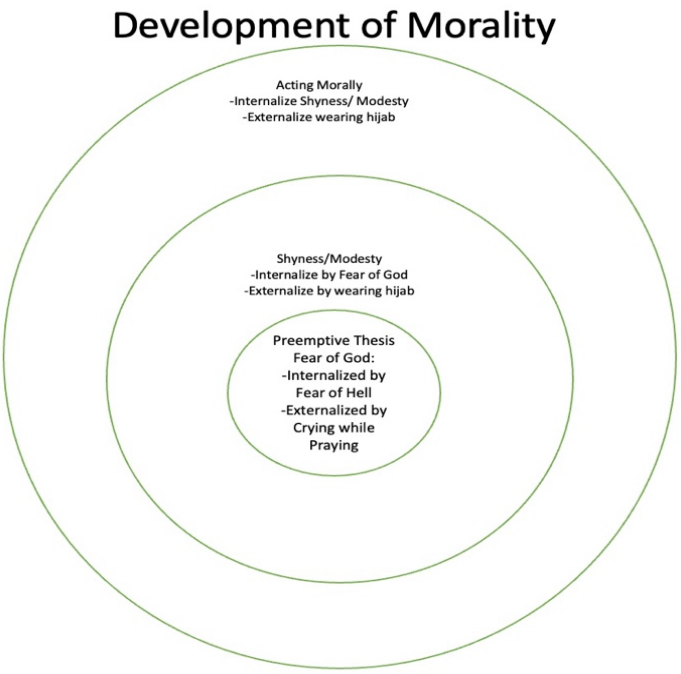
shyness is the result of systemic pressures—religious, cultural, or psychological—then it functions less as a virtue and more as a mechanism of control. The moral legitimacy of shyness, therefore, hinges on whether individuals have the freedom to reject it without consequence. In many cases, especially for women, this freedom is compromised by expectations that frame modesty and reticence as moral absolutes. A virtue that cannot be freely rejected cannot be freely embraced—and thus loses its status as a virtue. Unless shyness is cultivated in a context of genuine autonomy and mutual expectation across genders, it remains a gendered norm rather than a universal ethical ideal.

Fear of God as The Preemptive Thesis for Morality:

Becoming shy is the base for cultivating morality, but being shy is not just a psychological, social, and unstable cognitive phenomenon but also a challenging one to internalize, as Mahmood and *Dāʿiyāt* suggest. *Dāʿiyāt*, who had previously worked with Mahmood, argued that acting shyly when one does not feel shy is not a hypocritical attitude, rather "it means making oneself shy, even if it means creating it…She continued with her point, And finally I understood that once you do this, the sense of shyness eventually imprints itself on your inside" (Mahmood, 2005, 160). To become a shy person, one must first develop a profound fear of God.

Mahmood argues that *Dāʿiyāt*'s teachings regarding morality revolve around teaching women how to internalize the fear of God. According to *Dāʿiyāt*, morality is a structural system that cannot be simplified. To build a morally virtuous self and society, one must learn this structural moral system from experienced individuals and repeat what they have learned until they have both internalized and externalized this moral system. For instance, *Dāʿiyāt* believe that

one cannot possess moral virtues without being shy/modest and being shy/modest cannot exist without the fear of God. I extract this moral system as shown in the diagram[25] below:



Fear, as a fundamental human emotion, initiates a complex sequence of physiological and psychological reactions that deeply influence perception, judgment, and behavior. According to

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[25] - The diagram represents the development of morality in the *Dāʿiyāt'*s framework as a layered structure composed of three concentric circles, each building upon the previous one. Circle One, the innermost layer, represents the *premoral self*, where the foundation of morality is established through the internalization of the fear of God. This fear is cultivated through embodied devotional practices such as crying while praying, repeated *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and deep emotional responsiveness to divine judgment. It is seen not as weakness, but as the necessary spiritual state from which moral awareness originates.
Circle Two represents the emergence of *ḥayā'*—modesty or shyness—as a moral virtue. This layer arises only after the fear of God is internalized; in the *Dāʿiyāt's* perspective, modesty is not merely a gendered trait, but a moral disposition grounded in theological consciousness. Without fear of God, *ḥayā'* is deemed superficial or performative. Conversely, with genuine fear, modesty becomes an ethical response to one's awareness of divine surveillance and accountability.
Circle Three, the outermost layer, represents the full externalization of morality through observable behavior—such as modest dress, quiet speech, respectful demeanor, and deference in social interactions. These acts are not mere performances but are understood as the culmination of the internal moral structure developed in Circles One and Two. In this model, each circle is structurally dependent on the one beneath it: without fear, there is no true *ḥayā'*, and without *ḥayā'*, there can be no sincere moral action. The *daʿiyāt* emphasize that morality is not spontaneous but must be learned, embodied, and repeated through disciplined practice under the guidance of spiritually trained individuals. This system challenges secular or liberal views of morality as autonomous and instead frames it as a structured, God-centered process of self-formation.

LeDoux, fear is processed via two neurological routes: the “low road,” which is rapid, automatic, and unconscious, and the “high road,” which is slower, reflective, and conscious (LeDoux, 1996, 2014). This dual-route processing explains how fear can simultaneously produce immediate reactions essential for survival while also generating prolonged emotional states when a threat is perceived as enduring. LeDoux further argues that chronic fear exposure leads to structural changes in the brain, altering neural pathways and diminishing an individual's capacity for rational decision-making (LeDoux, 2001). This neurological rewiring results in increased sensitivity to perceived threats and a reduced ability to assess risk calmly and critically. The behavioral effects of sustained fear are seen in what is known as the flight-arousal syndrome—a biologically ingrained response that can become maladaptive when continuously activated (Gordon, 1980; Sarason & Sarason, 1990; LeDoux, 1996; Oakman et al., 1998; Greitens, 2016). Gordon emphasizes this point, asserting that “the flight response that arises in a state of fear is probably a genetically coded fixed action pattern,” reinforcing the idea that while fear serves an evolutionary purpose, it can distort one’s grasp of reality when sustained for too long (Gordon, 1980, 569).

Philosophical and psychological analyses similarly underscore the transformative impact of fear on one’s moral and cognitive framework. Morreall explains that fear is triggered by the anticipation or encounter of a threat, whether real or imagined, and this perception can fundamentally shape one’s worldview (Morreall, 1993). When fear becomes a dominant emotional condition, it tends to override reasoned ethical judgment, as survival concerns often take precedence over moral considerations. Gordon elaborates on this cognitive framing by stating that “all fearing is fearing that something is or was or will be the case,” underscoring the anticipatory nature of fear and its linkage to perception (Gordon, 1980). In essence, fear reshapes

both the present and imagined future, creating a framework in which all stimuli are evaluated based on their potential danger. This evaluative shift has implications for how individuals process moral decisions—especially if fear is treated as a foundational moral motivator. If the mind is continuously geared toward identifying and responding to threats, it is unlikely to prioritize long-term ethical commitments over short-term safety.

Taken collectively, these insights reveal that fear has both psychological and epistemological limitations that complicate its use as a moral foundation. A central issue is the sustainability of fear as a consistent motivator of ethical behavior. Emotions, by nature, are transient, and fear, in particular, is difficult to maintain without detrimental effects. LeDoux's research shows that prolonged fear contributes to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and eventual desensitization, undermining one's capacity to make rational or principled decisions (LeDoux, 2001). If we imagine a moral framework where fear of God is required to ensure ethical conduct, then that framework depends on the persistent stimulation of an unsustainable emotional state. Such a condition does not nurture moral deliberation but fosters emotional fatigue and compliance out of anxiety rather than virtue. Fear-driven morality, therefore, runs the risk of becoming performative rather than substantive, as individuals act out of avoidance of punishment rather than genuine moral commitment.

Moreover, this leads us to the problem of coercion in moral judgment. If individuals act morally because they are afraid of divine punishment, are they acting virtuously, or are they merely complying with an external threat? Psychological evidence suggests that fear heightens reactivity while suppressing deliberative reasoning, meaning decisions made under such conditions may lack ethical depth. While fear may deter immoral behavior, it does not cultivate moral character. This distinction is crucial in determining whether fear can be a legitimate source

of moral virtue. Mahmood's distinction between existential fear and cultivated fear of God attempts to address this issue. She argues that fear of God, when understood properly, is not the same as fear of violence or punishment; it is a cultivated ethical orientation embedded in religious practice (Mahmood, 2005). Yet, if this kind of "fear" lacks the physiological and cognitive attributes that define fear psychologically—namely, stress and urgency—then what is called "fear of God" may in fact be reverence or awe, not fear in the strict sense.

This leads to a theological and philosophical paradox. Fear, if it lacks emotional distress or physiological arousal, does not meet the psychological criteria for fear—it becomes something else entirely. As such, a morality based on this concept becomes unstable because it is grounded in an emotion that is either misidentified or misrepresented. Moreover, fear without stress cannot produce traits like modesty or shyness if those traits are said to emerge from the experience of fear. Modesty and shyness, when defined as emotional responses to divine fear, would require the psychological activation of fear's stress mechanism. Yet religious fear, as Mahmood and others describe it, lacks this feature and instead functions more as devotion or piety. This semantic ambiguity renders the idea of "fear of God" an insufficient basis for cultivating moral emotions such as *ḥayā'* (modesty/shyness). In fact, if fear is not truly experienced as fear, then neither modesty nor shyness can be derived from it as authentic moral responses.

Thus, fear of God—if stripped of the experiential and affective core that defines fear—fails as a credible foundation for moral virtue. Without stress, fear lacks its definitional properties and cannot act as a moral engine. Moreover, psychology warns us that persistent fear leads not to ethical flourishing but to cognitive breakdown, emotional suppression, and defensive behavior. It would be inconsistent, therefore, to advocate for a moral system that depends on such a fragile and volatile emotional state. Ethical behavior grounded in fear is reactive and shallow; it does

not reflect moral autonomy or interiorized virtue. *Dāʿiyāt*, however, attempt to navigate this tension by redefining morality itself. According to their teachings, a moral society is one in which women are the primary enforcers of moral codes, particularly concerning sexuality. Mahmood documents that they view the elimination of sexual sins—like harassment and extramarital relations—as the cornerstone of moral order (Mahmood, 2005, 57). In this view, modesty becomes the method, and *hijab* becomes both the means and proof of moral development.

Importantly, this moral system places a disproportionate burden on women to enact and preserve societal virtue. As Mahmood notes, the *Dāʿiyāt* argue that *hijab* is not only a divine obligation but also a protective tool meant to prevent sexual immorality and promote *ḥayā'* (Mahmood, 2005, 134). Here, moral virtue is tied to visible practices rather than internal dispositions, reinforcing a model of external compliance rather than internal moral deliberation. Fear of God, in this system, is less an emotion than a structural condition—a disciplinary mode that regulates women's behavior through theological and social expectations. The result is a framework where fear shapes action, but not necessarily understanding; where modesty is performed, but not critically examined; and where virtue is judged by conformity, not conscience. If the aim of moral education is to produce autonomous agents capable of ethical reflection, then this model—grounded in fear, surveillance, and gendered responsibility—falls short of achieving that goal. Instead, it replaces moral freedom with ritualized fear and reduces ethical complexity to a set of gendered prescriptions.

What would be the ramifications of following *Dāʿiyāt*'s teachings? These teachings have caused women to fear others by disguising this fear as fear of God. Social fear, which is the fear of others, is a more effective and easier way to control people than the fear of God, as a society

can quickly inflict physical harm on those who do not conform to its principles, making it a more powerful deterrent. According to *Dāʿiyāt'*s teachings and Islamic discourse in general, a person cannot be considered virtuous unless they actively ensure that others are following moral values as well. This is often described as commanding right and forbidding wrong, a practice that is not just an obligation but a sign of one's own piety (Mahmood, 2005, 141). Therefore, the fear of being constantly watched and judged by others can be a potent motivator for adhering to this moral values system. This situation puts women who choose not to wear the *hijab* in danger of facing judgment and harassment. In Iran, such women are at risk of being attacked with acid, while in Saudi Arabia, they face imprisonment. In Egypt, women who don't wear the *hijab* may experience extensive sexual harassment or attacks from strangers.

In *day'at*'s discourse, the moral system is based on the fear of God, which is actually the fear of society. If we can prove that the foundation of this morality is invalid, the entire argument falls apart. However, if we argue that the moral system may still stand because there is a kind of fear that is profound enough to uphold it, we need to examine the idea of shyness/modesty itself to see if it can lead to morality despite the foundation's problem. Let's continue examining *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral system.

The assumption that women should fear God more than men, or in a way that leads to modesty and shyness, reflects a deeply gendered conception of morality. This expectation implies that there is something inherently shameful or sinful about the female body, necessitating a stronger sense of fear as a means of moral regulation. As Mahmood notes, "female modesty is often framed [according to *Dāʿiyāt'*s teachings] not as a personal choice but as an ethical and social imperative, deeply tied to notions of piety and self-discipline" (Mahmood, 2005, 158). This raises ethical concerns about the differential moral burdens placed on women compared to

men and whether such expectations are rooted in religious doctrine or patriarchal social structures.

The emphasis on fear as a moral motivator is particularly revealing when applied to women. Historically, many religious and cultural traditions have linked female morality to bodily regulation, reinforcing the idea that women must embody virtue through physical restraint and modesty. Mernissi critiques this dynamic, arguing that the obsession with female modesty and seclusion stems not from divine command but from the anxieties of male-dominated societies seeking to control female sexuality (Mernissi, 1987). This suggests that the fear-based model of morality disproportionately affects women, enforcing behavioral standards that do not apply equally to men. If fear of God is meant to be a universal moral guide, why does it seem to be invoked more forcefully in discussions about women's dress, behavior, and bodily autonomy? Leila Ahmed and Barlas point out that the veil and modesty codes have historically been tools of both religious devotion and social control, making it difficult to distinguish between what is divinely ordained and what is culturally imposed (Ahmed, 2011, Barlas, 2019). This aligns with the idea that fear of God is not an impartial force but one that is often wielded to reinforce existing gender hierarchies.

While the theological roots of fear of God are important to examine, they should not overshadow the gendered ways in which morality and virtue are constructed. If fear is indeed a necessary element of moral development, then we must ask why its demands are not applied equally across genders. By interrogating these discrepancies, we can uncover whether religious moral frameworks genuinely support ethical development or if they primarily function to maintain social control. As Mernissi provocatively asks, If God's justice is perfect, why is it that men's sins are so different from women's? (Mernissi, 1987, 101). This question forces us to

reconsider whether fear-based morality is truly about divine justice or if it is, in fact, a reflection of human inequalities.

Epistemic Critique of Fear-Based Morality:

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005) highlights the role of *ḥayā'* (shyness, modesty) within the Islamic Revival movement as a cultivated feminine virtue essential for moral excellence. *Dāʿiyāt* (female religious preachers) present *ḥayā'* not just as a moral attribute but as a foundational virtue shaping ethical development. In examining *ḥayā'* as a preemptive virtue, I find myself drawn to the ways in which it functions not as a cultivated moral choice but as an enforced precondition for moral standing. Within the Islamic Revival movement, *Dāʿiyāt* (female religious preachers) frame *ḥayā'* as a necessary foundation for morality, suggesting that women must first embody shyness before they can be recognized as moral beings (Mahmood, 2005, 158). This positioning does more than simply dictate behavior—it fundamentally shapes how women engage with moral reasoning, limiting their capacity for epistemic agency. When a virtue precedes rational deliberation, as is the case with *ḥayā'*, it does not function as an ethical stance developed through critical engagement but rather as a preemptive constraint that determines the moral acceptability of women's thoughts and actions before they even begin.

Zagzebski provides crucial insights into the nature of preemptive virtues and epistemic oppression. Her theory of epistemic authority argues that when an epistemic authority holds a belief in P, that belief provides an overriding reason for individuals to accept P (Zagzebski, 2012, 107). When a belief is accepted not as a supplement to rational thought but as a reason that overrides all others, it effectively limits an individual's ability to engage with alternative perspectives. As Zagzebski notes, "the believer is oppressed because she does not

conscientiously judge that the belief comes from an epistemic authority. The belief is therefore heteronomous" (Zagzebski, 2012, 143). In this context, *ḥayā'* does not merely complement moral reasoning—it replaces it, imposing an external moral standard that women are expected to internalize before they can claim ethical agency. If women are taught that moral virtue begins with *ḥayā'*, then their ability to question whether shyness is a virtue at all is effectively suppressed before such a question can even be consciously posed.

