

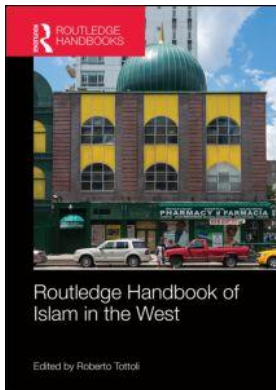
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## **Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West**

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### **Gender, feminism, and critique in American Muslim thought**

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# Gender, feminism, and critique in American Muslim thought

*Juliane Hammer*

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In early 2011, in the concluding paragraph of an essay entitled “Muslim Feminist Birthdays,” Aysha Hidayatullah wrote the following in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*:

Advancing gracefully will require that we face end points and forge new directions in our work without reinventing the wheel, failing to give each other credit, or falling prey to the divisive commercialism of the U.S. academy that exoticizes Muslim women and turns them into collectors’ items of competing value. Our survival as Muslim feminist subjects will depend on our ability to remain accountable to our greater communities, foster a spirit of critical engagement, and maintain the momentum of a collective movement that continues to nourish new life.

*(Hidayatullah 2011: 122)*

Hidayatullah, a scholar of Islamic studies, not only introduces us to the complexity of (American) Muslim feminist theology (her terminology), she also writes in response to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a leading Catholic feminist theologian, and as part of a group of religious feminists who ponder the past, present, and future of religious feminist thought and practice. Her observation about this complexity as well as her charge for the future of Muslim feminist thought provide a suitable framework for this chapter on the roles of gender, feminism, and critique in American Muslim thought. I focus my presentation and analysis on American Muslim women scholars at the intersection of the American academy and American Muslim communities. I argue that their commitments as public intellectuals focus on meaningful change in their societies and communities which hinges on the possibility of multiple and nuanced critique as well as dynamics of power, authority, and interpretation. In other words, we can only critically and meaningfully analyze the works of American Muslim women scholars if we recognize them as products of historical circumstances, individual as well as collective agency, and part of the ongoing negotiation of Muslim religious tradition.

The group of scholars I focus on here deserves some further qualification. American Muslim women have participated in and contributed to scholarship in the traditional Islamic sciences as well as the more or less secular field of Islamic studies in the American academy. However, not all of them foreground their Muslim identity; not all of them carry out normative and/or

prescriptive (sometimes called theological) work; and some women scholars do not identify with work that focuses on gender categories or changes in gender roles as central to their agenda. I focus on those Muslim women scholars who do identify with what has been called by some the “gender jihad” (Esack 1997: 239; Wadud 2006), a term that connotes specifically Muslim endeavors to approach Islamic textual sources, including the Qur’an, the *Sunna*, and the Islamic legal tradition, in ways that allow for reinterpretation of gender roles and societal change.

I hesitate to simply call them American Muslim feminist scholars because there has been much discussion and scholarship on Islamic and/or Muslim feminism (Badran 2009; Shaikh 2003; Hidayatullah 2009). While some of the scholars under discussion in this chapter apply the term feminist to themselves, others have rejected it as part of a hegemonic and colonial Euro-American enterprise. Yet others avoid identification with Western feminism because it potentially discredits their endeavors in the eyes of Muslim communities and thus weakens the potential for their recognition as religious and communal authorities and leaders, and thus the potential for change. Amina Wadud self-identified in 2006 as “pro-feminist, pro-faith” (Wadud 2006: 79), which might just be an acceptable middle ground. I avoid forcing the term feminist on American Muslim women scholars and their work, while I also acknowledge that it can be a useful shorthand for gender equality-focused projects and ideas.

My interest in gender-focused scholarship and Muslim women scholars is born out of my own experiences as a Muslim woman scholar in the American academy and more than a decade of research, discussion, and reflection on the dynamics of women’s scholarship, feminist thought, and Muslim identities. The spotlight on gender-justice-focused Muslim women’s scholarship runs many risks, among them patronizing forms of celebration, possible co-optation for liberal tolerance projects, criticism from Muslim communities about overemphasizing these particular scholars, and, not least, charges from the very scholars themselves of misreading or misrepresenting their work. Most of these cannot be entirely avoided. In what follows, however, I hope to offer a nuanced as well as critical portrait and analysis of the intellectual genealogies and faith struggles of women who are foremothers, colleagues, and in some cases friends. I engage in this scholarship both as an ongoing negotiation of my own positioning as a Muslim woman academic and as part of an equally ongoing push towards the full inclusion of gendered analysis into scholarship on Islam and Muslims. It is to this end that this chapter positions Muslim women scholars in a longer genealogy of gender thought in American Muslim intellectual endeavors while recognizing that the bulk of gender-justice-oriented work has indeed been carried out by Muslim women and not their more authoritative and influential male counterparts.

## Setting the stage

Women’s roles in a society have been a litmus test for its modernness, provided they did not live in Euro-American countries, since the days of early colonialism. Many have described the unholy marriage between feminism and colonialism and the resulting judgment on non-Western societies as lower on the civilizational ladder and thus in need of “civilizing” and thus colonization. This is particularly the case for women’s roles and status in Islam and in Muslim societies. The pervasive representation of Muslim women as oppressed, silent, and hidden behind veils (by Muslim men and Islam) is only rivaled in its mediatized power by the arguably more recent image of Muslim men as inherently violent (towards other societies as terrorists and towards their own women and children as abusers).

