



**Asma Afsaruddin (ed.)- *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 649p.**

Asma Afsaruddin's edited book, *The Oxford Handbook of Islam And Women*, is a compelling engagement with the ever-changing controversial topic of Islam and women. Discussing a wide range of diversified issues pertaining to women and Islam, the book, which is branched into seven major axes, opens up an opportunity for multidisciplinary and historical gates through which the contemporary gender and religious issues are rethought beyond the parochial and misleading ideological or ideologized debates. It traces a variety of trajectories the Islam/women conversations took in a long period, spanning the classical, the post-classical, and all the way down to the global periods. It brings together a constellation of different voices from a wide range of locations and fields to the ongoing discussion. Stressing the imperatives of temporal contextuality and specificity, the Handbook points out to the critical importance and necessity of incorporating women as interpretive communities to deconstruct a long legacy of male exegetical tradition to address and redress deeply anchored patriarchal foundations of the society.

Drawing on the pioneering critical interventions of Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud, Hibba Abugideiri's chapter addresses the gender issue within the lens of the Qur'ān as God's Word revealed to Muḥammad. She depolys a tawhidic paradigmatic approach to highlight the discrepancy between the Qur'ān's and man's treatment of woman and pushes it further to serve as a feminist exegetic paradigm to refute the religious basis of male supremacy. This chapter takes the paradigmatic women Mary, Bilqis, and Zulaykha in the Qur'ān beyond themselves to stand as models to be emulated by all Muslims, one the one hand, and to confirm *tawhid*, God's Unity.

Departing from the premise that the Qur'ān's meanings are multiple, unfixed, polyvalent, and inexhaustible and thus the gate of interpretation cannot be sealed, Hadia Mubarak delves into the classical exegeses of key Qur'ānic verses related to women. She contends that the Qur'ān is divine and interpretation is human and that there is a visible discrepancy in the classical *tafsir* tradition between the exegetes' recognition that the Qur'ān has an inherent meaning and the conviction that it lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations. She indicates that the hermeneutic tradition is not a "hermetically sealed box, nor are its contents fixed" and more importantly that the exegetes' intellectual, cultural, and social reality are detrimental to their interpretation of the Sacred Text, more particularly in relation to women's issues.

In her article “Women in the *ḥadīth* Literature,” Feryal Salem provides nuanced insights on the portrayal and references to women in early Islam. She explores the *Ḥadīth* literature based on four distinct types: 1. women whose stories are told from the past, 2. references to the wives of the Prophet as “Mothers of the Believers,” 3. Women/Companions of the Prophet, and 4. statements and references to women as a general category. She engages the *ḥadīth* corpus on women within a holistic approach, critiquing as it is the parochial, atomistic and selective method that overlooks the complexity and the effect of subjectivity in the whole transmission process.

In her chapter, Asma Afsaruddin interrogates the patriarchal readings of the Qur’ān by examining nonpatriarchal readings championed by a plethora of modern Muslim women exegetes. She takes the self-empowering gender-inclusive hermeneutic act beyond and in self-conscious reaction to the disempowering prism and prison of a long-standing legacy of premodern male interpretive tradition. Afsaruddin’s critical engagement with the writings of Muslim women exegeses is premised on the awareness that the male exegetes’ gender exclusive narrative is performative as it has a direct impact on women’s social and legal rights. Her close analysis of the arguments of conflicting proegalitarian and prohierarchal stances leads her to unequivocally take sides with the proegalitarian position, as there is no indication in the Qur’ān of a patriarchal and hierarchal ethos.

Focusing on the *ḥadīth* literature, Khaled Abou El Fadl outlines three thematic stratagems deployed by women scholars as hermeneutic approaches to question *ḥadīth* traditions’ foundations of gender inequity in Islam. These are namely, 1. the limited role of women in the production of Islamic knowledge, 2. the historicism of Islamic religious text, and 3 the supremacy of the Qur’ānic message and the centrality of universal ethical values. These thematic stratagems, Abou El Fadl, as a conscious male interpreter engaging with women interpreters of the religious tradition, argues that gender-inclusive approaches to *ḥadīth* literature seek to downplay the credibility of the misogynistic narratives attributed to the Prophet and to dismiss them as reinventions and productions of patriarchal institutions. The chapter points out that revelation is at once and the same time historically circumstantial and open-ended as it is perpetually relevant.