This leads me to a deeper concern: Does *ḥayā'* as a moral virtue actually cultivate ethical character, or does it simply ensure compliance with social expectations? If morality is to be meaningful, it must be rooted in intentional moral engagement rather than passive adherence to prescribed behavior. Kant's critique of heteronomous morality is particularly relevant here—he argues that moral action must stem from autonomous rational will rather than external pressures (Kant, 1785/1997). If *ḥayā'* is instilled through coercive fear—fear of society that is treated as a fear of God—rather than through rational ethical reflection, then it functions not as a virtue but as a mechanism of control. Similarly, Aristotle and MacIntyre's virtue ethics emphasizes that genuine virtues must cultivate internal goods—moral qualities that are developed through practical engagement with ethical dilemmas—rather than external compliance with behavioral norms (MacIntyre, 2007). If women's moral worth is tied to *ḥayā'*, then their ability to engage with morality beyond prescribed gender norms is severely restricted.

Beyond its philosophical limitations, *ḥayā'* also functions as an epistemic constraint. Miranda Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice describes how structural identity prejudices can obscure entire domains of social experience, making them unintelligible within dominant interpretive frameworks. As Fricker writes, "Hermeneutical injustice is the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing

to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker, 2007, 155). When *ḥayā'* is positioned as a moral axiom rather than a subject of ethical inquiry, women may be denied the conceptual tools to interrogate whether shyness is a genuine virtue or a culturally imposed standard. This suppresses critical moral reflection and reinforces epistemic exclusion.

Wadud directly challenges gendered notions of morality in Islamic discourse, emphasizing that *taqwā* —God-consciousness—is the only Qur'anic criterion of moral excellence. She writes, "The most noble of you from *Allah's* perspective is whoever (he or she) has the most *taqwā* … *Allah* does not distinguish on the basis of wealth, nationality, sex, or historical context, but on the basis of *taqwā"* (Wadud, 1999, 36–37). This Qur'anic ethic resists cultural norms that prioritize gendered behavior like shyness as moral benchmarks for women. Barlas echoes this critique by confronting patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts that attribute women's subordination to divine will. She argues that "what we may… uncritically read as [the Qur'an's] support for patriarchal theories of male privilege and sexual inequality must then be reexamined," noting that "an exegesis that disregards, minimizes, or fails to recover [the Qur'an's liberatory] teachings cannot be taken to represent the Qur'an accurately" (Barlas, 2019, 16). By foregrounding justice and interpretive accountability, Barlas and Wadud invite us to reframe *ḥayā'* not as a timeless virtue, but as a contested site of moral and epistemic control.

The social implications of *ḥayā'* as a preemptive virtue underscore its function in reinforcing patriarchal moral hierarchies. El Saadawi critiques how modesty is weaponized against women, linking their moral worth to bodily restraint while exempting men from similar ethical expectations. As she notes, female morality has historically been "measured in terms of the degree to which she could control the tempting powers of her body," which ultimately places the burden of male desire and social purity onto women alone (El Saadawi, 1980, 64, 172, 206).

This asymmetry is evident in how *ḥayā'* is enforced: shaping women's appearance, movement, and speech, while men's comportment remains largely unexamined. If *ḥayā'* were genuinely a moral virtue, it would be cultivated equally across gender lines.

Yet as both El Saadawi and Huda Sha'rawi argue, modesty has historically served to discipline women rather than foster genuine moral agency. Sha'rawi writes, "For years I had been forced to remain at home, forbidden to go out unveiled. This traditional veil was supposed to protect women and preserve their honor, but in reality it imprisoned us, preventing us from participating in society as full human beings" (Shaarawi, 1991, 113). Rather than nurturing inner ethical character, *ḥayā'* often functions as a mechanism of social control, ensuring that women remain within narrowly sanctioned boundaries of public behavior. If *ḥayā'* is understood as an epistemically preemptive virtue, it invites critical reflection on the structure of moral development within traditional Islamic ethics. Does this framework empower women to engage critically with ethical dilemmas, or does it simply reinforce rigid gender norms that restrict moral reasoning? According to both *Dāʿiyāt* and Mahmood, *ḥayā'* is not the primary or initiating moral disposition—it is what we might call a second-order preemptive virtue, one that depends on the cultivation of a first-order preemptive virtue: the fear of God (*taqwā)*. In *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral system, ethical subjectivity unfolds vertically, beginning with *taqwā* as the foundational orientation that enables the formation of further virtues like *ḥayā'*. Mahmood's analysis echoes this structure, describing how religious women cultivate *ḥayā'* not as a spontaneous emotional state, but as a disciplined and habituated disposition grounded in an overarching fear of divine judgment. As she explains, such embodied practices are part of a broader project of ethical self-formation in which emotional comportment is shaped by submission to divine authority (Mahmood, 2005).

The framework of *ḥayā'* as a second-order preemptive virtue—rooted in a prior, first-order cultivation of *taqwā* or fear of God—raises critical concerns about its role in moral development. Zahra Ayubi challenges the gendered moral architecture of classical Islamic ethics by arguing that the moral self for women is largely defined in terms of obedience and containment, rather than autonomous ethical agency. She explains that "the perfection of the female self is not contingent on self-knowledge, rationality, or volition in the same way as it is for men" (Ayubi, 2019, 107), suggesting that virtues like *ḥayā'* are not cultivated through moral deliberation but imposed as disciplinary norms that uphold patriarchal order. The psychological consequences of such fear-based moral conditioning are profound. LeDoux demonstrates that chronic fear activates the amygdala, bypassing cognitive processes in the neocortex and leading to avoidance behavior rather than rational ethical engagement (LeDoux, 1996). When *ḥayā'* is internalized through fear—whether divine punishment or social reprisal—it motivates behavioral compliance rather than authentic moral conviction. Paul Giladi extends this critique through the lens of recognition theory, arguing that epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are not granted full recognition as moral agents. When one's participation in ethical reasoning is undermined by coercive cultural norms and denied social recognition, the conditions for autonomous moral agency are structurally absent (Giladi, 2022, 56). These insights collectively raise a fundamental question: Can *ḥayā'*, when grounded in fear and gendered exclusion, truly function as a virtue—or does it instead foster a moral landscape defined by ritualism and formalism, in which conformity to external behavior replaces the cultivation of internal moral goods?

Reducing morality to formalism and ritualism presents significant philosophical and sociological problems. Aristotle asserts that morality should be rooted in virtue ethics, where

character and practical wisdom are central (Aristotle, 2014). If moral actions are performed purely out of habit or obligation rather than true ethical understanding, individuals fail to cultivate virtues essential for moral growth. Similarly, Kant differentiates between acting *in accordance with duty* (mere obedience) and acting *from duty* (moral conviction). When moral behavior is dictated solely by external pressures rather than internalized ethical principles, it loses its genuine moral worth (Kant, 1997).

Additionally, ritualized morality fosters hypocrisy and superficiality. E. Goffman explains how people often present a moral façade in public while behaving differently in private. When moral value is assessed based on outward conformity rather than genuine ethical engagement, individuals prioritize maintaining appearances over cultivating moral integrity (Goffman, 1959). This is particularly evident in societies where modesty or piety is expected of women, leading to a focus on performative morality rather than substantive ethical development. Formalistic morality also fails to adapt to ethical complexity. Martha Nussbaum (1990) argues that moral reasoning requires contextual sensitivity and emotional intelligence, which rigid rule-based frameworks often fail to accommodate. Likewise, John Dewey (1922) emphasizes the importance of reflective adaptation in ethical growth, cautioning against rigid moral structures that resist reform and critical inquiry.

Without distinguishing between virtue and ritual, morality risks becoming an instrument of social control rather than a meaningful pursuit of justice and ethical integrity. A genuinely ethical framework must encourage reflective engagement, adaptability, and personal moral agency. If virtue is truly about moral growth, it must allow for critical engagement, ethical reasoning, and autonomy—not just conformity to prescribed gender norms. As I engage with these critiques, I find myself returning to a central question: Is *ḥayā'* truly a moral virtue, or is it

a socially imposed limitation on women's moral and epistemic agency? The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that *ḥayā'*, when framed as a preemptive virtue, functions as an epistemic and ethical constraint rather than as a genuine foundation for moral development. If morality is about ethical growth, critical reflection, and the ability to engage with moral dilemmas, then a virtue that restricts epistemic agency cannot genuinely be classified as a virtue at all. Instead, I believe a more robust moral framework should prioritize moral autonomy, justice, and intellectual engagement, ensuring that ethical virtues are cultivated through critical thought rather than through rigid social expectations.

The *hijab* and the Problem of Moral Formalism:

According to *Dāʿiyāt*, women who embody shyness and modesty are highly valued as they are better able to participate in public life. *Dāʿiyāt* believe that women's adherence to feminine virtues like shyness, modesty, and humility is essential for their success in both religious and political spheres (Mahmood, 2005, 158-160). Additionally, in their teachings, *Dāʿiyāt* outline specific ways in which shyness and modesty should be practiced, which are considered mandatory. In order to internalize these virtues, one must have a deep reverence for God, which also implies a fear of societal judgment. Furthermore, women are expected to wear the *hijab* as a way to demonstrate these qualities outwardly. *Dāʿiyāt* argue that wearing the *hijab* is the necessary condition to attain and sustain this shyness/modesty virtue. Mahmood also supports this view, asserting that the veil is a necessary component of the virtue of modesty because it both expresses "true modesty" and is the means through which modesty is acquired (Mahmood, 2005, 159).

To summarize *Dāʿiyāt's* argument for wearing the *hijab*, they first assert that a morally virtuous society upholds sexual purity and avoids sexual sins (Mahmood, 2005, 47, 57, 91). In this context, donning a *hijab* is considered the necessary external expression of modesty and shyness (Mahmood, 2005, 23, 134). Additionally, they argue that women are more prone to sexual temptation and wrongdoing, which further justifies the necessity of the *hijab* in maintaining moral order (Mahmood, 2005, 57, 106, 134, 158). By wearing a *hijab*, a barrier is created between men and women, reinforcing boundaries that help prevent illicit interactions (El Guindi, 2003; Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Ahmed, 2011, 2020). *Dāʿiyāt* also claim that perceiving women as faithful to God is the only way for men to avoid harassing them (Mahmood, 2005, 16). The *hijab*, in this view, serves as a constant reminder to both men and women to avoid engaging in sexual sins (Mahmood, 2005, 111, 116, 161). Furthermore, wearing the *hijab* is seen as an indication of faithfulness to God (Mahmood, 2005, 160). Women, according to this framework, are religiously and morally responsible for building and maintaining a virtuous society (Mahmood, 2005, 112). Therefore, based on these premises, wearing a *hijab* is considered obligatory for women as a means of cultivating a moral self and contributing to the development of a moral society (Mahmood, 2005, 107, 160).

While my critique focuses on the *hijab* as a gendered moral obligation within Islamic revivalist discourse, it is essential to acknowledge that *hijab* is not a monolithic symbol that can be reduced solely to coercion or patriarchal control. Across different historical and social contexts, the *hijab* has carried multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings, ranging from a marker of piety and self-discipline to a symbol of political resistance, cultural identity, and personal autonomy. For many Muslim women, the decision—if it is made in adulthood— to wear the *hijab* is deeply personal and varies according to individual experiences, socio-political

environments, and religious convictions. Some women embrace *hijab* as an act of faith, viewing it as a spiritual commitment rather than an imposition. Others wear it as a form of cultural expression, resistance against Western hegemony, or a rejection of neoliberal beauty standards (Ahmed, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2015).

However, my critique of the *hijab* as a tool of oppression stems from the fact that the majority of Egyptian women today begin wearing it in childhood, long before they can engage in critical moral reflection or exercise true autonomy in the decision. If veiling is instilled from an early age as a normative expectation rather than a conscious ethical choice, can it still be considered an act of free will? Moreover, the association of *hijab* with identity has created a sense of obligation for many women to defend it—not necessarily because it reflects their autonomous self-definition, but because it has been deeply internalized as a core aspect of their identity. In many cases, the defense of *hijab* is not driven by personal conviction but rather by a desire to avoid feelings of guilt, social alienation, or accusations of being weak and oppressed—especially from Western or perceived Westernized critics.

It is imperative to note that Saba Mahmood's study was conducted during the rise of the Islamic Revival Movement in Egypt and other North African countries, a period when the *hijab* functioned as a symbol of political resistance (Ahmed, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Eltahawy, 2015). Highlighting this historical context is crucial because it situates Mahmood's work within a broader moment of decolonization and identity formation. At that time, the majority of Egyptian women did not wear the *hijab*, but as they sought to reclaim their cultural and religious identity after decades of Western colonial and postcolonial influence, many—through the lens of the Islamic Revival Movement—made a conscious, adult decision to adopt it. The Islamic Revival Movement was not merely a religious shift but also a socio-political act of resistance. It

emerged as a response to Westernization, state-imposed secularism, and authoritarian rule, offering an alternative framework for self-definition. Within this movement, the *hijab* was not just a religious or traditional garment—it became a symbol of defiance against both Western imperialist narratives and oppressive state policies that sought to suppress Islamic expression. However, my argument focuses not on this historical moment but on contemporary Egyptian women who have worn the *hijab* since childhood. Rather than a conscious, adult decision, their adoption of the *hijab* has often been shaped by early socialization and normative expectations. Thus, my analysis critically examines whether wearing the *hijab*—under these conditions—has genuinely fostered moral self-development and a more ethical society, as claimed by Islamic revivalist discourse. Despite their claim that wearing the *hijab* is a divine commandment, *Dāʿiyāt* faced difficulty convincing their audience due to disagreements among religious scholars and Islamic thinkers about whether the *hijab* is truly a moral or religious obligation (Mahmood, 2005, 147; Ahmed, 2011). To address this challenge, *Dāʿiyāt* sought a more practical and rational justification for the *hijab* that would resonate with a broader audience (Mahmood, 2005, 150). They portrayed the *hijab* as both a religious obligation and a practical step to protect women, as well as an essential practice for developing moral character.

In the following section, I will critically analyze why wearing the *hijab* cannot practically or cognitively solve the issue of harassment, nor can it be considered a reliable method for fostering moral virtues. To do so, I will examine the three key principles that *Dāʿiyāt* employ in their teachings on morality and the *hijab*. The first principle states that wearing the *hijab* is a requirement from God and must be done out of respect for Him. *Dāʿiyāt* based their discussions

on politically unchallengeable religious principles[26], which provided *hijab* with a form of immunity. Questioning *hijab*'s necessity is considered to be a form of unfaithfulness. *Dāʿiyāt*, and most Islamic religious figures, see themselves as protectors of Islam and Muslim women, particularly against Western influences (Mahmood, 2005; Badran, 2009; Barlas, 2019). When it comes to gender norms and Muslim women, *Dāʿiyāt* present these norms as God's absolute commands, despite the fact that these feminine values are widespread around the world, regardless of religion. They argue that wearing *hijab* is a divine requirement and a strong rebuttal to the idea that *hijab* objectifies women[27] (Mahmood, 2005, 43). While some scholars and religious individuals disagree and argue that *hijab* is not a divine requirement for women, I will not delve into this argument in this paper as it requires analyzing religious texts. It's worth noting that those who hold differing views—such as Elsaadawy and Eltahawy—have faced accusations of bad faith—as Barlas and most Islamic feminists label it—or being Westernized.

The second principle regarding *hijab* is that it plays a crucial role in safeguarding women's bodies. One of the most controversial claims made by *Dāʿiyāt* is that the *hijab* serves as a practical solution to social problems, particularly sexual harassment (Mahmood, 2005, 159). They argue that veiling creates a moral boundary between men and women, reducing temptation and maintaining social harmony. However, this claim is empirically questionable. Research on gender and harassment shows that sexual violence persists regardless of dress codes, even in societies where veiling is widespread[28] (El Guindi, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Macleod, 1991).

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[26] - Politically unchangeable religious principles are concepts and principles approved by the state to define itself.

[27] - Despite this, *Dāʿiyāt* played a part in spreading an objectifying message about women through mosques, media, and missions in schools and universities. The message stated that "women who do not wear a *hijab* are like uncovered sweets that are susceptible to flies aiming to eat them". This message objectifies women and raises questions about their worth and value.

[28] - When individuals like *Dāʿiyāt* are challenged by the notion that wearing a *hijab* objectifies women and is not a demand from God, they stick to this second principle of physical protection of women's bodies. According to *Dāʿiyāt*, wearing a *hijab* creates a

The fact that high rates of sexual harassment exist in regions where veiling is the norm directly challenges the idea that the *hijab* functions as a safeguard against such behavior.