Modern Muslim reformist thought developed in response to the experiences of colonialism that affected most of the Muslim majority world directly or indirectly. It is thus no accident that

reformers like Muhammad ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida, Abu al-‘Ala Mawdudi, and many others felt compelled to formulate their ideas on the status of women in their societies, typically with an eye towards equal rights gleaned from European discourses, regardless of whether those were in fact societal practice in those European model countries.

These representations, or rather stereotypes, have framed American Muslim community discourses on women and gender in Islam since the early twentieth century. American Muslims, diverse in ethnic and racial backgrounds, composed of Muslims from all Muslim majority countries as well as those born and raised in America, have always been thoroughly American and transnational at the same time. American Muslim attitudes to gender issues as well as the development of American Muslim thought have thus been grounded in the intersection of developments, values, and attitudes in Muslim majority societies and North America. As three waves of feminist theory and movement swept through North America and affected in myriad ways attitudes to gender roles and sexuality, Muslim societies from Morocco to Indonesia also negotiated, under the Western gaze, ideas about gender roles and changing economic, social, and political dynamics and Muslim religious adaptations to constantly changing societies.

### American Muslim thinkers and gender: the beginnings

It is important that the story of how American Muslim thinkers approached questions of gender roles should not start with Muslims who came to the United States as students and later scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. Part of the challenge lies in the ways in which scholars and/or intellectuals have been narrowly defined as engaged in higher education and the production of knowledge through institutions such as universities and research institutes. By that standard, leaders and intellectuals such as Elijah Muhammad, the long-term leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm X, the NOI’s most iconic figure, and Warith Deen Mohammed, son of Elijah Muhammad, and heir as well as transformer of the Nation of Islam from the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975 to his own death in 2008, would not be part of our purview here. Such exclusion would not only privilege American Muslim thinkers who came to the United States as immigrants; it also effectively marginalizes the thought and experiences of African American Muslims as somehow less important and not authentically Muslim.

Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X both expressed most of their ideas through speech rather than writing, even though Elijah Muhammad’s ideas have been published in many volumes of talks, lectures, and interviews. Malcolm X’s thought is most often located primarily in his autobiography (as told to Alex Haley). Both had far-reaching and important ideas about gender – mainly traditional gender constellations in which men provided economic stability and moral norms for the family, while women were responsible for maintaining the household, raising the children, and nourishing Muslim family bodies through proper diet and religious practice. This model of gendered respectability was imparted to NOI members through NOI publications like *Muhammad Speaks*, as well as in lessons and lectures, to women and girls, and men and boys. Fulfilling these “traditional” gender roles was represented both as essentially Islamic and as a remedy to the damage slavery and slaveholder discourse had done to Black families and Black bodies. It is also worth remembering that the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, when these discourses were developed, was a time in American history when American women were advocating for suffrage, and that it was only from the 1960s onward that second-wave feminism came into its own with its critique of gender discrimination and its push towards equal rights. Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X advocated for the right and responsibility of Black men to protect and defend their women against white assault and exploitation. In *Message to the Blackman in America*, Muhammad writes: “Islam will not only elevate your women but

will also give you the power to control and protect them. We protect ours against all their enemies” (Muhammad 1965: 60). These views of ideal gender roles and programs for implementing them shaped several generations of members of the Nation of Islam and the broader African American Muslim community, which of course included other African American Muslim groups and movements, some of whom identified as Sunni and claimed more religious authenticity and grounding in traditional Muslim discourse than the NOI.

It was in the late 1950s that several prominent Muslim scholars of immigrant background came to North America. Three have been hailed as the most influential on the development of American Muslim thought and will thus be discussed here in some detail: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a native of Iran, born in 1933; Ismail al-Faruqi, from Palestine (1921–86); and Fazlur Rahman (1919–88), a native of India/Pakistan. All three received education in both Muslim countries and Europe or the United States and (have) spent their scholarly and political careers as transnational Muslim scholars.

### *Ismail al-Faruqi*

Al-Faruqi studied at Indiana University and al-Azhar University in Cairo, and from the late 1950s until his untimely death in 1986 taught at McGill University in Montreal, at Syracuse University, and at Temple University. He also founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought as a conscious Islamic alternative to American higher education and the formation of an intellectual project he called the “Islamization of Knowledge.” Al-Faruqi wrote about gender (without using the term) in some of his work, where he discussed Islamic concepts of the family and espoused a concept of equity that is based on the sexes as different but equal. Men and women in Islam, according to him, have complementary God-given abilities while enjoying equal religious and civil rights, duties and responsibilities (al-Faruqi 1992: 129–39). “The West” had undermined these clear gender roles and thus contributed to the breakdown of traditional societies and families. Al-Faruqi’s ideas about women and gender were also taught by his wife, Lois Lamya al-Faruqi, who lectured extensively of the topic of women in Islam, representing versions of the complementary Islamic gender model in such lectures and her writings.