Mariam Sheibani’s chapter examines the premodern juridical perspectives on women’s rights and obligations in light of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. A perceptive reading of the legal doctrines pertaining to these issues in the Sunni and Twelver Shi’ī legal traditions helped her to expose their gendered nature as they provide different obligations and rules for men and women. Interestingly, this study reveals that in practice the legal system in premodern Islam is premised on the negotiation and adaptation of formal rules in the framework of sociocultural customs and that doctrinal rules are informed, reshaped, and circumvented in response to changing sociohistorical conditions.

Sohaira Siddiqui's chapter provides a concise overview of the ubiquitous and problematic Islamic family law (IFL) in different Muslim countries. The various enactments and reforms of the IFL showcase the tensions between the advocates of modernization and Islamization within the frameworks of the international law and the Islamic law that is incorporated in the constitution. Basing her analysis on a comparative study of the reform of IFL in Morocco and Malaysia, she shows how advocates of IFL reforms face different challenges emanating from their socio-political circumstances. She comes to the conclusion that contemporary reform is an ongoing process and undergoes problems of implementation. Hence the necessity to give attention to other mechanisms to ensure legal equality.

Natana J. Delong-Bas' chapter reflects on the rich scholarly work on the issue of "women's rights and duties in classical legal literature" whereby "women" are placed as a legal category. She opines that any analysis of "women's rights and duties in classical legal literature" requires a problematization and deconstruction of "women," "rights and duties," and "classical legal literature." This deconstructive method frees academic scholars from parochial reductivism, and exclusive unidimensional assumptions of women and their legal rights, as it articulates the complex and ever changing political, legal, social, and cultural contexts, over time and space. Yasmin Amin's chapter probes the existing gap about *al-Mubashsharāt bi-l-janna*, who are taken as paragons of virtue in classical and modern literature as they have been promised a place in a paradise, a reward all believers irrespective of their gender aspire to.

Maria Dakake's chapter entitled "Women as Moral Exemplars in Twelver Shī'ism" focuses on two female figures in the Shī'ī tradition: Fāṭima and Zaynab bint 'Alī. She draws a very insightful comparison between their moral qualities that are celebrated and emulated by all Shī'īs irrespective of their gender. Both the former's quietest and passive endurance of injustice is contrasted to the latter's outspoken condemnation and resistance to oppression shape the intellectual and political dynamic Shī'ī history. Such reading of history reorients the reader to important the role of early Shī'ī women in a hagiographic, religious and historical tradition that is predominantly male. Navigating the early and classical history, Asma Sayeed probes the historical patterns in *ḥadīth* transmission. She argues that historical studies tend to reveal two main concerns: historicity and representation across time.

Samer M. Ali's chapter draws the readers' attention to the Orientalist processes of otherizing the "Orient" as hypersexual and reotherizing it as 'sexless.' Europe's biases contributed to burrying and systematically sidelining women's roles as *littérateurs* and agents in society and consequently overlooking a rich legacy of Muslim women's millennial contribution to the literary tradition. Based on sources containing records of financial transactions involving women, Amira Sonbol's chapter examines Muslim women as economic beings during the premodern period. As opposed to the general image of women as being relegated to the

margins of economic life and stressing their interconnectedness with their society, she demonstrates how their economic participation is vital to their communities and families.

Drawing on the seminal work of Saba Mahmood's study *Marion Katz* explores the mosque as a public space that subverts the male-female dynamics of space and power. She argues that conservative religious women's visibility in the mosques is a moment of agency and retrieval of religious authority. It contributes to the counterhegemonic presence of women leading to the dismantling of the male-centeredness of Islamic pedagogy. Margaret Aziza Pappano's paper departs from the significant shift in recent scholarship on motherhood from a biologically determined social role to an active mother-centered engagement, to explore the role religion plays in determining maternal identities and practices. While she calls on the reader to distinguish between the nature of Qur'ānic verses on motherhood and the interpretive endeavors mobilized to negotiate maternal identities in the daily experiences in the Muslim societies.

In her chapter, "Women as Modern Heads of State," Tamara Sonn provides an overview of Muslim women's participation in political life in several Muslim countries. She interestingly discusses their self-conscious considerable engagement with their religious identities and social roles. Women political leaders stress in varying ways their perception of Islam which does not stand on opposite lines with democracy, social justice, freedom, and human equality, including between females and males. Elizabeth Brownson's chapter addresses two major lines of debates in scholarship on Muslim women's activism in Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria in recent decades. One revolves around Islamic activism and its ability or inability to empower women and the other one relates to the relationship between Islamist women activists and secular feminists and the (in)compatibility of Islamists' versions of Islam with women's rights.