The third principle asserts that the *hijab* is not merely a religious obligation but the primary symbol of a woman's moral uprightness. Mahmood analyzes how figures like *Dāʿiyāt* frame modesty—particularly *ḥayā'*—as a conduit to multiple moral virtues such as honesty, justice, and empathy. Mahmood presents this logic as akin to Aristotelian habituation, wherein modesty is cultivated through embodied repetition until it becomes internalized. However, this reading is problematic. In Aristotle's ethics, the development of virtue is always intentional and deliberative; a person becomes just by performing just acts purposefully and with knowledge of their moral content (Aristotle, 2014). *Dāʿiyāt*'s view, by contrast, reduces moral formation to the ritual act of veiling, suggesting that donning the *hijab* itself produces a virtuous character without requiring active engagement with the ethical content of each virtue. This reductive model turns *ḥayā'* into a second-order preemptive virtue—derivative of a first-order fear of God—rather than an autonomous moral practice. While Mahmood frames this process as a form of ethical agency, it bypasses the critical deliberation that Aristotle sees as essential to genuine virtue. Ayubi offers a significant critique in this regard, highlighting that classical Islamic ethics

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barrier between men and women, providing women with a strong sense of safety and protection (El Guindi, 2003; Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Ahmed, 2011, 2020). It is important to conduct a social and practical study to validate this argument, rather than relying on mere speculations by Mahmood and *Dāʿiyāt*. The correlation between wearing *hijab* and sexual harassment in Muslim communities warrants empirical and philosophical investigation, but it is not my intention to suggest that the former causes the latter. Rather, I am drawing a comparison between Egyptian society before and after the emergence of the *hijab* as a religious and moral symbol during the Islamic revival movement of the 1970s, to which the *Dāʿiyāt* belonged. Prior to that time, *hijab* was not prevalent in Egyptian society (Elkradawy, 1982; Zakarya, 1987, El Guindi, 1999a, 1999b, 2005; Duval, 2021). It is worth noting that prior to the 1970s, instances of street sexual harassment were relatively rare. However, coinciding with the rise of this phenomenon is the alarming statistic reported by the United Nations Agency that a staggering 99.3% of Egyptian women and girls have experienced some form of sexual harassment. It is also worth noting that 90% of these women *already since childhood wear* some form of veiling, such as the *hijab* or niqab. It is clear that the *hijab* does not serve as a reliable means of protecting women's bodies from unwanted advances.

often valorized male rational deliberation while reducing women's virtue to embodied modesty and deference. Such frameworks naturalize gender hierarchies by conflating moral excellence with gender performance, rather than universal ethical cultivation. MacIntyre provides an important corrective: genuine virtue must aim toward internal goods developed through practices that demand courage, honesty, and critical reflection. If the *hijab* is treated as a sufficient act of virtue without deeper ethical engagement, it risks collapsing into what MacIntyre would call an external good—a symbol upheld for its social value rather than its moral substance. Ultimately, the framing of *ḥayā'* as a moral prerequisite collapses into formalism and ritualism, where virtue becomes a matter of visible conformity rather than ethical deliberation. (MacIntyre, 1981, 191; Mahmood, 2005, 213–214; Aristotle, 2014, 1103a–1105a; Ayubi, 2019, 23–26)

This assumption is flawed because the relationship between modesty and honesty is not inherently causal but rather arbitrary. One can be modest and dishonest simultaneously, without perceiving any contradiction between these traits. This disconnection presents a significant problem in moral reasoning: a woman socialized to believe that modesty is a moral cornerstone may struggle to recognize that shyness does not guarantee honesty—and that modesty may even conceal moral failings. As Zagzebski argues, "The possession of a virtue does not necessarily lead to an increase in the quantity of right acts," and acquiring a single virtue, such as modesty, without cultivating others, may not lead to moral excellence (Zagzebski, 1996, 95). Further, the tendency to assume that one moral trait gives rise to others reflects what Jones Hills (1999) criticizes as a failure of moral education. He states that "to possess one virtue does not entail possessing another," and moral formation must engage each virtue distinctly and reflectively. Similarly, in the *Second-Hand Moral Knowledge* article, the danger of reducing moral development to passive reception of norms is highlighted—such practices often rely on epistemic

authority without fostering first-hand moral discernment. The paper critiques moral conformity that bypasses moral understanding, emphasizing that "moral knowledge is undermined if the agent is incapable of giving reasons for her belief, even if those beliefs are true" (Hills, 2009, 293). This aligns with Aristotle's insistence that virtues must be cultivated deliberately, and not merely acquired through isolated or habitual acts. Virtue formation, he maintains, involves practicing each moral virtue individually, through intentional, repeated action, until it becomes a stable trait. Therefore, relying on modesty to produce other virtues like honesty or justice oversimplifies moral development and risks moral superficiality. This aligns with more contemporary philosophical discussions about *moral development and virtue ethics*, which emphasize the *intentional cultivation of multiple moral traits* rather than relying on external symbols or practices (Taylor, 1989; Zagzebski, 1996). Thus, modesty alone cannot transform these women into virtuous individuals, as it *lacks the deliberate moral engagement that Aristotle emphasizes*. Hence, Mahmood is mistaken in her claims.

To further analyze this, we must examine how individuals acquire moral values over time. The first stage of moral development is often second-hand moral knowledge, where individuals learn morality from external sources such as family, religious leaders, and social institutions. This process involves both emotional and intellectual engagement, in which one develops an intuitive sense of what is considered morally right or wrong based on social reinforcement (Hills, 1999; Aristotle, 2014). As Lawrence Kohlberg emphasizes, "moral concepts are essentially concepts of social relationships as manifested in social institutions," and emerge through "role taking," where individuals begin to see themselves from the perspective of others (Kohlberg, 1981, 174). Moral development, then, is not simply internal reflection but a dialogical process grounded in one's embeddedness in a moral community. Families and

institutions play a pivotal role in shaping this trajectory; indeed, the amount of parental encouragement in moral discussion has been shown to strongly correlate with a child's moral advancement (Kohlberg, 1981,154). These moral insights are not neutral but deeply tied to the justice structures and normative expectations of one's surrounding culture. Social institutions do more than transmit values—they provide the structural environments where norms are experienced, internalized, and evaluated. As Kohlberg notes, "their justice structure is also an important determinant of role-taking opportunities and consequent moral development" (Kohlberg, 1981, 431). Thus, the experiences and teachings of others shape moral judgment significantly, often instilling a deep sense of moral obligation tied to prevailing social norms, while also setting the groundwork for more autonomous stages of moral reasoning.

To further analyze this, we must examine how individuals acquire moral values over time. What we might call the second stage of moral development involves the internalization of moral knowledge from external sources—such as family, religious leaders, and social institutions. This stage goes beyond mere obedience (as in Kohlberg's preconventional stage) and reflects an emerging alignment with social norms, often perceived as legitimate and morally binding. Individuals at this stage engage both emotionally and intellectually, developing an intuitive sense of what is considered right or wrong through reinforcement and cultural immersion (Aristotle, 2014). Yet, as Alison Hills (1999) argues, acquiring moral beliefs through testimony—even from trusted authorities—does not necessarily constitute *moral understanding*. One may believe an action is right because they were told so, but unless they comprehend the *reasons* behind that action, they remain epistemically dependent. Moral understanding, Hills contends, requires the capacity to explain and reflect on those reasons, not merely to inherit them. Lawrence Kohlberg situates this form of socialized morality in his conventional stage,

where individuals conform to norms not only to avoid punishment but also to uphold social order and gain approval. “Right is literal obedience to rules and authority... [and] the reasons for doing right are avoidance of punishment and the superior power of authorities” (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 409). As agents absorb values from caregivers, schools, and religious traditions, they begin to associate morality with the preservation of established structures rather than with autonomous ethical reasoning.

This conventional adherence to norms, while essential to early moral formation, also exposes the danger of moral unreflectiveness. As Barlas (2019) demonstrates in her critique of conservative Qur’anic interpretations of modesty, religious authorities often impose rigid moral expectations—especially on women—not rooted in the Qur’an itself, but in patriarchal traditions: “This obsession with the female body has spawned forms of veiling the Qur’an does not mandate” (Barlas, 2019, p. 158). In such contexts, modesty becomes a social duty stripped of personal moral deliberation, paralleling Kohlberg’s Stage 4 morality in which individuals conform to the law or societal structure without questioning its justice (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 152). To counter this unreflective moral conformity, Linda Zagzebski (1996) advances a virtue-based model of moral development. She insists that moral growth requires the *intentional cultivation* of both moral and intellectual virtues. These virtues emerge not from obedience or social conformity, but from an agent’s motivation to pursue truth, act with integrity, and develop habits of ethical reasoning. “Virtues are acquired excellences of character, and intellectual virtue includes the motivation to know as well as success in achieving it” (Zagzebski, 1996, pp. 134–135). Similarly, MacIntyre (2007) warns that when moral rules are detached from their historical grounding in practices and community, they collapse into hollow imperatives: “Moral rules and precepts had to be understood in a new way... yet still uttered as if there was some impersonal

standard by which moral disagreements might be rationally resolved" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. x). Thus, the experiences and teachings of others do indeed shape moral judgment significantly during the second stage of moral development. But unless these teachings are interrogated through reflective and virtue-oriented reasoning, they risk fostering passive conformity rather than genuine moral agency.

The third stage of moral development involves the formation of *first-hand moral knowledge*, in which individuals gain autonomy in their moral reasoning and engage in sustained critical reflection. Rather than simply adhering to inherited moral doctrines or external prescriptions, individuals at this stage apply practical reasoning and personal judgment to navigate complex moral issues (Aristotle, 2014). This shift represents a profound internalization of ethical principles—not in the sense of social conformity, but through the capacity to interrogate and revise those principles based on reasoned deliberation. As Zagzebski (1996) notes, virtues are not simply habits but cultivated dispositions that integrate motivation, cognition, and moral intentionality. Similarly, Kristján Kristjánsson (2007) emphasizes that moral maturity is achieved when individuals reflect critically on the sources of their values, exercising *phronesis* or practical wisdom to guide action in morally ambiguous situations.

At this stage, moral judgment becomes self-determined rather than dictated by external authorities. It allows for moral independence: the ability to assess ethical claims without the distorting influences of fear, social pressure, or institutional conformity. However, not everyone reaches this stage with ease. Many remain suspended in the second stage—not due to incapacity, but because of epistemic and social constraints that discourage reflective engagement. As Michel Foucault (1978) and Talal Asad (1993) argue, institutional and discursive power can inhibit

individuals from developing moral autonomy by conditioning them to equate obedience with virtue. When individuals merely echo inherited norms or rely on religious or political authorities without reflection, they fall into what I call *third-hand moral knowledge*. This is a state of recursive moral dependency—where one does not just inherit values but inherits them *already interpreted* by intermediaries, often stripped of their original context and critical depth. Third-hand morality is not just second-hand; it is second-hand *twice removed*—repackaged through authority structures that discourage interrogation. Breaking free from this trap requires more than information; it demands intellectual courage, emotional honesty, and the sustained exercise of moral reasoning.

Third-hand moral knowledge occurs when individuals defer their moral judgments to external authorities rather than developing their own moral reasoning. In such cases, people do not merely accept inherited norms but adopt them as pre-packaged belief systems already interpreted by others, thereby losing the capacity for direct ethical engagement. As Rokeach explains, “It is not so much what you believe that counts, but how you believe” (Rokeach, 1960, 6). This insight is central to understanding the psychological structure of third-hand moral knowledge: the issue lies not in the moral content itself, but in the closed manner through which individuals accept it.

Rokeach describes the *closed mind* as one characterized by rigidity, deference to authority, and an inability to tolerate ambiguity, all of which can prevent the development of moral autonomy. He writes, “The closed mind achieves its systematic character ‘for free,’ through the external authority’s efforts rather than its own. When left to its own devices... it cannot integrate new beliefs into a new system” (Rokeach, 1960, 225). This reliance on an external structure to supply moral meaning results in a form of cognitive passivity. Rather than

engaging in self-directed ethical reflection, individuals remain trapped in inherited moral systems, often out of fear, anxiety, or a perceived incapacity to reason independently.
This form of belief—*third-hand moral knowledge*—is maintained by psychological defenses and social mechanisms that discourage critical examination. Rokeach notes that closed belief systems are sustained by "a generalized need to structure one's world rigidly," and that such systems are "resistant to change" even when confronted with contradictory evidence (Rokeach, 1960, 17–18). Thus, moral development is stunted not only by the presence of external control but by an *internalized need* for cognitive certainty that inhibits growth beyond inherited doctrines.

David Hume argues that our emotional responses to moral situations are not incidental but foundational to the development of moral judgment. In his view, moral distinctions arise not from pure reason but from the sentiments we experience in response to actions that affect the well-being of others: "Morality is more properly felt than judged of" (Hume, 1999, 470). Thus, emotions such as sympathy, compassion, or indignation are not impediments to moral reasoning but are in fact its necessary conditions. If individuals are not conditioned to associate specific actions with moral sentiments—or if they have developed first-hand moral knowledge—they may instead rely on an internal moral compass or *conscience* to guide their judgments. For Hume, moral sentiments serve as the origin and justification of moral standards, which means that individuals who engage in personal moral reflection are capable of cultivating a sense of justice even in opposition to dominant societal norms.

Joseph Butler reinforces this view by offering a theory of conscience that is both emotional and rational. He describes conscience as a "faculty of reflection" that enables individuals not only to judge right from wrong but also to experience emotions such as guilt, remorse, and moral obligation in response to their actions (Butler, 1726). This dual nature of

conscience suggests that it serves as both a moral sensor and motivator, compelling individuals to align their actions with what they know to be morally right. According to Butler, those who suppress or override their conscience often do so deliberately—usually out of fear of social reprisal or a desire to maintain acceptance within their community. In such cases, emotional and rational capacities are subordinated to external pressures, blocking the development of authentic moral agency. Together, Hume and Butler offer a model of moral development that aligns with the third stage of moral reasoning: one rooted not merely in rational deduction or social conformity, but in a reflective equilibrium between moral emotion and personal judgment.

A striking example of third-hand moral knowledge is the widespread belief in certain patriarchal societies that it is morally justified to kill, harm, or exclude women accused of engaging in extramarital sex, even in cases of coercion or rape. Such beliefs are not merely passively inherited; they require individuals to suppress their innate moral sentiments, such as empathy, compassion, and a sense of justice. As Hume argues, moral distinctions are rooted in emotional responses, and it is through these sentiments that we first come to recognize cruelty and injustice. Overcoming this natural moral resistance requires deliberate cognitive suppression and desensitization—an intentional act of silencing one's conscience to conform to an external moral code.

The psychological motivation for this suppression often stems from fear of communal reprisal, the desire for social acceptance, or deep-seated epistemic deference to religious or cultural authorities. As Rokeach observes, closed belief systems are characterized by rigid adherence to external doctrines and a resistance to independent moral thought: “The closed mind achieves its systematic character ‘for free,’ through the external authority’s efforts rather than its own” (Rokeach, 1960, 225). In such contexts, individuals are not simply following tradition—

they are upholding an inherited moral framework twice removed from reflection, one filtered through institutional narratives and presented as unquestionable truth. This illustrates the dangerous consequences of third-hand moral knowledge: when conscience is subordinated to unquestioned authority, individuals become agents of injustice without perceiving themselves as such. The internal moral voice is not absent—it is overruled by social conditioning and enforced silence. As a result, ethical responsibility is externalized, and violence against women becomes normalized as moral duty, rather than recognized as moral failure.

Ultimately, third-hand moral knowledge reinforces obedience to authority at the expense of developing moral autonomy. When individuals accept moral judgments solely because they are validated by an external epistemic authority—whether religious, political, or cultural—they relinquish the responsibility of moral reasoning. This is not authentic ethical engagement but a form of epistemic submission, where reflection is replaced by deference. As Milton Rokeach warns, closed belief systems are structured in ways that discourage the integration of new ideas or critical perspectives, producing individuals who "cannot integrate new beliefs into a new system" when left to their own devices (Rokeach, 1960, 225). In this condition, the individual's conscience is muted, and moral conformity masquerades as moral clarity. This form of inherited moral allegiance sustains and legitimizes harmful societal norms, especially when those norms are wrapped in the language of moral certainty. Without the capacity—or willingness—to question these norms, individuals become complicit in perpetuating injustice under the guise of moral righteousness. True moral agency, by contrast, requires more than the passive absorption of dominant beliefs; it demands critical reflection, emotional awareness, and a commitment to ethical accountability. Without these, justice becomes unattainable, and progress becomes impossible.

