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ISLAMIC SHI'Ī ETHICS AND THE BIOPOLITICS OF THE MATERNAL BODY

Ladan Rahbari

Introduction

In Islam, the body is valued as an asset and a gift from God. Maintaining it is an individual and social responsibility delineated in Islamic ethics. While the Islamic ethics on the female body is made up of many different topics, what has globally received attention is the ethics of public visibility of the women's bodies. Shi'ī bodily rituals that revolve around the management of hygiene and purity and ceremonial fitness attend to the body in both "material" or seemingly "immaterial" forms.¹ From the general hygiene and cleanliness rituals to purification of the soul, the Islamic bodily rituals consist of regular, everyday routines. While the rituals apply to most "adult" human beings, the transformation of the body through the life course of a person can lead to differential Islamic ethics and guidelines. Bodies' status and interrelations change throughout a person's life based on many factors, including reproductive age, changing levels of ability, and life occurrences.

Islam is sometimes considered a pronatalist religion that both values and overly glamorizes women's maternity. This generalizing standpoint is going to be put under scrutiny in this chapter. When it comes to the maternal body, a first look at Shi'ī sources of ethics might not reveal a focused attention on the maternal body. The maternal body is, however, embedded in juristic and ethical guidelines on Islamic hygiene, purity, and piety, as well as when it comes to the rights of mothers and their children. The array of Islamic Shi'ī ethics on the maternal body throughout the different stages of motherhood has not attracted much scholarship.

Islamic ethics, as a discipline, is both a practical and theoretical approach that investigates normative action and is concerned with human activities in the world. Therefore, Islamic law and legal theory are loci of fields that fall under Islamic ethics (Reinhart 1983, 186). Islamic ethics not only studies principles and their conclusions but also depends on divinely revealed laws (Brockopp 2003, 2). It thus aims to describe how the human being does and must respond to the moral knowledge derived from *fiqh* (Reinhart 1983, 196). Shi'ī ethics on motherhood and the maternal body cover different issues from contraception, pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth to breastfeeding, child guardianship, and childcare (Tabatabaei 1972; Yazdanpanah 2014; Inhorn 2006; Inhorn and Tremayne 2012). Islamic ethics on the maternal body are not separable from gendered biopolitics in any given context. Biopolitics, developed by Michel Foucault, refers to taking control of life and death, and other biological processes of human beings, and

governing them (Braun 2007, 11). It includes a wide array of techniques of governance, from population control programs to gendered body control, such as birth control regimes. However, other contextual factors, such as local conflicts to the rise of empowered conservative/extremist powers, can lead to the rise of pronatalist and maternalist campaigns that aim to assert control of women's bodies.

When it comes to Islamic perspectives, studies in the Hadith collections and the Qur'an have shown that motherhood is a central notion (Tucker 2008; Schleifer 1996; Pappano and Olwan 2016). While maternity has been demonized as a biological punishment for the original sin (Spellberg 1996), it is predominantly portrayed as one of the holiest and most spiritual positions a human being can achieve. Islam considers pregnancy, birth-giving, caring for children, and feeding children all practices with spiritual value and thus rewards them equivalent to acts of worship. The Prophet's famous quotation "[P]aradise lies at the feet of the mother" is often interpreted as a promise of salvation to mothers (Oh 2010, 645). Also, on an individual level, Islam plays a vital role in reproductive decisions among many Muslim populations (Sargent 2007, 174).

This study aims to rectify an existing gap in the study of Shi'i ethics on the maternal body as it puts its focus on Islamic canonical texts, such as Hadith and the Qur'an, as well as prominent contemporary Shi'i resources, in order to not only investigate and extract the ethical and theological standpoints on the maternal body but also place the prescriptive and practical ethical guidelines to mothers concerning their bodies within the biopolitics of Shi'i ethical discourses. Besides the Qur'an and Hadith, the focus of the chapter is put only on contemporary jurisprudence, and classic sources are referred only if they were in relevance to the contemporary rulings.

The contemporary Shi'i guidelines are different from their Sunni counterparts primarily in that Shi'i *ijtihad* relies on a "live update" approach, where a living *mujtahid* (a scholar with juristic authority) updates the rulings according to the contemporary social and ethical challenges in the society that create new challenges for the religion as well. Unlike Sunni jurisprudence (*ijtihad*), where universal opinions and consensus are more the norm, theoretically speaking, it is accepted for Shi'i scholars with juristic authority to produce individual rulings that differ from their counterparts (Inhorn and Tremayne 2012). Diversity of approaches is thus, in theory, an expected result when it comes to Shi'i jurisprudence. In practice, however, there is often consensus and proximity, if not similarity, in *mujtahid*'s rulings in Shi'a majority contexts, and starkly different interpretations face resistance from religious authorities closer to political power. (An example of this is Ayatollah Saanei's views and controversies over them in Iran; see his views in, e.g., Masoumeh Rad and Alireza 2019).