### *Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

Nasr attended school in the United States and later completed his college education and an MA at MIT and a Ph.D. at Harvard University. He taught in Iran until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when he left for political reasons. He has taught at Temple University and, since 1984, at the George Washington University. A prolific writer and author of over fifty books on topics in Islamic studies, Nasr has only written one short piece that directly addresses questions of gender roles in Islam. Titled “The Male and the Female in the Islamic Perspective,” it is a chapter in his book *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (Nasr 1987: 47–58). In it, he presents as the Islamic perspective on gender roles and relations a model that is, similar to al-Faruqi’s, based on complementarity. The male sex reflects the divine qualities of majesty and the absolute, while the female sex is a reflection of Divine beauty and infinity. Nasr asserts that discord and chaos in society have resulted from the revolt of modern people against these divine ordained principles, which have as their purpose to guarantee equilibrium in human society. In all his work, Nasr identified with perennialist and traditionalist thinkers, and leveled a general critique of modernity and its anti-religious movements and tendencies. The majority of his works present and analyze what he describes as the immutable Islamic tradition including Sufism, Islam and science, and cosmology.

### Fazlur Rahman

Perhaps the most directly influential male Muslim scholar of this generation (on the Muslim women scholars discussed here), Rahman focused his work on the necessity of reinterpretation of Islamic sources in order to maintain Islam as relevant for modern Muslims. While al-Faruqi could be characterized as a Muslim modernist, especially in his project of reconciling Western social sciences with Islamic principles, and Nasr as anti-modern in his intellectual and political pursuits, Rahman was a true and critical Muslim modernist reformer who early in his career also participated in educational politics in Pakistan. Educated in India and England, he initially taught at McGill, and, from 1969 until his death in 1988, at the University of Chicago. Rahman wrote several important books outlining his program for the reinterpretation and re-evaluation of Islamic textual sources, including *Islam* (1979), *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (1980), and *Islam and Modernity* (1982).

Rahman advocated for and carried out a thematic interpretation of the Qur'an, reflected in *Major Themes in the Qur'an*, as well as a historicized approach to the text which he called "the double movement":

Whereas the first movement has been from the specifics of the Qur'an to the eliciting and systematizing of its general principles, values, and long-range objectives, the second is to be from this general view to the specific view that is to be formulated and realized *now*. That is, the general has to be embodied in the present concrete socio-historical context.

*(Rahman 1982: 7)*

It is through these two hermeneutical strategies that Rahman became an important influence on American Muslim women scholars from the 1980s onward. Rahman also briefly mentions issues of gender, most notably in a chapter titled "Man in Society," in which he discusses polygamy as an example for his approach to achieving justice in human society. Rahman here advocates a move away from polygamy as incompatible with justice, and reinterprets verses of the Qur'an addressing the issue accordingly (Rahman 1980: 47–51). More curious perhaps is a move in the chapter on God in which Rahman, in 1980, opted to translate the word "*huwa*" in the Qur'an as him/her in Qur. 50:37, which indicates an attempt at and consciousness of the possibility of gender-inclusive translation/interpretation (Rahman 1980: 2).

During and after the intellectual "reign" of Nasr, al-Faruqi, and Rahman, there have of course been other Muslim scholars working in and around the American academy. Some, including, for example, Ebrahim Moosa and Farid Esack, both from South Africa, have contributed in meaningful ways to the development and discussion of progressive Muslim thought (especially on gender), as has Omid Safi. All three are represented alongside Khaled Abou El Fadl and Scott Kugle in a groundbreaking collection of essays edited by Omid Safi in 2003, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*. It is no coincidence that the title of the book includes both justice and gender and one of the three parts of the book is dedicated to gender justice. The volume set the tone for a generation of scholars and activists, and allowed for a sustained conversation on progressive reform in thought and practice. Khaled Abou El Fadl's thought is perhaps the second most important reference point for women's gender-justice-centered approaches to the Qur'an.

### Khaled Abou El Fadl

Born in 1963 in Kuwait, Abou El Fadl is professor of Islamic law at UCLA, holding degrees from Princeton University as well as more traditional Islamic legal training in Kuwait and

Egypt. Abou El Fadl has written extensively about authority and developments towards authoritarian discourse in modern Muslim discourse, and it is no accident that his most relevant work, *Speaking in God's Name*, takes women in Islamic law as its focus. Abou El Fadl argues for an approach to the Qur'an and the Islamic legal tradition that retains traditional methods and tools of *fiqh* while recognizing Qur'anic and legal interpretations from the Muslim past as framed by societal attitudes and thus a product of their time. It is, like in Rahman's work, the move from recognizing what in the Islamic sources is eternal and relevant for all times and places to distinguishing it from ideas and discourses that are historically determined and thus confined to a particular time. Abou El Fadl has argued for what he calls a "conscientious pause" in approaching the Qur'an, by which he means the possibility of acknowledging that particular passages in the Qur'an, at least on surface reading, may clash with the reader's values and thus her conscience, which then requires her to at least pause and then, possibly, follow her conscience and not the text (Abou El Fadl 2001: 94). Abou El Fadl has issued and published legal opinions on a variety of issues, thus participating in the production of contemporary American Muslim jurisprudential opinion. Abou El Fadl has also actively supported Muslim women scholars in a variety of ways.