Third-Hand Moral Knowledge and Gendered Social Conditioning:

Dāʿiyāt's teaching of morality exemplifies *third-hand moral knowledge* in several key ways. First, it constructs feminine virtues not as choices or cultivated dispositions, but as essentialized attributes, naturalized within a religious moral framework. This essentialism disguises socially constructed norms as divine truths, bypassing critical reflection. As Mahmood explains, the mosque movement's pedagogical approach was explicitly designed to produce an internalization of external norms, so that modesty, obedience, and self-restraint became second nature to women. "Through this pedagogy, embodied actions like veiling and gender segregation are cultivated until they are experienced as spontaneous expressions of the self" (Mahmood, 2005, 131). This process effectively fuses affect and discipline, making it impossible to distinguish genuine moral sentiment from socially mandated conduct.

Such moral education aligns precisely with *third-hand moral knowledge*, where virtue is not deliberated upon but prescriptively performed, learned through layers of doctrinal instruction and authoritative repetition. A crucial paradox emerges from this logic: if women are naturally inclined toward feminine virtues, why must these virtues be relentlessly practiced and policed through moral training, public ritual, and physical symbols like the *hijab*? The answer lies in the anxiety *Dāʿiyāt*'s discourse seeks to contain—the fear that morality, if left to autonomous reasoning or plural expression, would deviate from the singular moral script sanctified by institutional Islam. Thus, the *Dāʿiyāt*'s discourse not only aims to naturalize and Islamize feminine behavior but also to regulate its very form of expression. This form of moral instruction does not foster autonomous ethical agency but instead inculcates a codified performance of virtue, externalized through bodily comportment and veiling. In doing so, it displaces personal

moral reflection with embodied conformity, reflecting the deeper mechanics of third-hand moral knowledge: internalized, authoritative, and unquestioned.

Dāʿiyāt presents feminine virtues as both practical and essential for everyday life, framing them as solutions to individual and societal problems, particularly in contexts like sexual harassment (Mahmood, 2005). However, this pragmatism does not align with Aristotle's concept of practical reasoning (*phronesis*), which involves deliberation, judgment, and choosing the most virtuous course of action in a specific context. As MacIntyre explains, practical reasoning, for Aristotle, is a process rooted in the agent's desires and goals, culminating in an action that expresses an internalized belief—not a rule-following mechanism but an evaluative judgment grounded in virtue: "Practical reasoning then has, on Aristotle's view, four essential elements… The conclusion, as I already said, is the action." In contrast, *Dāʿiyāt*'s model treats feminine virtues as fixed moral formulas rather than as dispositions requiring reflective application. This pedagogy, Mahmood argues, attempts to "render embodied behaviors second nature," blurring the line between individual emotional expression and social conformity (Mahmood, 2005, 131). Women are trained to embody modesty, humility, and obedience as stable, externalized traits, not as products of internal moral deliberation. This approach contradicts Aristotle's insistence that virtue must be context-sensitive, cultivated through conscious ethical engagement, and supported by practical wisdom *(phronesis)* rather than passive habituation.

Linda Zagzebski also criticizes approaches that reduce virtue to behavioral compliance. She emphasizes that virtues—especially intellectual ones—require motivation, cognition, and emotional judgment working together toward epistemic and moral goods. Virtue is not merely about right action, but about the agent's inner reasoning: "Virtues are acquired excellences of character… including the motivation to know as well as success in achieving it" (Zagzebski,

1996,134–135). Asma Barlas provides a powerful theological critique that complements this philosophical objection. In patriarchal Islamic societies, the veil and modesty are framed not as individual ethical choices but as mandatory signs of virtue that protect society from male sexual aggression. Barlas exposes this as a deeply flawed moral logic: "The obsession with the female body has spawned forms of veiling the Qur'an does not mandate" (Barlas, 2019, 158). The insistence that moral worth resides in visible conformity to gendered dress codes not only instrumentalizes women's bodies but displaces moral agency from internal judgment to external markers.

In sum, *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral model lacks the evaluative structure of Aristotelian ethics and the epistemic depth of virtue theory, substituting a fixed moral template for the kind of practical reasoning that fosters autonomous ethical agency. Rather than cultivating moral growth, it conditions women to perform moral virtue as *a rehearsed role*, suppressing the very reflective judgment necessary for virtue to be genuine. *Dāʿiyāt* assert that wearing the *hijab* protects women from sexual harassment by signaling modesty, religious commitment, and sexual unavailability to men (El Guindi, 1999; Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2015; Ahmed, 2011). This discourse frames veiling as a strategic and empowering act that prevents unwanted male attention while fostering female piety. Mahmood, echoing this view, notes: "The veil makes it easy for women to avoid sexual harassment on public transportation, lowers the cost of attire for working women, and so on" (Mahmood, 2005, 153). In this framework, veiled women are positioned as moral agents exercising religious discipline—not passive victims—by contributing to collective virtue and restraining male desire.

However, this claim raises critical philosophical and feminist concerns. Does the *hijab* truly prevent sexual misconduct, or does it instead shift the burden of men's ethical decisions

onto women? El Guindi (1999) underscores that modesty in Islamic contexts is a broader relational ethic encompassing privacy and resistance, but this does not erase the structural asymmetry in assigning responsibility for sexual regulation. Ahmed further highlights how veiling in postcolonial Egypt was re-signified not just as religious piety but also as nationalist virtue, implicitly reinforcing women's roles as moral stabilizers of the public sphere. This assumption that modesty is both morally absolute and practically protective reduces virtue to external signs of compliance, thereby collapsing the distinction between moral performance and ethical reasoning. From an Aristotelian perspective, this contradicts the essence of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which requires agents to deliberate contextually and select actions based on reflective judgment—not habituation. MacIntyre similarly warns that moral rules detached from reasoning and social practices devolve into rigid behavioral codes: "When the virtues are no longer embodied in any form of social life, they are deprived of their point and purpose" (MacIntyre, 1981, 181).

Furthermore, Zagzebski's account of moral and intellectual virtue stresses that genuine virtue requires the convergence of motivation, affect, and rational inquiry. If virtue is cultivated without reflection—through rote observance of modesty codes or fear of divine and social punishment—it ceases to be an ethical capacity and becomes, instead, a performance of submission (Zagzebski, 1996, 134–135). Abu-Lughod underscores that when women internalize these moral expectations without questioning their social construction, "the veil becomes less an expression of faith than a tactic for navigating a system that already marks and controls women's bodies" (Abu-Lughod, 2015, 44). Thus, while *Dāʿiyāt*'s discourse may appear to empower women within its religious logic, it ultimately restricts first-hand moral reasoning by promoting conformity over critical engagement. Framing *hijab* as a universal moral solution obscures

women's agency and moral autonomy, reducing ethical development to external compliance rather than internal deliberation.

Dāʿiyāt's teaching of the *hijab* as the ultimate preventative measure against sexual harassment and sin reveals a fundamental lack of practical reasoning, which in turn obstructs the cultivation of first-hand moral knowledge. Within this framework, the *hijab* is framed not as a personal or situational moral decision, but as a universal, non-negotiable requirement—a visible guarantee of virtue. Mahmood (2005) observes that this pedagogy deliberately aims to cultivate *internal transformations* through repetitive bodily practices until modest behavior becomes second nature. "The veil," she writes, "makes it easy for women to avoid sexual harassment… and marks a commitment to moral and social transformation" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 153). Here, virtue is not the outcome of deliberation but of embodied habituation, where ethical value is measured through external appearance rather than internal reflection. This approach contradicts the Aristotelian model of practical reasoning, which demands the agent's capacity to assess diverse circumstances, weigh competing goods, and choose actions rooted in *phronesis*—practical wisdom. Aristotle does not deny that habituation matters, but insists that virtue involves rational discernment, not mechanical conformity. As MacIntyre (1981) emphasizes, virtues only flourish within practices that allow for critical moral engagement, not rote performance of moral scripts. When *hijab* is taught as an automatic solution to social decay, it short-circuits this process, replacing agency with submission to external moral scripts.

Furthermore, this moral model burdens women with the task of preserving societal virtue, reinforcing the assumption that women's bodies are the locus of moral order. El Guindi notes that in such frameworks, modesty becomes a social code "not simply about privacy or piety, but about the public management of sexuality" (El Guindi, 1999, 77). This diverts responsibility

away from men and institutional structures and instead treats female bodily comportment as the primary means of regulating male behavior. The *hijab*, therefore, becomes less a reflection of one's autonomous moral reasoning and more a socially enforced performance of gendered virtue. By treating the *hijab* as an inflexible moral safeguard rather than a context-dependent ethical decision, *Dāʿiyāt*'s pedagogy discourages the development of critical moral agency. Women are taught not to deliberate morally but to obey—thereby internalizing a third-hand form of moral knowledge, mediated by institutional authority rather than cultivated through personal reasoning. In doing so, the very capacity for moral reflection—what Zagzebski (1996) calls the integration of motivation, knowledge, and judgment—is stifled in favor of visible compliance. According to Thomas Hobbes, human nature is inherently self-interested and prone to conflict, requiring external constraints—such as laws, customs, and fear of punishment—to maintain social order and moral behavior. As he famously put it, without such structures, life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651). Within this framework, virtue is not naturally cultivated but imposed, aligning closely with *Dāʿiyāt*'s view that women must discipline themselves—visibly and consistently—to prevent male misbehavior. However, this assumption both absolves men of ethical responsibility and constrains women's moral autonomy, reducing their agency to symbolic compliance.

If *Dāʿiyāt* argue that men should respect women because they wear the *hijab*, this raises a fundamental ethical question: Is respect for women contingent on their adherence to specific dress codes, or should it be an unconditional moral imperative? If men's morality hinges on whether or not a woman covers her body, then moral accountability is externalized and selective—directed at appearance rather than behavior. The implication is troubling: women who do not veil are implicitly blamed for any harassment they face, as if their dignity and safety are

contingent rather than inherent. In this logic, the veil becomes the condition for moral protection, and women are no longer recognized as autonomous moral subjects but as extensions of the veil itself. Their worth becomes inseparable from the garment, a dynamic that both reduces and instrumentalizes female personhood.

This is further complicated by the ambiguity of what constitutes "proper" *hijab*, a problem noted by R. Wagner, who documents the shifting and contradictory expectations placed on veiled women across Muslim-majority societies. Some men demand full-body coverage (*niqab*), others consider a headscarf sufficient, and still others impose additional behavioral requirements (Wagner, 2012). As a result, women are trapped in a moral framework defined by male perception, forced to navigate ever-changing standards with no guarantee of safety or respect. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban's constantly evolving dress codes are dictated by patriarchal interpretations of modesty, leaving women's bodies perpetually subject to surveillance and regulation. This raises a deeper philosophical concern: if respect is extended not to the woman but to the veil, then moral regard is conditional, object-centered, and deeply fragile. It suggests that without this external signifier, women cease to be worthy of dignity—an untenable position both ethically and politically. Such logic fails to uphold a universal standard of human respect and instead promotes a relational morality based on visibility, fear, and control, rather than justice or virtue.

Upon closer examination, the belief that wearing the *hijab* prevents sexual sin is not only empirically unsubstantiated but also philosophically illusory. If, as *Dāʿiyāt* and Mahmood suggest, shyness and modesty—embodied in veiling—naturally lead to moral virtue, then societies with high *hijab* adherence should be among the most ethically upright and free of gender-based violence. Yet the empirical reality contradicts this assumption. In Egypt, where

hijab has become a near-universal norm over the past three decades, with over 90% of women veiled from childhood (UN Women, 2013), sexual harassment remains alarmingly prevalent. The same report notes that 98% of Egyptian women report experiencing some form of sexual harassment—many while wearing the *hijab*. This stark contradiction undermines the moral logic that associates veiling with virtue. It reveals that external symbols of modesty cannot substitute for ethical reasoning or structural reform. If the *hijab* were truly a preventative measure, its widespread adoption should have yielded a measurable decline in sexual misconduct. That it does not suggests that veiling, as enforced by *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral discourse, is not an effective ethical strategy but rather a form of moral symbolism detached from actual social outcomes.

Moreover, if *Dāʿiyāt* or other religious leaders argue that *hijab* should be upheld simply because it is widely practiced, their reasoning commits the *Bandwagon Fallacy*—the assumption that the popularity of a belief equates to its moral or logical validity. As Tindale (2007) explains, this fallacy appeals to collective agreement rather than rational justification or ethical merit. It implies that dissenting from the majority is inherently less virtuous or wise, discouraging individual moral judgment in favor of conformist submission. The result is a model of moral development that rewards obedience over reflection, placing disproportionate responsibility on women to embody collective virtue while absolving men and institutions of their ethical obligations. If virtue is to be cultivated meaningfully, it must arise from deliberation, justice, and structural equity, not from coercive dress codes or moral policing.

At the onset of the Islamic revival movement, *Dāʿiyāt* promoted the *hijab* not only as a religious obligation (*fardh*) but as a tool for the moral and national transformation of Muslim society. By framing the *hijab* as both a divine command and a practical necessity, they positioned it as a linchpin of Islamic identity—especially for women. In this discourse, modest

dress became the visible axis around which piety, morality, and national renewal were imagined to revolve. As Mahmood (2005) explains, the pedagogical aim was to shape "moral selves" through embodied practices like veiling, whereby repetition cultivated an internalized sense of religious virtue. This project was not just theological but also political: by Islamizing women's appearances, *Dāʿiyāt* sought to Islamize the nation itself. As this discourse spread, *Dāʿiyāt* gained significant epistemic authority—the power to define moral truth and religious duty. This authority rested on the claim that *hijab* not only fulfilled divine will but would, over time, produce concrete moral benefits. Yet these "benefits" were not immediately observable, and so many women adopted the *hijab* preemptively, fearing that rejecting it might signal a rejection of Islam itself. In effect, *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral argument functioned as a kind of Pascal's Wager: better to veil and be right than unveil and be wrong.

As veiling became more common, religious leaders circularly reinforced their claim: the popularity of the hijab was cited as evidence of its religious and moral truth. However, this reasoning is logically flawed. It commits the fallacy of *argumentum ad populum*—equating popularity with truth. As Tindale (2007) notes, such fallacies obscure reasoned deliberation by privileging consensus over justification. Just because many women wear the *hijab* does not prove that it fosters virtue or prevents harm. In fact, empirical data sharply challenges *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral calculus. Despite the *hijab's* widespread adoption in Egypt—over 90% of women wear it from a young age (UN Women, 2013)—rates of gender-based harassment remain extraordinarily high, with 98% of women reporting harassment regardless of their attire. This disconnect between *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral claims and the lived realities of women exposes a critical rupture in their reasoning. If the veil were truly a barrier to sexual sin, then such a staggering level of harassment would be unlikely.

What emerges, then, is a self-reinforcing ideological system, where visible conformity becomes both the proof and product of moral necessity, even when the promised outcomes—social harmony, respect, virtue—remain unrealized. This not only undermines the credibility of *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral claims but also reveals how epistemic authority can be built on recursive logic and fear-based compliance, rather than on critical reflection or evidence-based reasoning. Beyond its logical inconsistencies, *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral framework operates through a system of third-hand knowledge, sustained by the dual mechanisms of claimed religious expertise and fear-based rhetorical intimidation. Rather than encouraging moral understanding or reflection, their teachings are structured to shield their claims from critique and enforce unquestioned obedience. By monopolizing access to divine truth, *Dāʿiyāt* elevate themselves as an epistemic authority, presenting modesty, shyness, and obedience as uniquely feminine virtues, with the *hijab* and submission to husbands portrayed as the highest expressions of piety (Mahmood, 2005).

Crucially, the threat of punishment becomes central to *Dāʿiyāt*'s moral pedagogy. Mahmood (2005) recounts that women are taught that disobeying their husbands not only warrants divine punishment but also justifies male disciplinary action: If a woman does not please her husband, she angers God… She will be cursed by the angels until morning. Such rhetoric fuses religious fear with social discipline, producing a moral environment where noncompliance is punished not only in the afterlife but also in this world—through ostracization, verbal abuse, or even physical violence. What appears to be fear of God is, in reality, a fear of violating institutionalized gender hierarchies. This pedagogy does not nurture genuine virtue or moral agency. Instead, it conditions women to obey through fear, effectively suppressing their ability to engage in first-hand moral reasoning. Drawing on Hobbesian moral theory, we might say that *Dāʿiyāt* enforce a version of moral order rooted not in ethical conviction but in external

coercion, where the internalization of fear replaces rational deliberation. Under such a system, moral action is no longer the product of thoughtful judgment but the result of compliance with externally imposed codes, especially those defined by patriarchal authority. In this way, *Dāʿiyāt*'s teachings do not cultivate moral maturity but perpetuate a system of epistemic and moral dependency. Women's worth is assessed through their adherence to narrow, male-defined markers of virtue, and failure to comply is met not with dialogue but with threats of divine wrath. Such a framework weaponizes religion to enforce conformity, leaving no space for disagreement, reflection, or dissent. Rather than fostering ethical development, it reproduces obedience through intimidation, thereby halting the progression toward moral autonomy and self-knowledge.