Additionally, in this chapter, following in the footsteps of prominent scholars of motherhood Andrea O'Reilly (2012) and Sara Ruddick (1980), I use the word "mother" to refer to individuals who engage in maternal work or practice (also see motherwork in Collins 2016). *Maternal work*, a term coined by Sara Ruddick, entails the material and socially constructed work of mothering, from giving birth and breastfeeding to caring and nurturing children (Ruddick 1985, 1980). Maternal work is thus not associated with people's sex or biology but rather the named practices. Therefore, I employ "person" instead of "woman" when generally referring to mothers, that is, people carrying out maternal work. The same approach is adopted when it comes to the body. When referring to "women's bodies" in the following, I do so in order to highlight the gendered and feminized nature of maternity and motherhood in the Islamic Shi'i resources on which I draw. I also only use "female" when the sources I studied specifically referred to bodies biologically deemed female.

The chapter is organized as follows: in the next section, the notion of "the maternal" in Islamic Shi'i ethics is explored and introduced. The study then investigates Shi'i ethics on the

maternal body in two sections dedicated to the existing guidelines on the maternal body before and after birth. The rationale for this categorization is explained in the following sections. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion, the study will attempt to apply a matricentric lens to the study of Shi'i ethics on the material body.

Defining the “Maternal” in Shi'a Islam

It is neither possible nor specifically constructive to discuss where maternity “starts” and “ends.” My intention in this chapter is thus not to undertake such a task but in order to recognize the stages, experiences, and embodied aspects of the maternal that have been addressed in Shi'i scripture and ethical discourse. In classic Islamic writings, maternity is considered a liminal stage. As Kueny (2013) has shown by analyzing medieval Islamic discourses on motherhood and the maternal body, male physicians, theologians, and scholars, among others, proclaimed authority to control and suppress the maternal body. There has been a lack of female voices when it comes to classic and mainstream Islamic authority (Jardim 2016). Besides this, the traditional Islamic canon comprising the Qur'an and Hadith contains numerous references to mothers made by people who observe them, and few references are directly from mothers themselves; moreover, no substantial commentary from mothering comes directly from mothers (Oh 2010, 642). While some exceptions exist (see, for instance, the case of Banoo Amin in Rahbari 2020b), the absence of mothers is also related to the general absence or silencing of female voices in Islamic scholarship in general and Shi'i scholarship in particular (Jardim 2016).

The maternal, and the female body's potential to childbearing, is discussed even before the person decides to become a mother. There are relevant ethics on the female body that has been viewed as the maternal vessel for carrying the child. In terms of prevention techniques and contraceptives, there are a variety of approaches. The majority of contemporary Shi'a scholars have ruled in favor of sanctioning contraceptive usage but warn their followers that permanent pregnancy prevention is either not a desired practice or not allowed (SNN 2014). These fiqh interpretations of Shi'a Islam can be considered “maternalist” because of paying excessive focus on women's reproduction, maternal health, and childcare (Kashani-Sabet 2011, ix). The patriarchal tendencies in these perspectives are evident, as the same sources also suggest that women may not take contraceptive measures without consulting and getting permission from their husbands. In classic Shi'i sources, there are guidelines to maintain fertility and establish a successful conception by consuming or avoiding specific food, avoiding specific positions, times, and locations during intercourse (Shaykh al-Saduq 979 2014 ed.). These latter advices are, however, not endorsed – albeit not rejected either – by contemporary scholars. This means that the Shi'a ethics on the maternal body do not begin with the moment of conception but before that. The female body is thus viewed as implicitly maternal even before conception and pregnancy.

The explicit reference to the maternal body in Islamic ethics happens, however, after conception. As soon as the conception happens and the person becomes pregnant, the rights and ethics of the person's body and the formed embryo are integrated. It seems that the embryo is given the status of a separate entity to some extent, even before ensoulment. This means that specific guidelines apply to how to manage, treat, and protect each of the entities, the mother and the embryo. The separation is, nevertheless, not that clear-cut, as the boundaries of the maternal body are extended to the “new life” and the two are considered bound entities in many ways. This complex definition has significant consequences for the mother, as seeing the embryo as an entity with rights attached to the maternal body as well as the rights of its own means that the ethics and decision-making about the fate of the mother's body collide with

ethics on the embryo's well-being (to which I will return later in this chapter). This blurring of the boundaries extends into postnatal activities of breastfeeding and nurturing the child (Kueny 2013, 2).

In mainstream Shi'i rulings and ethical guidelines, the maternal body is also highly feminized. Motherhood, maternity, and the maternal have all been prevalently considered, as a rule, "female," if not "feminine," positions. Similarly, femininity and womanhood are also highly associated with maternity and motherhood. In the writings of Lady Amin,² for instance, womanhood, in its both physical and metaphysical aspects, is considered aligned with motherhood and maternity (Rahbari 2020c). Amin explains that women are not only biologically inclined towards reproduction but also psychologically maternal and thus fit for maternal work (Amin 2011). This form of gender essentialism theorizes gender as both a fixed identity and a mark of difference (DiQuinzio 1993, 1). This form of ideology characterizes a large segment of mainstream Shi'i perspectives, within which maternity is considered an innate capacity of "women."