There is acknowledged irony in opening a genealogy of the ideas of American Muslim women scholars with an overview of important male scholars and thinkers and their ideas on women and gender. However, the pages above provide a sense of the terrain into which Muslim women scholars stepped in the 1980s. They bring into sharp relief just how innovative and nothing short of revolutionary the ideas of scholars such as Riffat Hassan and Azizah al-Hibri in the 1980s, followed by those of Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas in the 1990s, and of Kecia Ali and Aysha Hidayatullah in the 2000s, truly were.<sup>1</sup> I have selected six women scholars from a larger group because of the ways in which they have propelled American Muslim thought on issues of gender justice forward through their extensive writing and various forms of activism. Elsewhere I have described the first and second generations of American Muslim women scholars as individual thinkers rather than part of a movement (Hammer 2012). Aysha Hidayatullah has described them as "a new cohesive field of scholarship on the Qur'an," the focus of her analysis (Hidayatullah 2011: 119). Approaching and reinterpreting the Qur'an was and is central to all Muslim reformist scholarship and has thus played a central role in the works of many Muslim scholars since the nineteenth century. The emphasis on a field of study rather than a movement is indicative of some of the issues and obstacles Muslim women scholars have faced and continue to face from various directions that have hampered their working collectively in the same direction. This will become clearer in my analysis below. Before proceeding to the analysis of such obstacles and challenges, as well as the patterns and dynamics of Muslim women's scholarship, it is prudent to present short sketches of the lives and works of the six scholars discussed here.<sup>2</sup>

### *Riffat Hassan*

Hassan was born in 1943 in Pakistan and educated in England. She came to the United States in 1972 and taught for thirty-three years at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. Since the 1980s, she has identified herself as a Muslim feminist theologian whose work focuses on feminist reinterpretation of the Qur'an. Hassan has emphasized the Qur'an as the only necessary framework for women's rights as human rights and has characterized the Qur'an as the "Magna Carta of human rights" (Hassan 1999: 248–50). Her readings of the Qur'an claim equality in God's creation of the sexes, which she argues needs to be translated into societal practices of gender equality. Most of her ideas were published in many articles she wrote from the 1980s to

the early 2000s. Notably, Hassan published several pieces in collections of religious feminist writings, thus indicating her involvement with the religious part of the American feminist movement (Hassan 1991, 1999, 2006). Simultaneously, she has continuously been involved in NGO-based human rights work in Pakistan, campaigning for better protection for women by Islamic family law, including family planning and personal status law, as well as raising awareness of violence against women and the responsibility of the state and society in addressing these issues.

### *Azizah al-Hibri*

Al-Hibri was born and raised in Lebanon and educated at the American University in Beirut as well as in the United States. She taught at the law school of the University of Richmond from 1992 until her retirement in 2012. Her appointment in 1992 made her the first Muslim woman law professor in the United States. Al-Hibri is the founder of Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, a Washington, DC-based, globally operating organization advocating Muslim women's rights and their right to education and leadership. Karamah was founded in 1993 and positions al-Hibri together with Riffat Hassan as trailblazers and foremothers among American Muslim women scholars. Al-Hibri was also the founding editor of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, which has been continuously published since the mid-1980s. The journal editorship as well as many articles in feminist journals and edited collections place al-Hibri, like Hassan, in the genealogy and history of American religious feminist thought and organization (al-Hibri 1982, 1999, 2001). Both started writing from their subject position as Muslim women at a time when most scholarship in Islamic studies was about Muslim women and not by them. Al-Hibri has argued that Islam at its core is gender just, and that Islamic law can and should be reinterpreted towards such gender equality where existing interpretations violate the divine requirement of justice. She has published scores of articles in law journals, Islamic studies journals, and edited collections but no book-length treatment of her ideas has appeared. In 2011, al-Hibri was appointed by President Barack Obama to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.

### *Amina Wadud*

Wadud opened the door to a new era of Muslim women's scholarship in the 1990s and became the most important proponent of equality-centered reinterpretation of the Qur'an. She was born in 1952 to the family of an African American Methodist minister and converted to Islam during her college years at the University of Pennsylvania. She holds a Ph.D. in Islamic studies from the University of Michigan, and has also studied and worked in Egypt and Malaysia. From 1992 to 2008 she taught Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Her two books, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999) and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (2006), together with a large number of articles and book chapters, outline the trajectory and development of her thought and position her as the most important American Muslim woman scholar of the Qur'an to date.

Wadud has engaged in a thematic, gender-just reading of the Qur'an and developed her "Tawhidic paradigm of horizontal reciprocity," in which men and women in society can only be equal, in interchangeable positions, with God above (Wadud 2006). She has adopted Rahman's double movement and has furthered Abou El Fadl's call to a conscientious pause to argue that there are passages in the Qur'an that her conscience will not allow her to accept, regardless of how they are interpreted. Her first book, *Qur'an and Woman*, has been very widely read, including in Muslim countries and communities, and has been translated into many



languages. Wadud gave a Friday *khutba* in 1994 in a South African mosque and led a mixed gender congregation Friday prayer, also offering a *khutba*, in 2005 in New York City (Hammer 2012). These acts of public and mediated activism have brought her more attention and criticism from Muslims than any of her written work, unfortunately overshadowing her nuanced and deeply invested Qur'anic exegesis and its implications for change in Muslim societies and communities.

### Asma Barlas

Barlas was born in 1950 and educated in Pakistan and the United States. She was part of the Pakistani Foreign Service until concerns for her safety over criticism of the Pakistani government prompted her to apply for political asylum in the United States in 1983. She is professor of politics at Ithaca College in New York, and has been chair of the politics department as well as director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race and Ethnicity. Her most central contribution to American Muslim thought on gender is her 2002 book *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations in the Qur’an*. She has also published numerous articles and book chapters on related topics, as well as earlier work on the colonial legacy in South Asia and a more recent project on approaches to interfaith conversations. *“Believing Women”* has been translated into a number of languages and is widely read by students and scholars in American academia. Barlas argues that putting men in a hierarchically higher position than women in Muslim society violates the most basic principle of Islam, the oneness of God, the creator and omnipotent sovereign. Barlas acknowledges the possibility of multiple interpretations of the Qur’an, while arguing that no interpretation can violate the principle of justice in the Qur’an. Barlas is ambivalent about the designation feminist but extensively engages with feminist thought in her book. She has also written about Amina Wadud (Barlas 2004, 2006).