Epistemic Layers of *hijab:*

According to *Dāʿiyāt*, wearing the *hijab* is not merely an act of piety but a moral virtue with layered epistemic depth. Their teachings present *hijab* as a practice that completes a woman's identity and aligns her with divine will, social order, and personal discipline. This framework can be divided into three distinct epistemic layers, each representing a deeper entrenchment of *hijab* as moral obligation. The first epistemic layer involves cultivating a sense of positive moral duty. Women are encouraged—often through peer instruction, mosque sermons, television programs, and school outreach—to see the *hijab* as a dual responsibility: toward God and toward society. At this stage, wearing the *hijab* is framed as inherently good, and not wearing it as morally deficient or blameworthy. The tone in this stage tends to be persuasive and emotionally nurturing, particularly during the early stages of the Islamic revival when *hijab* was less widespread. From an Aristotelian perspective, this layer resonates with the idea that virtue is cultivated through repetition—that habituated actions shape moral character. However, the emotional terrain becomes more complex as the practice of veiling is often linked

to guilt and bodily shame, especially when women internalize the belief that their bodies, particularly their hair, are sites of moral danger. Rather than cultivating reflective virtue, this process conditions women to fear their own visibility.

The second epistemic layer, as Mahmood (2005) observes, entails the internalization of *hijab* as an absolute, non-negotiable obligation. Women no longer perceive veiling as a choice but as a requirement that is inseparable from moral and religious identity. This shift is marked by a rhetorical transformation: what was once gently encouraged becomes coercively enforced. Language hardens into moral binaries—such as the revivalist claim that "those who do not support *hijab* want women to be naked"—collapsing any nuanced discussion of agency, context, or alternative forms of modesty. This form of discursive violence, which equates non-veiling with public indecency, creates profound social anxiety. Even women who regularly wear the *hijab* may experience distress or shame if seen without it, internalizing the idea that their moral worth is proportional to how completely they conceal their bodies. Hair, once a personal attribute, becomes charged with moral weight—viewed with the same anxiety and regulation as genitalia. As a result, religious piety is fused with bodily shame, and the boundaries between devotion and discipline collapse into a regime of surveillance, guilt, and conformity. These two layers reveal how *Dāʿiyāt*'s discourse progresses from encouragement to coercive epistemology—from cultivating a sense of duty to producing a system where noncompliance signifies moral and social deviance. What begins as the moralization of modesty ultimately devolves into the politicization of female embodiment, where women's bodies are rendered public symbols of communal piety, national identity, and moral virtue. This process not only obstructs first-hand moral reasoning but also anchors moral value in external visibility rather than in internal virtue, thereby hollowing the very ethical foundations it seeks to build.

The third epistemic layer of *Dāʿiyāt*'s *hijab* discourse involves the cultivation of moral superiority and emotional attachment to veiling among *Mohajabat* (women who wear the *hijab*). At this level, women are no longer simply performing a religious duty—they are taught to view themselves as morally elevated compared to those who do not wear the *hijab* (Mahmood, 2005). *Dāʿiyāt* teach that veiled women will receive special favor from God in the afterlife and greater respect from society in the present. The *hijab* is thus redefined not only as an act of religious obedience but as a source of happiness, self-worth, and spiritual fulfillment. Women are conditioned to associate joy, approval, and divine love with the veil, constructing their moral identity through a system of emotionally loaded compliance. This discourse fosters a false sense of agency. Repeated exposure to this moral rhetoric leads many women—especially those who began veiling in childhood—to assert that they *freely* chose to wear the *hijab*, even when their initial decision was shaped by social pressure, religious authority, or family mandates. The claim that the *hijab* "brings happiness" functions as an internalized affirmation, concealing the structural constraints that produced the desire itself. This phenomenon mirrors Paulo Freire's theory of false consciousness, wherein individuals internalize oppressive norms and misrecognize them as expressions of personal will (Freire, 1970). Similarly, Althusser's concept of ideological interpellation helps explain how subjects come to "recognize themselves" in ideological structures that were never freely chosen, but imposed through repetition, education, and ritual (Althusser, 1971). Within this third layer, modesty is no longer merely a moral imperative—it becomes a marker of epistemic and emotional legitimacy. Women gain recognition not only as pious but as better, more respectable, and more fulfilled. This framework leads to the stigmatization of non-veiled women, who are often viewed as less dignified, less virtuous, or even sinful. As a result, the *hijab* functions less as a symbol of agency and more as a

tool of social regulation, embedding value judgments in visible appearance and consolidating power through normative conformity.

Together, these three epistemic layers—duty, fear, and superiority—undermine *Dāʿiyāt* and Mahmood's broader claim that *hijab* represents a free act of moral agency. If veiling is taught through coercion, guilt, emotional conditioning, and hierarchical comparison, then it cannot be considered a product of autonomous ethical reflection. Rather than fostering moral virtue, this pedagogical model reinforces third-hand moral knowledge: a system where beliefs are inherited, policed, and performed rather than interrogated, chosen, or reasoned through. What is presented as a spiritual awakening is often an effect of emotional manipulation and epistemic submission, not ethical freedom.

Conclusion:

This paper has critically examined the Islamic revivalist construction of *ḥayā'* (shyness/modesty) and *hijab* as moral imperatives, arguing that they function less as virtues and more as mechanisms of gendered control. What is presented as ethical cultivation through religious piety is, in practice, a deeply embedded system of third-hand moral knowledge—where inherited norms are internalized and performed without the opportunity for critical reflection. By tracing the psychological roots of fear, the epistemological structures of authority, and the sociopolitical functions of modesty discourse, I have shown that *ḥayā'*, when demanded rather than chosen, does not foster moral agency but suppresses it. In such a system, women are not encouraged to become ethical subjects but are trained to embody a predefined moral script in which obedience stands in for virtue, and veiling becomes a substitute for moral reflection

The moral framework constructed by *Dāʿiyāt* collapses the distinction between fear and faith, coercion and choice, external performance and internal conviction. By tying morality to a fear-driven conception of *taqwā* and the visible sign of *hijab*, this model distorts the very meaning of ethical development. Morality grounded in fear cannot produce stable virtue, only behavioral compliance. And a virtue that is imposed unequally on women, taught through shame, and measured by bodily concealment, cannot be considered a virtue at all—it is a disciplinary tool masquerading as ethics.

True moral development demands epistemic openness, ethical autonomy, and the freedom to question. It requires a shift from ritualized modesty to reflective integrity, from inherited obedience to conscious engagement. If virtue is to be meaningful, it must be chosen with understanding, not absorbed through fear. This means creating space for women to cultivate morality not as a gendered burden but as a human capacity—rooted in justice, freedom, and critical moral reasoning. Only then can we speak of *ḥayā'* not as a veil over women's agency, but as a concept worthy of ethical seriousness. Until that transformation occurs, the current framework must be challenged—not because it is religious, but because it is unjust.

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Rethinking Gender Equality in Egypt: De-Arabization and Eco-agrarian Identity as Epistemic-Moral Shift

Introduction:

Most Third World feminist frameworks, including Islamic feminism, remain entangled in the binary of authenticity and modernity—that is, between reclaiming a supposedly pure cultural past and embracing Western liberal models of gender equality. This dualism has become one of the primary obstacles preventing countries in North Africa, particularly Egypt, from imagining and achieving meaningful forms of gender justice. These frameworks often oscillate between apologetic appeals to religious or cultural authenticity and uncritical adoption of Western feminist scripts, both of which fail to confront the underlying colonial logic that continues to structure gender relations.

In this paper, I argue that advocating gender equality in Egypt requires a deeper epistemic and moral transformation—one that breaks from both Arabized traditions (often mistaken as the authentic Egyptian heritage) and Western modernist narratives. What I propose is not a nationalist or essentialist return to a glorified past, but an epistemic reorientation: a reclaiming of Egypt's indigenous, historically grounded, land-based identity as a starting point. This approach does not seek a fixed blueprint but rather a point of recognition that connects history, land, and self-understanding—an origin from which more just and pluralistic gender relations can be reimagined.

Current gender structures in Egypt are not simply the outcome of Western colonialism; they are the continuation of a longer coloniality that includes Arabization as both a historical colonial and contemporary neo-colonial force. Walter Mignolo defines coloniality as the "darker

side of modernity," emphasizing its ability to persist even after formal political decolonization, reinventing itself under new guises (Mignolo, 2012, 3). But in this paper, I extend this idea: coloniality is not only the shadow of modernity—it is the darker side of humanity itself, recurring through any imposed system that reorganizes life around domination. In this sense, Arabization, like Western imperialism, should be understood as a form of colonization. It is not merely cultural assimilation but a "colonial matrix of power"—a structural force that reshapes gender roles, silences local knowledges, and installs patriarchal norms under the guise of religious or linguistic unity (Mignolo, 2012). This echoes Frantz Fanon's assertion that colonialism constitutes an epistemic rupture, one that replaces indigenous worldviews with those of the settler (Fanon, 2011).

The erasure of Egypt's pre-Arab epistemic system is a central concern of this paper. Arabization displaced indigenous paradigms that were deeply embedded in agrarian labor, communal land ownership, and gender complementarity. Cheikh Anta Diop reminds us of that agrarian societies historically fostered cooperative gender relations, not rigid hierarchical structures (Diop, 1990, 86). Thus, my argument proceeds through two epistemic-moral transformations: first, de-Arabization—a critical examination of Arabization as a colonial project that imposed homogenized cultural identities and gender injustice across North Africa. This is not a rejection of Islam, but a demand to distinguish between sincere religious belief and the political-cultural imperialism masked as faith. Arabization exemplified what Gversesri Spivak warns about: dominant colonial narratives frequently engage in "epistemic violence" by erasing indigenous cultures and histories (Spivak, 1988). In this light, labeling Egypt and other North African countries as "Arab" erases older, plural, and land-bound identities. Fanon emphasizes that national liberation and cultural revival are interdependent: national liberation and the

resurrection of the state are the preconditions for the very existence of a culture (Fanon, 2011, 178). Second, I propose reclaiming Egypt's agrarian identity as a site of epistemic possibility. Amílcar Cabral writes that "national liberation is necessarily an act of culture" (Cabral, 1979), and I take this seriously: Egypt's agrarian past offers a socio-economic vision in which gender roles were not defined by subordination, but by mutual labor, shared resource management, and interdependence. Revisiting this land-based identity is not about cultural nostalgia but about tapping into an alternative moral and ecological logic—one that resists the masculinist authority of both desert patriarchy and Western capitalist individualism.

By foregrounding these indigenous traditions and non-linear histories, this paper aims to shift the feminist discourse in Egypt away from the binary of authenticity and modernity. Instead, it offers a decolonial starting point—an epistemic anchor from which gender relations can be reconstructed around justice, mutuality, and dignity, rather than apology or mimicry.

First Epistemic-Moral Shift: De-Arabization as Decolonization:

Arabization as a Colonial and Neo-Colonial Project: Desertification of Identity

Gender inequality in contemporary Egypt must be understood not as a civilizational constant but as the result of successive epistemic ruptures—colonial, postcolonial, and internal—that severed the region from its agrarian, pluralistic, and historically egalitarian foundations. Among these ruptures, particular religious, legal, and linguistic shifts have played a major role in reshaping Egyptian identity. These transformations reorganized the ontological parameters within which gender, morality, and historical consciousness are made intelligible, often elevating desert-based patriarchal values over Nile-based communal and agrarian ones. As Nawal El Saadawi powerfully asserts, women must write their own history, for if they do not, others will

continue to distort it (El Saadawi, 1980). Reclaiming history, then, is not simply an archival exercise—it is an ontological and epistemic act of recovery. The prioritization of desert-centered logics of scarcity and hierarchy over Egypt's indigenous Nile-centered epistemology—rooted in agricultural subsistence and gender complementarity—has contributed to a framework of domination and moral rigidity. In this context, the rewriting of history through selective erasure functions as a form of epistemic violence, one that obscures Egypt's plural past and displaces the memory of more cooperative gender relations.

Pre-Arab Egypt, as documented by El Saadawi, Zahi Hawass, and Bahaa Taher, was marked by women's visibility and authority across political, intellectual, and spiritual domains. These roles were not anomalies, but reflections of a cooperative social order embedded in land-based economies. Their later reclassification as exceptions exemplifies the colonial process of rewriting gender memory. As Spivak (1988) explains, such discursive substitutions function as epistemic violence, rendering the subaltern's agency illegible and replacing indigenous narratives with hegemonic scripts. Arabization's impact was not confined to its initial historical moment, its neo-colonial afterlife rearticulated domination through the seductive dialectic of authenticity and modernity. Arabness was redefined as Egyptian essence, while Western paradigms—and more crucially, Egypt's own pre-Arab genealogies—were cast as corrupting or foreign. This false binary concealed Arabization's colonial roots and enabled it to masquerade as cultural authenticity. Radwa Ashour's notion of double colonization captures this internalization: the colonizer no longer rules from without but resides within, shaping desire, shame, and cultural legibility (Ashour, 2014). Arabized patriarchy thus functions simultaneously as a residue of conquest and a performative enactment of colonial logic—coded as tradition but structured by domination.

This dynamic reflects Aníbal Quijano's theorization of the coloniality of power, where systems of control persist not through overt domination but through the naturalization of hierarchical social orders. As he writes, "Gender, perhaps the most ancient axis of domination, has been subordinated to the colonial matrix of power" (Quijano, 2024, 2). Arabization did not simply impose new cultural forms; it redefined what gender meant, assigning new values, roles, and ontological statuses to gendered bodies through an epistemic system that claimed universal legitimacy. Historically, this project can be traced to the 7th-century Arab expansion, during which Arabic was institutionalized as the language of law, governance, and theology (Hodgson, 1974). As David Laitin (2007) explains, this was part of a broader process of language rationalization, wherein the imposition of a dominant language served to streamline statecraft, education, and social mobility. Arabic became the "high language" of political and epistemic legitimacy, while indigenous languages were relegated to the private sphere and associated with emotionality, backwardness, or superstition (Laitin, 2007, 10; 16–17). M. Talbi (1971) similarly notes that early Arab regimes granted legal and economic privilege to Arabic-speaking elites, creating an ethnolinguistic ruling class whose authority was both spiritual and administrative.

This linguistic and institutional hegemony was deeply entwined with a broader ecological and symbolic reordering of Egypt's identity. Drawing on Fatima Sadiqi's analysis of how patriarchal desert cultures influenced North African gender systems, I refer to this transformation as the desertification of identity—a symbolic shift in which the Nile Valley's historical logic of sustenance, interdependence, and reciprocity gave way to more hierarchical norms shaped by desert survivalism (Sadiqi, 2003, 134). Whereas the fertile Nile environment fostered cooperative and complementary social structures, desert conditions historically produced systems oriented around control, rigidity, and scarcity. As Cheikh Anta Diop observes, pre-desert

Egyptian societies exhibited gender cooperation rooted in land-based economies, while later transformations introduced lineage-based patriarchy aligned with more austere survival logics (Diop, 1990, 86). These changes constituted not only shifts in language or administration but a deeper ontological reorientation—one that reshaped labor, gender, and symbolic life around scarcity and dominance.

Rather than dismantling Arabization, European colonialism intensified its reach. Under British rule from 1882 to 1956, Egypt experienced the consolidation of a bifurcated linguistic regime: Arabic remained the language of daily administration, while English ascended as the medium of elite governance and capital (Owen, 2004). Afaf Marsot (1985) argues that this duality institutionalized cultural alienation through a linguistic hierarchy that mapped directly onto class, race, and power. While French colonialism in Algeria suppressed Arabic to impose assimilation, British policy in Egypt allowed Arabic to survive only as a subordinate tool of administration, stripped of epistemic authority. Ironically, it was within this colonial framework that Arabization was reimagined as a nationalist vehicle. Intellectuals such as Mustafa Kamil and later Gamal Abdel Nasser instrumentalized Arabization in their quest for anti-colonial unity (Gershoni & Jankowski, 1986). Yet this reinvention reproduced the very epistemic violence it sought to resist. As Niloofar Haeri explains, “Egyptians had to be made, often forcefully, into ‘Arabs’ because they did not historically identify themselves as such” (Haeri, 2003, 137). Nationalism—Arabization—became a mechanism of internal colonialism, erasing Egypt’s plural past—including its Coptic, Nubian, and pre-Arab identities—and replacing it with a monolithic Arabized subjectivity.