Without intending the experiences of women in terms of their engagement with their society, politics, economy, and religion, Nermin Allam's chapter examines early women's social and religious activism in Egypt and occasionally on other countries in North Africa. Allam analyses the debates related to this activism and highlights the intersectionality between secular and Islamic discourses in their intellectual grounding and practices. Her analysis focuses on the debates over the authenticity, the ideological foundation, and the credibility of women's activism. Seema Golestaneh discusses women's religious and social activism in Iran outside of the prism of the simplistic and ideological frames of Western feminism and outside the conventional definitions of activism.

Chiara Maritato investigates women's religious and social activism in Turkey in light of the political and social transformations in Turkey and beyond the limiting scope of feminism– antifeminism dichotomy. Her chapter probes women's activism as it is shaped by the headscarf ban and women's right to wear

headscarves in the public sector. It examines the implications of women's shift from the status of activism to one of bureaucracy. Elora Shehabuddin's article examines the specificity of women's activism in Paksitan and Bangladesh, as it is framed in an Islamic rhetoric foregrounding their Muslim identity and personal piety as forms of empowerment. She argues, however, that such religious and social engagement can backlash as it is conducive to the support of discriminatory policies against women who observe religious practices differently from the movement's lines.

Nelly van Doorn-Harder's chapter looks at women's religious and social activism in Muslim-majority countries of South Asia. It underscores women's access to public life and the religious education circles and how their call for gender and women's rights is based on interpretations of religious teachings. Harder argues that the challenging rise of radical Islam shifted women's agenda to issues including violence against women, polygyny, child marriage, Hudud laws, and human trafficking. Maria Jaschok's and Man Ke's paper addresses Muslim women's activism in China, indicating that theirs is more about activities than activism. It provides an analytical survey of related scholarship related to this topic through the critical prism of the researcher's positionality as it shapes conceptualization and methodology.

Nina Hoel's article explores Muslim women's activism in South Africa, arguing that should be construed within the intersecting structures of oppression, with particular emphasis on religion, race, gender, and sexuality that give rise to activist initiatives based on Muslim women's diverse experiences. To do so, the article presents three experiential cases to stress that Muslim women negotiate Islamic teachings in a variety of different ways; these are namely: women's access to mosques, the development of Muslim personal law, queer Muslim lives in South Africa. Juliane Hammer's chapter tackles religious and social activism in the United States within a critical framework that takes into account the historical process, diversity, and politics of Muslim women's activism, and the analysis of such activism.

Jeanette S. Jouili addresses Muslim women's activism in Western Europe by reflecting on the developments in academic research on Muslim women's activism in Europe. She gives her thoughts on the diversified challenges and agendas of women's activism informed by the particularity of the socioeconomic conditions of these women, the political discourses knitted about them, and the fixed images about as they engage the public domain. Alainna Liloia's chapter examines the specificity of women's religious and social activism in the Arab Gulf states and the various ways in which they negotiate religious, social, political norms and societal roles. She provides insights on a set of strategies adopted by women in the Gulf to question and resist gender norms.

Ruqayya Y. Khan's article on "Modern Representations of the Wives of the Prophet" is a critical evaluation of the Islamic classical sources and Western scholarship on the topic. Interestingly, she shifts her focus on the analysis of

these women as Wives, and less as the Mothers of the Believers. She deplores the remarkable gap between the abundance of material regarding the dominant Islamic narratives about the lives of the Wives and the scarcity of material their lives after the Prophet's death. The new shift should be articulated in egalitarian lens and a more nuanced recognition of the different roles and contribution of these women in Islam.

The last chapter in this Handbook entitled "Women's Saratorial Agency: The History and Politics of Veiling" by Anna Piela argues that although the veil is associated with Islam, it is not exclusively Islamic. As Islamic veiling takes the reigns in Muslim countries and Western representations, it eclipses more important issues pertinent to women's lives, such as education, employment, and political participation. Piela asserts that the debate and controversy over the Islamic veil is articulated less on its religious than on its political nature and beyond and above women's intentions of wearing it.

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