### Kecia Ali

Ali, born in 1971, was born and raised in the United States and converted to Islam during college. She holds a Ph.D. in Islamic studies from Duke University, and since 2006 has been teaching in the religion department at Boston University, where she is an associate professor. Ali is a specialist in Islamic law and ethics, and has focused her research, so far, on Islamic sexual ethics and marriage. Her 2006 book *Sexual Ethics & Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*, engages with the Islamic legal tradition regarding issues of gender and sexuality, including polygamy, homosexuality, dower, and divorce. In the book, Ali engages this historical tradition with contemporary reinterpretations, including the work of al-Hibri and Wadud, and thus begins to produce a new kind of conversation about gender justice that acknowledges as well as critiques past trajectories and ideas. Her second book, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (2010), continues her sustained engagement with Islamic law and furthers her argument that rather than rejecting the entire Muslim interpretative tradition as misogynist and patriarchal, which leaves Muslims with very little to hold on to, scholars and intellectuals interested in gender justice need to allow a critical look at Muslim knowledge and creatively apply what can be salvaged. Ali officiated at a Muslim wedding in 2006. She has been involved in feminist scholarly networks and self-identifies as a Muslim feminist.

### Aysha Hidayatullah

Hidayatullah was born in 1979 and thus belongs to the most recent generation of Muslim women scholars of note. She received her Ph.D. in Islamic studies from the University of

California, Santa Barbara, and teaches Islamic studies at the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit school in California. Hidayatullah's groundbreaking book, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (2014), chronicles the approaches of Hassan, al-Hibri, Wadud, and Barlas to Qur'anic exegesis, and offers both a deep reflection on the nuances and trajectories of their interpretations and an important critique of their ideas. It is no accident that this chapter began with a reference to Hidayatullah's recent writing as she engages in the deeply painful task of honoring and critiquing her intellectual forebears. Hidayatullah's central contribution lies in her open acknowledgment that Muslim women's "feminist" theology has reached an impasse in interpreting the Qur'an in ways that cannot recognize textual limitations and reconcile the resulting tension with feminist commitments to justice and equality.

Ali and Hidayatullah, much more so than the older generation of American Muslim women scholars, operate as part of a network,<sup>3</sup> yet not a movement, of many more young Muslim women scholars and graduate students in the American academy, pointing to a future of American Muslim thought on gender justice and equality that may take surprising and unexpected turns in the future. In the second part of this chapter, I want to engage with the six scholars presented above with regards to how they negotiate the possibilities and challenges of multiple critique *vis-à-vis* feminist theory and practice, other Muslim scholars and their interpretations, and American liberal imperialism. I contextualize their ideas through a discussion of their claims to and investment with authority and their simultaneous marginalization in American (and transnational) Muslim communities, on the one hand, and the American academy, on the other.

## Multiple critique

In a much-cited essay published in 2000, and in her book *Women Claim Islam* (2001), Miriam Cooke coined the phrase "multiple critique" to describe what she saw as new forms of expression, debate, and activism among Arab Muslim feminists in the Middle East. She combined Moroccan cultural critic Abdelkebir Khatibi's "double critique" and African American sociologist Deborah K. King's "multiple consciousness" (Cooke 2000: 100) to devise the term, which describes "Islamic feminists' critical rhetorical strategies" (Cooke 2000: 99) in which they transcend their marking as victims and identify simultaneously with Islam, feminism, and other dimensions of their identity. These strategies of critique are based on multiple forms of consciousness and agency and enable Muslim women to recognize possibilities as well as dangers of alliances, networks, and co-optation. Cooke's essay seems to have been born from widespread feminist puzzlement with Muslim women activists and thinkers in Muslim majority countries (as well as in America and Europe) who, unlike Western feminists and general public opinion, were not willing to locate the source of the oppression (which they did acknowledge as an issue) in Islam.

As part of a long and protracted intellectual debate about the term Islamic feminism<sup>4</sup> (which Cooke embraces) and its (self-)ascription to particular Muslim women, Sa'diyya Shaikh has criticized the major assumption behind Cooke's definition of the term as inviting "to consider what it means to have a difficult double commitment, on the one hand to a faith position, and on the other hand to women's rights both inside the home and outside" (Cooke 2001: 59). Shaikh contends that Cooke's construction of the opposition between their faith and women's rights is a false dichotomy and runs "contrary to the self-definitions of many Muslim feminists who see their feminism as emerging organically out of their faith commitment and whose contestation of gender injustice is more than simply the result of a post-colonial struggle" (Shaikh 2003: 155).