Following independence from British colonization, Arabization was further entrenched through education, media, and religion. State-sponsored media projects, as documented by Leila

Abu-Lughod, normalized a disciplined, Arab, middle-class national identity, marginalizing rural, Coptic, and working-class representations (Abu-Lughod, 2005, 111–112; 155–156). Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia-funded religious curricula embedded *Wahhabi*[29] norms into Egypt's institutions, reconfiguring moral and epistemic legitimacy along Gulf-determined lines (Lacroix, 2011, 42–47). These developments produced what might be termed a transnational Arab imaginary—a regime of cultural production that overwrites Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, and indigenous North African epistemologies in favor of a purified, Gulf-aligned Arab subjectivity. The consequences of this reordering are not only cultural but metaphysical. Arabization narrows historical consciousness, reduces epistemic diversity, and conditions gender identity around desertified values of control and division. In doing so, it forecloses the possibility of imagining justice outside its imposed terms.

Against this backdrop, the project of de-Arabization must be understood not as a rejection of religion, but as an epistemic and moral disentanglement of Arab imperial frameworks from Egypt's land-based and historically plural modes of knowing. It is a call to recover Egypt's indigenous epistemologies—not nostalgically, but critically—as alternative grounds for feminist and political liberation. Diop reminds us that land-based economies produce not just food but relational ethics. Cabral adds, "National liberation is necessarily an act of culture" (Cabral, 1979, 144). Feminist decolonization, then, cannot rest on textual reinterpretation or legislative change

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[29] - *Wahhabism* refers to "the rise in a relatively unimportant part of northern Arabia in the eighteenth century of *Wahhābism*, an aggressively anti-Pre-Textual and anti-Con-Textual form of Islam, followed by the accession to power in the Arabian peninsula by the adherents of this movement in the early twentieth century, followed in turn by the discovery of copious quantities of the most strategically critical and financially lucrative modern commodity in the Arabian peninsula, the funds from which have entrenched the power of the Saʿūdī Wahhābī state and supported the propagation of this anti-Pre-Textual creed worldwide, is a series of events that (the early twentieth-century machinations in Arabia of the Great Powers notwithstanding) has little to do with the rise of modernity in post-Enlightenment Europe"(S. Ahmed 2016, 532).

alone. It requires a radical revaluation of being—an excavation of suppressed ontologies and collective memories. Ashour echoes this imperative: "[Arabization] taught us that a woman's place is behind the veil, but history reminds us that Egyptian queens once ruled empires without hiding their faces" (Ashour, 1999). As Sadiqi (2003) affirms that our grandmothers did not wait for Western feminism to liberate them; they built civilizations in which they were already free. These voices insist on a decolonial feminist praxis grounded in land, memory, and self-determination—one that moves beyond imposed binaries of Arab versus Western, religious versus secular, and reclaims justice through Egypt's own plural and cooperative past. In a similar vein, Uma Narayan critiques the uncritical export of Western feminist frameworks to postcolonial contexts, observing that "what gets called 'tradition' in Third World contexts is often a hybrid artifact of colonial and postcolonial transformations" (Narayan, 1997, 13). This insight deepens the critique of Arabization as a falsely naturalized tradition, exposing it instead as a colonial remnant that continues to structure gender oppression under the guise of authenticity. Together, these thinkers call for a feminism that is not imported or inherited but excavated—built from within the ruins of colonized memory, reclaiming the lost epistemologies of women who once shaped their worlds with autonomy and authority.

Pre-Arabization gender equality in Ancient Egypt: A progressive framework

The dominant narrative of gender equality often assumes a linear trajectory—an inevitable march from oppression to liberation, culminating in the ideal of absolute freedom. Rooted in Western liberal epistemologies, this teleological framework envisions emancipation as a singular path, casting non-Western societies as perpetually lagging behind or incomplete. Ancient Egypt radically complicates this model. Rather than offering a utopian promise of future liberation, it presents a memory of historically embedded gender justice—where women's

autonomy was materially grounded, legally recognized, and culturally affirmed. This disrupts the presumption that progress unfolds in fixed, sequential stages or that gender equality must conform to a Western script. As Uma Narayan warns, “The story of women’s progress is often told as if we are all on the same train of modernity... but some of us are just seated further back” (Narayan, 1997, 9). Her critique exposes the universalizing arrogance of liberal feminism and invites a more pluralistic understanding of freedom—rooted in land, history, and alternative genealogies of justice.

While Islamic feminism often grounds its legitimacy in claims of authenticity—framing Arabized epistemologies as the rightful basis for Muslim women's liberation—it inadvertently falls into what might be called the authenticity trap. Scholars like Saba Mahmood, Asma Barlas, Margot Badran, and Amina Wadud variously suggest that either (a) freedom can be fully realized through submission to traditional Islamic norms, or (b) Arab-Islamic paradigms, if sufficiently purified of Western influence, will eventually yield an ideal feminist model uniquely suited to Muslim women. In both cases, authenticity is treated not as an opening but as a destination—a pre-given, complete path to liberation. This stance implies that Muslim women require fundamentally different paradigms of freedom than Western women, often reinforcing the problematic assumption that freedom is a Western invention rather than a human value. In contrast, my feminist approach treats authenticity not as an endpoint but as a starting point—a practical, epistemological move that offers confidence, imaginative grounding, and historical orientation. The recovery of gender complementarity in pre-Arab Egypt is not about asserting ethical superiority or claiming Egyptian exceptionalism; it is about demonstrating that gender justice is a human capacity that can emerge organically from specific historical, material, and ecological contexts. This history provides an epistemic foundation—not a blueprint—for

imagining contemporary feminist futures. It helps de-Arabize the present not by reverting to the past but by unlocking suppressed possibilities within it. In this way, my approach avoids the binary of authenticity versus modernity altogether. Instead, it proposes a third horizon: a decolonial feminist praxis rooted in land, memory, and human dignity—where freedom is neither a Western abstraction nor a theological decree, but an embodied ethical relation to place, labor, and each other.

In Ancient Egypt, women were not passive beneficiaries of a benevolent patriarchy. They were autonomous legal actors—property owners, contract-makers, and litigants—within a social order that recognized their agency (Robins, 1993; Toivari-Viitala, 2001). The case of Naunakhte, a woman who sued her sons for neglect during the 20th Dynasty, is emblematic of a system that held men accountable to women (Eyre, 2013). The political authority of Hatshepsut and Cleopatra VII likewise illustrates that gendered power in Egypt was not fixed but performative and historically contingent (Tyldesley, 1996; Fletcher, 2008). Even when adopting male regalia or aligning with patriarchal structures, these women enacted real authority. Simone de Beauvoir's insight—that women often adopt male-coded norms to access power (Beauvoir, 1949)—applies here, but it does not negate the legitimacy of their autonomy or the cultural systems that recognized it. These rights were not symbolic or exceptional. They were structurally embedded within Egypt's agrarian logic—a material and moral framework grounded in sustenance, reciprocity, and social stability (Lerner, 1986). Egyptian women's freedoms were not granted through crises or exceptions, but through a consistent legal and economic infrastructure. As Wilkinson (2010) and Robins (1993) document, legal and economic archives reveal a conception of personhood tied to land and labor, not abstract liberal ideals. Freedom in Ancient Egypt was defined not through disembodied autonomy, but through one's ability to sustain

oneself, participate in community, and be recognized in law. This historical model challenges binary notions of total subjugation versus total liberation and reorients our understanding of justice around material rootedness and interdependence.

Longing for freedom is not a Western value—it is a human impulse, shaped by time, place, and material conditions. However, the idea of absolute freedom is a dangerous illusion that ignores how our bodies, histories, technologies, and ecologies condition what is possible. Feminist philosophers emphasize that freedom is not about escaping all constraints, but about securing enough autonomy to live with dignity, to make meaningful choices, and to resist domination. This raises the philosophical question: where do we draw the line between freedom and subjugation? There may be no single or definitive answer, but we can identify meaningful markers. These include the ability to own and inherit property, to speak and dissent, and to participate in political and spiritual life on non-patriarchal terms. Feminist justice, in this light, is not about replicating liberal autonomy but about reclaiming the epistemic, material, and cultural ground that enables ethical existence.

Narayan's critique of "death by culture" narratives—where women's traditions are blamed for their oppression while colonialism, capitalism, and racism remain unexamined—reinforces the need for historically specific analysis (Narayan, 1997, pp. 86–87). Ancient Egypt, as a counter-example, defies the notion that feminist agency only becomes possible under modern conditions. Its legacy is not a golden age to be romanticized, but a horizon to be remembered—where freedom was lived not in abstraction but through embedded relations of land, lineage, labor, and law. This legacy extends beyond legal records into the spiritual and symbolic infrastructure of society. Women held high religious roles such as the God's Wife of Amun and priestesshoods of Hathor and Isis, positions that conferred spiritual authority, political

leverage, and economic control (Lesko, 1998). These were not ornamental roles, but structurally significant, positioning women at the center of temple economies and ritual governance.

Political authority, too, was not beyond women's reach. Figures like Nefertiti, Hatshepsut, and Cleopatra VII were not anomalies but exemplars of a gender system in which sovereignty was imaginable and institutionally supported. These women did not merely inherit or symbolically perform power—they enacted and sustained it through governance, diplomacy, and lineage continuity. Hatshepsut's strategic adoption of masculine titles and imagery served to consolidate authority rather than negate female agency (Tyldesley, 1996). The title of "Great Royal Wife" itself embodied diplomatic, ritual, and dynastic influence. Genealogical records confirm that royal women were central to succession and foreign policy (Dodson & Hilton, 2004). Their authority was rooted not in exception, but in an epistemic and symbolic system that accommodated female power.

Family law and everyday legal practices further affirm this embedded agency. Egyptian women could initiate divorce, retain custody of children, and protect their property through enforceable marriage contracts (McDowell, 1999). These documents ensured women's financial security and reflected a model of negotiated, contractual reciprocity rarely found in neighboring patriarchal systems like Greece or Rome. While some scholars argue that these rights arose from economic necessity during crises, this explanation falls short. Robins (1993) and Tyldesley (1994) show that such rights persisted across periods of stability and upheaval, suggesting structural permanence. Furthermore, these rights were supported by a religious and symbolic infrastructure that upheld women's legitimacy as moral and legal agents (Johnson, 2002). The persistence of these practices signals a normative framework where women's autonomy was not anomalous but expected.

Arguments that reduce women's rights in Ancient Egypt to economic utility rely on a flawed and overly functionalist logic. They assume a false dichotomy between pragmatism and principle, neglecting the cultural and symbolic systems that affirmed female capacity. If rights were granted solely due to necessity, we would expect their erosion in stable times—but the evidence shows the opposite (Tallet, 2017). Legal papyri, wills, and tomb inscriptions reflect women's sustained autonomy before, during, and after such moments (Robins, 1993; Lesko, 1996). These rights were not reactive adjustments; they were embedded in Egypt's cosmology, where female deities like Isis and Hathor shaped societal views of wisdom, regeneration, and governance (Tyldesley, 1994). Such theological foundations provided not just inspiration but institutional models for women's real-world agency. What emerges from this history is a complex and coherent model of gender justice—one grounded in agricultural life, spiritual symbolism, and legal reciprocity. It is not a narrative of exceptionalism or romanticization, but of a historically situated epistemology that centered women's autonomy as integral to social order. Gender equality in Ancient Egypt was not a symbolic gesture or crisis-dependent adaptation—it was an ontological and political structure. Recognizing this would lead to challenging the misconception that gender justice must always be imported from liberal modernity. Instead, it affirms that plural feminist pasts existed, and that they offer powerful resources for rethinking freedom, responsibility, and collective life today. To dismiss this history as an exception is to miss its philosophical and political significance. To reclaim it is to affirm the possibility of justice grounded in one's own land, memory, and cosmological imagination.

Arabization's Impact on Gender Roles

Cultural and linguistic transformation in Egypt has not merely unfolded as a passive or benign diffusion—it has functioned as an enduring ideological force that reshaped epistemic

structures and gendered identities. In particular, the emergence of Arabized social frameworks contributed to a reconfiguration of Egyptian identity, marked by the increasing dominance of desert-centered patriarchal norms. These shifts gradually displaced the agrarian epistemology of the Nile Valley, where gender relations were more complementary and cooperative, replacing them with hierarchical structures that positioned women in politically, economically, and ontologically subordinate roles. Salwa Bakr (1995) underscores this transformation by noting that Egyptian women were once landowners, philosophers, and rulers—figures who anchored society, not exceptions to it. Today, their contributions are often cast as anomalies, reflecting the deep erosion of indigenous gender memory. This process aligns with what María Lugones (2010) describes as the "coloniality of gender," in which imposed systems of thought displace previously reciprocal gender dynamics with rigid binaries. Arabized epistemologies, in this sense, did not simply alter cultural symbols—they enacted a profound epistemological rupture that redefined women from autonomous agents into subjects shaped by external norms and disciplinary frameworks.

Language has been central to this transformation. As El Saadawi (2009) sharply notes, "The colonized mind speaks the language of its oppressor and calls it liberation." Language in this context is not a neutral medium but a technology of domination. It shapes not only how subjects speak but what they can know, remember, and desire. Spivak's concept of epistemic violence (1988) finds resonance here: Arabization replaced indigenous knowledge systems with an Arabized symbolic order that delegitimized pre-Arab modes of expression, memory, and resistance. Ahdaf Soueif (2004) extends this critique, emphasizing that language loss is not just about vocabulary—it is the loss of an entire conceptual universe, a disorientation in how one understands freedom, agency, and belonging. The institutional effects of Arabization on gender

were both systematic and wide-reaching. The introduction of patrilineal inheritance systems marginalized women from land ownership, severing their historical role as agrarian stewards and undermining their economic independence. Previously, women had rights to inherit and manage land, a structure that reflected the material foundation of Egypt's riverine gender order. But under Arab legal codes, male heirs were prioritized, and women's property rights were subordinated to patriarchal guardianship. Equally transformative was the normalization of veiling and female seclusion. While veiling predates Arabization and existed in various cultural contexts, Arabization codified it as a moral obligation tied to honor, piety, and social order. El Saadawi (1980) argues that this shift turned women's bodies into battlegrounds for patriarchal control—markers of public morality whose visibility became subject to external policing. The spread of purdah further entrenched this logic by restricting women's mobility, effectively excluding them from civic, political, and economic life.

Polygamy and male-dominated marital laws also became institutionalized. While polygamy was not historically widespread in Egypt, Arabization gave it religious and legal legitimacy. Coupled with unilateral divorce (*ṭalāq*), these practices enabled men to exert total control over marriage, reducing women to replaceable figures within patriarchal households. El Saadawi (1980) contends that such laws reflect not only gender inequality but an ontological denial of women's agency: they are rendered objects of exchange, not coequal partners in familial or social life. Perhaps most symbolically devastating was the introduction of the concept of *fitna*.[30] Women were no longer seen as political or spiritual actors but as sources of seduction and disorder. *Fitna* framed women as existential threats to the moral fabric of society,

[30] -*Fitna* is an Arabic term that means trial, temptation, or chaos. It often refers to internal conflict, civil strife, or anything that disrupts social or religious order. In some contexts, it can also mean moral temptation or a test of faith.

legitimizing restrictions on their presence, voice, and autonomy. This mirrors colonial logics in which indigenous women are depicted as inherently dangerous, their freedom as a risk to the social order. In this sense, Arabization enacted a metaphysical reordering of gender—where controlling women became synonymous with preserving civilization. Legal structures reinforced this subjugation through testimonial inequality. Under Arabized legal systems, a woman's word was worth half that of a man's. In matters ranging from inheritance to criminal law, this epistemic hierarchy institutionalized mistrust of women's voices and codified their inferiority. Such frameworks excluded women from justice not only as plaintiffs or defendants but as knowers—denying their authority to speak the truth of their own lives. This epistemic subordination also sanctioned honor-based violence. The Arabized valorization of *ʿird* (honor) positioned women as the bearers of family reputation. Any deviation from prescribed behavior—selecting a partner, asserting sexual agency, or seeking independence—became a threat to male prestige. The result was a social order in which surveillance, punishment, and even death could be justified in the name of honor. As Soueif (2004) notes, this obsession with female purity rendered women perpetual suspects in their own communities, forced to perform virtue under the threat of obliteration.

Taken together, these structures amount to more than the sum of their parts. Arabization remade the very architecture of social life, embedding gendered subordination into legal codes, religious discourse, and linguistic norms. Its effects persist not because of religious faith alone but because of an internalized colonial logic that confuses dominance with morality and tradition with truth.

De-Arabization, therefore, is not a rejection of cultural identity but a philosophical and epistemic imperative. It entails distinguishing between spiritual belief and Arab cultural

imperialism, between communal values and imported hierarchies. It is a call to recover a feminist framework grounded in Egypt's agrarian epistemology, in which gender complementarity was linked to land, labor, and cosmological balance. This framework transcends both liberal feminism's obsession with abstract freedom and religious legalism's fixation on fixed roles. Instead, it seeks a historically grounded, land-based feminist praxis—one that remembers rather than reinvents justice. It draws from decolonial theory, historical materialism, and feminist critique to ask: What would it mean to build gender justice not from imported scripts but from the buried wisdom of Egypt's own past?

De-Arabization Feminism:

Epistemic-Moral Transformation (EMT) bridges the domains of epistemology and moral philosophy by emphasizing how knowledge systems shape ethical behavior, moral perception, and social structures. At its core, EMT is a recognition that how we come to know the world influences what we consider just, right, or possible. Historically, one of the most potent examples of EMT has been the process of decolonization, which cannot be reduced to political independence alone. Rather, it entails a deep reordering of both the ways knowledge is produced and how moral authority is understood. Boaventura de Sousa Santos has stressed that colonialism did not merely conquer bodies and lands—it conquered minds by privileging certain epistemologies and rendering others invisible or primitive (Santos, 2018). In this sense, colonial domination worked as much through epistemic frameworks as through political and military force. Frantz Fanon argued that decolonization is a "total disorder" precisely because it upends these entrenched epistemic-moral orders and invites a complete reimagining of identity, knowledge, and justice (Fanon, 1961).

Within postcolonial theory, decolonial thinkers like Walter Mignolo and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have built on Fanon's insights by calling for the dismantling of Western epistemologies that universalize moral norms while erasing other forms of knowing. Thiong'o, for instance, asserts that colonialism operated through language and cultural narratives that delegitimized indigenous epistemologies and shaped consciousness through imposed moral frameworks. He thus calls for a "decolonization of the mind," a process through which people reclaim control over their own historical and ethical narratives (Thiong'o, 1986). This concept is deeply resonant with feminist philosophy, which views the personal and the political as co-constitutive and insists that moral agency is historically and culturally situated. Feminist epistemologists challenge dominant narratives by showing how patriarchal systems intertwine with colonial structures in producing "rational" and "objective" knowledge. The project of decolonization, then, must also be feminist—committed to undoing epistemic violence across gendered lines. Liberation is not complete unless it accounts for how knowledge and morality have been shaped by both imperial and patriarchal interests.

Feminist epistemologists such as Sandra Harding, Linda Alcoff, and Uma Narayan have long argued that claims to neutrality and objectivity in knowledge production often mask deeply embedded colonial and patriarchal biases. Narayan in particular critiques how women's agency in the Global South is frequently reduced to a dichotomy between oppressive traditions and liberatory Westernization. She urges a move beyond this binary by emphasizing the importance of historically rooted and context-specific forms of feminist critique (Narayan, 1997). These critiques reinforce the necessity of reclaiming pre-Arab, agrarian epistemologies in Egypt, which were grounded in ecological interdependence and gender complementarity rather than in binary, oppositional frameworks. This recovery is not merely cultural but epistemological: it asks us to

revisit the systems of thought and value that informed pre-colonial gender relations. In such systems, knowledge was embodied, land-based, and often preserved through communal and ritual practices. Feminist philosophers argue that reclaiming these modes of knowing is essential for building ethical frameworks that are responsive to the lived realities of historically marginalized people.

Feminist ethics, in particular, offers a compelling alternative to dominant moral theories that prioritize abstraction, individualism, and control. Thinkers like Alison Jaggar and Virginia Held have critiqued how patriarchal and colonial value systems frame ethics around autonomy and authority rather than interdependence and care. These models have historically delegitimized moral practices centered on nurturing, relationality, and communal well-being. In contrast, Egypt's agrarian society operated on a moral logic of reciprocity, mutual labor, and ecological awareness. These values were not idealistic but foundational to the society's economic and social organization. Feminist ethics helps us recognize such value systems not as quaint relics but as vital moral resources that have been systematically erased by both Arabized patriarchy and liberal Western feminism. By asserting that memory, embodiment, and locality are central to moral reasoning, feminist philosophers offer a pathway for rethinking justice in ways that are historically and culturally accountable.

From this vantage point, de-Arabization can be understood as a feminist and decolonial project aimed not at opposing religion per se, but at disentangling Arab cultural imperialism from Egypt's indigenous identity. Fatima Sadiqi (2003) reminds us that Arabization enforced the notion that righteous womanhood is defined by veiling and domesticity, yet Egypt's own history features women like Hatshepsut and Nefertari—queens who led without concealment or submission. Nawal El Saadawi (1980) further insists that reclaiming one's self requires

reclaiming one's history, making memory itself a site of resistance. In this sense, Arabization represents what Aníbal Quijano (2000) terms the "coloniality of power"—a structure that redefines identity, knowledge, and morality in service of domination. Reclaiming Egypt's land-based epistemology is thus not a nostalgic exercise, but a deliberate act of epistemic disobedience that reasserts the legitimacy of erased moral and knowledge systems. It resists the binaries of modernity versus tradition, secularism versus religiosity, and Western feminism versus Islamic authenticity. Instead, it seeks justice rooted in the ecological and social life-worlds of the Nile Valley.

Frantz Fanon (1952) warns us that one of the most insidious forms of colonization is internalized: when the colonized adopt the worldview of the oppressor and mistake it for freedom. This is particularly true in the case of language, where Arabic became a tool of epistemic domination that reoriented Egypt's historical consciousness. Although Arabic holds immense religious and literary value, in Egypt it was used to overwrite indigenous knowledge systems and enforce masculinist legal structures drawn from desert-based societies. Linda Alcoff (1991) identifies this as a form of epistemic authority—those in power not only define what is said but whose knowledge is counted as valid. As a result, many Egyptians now see the Arab conquest as a liberating event, rather than a colonial imposition, and perceive their pre-Islamic ancestors as disconnected strangers. This epistemic rupture fragments historical belonging and makes moral continuity impossible. Yet, as Narayan (1997) cautions, rejecting Western norms must not lead to uncritical celebration of Arabized traditions, which are themselves products of imperial imposition. A genuine decolonial feminism in Egypt must chart a third path: one that neither mimics the West nor defends Arabized patriarchies.

Mona Eltahawy (2015) captures this emancipatory vision when she calls for gender liberation “unshackled from imposed identities.” This vision does not involve a return to the past but a selective recovery of its ethical architectures. Egypt’s pre-Arab agrarian society offers moral and gender frameworks based on care, reciprocity, and interdependence—values which were not incidental but central to how social life was organized. These traditions provide an alternative to both the individualism of Western liberalism and the legalism of Arabized patriarchal codes. Jaggar (1989) argues that traditional moral theories have excluded emotional and relational dimensions of ethics, falsely presenting such exclusions as neutral. In fact, these exclusions reflect the power dynamics of their time, which privileged detached rationality and devalued care as feminine and therefore inferior. Feminist ethics not only critiques these omissions but restores value to embodied, care-based moral systems. When applied to Egypt, this means recognizing that agrarian gender logics were viable ethical frameworks that can be revisited and reactivated in light of contemporary struggles.

The post-2011 revolution in Egypt opened a new chapter in epistemic and moral reflection, demonstrating the transformative potential of collective awakening. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) shows how digital networks enabled Egyptians to organize outside of state propaganda, generating new narratives and communities of resistance. Manuel Castells (2012) argues that such networked movements are not merely political; they are epistemic and moral, producing new ways of knowing and being. Among these narratives is a growing rejection of Arabized identity and a reembrace of indigenous Egyptian heritage. L.A. Paul (2014) refers to such moments as transformative experiences—encounters that change both what we know and how we evaluate moral choices. The work of Maria Lugones (1987) supports this in describing “world-traveling” as a practice of stepping into suppressed epistemologies and gaining new

ethical perspectives. These frameworks are crucial for understanding de-Arabization not as a cultural backlash, but as a process of ethical becoming—one that reclaims care, balance, and relationality as guiding principles for life and justice.

Ancient Egyptian cosmology can guide this reorientation. Pre-Arab Egyptian moral systems placed fertility, cosmic balance, and gender complementarity at the center of life. Goddesses like Isis, Ma'at, and Hathor embodied justice, order, and regeneration, while male figures were portrayed as nurturers of land and harmony, not as rulers of women. This moral structure contrasts sharply with the desert-based masculinities introduced through Arabization, which linked manhood with control, dominance, and rigid legalism. Carol Gilligan (1982) argued that care-based moral reasoning, grounded in responsiveness and relationality, is an equally valid moral logic. Virginia Held (2006) expanded this by asserting that care should shape political and institutional life, not just interpersonal relationships. In this light, reclaiming Egypt's agrarian ethics of care is not regressive; it is a forward-looking act of moral resistance. Joan Tronto (1993) reinforces this by framing care as an essential practice for sustaining life and community—a lens that fits Egypt's historical rituals and social formations.

Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (2005) helps articulate the feminist stakes of de-Arabization: it is not a rejection of masculinity but of the violent, hierarchical model imposed by Arabized legal and cultural codes. Egyptian men once played roles that were nurturing and cooperative—farmers, stewards of land, spiritual participants in communal rites. These roles challenge the colonial genre of masculinity imposed by Arabization and point to alternative masculinities rooted in interdependence and ethical responsibility. Sylvia Wynter (2003) theorizes this as ontological colonization—the imposition of a singular, colonial "genre of the human" that delegitimizes local modes of being. Reclaiming the Nile Valley's conceptions of

time, nature, and gender is therefore a project of ontological as well as epistemic and moral decolonization. Feminist de-Arabization must move beyond critique toward the active recovery of erased moral frameworks, enabling Egyptians to reimagine identity in ways that are indigenous, balanced, and life-affirming.

Finally, the practical dimensions of Epistemic-Moral Transformation (EMT) emerge most clearly in education, law, and policy. Epistemic shifts, when embraced on a societal scale, result in legal reforms that reflect redefined conceptions of justice. Egypt's laws have long reflected Arabized norms, privileging patriarchal models rooted in desert tribalism. However, a rising consciousness of Egypt's indigenous past, particularly its egalitarian gender norms, is challenging these legal frameworks. Feminist activists increasingly cite historical figures like Hatshepsut as symbols of indigenous female authority, using these precedents to demand changes in personal status laws that govern marriage, guardianship, and inheritance. Yet change faces resistance: epistemic structures are not merely intellectual but institutional, deeply embedded in education systems and legal codes. Martha Nussbaum (1997) reminds us that education is crucial to moral development; it can either reinforce existing hierarchies or help cultivate critical, reflective citizenship. Thus, decolonizing education is key—curricula must integrate suppressed epistemologies and promote moral reasoning grounded in historical and ecological specificity.

Education must be seen not only as content delivery but as epistemic reformation. Incorporating Egypt's agrarian, pre-Arab gender systems into curricula would disrupt the dominant Arabized narratives that obscure indigenous identities. Santos (2018) calls this "epistemologies of the South," urging the legitimation of marginalized knowledge traditions as sources of ethical and political insight. By fostering awareness of Egypt's own epistemic and

moral heritage, educational reform can become a site of de-Arabization and feminist transformation. The goal is not to romanticize the past but to recognize its moral insights and use them as resources for present and future justice. In this way, de-Arabization becomes not only a cultural project but a comprehensive ethical undertaking—reshaping institutions, reshaping moral imagination, and reshaping identity from the ground up.

Second Epistemic-Moral Shift: Neo-Eco-Agrarian Identity as Gender Justice:

Traditional Eco-Agrarian Identity and Gender Egalitarianism

The second epistemic-moral shift proposed in De-Arabization Feminism centers on the reclamation and reconstruction of a neo-eco-agrarian identity as a foundation for realizing gender justice. Rather than viewing agrarianism as a nostalgic return to a premodern era, this shift understands it as a viable, historically rooted, and philosophically rich counter-framework to both capitalist modernity and Arabized patriarchal systems. Agrarian life is not merely economic—it is ontological, a mode of being that arises from the intimate interweaving of land, labor, and care. This identity refuses the compartmentalization of life and instead fosters a deeply relational and interdependent worldview. It grounds ethical and political life in the material reality of the land, challenging disembodied liberal and religious abstractions. Through this lens, agrarian existence becomes a transformative terrain on which gender equality is not granted but cultivated through reciprocity, sustainability, and shared labor. Thus, neo-eco-agrarianism is not a retreat but a forward-looking, justice-oriented reimagining of life beyond colonial modernity.

Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist dictum that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949) provides an essential insight into the performative and material construction of identity. Her assertion is not merely philosophical but also deeply political,

emphasizing how gender emerges through social and embodied experience rather than biological determinism. Audre Lorde expands this insight by arguing that labor, especially for women, functions as a means of epistemic formation and self-assertion, not just survival (Lorde, 1984). Within agrarian contexts, labor is not an alienated task but a relational practice through which individuals come to know themselves and others. Farming, in this light, becomes a form of ethical becoming that organizes life through the cyclical rhythms of planting, harvesting, and regeneration. These cycles connect human life to natural temporality, resisting the linear time of capitalist development and opening space for seasonal consciousness and ecological attunement. Agrarian identity, then, includes a moral formation in which land, community, and care shape one's agency and capacity for ethical life.

Historically, agrarian systems have been closely tied to the cultivation of virtue and the realization of communal values. Aristotle, in *Politics* (1252b), links agricultural life with eudaimonia, or human flourishing, by emphasizing self-sufficiency, interdependence, and civic virtue as key aspects of ethical societies. In this spirit, agrarian living promotes not only material stability but also moral and social coherence grounded in cooperation. Silvia Federici similarly highlights the emancipatory potential of subsistence farming, especially in non-capitalist contexts where women have historically sustained communities through their connection to land: "Women have been the subsistence farmers of the world... while capitalism has always sought to separate them from land" (Federici, 2004). Unlike modern gender regimes based on domination and privatization, these agrarian structures allowed gender to be negotiated through shared responsibility. Such systems did not erase gender distinctions, but they embedded them within practices of mutual labor and ethical complementarity. In this way, land-based societies offered

an alternative model where gendered roles were shaped through contributions to collective life rather than through structural subordination.

The epistemic values of agrarian life center on care, reciprocity, and sustainability—principles often eclipsed by capitalist systems that prioritize efficiency, accumulation, and individualism. Vandana Shiva argues that traditional agricultural systems integrate what industrial models forcibly separate: the reproductive and productive spheres (Shiva, 1988). In the agrarian worldview, the care of soil, seeds, water, and animals is intimately linked to the care of children, elders, and communities. This entwining reveals a unified moral economy in which domestic labor is not invisible or devalued but honored as integral to life's continuity. Such a perspective counters the mechanistic logic of modern economies that treat care as non-productive and therefore disposable. By contrast, in agrarian life, care is not marginal—it is the very principle that sustains human and ecological systems alike. This ethic provides a powerful critique of both liberal capitalism and Arabized patriarchy, each of which severs ethical labor from its communal and environmental context.

Women have historically played a central role as epistemic agents in agrarian societies, serving as stewards of environmental knowledge, healers, cultivators, and cultural transmitters. Robin Wall Kimmerer emphasizes the deep ecological intelligence embedded in women's relationships with land, particularly through their knowledge of plant medicines, seed preservation, and sustainable farming practices (Kimmerer, 2013). This challenges the dominant, technocratic agricultural models that elevate male-coded, scientific authority while marginalizing indigenous and experiential knowledge. In pre-colonial agrarian Egypt, women's labor was not limited to the household; it extended to the fields, irrigation systems, and community decision-making spaces. These roles positioned women as moral and ecological anchors within their

societies, shaping not only economic life but also collective memory and cultural continuity. Their authority was not symbolic—it was practical, political, and epistemological. Recognizing this history interrupts contemporary narratives that reduce women's roles to domesticity or religious submission and instead reclaims their rightful place as central figures in sustaining life and knowledge.

The cooperative dimensions of agrarian life foster inclusive and democratic decision-making that stands in stark contrast to patriarchal and hierarchical land regimes. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva argue that, prior to colonial disruptions, many agrarian societies were governed through communal processes where women's input was not only welcomed but vital (Mies & Shiva, 1993). These practices sustained a sense of shared ownership and mutual accountability that defied the privatization and male domination imposed by later Arabized inheritance systems. The replacement of cooperative land governance with patrilineal property laws introduced profound gender inequalities that remain entrenched today. In cooperative agrarian contexts, governance was not about domination but about deliberation, consensus, and sustainability. Reviving these models offers more than policy reform; it gestures toward a fundamental reordering of power that aligns with feminist and ecological ethics. Reclaiming such structures challenges both the state and the market as the sole arbiters of land and invites new, community-based forms of justice.