I would further argue that cooke's use of multiple critique is only useful if it transcends the dichotomy between Islam and feminism, the US and Muslim communities, the academy and the "real world." It is in their claim to simultaneous and legitimate critique of different actors, power dynamics, histories, and injustices that Muslim women scholars find moments on a spectrum of empowerment and marginalization. To that end, I present three of the many intersectional topics of negotiation in the works of American Muslim women scholars to illustrate how they negotiate critique and experience its impact. It is important to note here that "feminism," "academia," and "Islam/Muslims" are not discrete but overlapping and intersecting spheres the scholars negotiate in their work and life, thus creating powerful influences on Muslim women scholars' ideas, thoughts, and activism. The focus on how these intersecting and overlapping spheres have shaped American Muslim thought should also not overlook the varying and considerable degrees of agency Muslim women scholars exercise in their work. They do, however, present their ideas as dynamically produced in constant engagement with their surroundings, histories, and intellectual genealogies.

### Feminism: theory and practice

Despite reluctance and concern about adopting the term itself, it is clear from the scholar profiles above that Muslim women scholars have in multifaceted ways participated in feminist theory and practice. Whether in working with religious and secular feminist networks, like al-Hibri, Barlas, and Ali, or in the adoption of the ideas of leading feminist theoreticians which is evident in the works of all of the scholars discussed here, feminism has an enduring presence in these women's lives.

It is significant that some but not all of the scholars are also women of color, which makes it necessary to ground their negotiations of feminist theory and their participation in feminist practice in the trenchant critiques leveled by third-wave feminists. Third-wave feminism was and is characterized by critiques of second-wave feminist assumptions about femininity which are based on the experiences and values of white middle-class women, thus not reflecting the life-worlds of women outside that group. Feminist thinkers of color have called out power dynamics and abuse by white feminists and the differing interests of their doubly or more marginalized communities in North America. Reference to third-wave feminism is evident in the work of Amina Wadud, whose subject position as an African American Muslim woman convert has resulted in reflections on her marginalization and critiques of the structures that produce it (Wadud 2006).

Feminist thought has a complex and troubled history of dealing with religion, which produced a majority secular and often anti-religious stance in much of the feminist movement, whereby religions were dismissed as inherently patriarchal, products of patriarchal societies, and unredeemable for feminist transformation of society. Christian and later Jewish feminists (and occasionally others such as the Buddhist thinker Rita Gross) have carried out tremendous thought work in engaging their religious traditions as resources for feminist challenge and change in the USA while constantly negotiating their religious commitment *vis-à-vis* secular feminists, not to mention pushback from their religious communities and leaders (Sharma and Young 1999; Gross 1996).

Muslim women thinkers came into that conversation in the 1980s and have more often than not been treated as newcomers who can learn from their predecessors rather than full participants in the conversation. Wadud, Ali, and Hidayatullah have all discussed such experiences in different venues. They have thus engaged in multiple levels of critique as well as utilization of feminist discourse and practice. I have had my own recent experiences with presenting research

on the limits of feminist inquiry for analyzing the arguments and programs of American Muslims engaged in work against domestic violence (Hammer 2013). I have been told that I am an apologist for conservative Muslims, men and women, as well as a traitor to feminist ideals. But mostly, I have had to contend with assumptions about Muslim women as oppressed by Islam, which I initially presumed to be a stereotype of the past. Feminists have of course historically participated not only in ideological justification of colonialism but, more recently, in military intervention in Muslim countries with the pretext of liberating Muslim women (Ahmed 1992; Weber 2001; Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002; Abu-Lughod 2002).

### Islam and Muslim communities

It is at the intersection of critical feminist commitments and perceptions of feminism as a product of and tool for continuing Western domination among many Muslims worldwide that Muslim women scholars negotiate their place within Muslim communities and their faith tradition. The intense struggle to interpret foundational Islamic texts in ways that reflect their commitment to gender justice (in itself not an unqualified notion) positions each and every one of them as Muslim and identifying with Islam. Wadud very clearly acknowledged the power struggle over definitions and boundaries of Islam or the Islamic tradition when she wrote: “I have moved to a new, albeit uncomfortable, reflection: neither their ‘Islam’ or my ‘Islam’ has ultimate privilege. We are all part of a complex whole, in constant motion and manifestation throughout the history of multifaceted but totally human constructions of ‘Islam’” (Wadud 2006: 6).

Wadud, Barlas, and others are less willing to acknowledge the constructed nature of the Qur’an as the main source of divine self-disclosure and thus understanding of God’s will. Wadud writes: “I come away from the Qur’an ... with the sense that all the questions I have asked can be clarified therein” (Wadud 2006: 9). Kecia Ali and Aysha Hidayatullah have perhaps moved the furthest in recognizing that there may be limitations to reinterpreting the Qur’an that cannot be overcome by more sophisticated hermeneutical moves. Ali writes in 2009 that “there comes a point at which it becomes necessary to step outside the text” and goes on to say that the Qur’an could be read in conjunction with other materials, including *hadith*, *fiqh*, Sufi writings, and others, in order to provide “inspiration and a broader framework for ethical approaches to Muslim life. ... An egalitarian ethics must be grounded in a theological approach to the Qur’anic text, and reformist thought in general must engage more explicitly with theological concerns. Ultimately, it is only at the level of discussions about God and God’s relationship to humanity that key questions about basic principles can be addressed” (Ali 2009: 98).