Carolyn Merchant deepens this critique by tracing how women's bodily and ecological knowledge—especially regarding fertility—was systematically devalued through processes of enclosure, medicalization, and epistemic violence (Merchant, 1980). Fertility, once understood as a sacred capacity linked to both land and life, became pathologized under scientific rationalism and patriarchal control. The knowledge women once held about soil cycles,

menstrual rhythms, plant propagation, and childbirth was gradually removed from their domain and reclassified as inferior or superstitious. This epistemic shift did not just erase knowledge; it stripped women of authority, agency, and sovereignty. In contrast, agrarian systems recognized women's reproductive roles as socially vital and spiritually significant. By intertwining agricultural and reproductive labor, these systems preserved a form of epistemic autonomy and moral recognition for women. Reinstating this interconnection could restore a holistic ethical vision in which care for land and care for life are inseparable practices.

The erosion of these agrarian values under modern state formation and economic reform is particularly evident in Egypt. Timothy Mitchell observes that during the Nasserist era, agriculture was centralized under state control, which diminished local autonomy and displaced traditional farming knowledge (Mitchell, 1988). Rather than empowering farmers, modernization subordinated them to bureaucratic authority, eroding the relational systems that had long sustained rural life. The neoliberal reforms of the 1970s further deepened this rupture. As Robert Springborg notes, these reforms recast rural Egyptians—especially the *fallāḥīn* [farmers]—as relics of an unproductive past, effectively severing them from national development narratives (Springborg, 1989). These shifts reinforced class and gender stratifications by devaluing traditional labor, particularly women's work in agriculture and care. The symbolic and material disconnection from Egypt's agrarian roots accelerated with these reforms, leaving a cultural vacuum in place of once-rich communal practices. As a result, modern Egypt faces both an ecological and an ethical crisis that stems from the loss of its land-based moral economy.

Arabization played a significant role in intensifying this disconnection by replacing complementarity-based gender systems with rigid, desert-derived patriarchal hierarchies. Fatima Sadiqi explains that agrarian societies operated through necessity-driven gender collaboration,

whereas Arab patriarchal codes imposed binary and vertical forms of gender ordering (Sadiqi, 2003). This shift reflects what Aníbal Quijano terms the "coloniality of power," in which colonial and postcolonial systems restructure knowledge and gender to consolidate control (Quijano, 2000). Within this framework, Arabized patriarchy functions as both a cultural and political system that alienates communities from their land and from one another. However, this rupture also opens space for alternative ethics to reemerge. Wendell Berry emphasizes that good farming, like care, is a moral practice rooted in love, attention, and humility: "Good farming, like care, is an act of love... it demands attention, respect, and dedication" (Berry, 2002). This farmer's ethic resists the commodification of labor and instead elevates shared stewardship as the basis for community well-being. When embedded within feminist decolonial thinking, care is redefined not as a private, gendered duty but as a public and universal moral commitment.

Finally, by advancing a neo-eco-agrarian identity, this second epistemic-moral shift offers a compelling decolonial feminist alternative to both Western liberalism and Arabized patriarchy. It asserts that gender justice cannot be abstracted from the land, from ecology, or from communal labor. The ethics of the farm, the rhythms of the seasons, and the values of cooperation all converge to form a moral and political vision capable of resisting both neoliberal commodification and cultural hegemony. Reintegrating traditional ecological knowledge, resisting capitalist extraction, and reclaiming agrarian moral economies are not acts of nostalgia—they are strategies for survival, autonomy, and collective dignity. This vision does not seek a simple return to the past; rather, it excavates the past for usable tools, ethical frameworks, and forms of solidarity that can inform future resistance. De-Arabization Feminism thus envisions a transformed Egypt—not through rupture, but through rootedness, where memory, land, and care rebuild a more just world.

Toward a Neo-Eco-Agrarian Future: A Feminist-Decolonial Start-Point for Egyptian Feminism

The neo-eco-agrarian project proposed for Egypt does not aim to nostalgically restore an ancestral way of life. Rather, it represents a creative and ethical reimagining of the future—an act of epistemic and moral reconstruction grounded in the land-centered wisdom of the Nile Valley. This vision seeks not to replicate the past but to learn from it, drawing from agrarian ethics as a fertile epistemic starting point for feminist decolonial transformation. In the face of ecological degradation, colonial rupture, and entrenched patriarchal governance, Egypt must reimagine its social order by re-centering the land as a source of knowledge, justice, and belonging. Such a future demands that we see ecological interdependence and gender equity not as secondary concerns but as the foundations of a truly ethical society. The goal is not to conserve traditions as static artifacts, but to allow their ethical principles to animate new political arrangements. A neo-eco-agrarian Egypt would be one where the cultivation of food, identity, and justice all begin with the soil.

At the center of this ethical reordering lies the land itself—not as property to be owned, exploited, or inherited along patriarchal lines, but as a living participant in communal life. Reclaiming access to land on equitable terms requires a direct confrontation with legal and cultural structures that have historically excluded women and fragmented traditional agrarian communities. Feminist land reform must go beyond redistribution and include mechanisms of co-governance, such as cooperative farms, communal decision-making, and village-based stewardship councils. These frameworks resist capitalist commodification and instead affirm the relational, reciprocal ties between people and the ecosystems that support them. The act of restoring women's relationship to land is not just a question of ownership but of political

empowerment and moral responsibility. Reviving collective land-based systems is a philosophical and social commitment to rebuilding the broken fabric of intergenerational care. Through this lens, agriculture becomes not a marginal sector but a site of justice and ethical life.

For this transformation to endure, education must be restructured to foster ecological awareness and historical consciousness rooted in Egypt's agrarian legacy. Curricula should be designed to include the Nile Valley's sustainable irrigation systems, indigenous crop varieties, and the critical role women played in pre-colonial agricultural life. Teaching ecological literacy as a civic duty would empower young people to see the land not as an object of exploitation but as a partner in survival and justice. Community archives that document oral histories, seed-saving techniques, and ancestral farming practices should be developed through grassroots initiatives. These archives could be maintained not only in rural spaces but integrated into urban educational centers to reconnect fragmented populations with their land-based origins. Vocational education must also expand to include not just technical skills but ecological stewardship and feminist political consciousness. The classroom must become a space where memory and futurity converge to prepare the next generation for regenerative living.

The revival of ethical cultivation depends on adopting agroecology as a guiding framework for agricultural practice. Agroecology goes beyond technical solutions; it offers a philosophical approach to farming rooted in balance, biodiversity, and local knowledge systems. It refuses the monocultural logic of industrial agriculture and instead encourages symbiotic relationships between soil, seed, water, and people. By defending native seed sovereignty, Egypt can reclaim its food systems from the grip of multinational corporations that threaten both ecological and cultural autonomy. Agroecology also reframes water as a collective right, challenging privatized models that have turned access into a site of exclusion and dispossession.

Water justice initiatives, particularly those led by women and local communities, can re-establish water as a shared inheritance sustained through care rather than exploitation. Through agroecology, agriculture becomes an arena of resistance and renewal—a space for reclaiming autonomy and restoring relationships between human and more-than-human worlds.

No agrarian transformation can succeed without revitalizing the rural economy in ways that affirm dignity, agency, and ecological harmony. Supporting smallholder and sustainable farmers through subsidies, cooperative insurance programs, and equitable credit structures will enable them to thrive without reliance on extractive corporate intermediaries. Local food systems must be strengthened not simply for economic resilience, but for the cultural and ethical renewal they make possible. Rural markets are more than commercial spaces; they are places where tradition, community, and ecological care intersect. These spaces allow for intergenerational exchange, the preservation of culinary and botanical knowledge, and the cultivation of shared moral economies. Women farmers, in particular, must be recognized as key architects of these alternative economies and supported with infrastructural and legal protections. Building rural economies from the ground up ensures that agrarian life remains viable, vibrant, and resistant to neocolonial pressures.

Reorienting Egypt toward a neo-eco-agrarian future also entails a cultural transformation that reshapes how farmers and rural life are represented in national consciousness. The agrarian worker must no longer be seen as backward, passive, or obsolete but instead honored as a bearer of ecological wisdom, cultural memory, and practical intelligence. Artistic mediums such as literature, film, music, and visual art can play a critical role in reshaping these perceptions. By presenting farmers as ethical subjects and community leaders, cultural production can inspire pride, solidarity, and moral imagination. Reviving agrarian rituals, seasonal festivals, and folk

practices through state support and civil society initiatives can also reweave the severed ties between land and collective identity. These cultural expressions are not decorative—they are acts of epistemic healing that assert the continued relevance of agrarian life in shaping Egypt's future. They enable the farmer to become a symbol not of the past, but of possibility.

Sustaining this transformation will require bold shifts in agricultural policy that reject neocolonial frameworks built on monoculture, export-oriented development, and foreign investment dependency. Instead, policies must be shaped by a feminist-decolonial logic that centers rural knowledge, values ecological resilience, and promotes economic justice. This means giving smallholder farmers—especially women—participatory control over land tenure systems, water governance, and seed regulation. Institutionalizing participatory governance models ensures that policy decisions reflect the lived realities and aspirations of those most directly involved in agricultural life. Moreover, forging alliances with indigenous, peasant, and ecofeminist movements across the Global South can amplify Egypt's position in a broader transnational struggle against planetary extractivism. By grounding agricultural governance in feminist ethics and ecological humility, Egypt can lead in developing regenerative models of food sovereignty and environmental stewardship. Policy becomes not merely administrative but an instrument of moral and ecological realignment.

This is not a call to regress or retreat into idealized visions of the past. It is a call to build a future that is as grounded in historical knowledge as it is oriented toward ethical transformation. The agrarian structures of the Nile Valley, with their principles of gender complementarity, environmental reciprocity, and cooperative labor, provide a point of departure rather than a fixed model. From these foundations, Egypt can envision new worlds where land is again made meaningful, not through conquest or commodification, but through care, memory,

and mutual obligation. This neo-eco-agrarian horizon offers more than agricultural revival—it offers ethical clarity in an age of confusion, and collective rootedness in an era of fragmentation. By embracing this path, Egypt can reclaim its past not as a script to be reenacted, but as an archive of living values ready to be reawakened. The future begins where the land is once again allowed to speak.

Conclusion: From Epistemic Recovery to Feminist Regeneration:

This paper has argued that achieving gender equality in Egypt demands more than policy reform or scriptural reinterpretation—it requires a profound epistemic and moral shift that disentangles Egyptian identity from both Arabized patriarchy and Western liberal teleologies. Through a twofold framework—de-Arabization and the reclamation of a neo-eco-agrarian identity—I have proposed an alternative vision of feminist justice grounded in land, memory, and moral ecology. De-Arabization, as outlined, is not a negation of Islam or cultural belonging but a critique of the imperial logics that conflated Arabness with authenticity, erasing Egypt's plural and agrarian past. It is a call to recover suppressed epistemologies, not to reenact the past, but to retrieve the tools it offers for ethical reorientation.

The second epistemic-moral shift—the embrace of a neo-eco-agrarian identity—extends this vision into the future. It affirms that justice cannot be abstracted from ecology, and that feminist agency cannot flourish in epistemic systems that alienate people from the land, from care, and from each other. By retrieving Egypt's agrarian heritage, not as nostalgia but as an ethical archive, we open possibilities for feminist, decolonial futures built on reciprocity, interdependence, and historical consciousness. Such a future resists both capitalist commodification and desert-based masculinist control. It invites a radical reimagining of

identity—where freedom is not defined by mimicry of the West or fidelity to Arabized codes, but by the capacity to live ethically with others, the land, and oneself.

What is at stake is not simply the past, but the future of feminist thought and practice in Egypt. Reclaiming indigenous gender logics from before the Arabization project is a political and moral act—a refusal to be defined by colonial inheritances or theological binaries. Instead, it is an insistence on beginning again, from within. In doing so, we do not abandon religion or reason, but reframe them within an ethics of care, plurality, and rootedness. Egypt's feminist horizon, then, must not be a linear march toward a Western ideal nor a retrenchment into Arabized dogma. It must be a grounded, regenerative practice of remembering and replanting the seeds of justice buried beneath centuries of conquest and forgetting.

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Dissertation Conclusion

This dissertation critically examines Islamic feminism as a multifaceted project that simultaneously challenges and reproduces patriarchal structures within the realms of religion, politics, and epistemology. Through four interlinked papers, I demonstrate that while Islamic feminism purports to offer a liberatory path for Muslim women, it ultimately remains constrained by the very legal, theological, and colonial frameworks it seeks to reform. Rather than forging a new feminist horizon, Islamic feminism functions as a neocolonial and revivalist endeavor that re-legitimizes patriarchal authority under the banner of faith-based gender justice.

The first paper, *"What is Islamic Feminism?"* challenges the coherence and legitimacy of Islamic feminism by tracing its conceptual and methodological entanglements. While its leading figures—such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas—claim to advocate for women's rights from within the Islamic tradition, their hermeneutical strategies often rely on external moral frameworks derived from secular feminist ethics. This dual reliance results in epistemic tension: Islamic feminism must either stay faithful to traditional jurisprudential methods, which are themselves patriarchal, or adopt modern ethical paradigms that risk undermining its Islamic credibility. The paper argues that this tension creates a crisis of legitimacy, leaving Islamic feminism vulnerable to both conservative critiques of innovation (*bidʿah*) and secular critiques of political ineffectiveness.

The second paper, *"Between Scriptural Authority and Gender Equality: Reinterpreting the Qur'an in Feminist Tafsīr,"* examines the methodological inconsistencies in feminist Qur'anic exegesis. It argues that feminist interpreters often elevate egalitarian verses while

minimizing or reinterpreting those that endorse male authority, thus prioritizing ethical outcomes over juridical continuity. Drawing on classical Islamic legal tools such as *ijmāʿ, qiyās, and asbāb al-nuzūl*, the paper shows that feminist *tafsīr* often departs from traditional norms in ways that undermine its claims to Islamic authority. Rather than resolving the contradictions between justice and scripture, these reinterpretations introduce new ones—especially when modern notions of equality are projected back onto pre-modern texts without reconstructing the legal system that enforces those texts.

The third paper, *"The Epistemology of Modesty: Taqwā, Ḥayāʾ, and the Fear-Based Moral Logic of Pious Femininity,"* explores the affective and psychological dimensions of Islamic feminist morality. It argues that the central virtues promoted by Islamic feminists—especially *taqwā* (fear of God) and *ḥayāʾ* (modesty or shyness)—are not neutral ethical traits but moral imperatives that reinforce gendered obedience and emotional self-discipline. Drawing on psychological studies of fear conditioning and social inhibition, the paper challenges the claim that shyness can be cultivated as a virtue. It shows that the valorization of fear-based morality contributes to internalized subordination rather than ethical empowerment, transforming fear into a mechanism of control rather than liberation. This critique reveals that Islamic feminist morality is structured more by conformity and spiritualized fear than by critical agency.

The fourth paper, *"Rethinking Gender Equality in Egypt: De-Arabization and Eco-Agrarian Identity as Epistemic-Moral Shift,"* offers an alternative framework to both Islamic and Western feminist paradigms. It proposes a double epistemic-moral shift. The first shift critiques Arabization as a historical and neocolonial project that replaced Egypt's pre-Islamic, agrarian, and relatively egalitarian society with desert-based, patriarchal social systems. The second shift calls for the reclamation of Egypt's indigenous eco-agrarian identity—a way of life rooted in

collective land stewardship, cooperative labor, and ecological interdependence—as a foundation for feminist thought. By grounding gender justice in land, history, and care rather than scripture or modern liberalism, this paper advances a decolonial feminist epistemology that resists both religious authoritarianism and Western developmentalism.

Together, these four papers argue that Islamic feminism—despite its emancipatory aspirations—remains epistemically compromised and politically limited. Its internal reliance on patriarchal legal structures and external dependence on modern ethical discourse render it a reformist project rather than a revolutionary one. While Islamic feminists have succeeded in opening space for dialogue, their methodological contradictions and institutional co-optation prevent them from achieving transformative change.

This dissertation ultimately calls for a new feminist paradigm: one that does not oscillate between apologetics and secularism, but instead forges a land-based, historically grounded, and ecologically attuned politics of liberation. In challenging the sacred legitimacy of both Islamic jurisprudence and Arabized patriarchy, and in proposing an eco-agrarian feminist alternative, this work contributes to the decolonial reimagining of gender justice in North Africa. It invites feminist theorists, activists, and scholars to move beyond the constraints of religious accommodation and embrace new epistemologies rooted in care, labor, and the earth.