Hidayatullah diagnoses the end of Muslim feminist theologians’ relation to the Qur’an in a singular manner, and argues that they have “reached the end of the road” unless they are willing “to develop new ways of understanding their relationship to the Qur’an that account for the sexist elements of the literal text while also maintaining the sanctity and authority of their holy book as Muslims” (Hidayatullah 2011: 119). While this diagnosis and prescription for new paths to Muslim feminist engagement ring honest, painful, and true, especially in the work of Hidayatullah, they also move these scholars to the very fringes, if not outright outside, of the boundaries of Muslim communities.

With dwindling certainty about sources of Islamic religious authority, in what Khaled Abou El Fadl has described as a “crisis of authority” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 26), anyone can claim authority to interpret Islamic texts and derive guidelines for Muslim life. In his view, this crisis is linked to the systematic colonial destructions of Islamic institutions of jurisprudence while also

allowing for new authorities, including public intellectuals (and women), to step into the vacuum created by the shifts in authority structures. More importantly for us, the weakening of traditional structures of Islamic legal authority has shifted the focus of many modern Muslims towards the Qur'an and the *Sunna* as the most authoritative sources for their life conduct. This has placed heightened responsibility on the shoulders of those who engage in their interpretation, but has also produced a situation of exegetical relativism in which every Muslim can interpret, the Qur'an especially, for her/himself. Contemporary American Muslim scholars assume and are invested with religious authority and are trusted, selectively, with guiding American Muslims in their religious affairs.

Muslim women exegetes thus not only challenge the authority of the Qur'an, when they move in that direction, they also challenge gender attitudes and practices that are not only deeply embedded in Muslim communal life but also often justified as authentically Islamic through the Qur'an and *Sunna*. In turn, their claims to authority are questioned, as has been the case for Hassan, al-Hibri, Wadud, Barlas, Ali, and Hidayatullah, as well as others. This rejection of either their qualifications for exegesis (including knowledge of Arabic and traditional Islamic training) or their authenticity as Muslims (convert status, wearing *hijab*, etc.) has left them vulnerable to attacks, which are often personal. More importantly, their interpretative stances have marginalized them within Muslim communities or, worse, have placed them outside Muslim communal networks altogether.

Active exclusion was most pronounced after Amina Wadud led the Friday prayer in 2005, when she received death threats and her university was petitioned to terminate her contract. There were accusations of her being an agent of American imperialism and Western feminism bent on feeding Islamophobia and destroying Islam from within. In response to such marginalization, Muslim women scholars have built and continue to build networks and alternative communities, as exemplified in the prayer event as well, and they continuously present their ideas to those open to them, thus building interpretative communities of their own. Wadud's (first) *hajj* trip to Mecca and Medina in 2010 demonstrated her claim to Islam and belonging to a Muslim community. Women scholars have also experienced silence as rejection. When their work is better known among American undergraduate students and in women's studies circles than among Muslim communities, and without the opportunity to discuss their ideas and convince Muslims of their merit, Muslim women scholars are under pressure to adjust their thoughts and negotiate their practical application. And, as Hidayatullah points out, some of their ideas can potentially even undermine years of grassroots activist effort to improve the lives of Muslim women globally (Hidayatullah 2011: 122).

And, not least, Muslim women scholars and their ideas also challenge the authority of male Muslim scholars and present competition in the marketplace of religious leadership and power. It is no coincidence that women scholars with less challenging ideas, such as Ingrid Mattson, the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and long-time professor of Islamic studies at Hartford Seminary, are considered authoritative and are not challenged in their ideas. This is because challenges to the gender role status quo in Muslim discourse and practice are perceived as a significant threat to communal stability despite the fact that sweeping changes and renegotiations have in fact taken place over the last century. On a more optimistic note, the work of Muslim women scholars such as Wadud, Barlas, and Ali has had a tangible impact on conversations about gender issues in Islam, whether Muslims are willing to acknowledge it or not. Even performances of mediated activism like the 2005 prayer event have furthered conversation and mainstreamed gender discussions among Muslims (Hammer 2008).

Muslim women scholars are also involved in global Muslim feminist and activist networks, which has made some of them known (or infamous) beyond the boundaries of the United

States. Especially in the global “War on Terror” waged by the United States and its allies after September 11, 2001, certain American Muslim leaders have become representatives and spokespersons for the United States government and purported positive examples for Muslim moderation and American inclusion of Muslims in all spheres of American society. Muslim women’s calls to reform Muslim societies and improve Muslim women’s lives worldwide have in this vein sometimes been interpreted as part of American cultural imperialism and soft power, which bring/force progressive and liberal ideas onto Muslim societies for ulterior motives. This line of challenge is sometimes also adopted by American Muslim community leaders intent on undermining the authority of Muslim women scholars.

## Academia

There is probably a smoother way to connect Muslim community impact and debates with Muslim women scholars in the American academy, but one common denominator is the question of activism. It is the intersection of discourse and activist practice that also ties academic dynamics and scholarly authority to feminist ideas. All of the scholars discussed here, from Seyyed Hossein Nasr to Aysha Hidayatullah, have held or still hold teaching and research positions in American institutions of higher learning. How do they negotiate their commitments as scholars in secular academic institutions (even private religious universities and colleges have a commitment to liberal arts education) with their focus on prescriptive/normative work?

While scholars in the field of religion and later religious studies have engaged in debates about the blurry boundaries between faith commitments and secular analysis, normative versus analytical approaches to religions, and not least insider and outsider positions in the academic study of religion for many decades, the study of Islam has exhibited its own peculiar dynamics in this regard. When the American Academy of Religion (AAR) began to hold sessions on Islam in the 1970s, and even more so when the Study of Islam Section was founded as a major unit in the AAR in 1985, debates ensued about these forms of positionality that have continued into the present. How does one distinguish between teaching a religion and teaching about religion? How, in the spirit of liberal inclusion, can particular religious subject positions be accommodated without becoming forms of indoctrination and proselytization? This issue is more pronounced because of the Euro-American history of Orientalism, the study of non-Western societies in the service of colonial and neo-colonial domination so famously described by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, published in 1979.

The American academy has both marginalized and promoted Muslim women scholars, as evidenced in the positions they hold but also in their success in having their work published by mainstream academic presses. I claim simultaneous promotion and marginalization because it is the very dynamic of providing protected spaces for Muslim feminist inquiry while self-congratulating on one’s tolerant inclusion of the liberal other that both creates opportunity and stifles it. Muslim women scholars who are critical of Muslim gender practices and call out the many injustices committed against Muslim women worldwide are always at risk of becoming poster children for simplistic as well as often imperial deconstruction of Muslim societies and Islam. Muslim women’s scholarship has made few inroads in women’s and gender studies, especially when it is religiously prescriptive, and Muslim women scholar activists have had to defend their investment and activism in their communities as undermining their scholarly authority as much as they have been included for the purpose of presenting American academia as open to new ideas and daring revolutionary thought.<sup>5</sup>

The tension between scholarship and activism, with one undermining the weight of the other, has been felt for decades by feminist scholars more generally. In addition, in academia as

well, women scholars of color continue to experience multiple forms of marginalization and micro-aggression as well as hampered access to resources and positions unless they are willing to inhabit token positions. White privilege has allowed some Muslim women scholars access to better resources and less likelihood of being challenged for their activism and critique of academia. The unequal distribution of resources, positions of job security, and recognition has also divided Muslim women scholars and contributed to continued competition over cooperation. It requires continuous self-critical reflection as well as a willingness to challenge institutional structures that produce such inequality, at the risk of losing one's own professional security and/or reputation.

## Conclusion: work and life, experience and struggle

In charting the intellectual trajectories of American Muslim thinkers, and Muslim women scholars especially, I have come to appreciate the complexity of their work but also their lives. Each in their own way has experienced faith struggles, challenges to authority, credibility, and communal belonging, and each has contributed to a growing body of American Muslim thought on gender. Their published works are a testament to the depth of their thinking and the complications and challenges in charting new paths towards their visions of more just Muslim communities and societies. Their writings incorporate, often seamlessly, their personal experiences and struggles into their scholarly ideas and expressions. To claim personal experience as politically and intellectually relevant, to admit pain as well as passion, means to open oneself to dismissal, ridicule, and more struggle.

However, foregrounding their experiences of challenge and struggle should not overshadow their myriad contributions to critique: of feminist theory and practice; of academic institutions, of Muslim communities, and American society; they lay bare the politics of knowledge production, the machinations of Islamophobia, bigotry, and discrimination in its many forms. They live intersectional lives and perform intersectional intellectual work as scholars, thinkers, public intellectuals, and leaders. They participate in intra-Muslim conversation and debate about gender, justice, tradition, and authority. And studying them and their thought(s) provides more than a passing glimpse into the dynamics of global and American Muslim thought; the forces of secularization and religious negotiation; and the continuing significance of gender analysis for understanding the past, present, and future of Islam.

## Notes

- 1 The six women scholars selected are arguably very significant but the selection is limited by the length of this chapter more than by a commitment to judging the relevance of some scholars over others. The list could and should have included, among others: Nimat Barazangi, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Debra Majeed, Gwendolyn Simmons, Asifa Qureishi, Hina Azam, Saadia Yacoob, and Mohja Kahf. Many more have been interlocutors for the women discussed here. One could even argue that more traditionally inclined Muslim women scholars, including Ingrid Mattson and Hadia Mubarak, have been part of an ongoing conversation about Muslim women's rights and roles in contemporary Muslim societies and the gendered nature of Islamic traditions.
- 2 Throughout this section I mention some of the works of the scholars which also appear in the list of references at the end. For a more complete list of each scholar's publications, see the bibliography of my book (Hammer 2012).
- 3 This is not to say that there have not been meetings, convergences, and instances of cooperation between Muslim women scholars from the 1980s to the 2000s. Books such as *Windows of Faith* (2000), edited by Gisela Webb, are testament to such cooperation and conversation; however, they are outweighed by a deep sense of lonely struggles in the works of Wadud, Barlas, and Hassan.

- 4 For the most thorough discussion of the various debates and positions, see Seedat (2013).
- 5 In 2010, Kecia Ali, Laury Silvers, Hina Azam, Aysha Hidayatullah, Fatima Seedat, Saadia Yacoob, and myself recognized the multiple forms of exclusion and marginalization Amina Wadud had experienced throughout her academic career, which resulted in our producing an alternative Festschrift for her, an edited collection of academic essays, personal reflections, and a painting by thirty-three contributors whose thought, work, and life have been touched by Wadud's work. The volume *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud* transcends the boundaries of academic publishing and is available as a free e-book: [www.bu.edu/religion/files/2010/03/A-Jihad-for-Justice-for-Amina-Wadud-2012-1.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/religion/files/2010/03/A-Jihad-for-Justice-for-Amina-Wadud-2012-1.pdf).

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