The maternal is sacralized and glorified in classic and contemporary jurisprudence and bolstered through narratives of motherhood and maternity of Shi'i saints. The myth of the ideal mother, who is subordinate to both men and God, is reiterated and embellished in the theological writings around many Muslim female saints, such as Fatima, Mary, and Khadija (Kueny 2013, 11). The most prominent female Shi'i figures' narratives are predominantly recounted around their maternity and/or maternal characteristics. Among these saints, doubtlessly, the Prophet's daughter Fatima's protector and maternal caregiver roles not only have been essential in the formation of imam line and continuation of the Prophet's legacy but also in the formation of discourses of Shi'i martyrdom and oppression. It is due to this pivotal imaginary of Fatima as the mother of the imams and the symbolic mother of the Shi'a population that in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Mother's Day has been celebrated on Fatima's birthday (Kashani-Sabet 2011, 210).

The Mother's Day example is an evidence of how state biopolitics and culturally maintained narratives of motherhood reinforce each other. These narratives of sacrificial and divine (non)motherhood are not merely stories and have shaped the way normative motherhood is developed in Muslim contexts (Rahbari 2020b). The maternal body, in its most "natural" functions, has also been affected by these discourses, as no "natural body" resides outside of social discourses and cultural norms (Kueny 2013, 51). In the next two sections, I discuss the ethical guidelines on the maternal body before and after birth. The "before" and "after" categorization is used because of the implications of birth for the bodily rituals, responsibilities, and ethical issues regarding the maternal body that emerge after birth.

The Maternal Body Before Birth: Shi'a Bio- and Necropolitics

As discussed in the previous section, within Islamic ethical guidelines, maternity does not "begin" at the moment of conception, but conception is an important occurrence that marks a new stage for the maternal body. The maternal body is seen not only as a vehicle with the "potential" to receive a divine miracle of life but also a residence for the newly formed life. The woman's womb is mentioned in the Qur'an in reference to God's absolute knowledge of what takes place in it:

God knows well what every female conceives. They know what the wombs spoil and dispose of. In Their plans everything has been designed proportionately.
(Qur'an, Chapter 13, Verse 8)³

From the moment of conception, the created life has value in the Islamic viewpoint, even before ensoulment occurs. This means that under “normal” circumstances, termination of pregnancy without a rational reason is not allowed, no matter the stage of the pregnancy. Ensoulment is, however, an essential factor when it comes to maternal bio- and necropolitics. Despite the existing diversity of thoughts, the general consensus is that termination of pregnancy is not allowed, unless under specific circumstances (Fallahnejad, AghaMajidi, and Azizadeh 2017). According to most Shi’a scholars, as long as ensoulment has not occurred, there is a distinct hierarchy of value between the mother and the embryo, as the mother is a human being who has a soul, and the embryo is an entity without a soul (Mohseni 2005). The maternal body comes into question not only concerning the embryo but also as an independent entity. The mother’s life and well-being are to be prioritized in the period before ensoulment, and the pregnancy can be terminated if the mother’s body risks taking severe or fatal damage as a result of the continuation of pregnancy (Namazifar, Monireh, and Ghorbani 2011).

In the case of an ensouled fetus, according to many Shi’i scholars, it is no longer possible to prioritize the mother or the child over the other as both are considered humans with equal rights to live in the eyes of God (Afshar and Mahmoudian 2013). This means that according to most Shi’a scholars, termination of pregnancy is not allowed even though the mother’s body might suffer consequences as a result of carrying the child (Nemati and Omani Samani 2012). Based on this view, aborting a fetus is considered a sin, and in countries such as Iran where Shi’i law is encoded, it is also a punishable crime whether it is practiced by the mother, a medical practitioner, or any other party (Sadeghi, Sadeghi, and Hasanpour 2018). There are, however, exceptions to this ruling. Ayatollah Saanei, Ayatollah Tabrizi, and Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabili – all three Shi’a mujtahids and sources of emulation – have ruled in favor of termination of pregnancy after ensoulment in cases where the mother’s body would get fatally harmed by the pregnancy (Nemati and Omani Samani 2012). The maternal body is thus, in the second viewpoint, prioritized over that of the fetus no matter the stage of the pregnancy.

In popular Shi’a narratives, the stories of the holy martyrdom and sacrificial motherhood of Fatima are an example of how the killing of an unborn child is approached in Shi’a. According to Shi’a history, Fatima was martyred while being pregnant with her fifth child, Mohsen (Asadbeigi and Seraji 2015). Fatima’s martyrdom in Shi’i narratives is as much about the violation of her own maternal body as of her unborn child. In the Qur’an, the imagery of a mother stopping nursing and aborting a child is used to illustrate the horrors of the Day of Judgment:

On the Day you see it, every nursing mother will be distracted from that [child] she was nursing, and every pregnant woman will abort her pregnancy.

(Qur’an, Chapter 22, Verse 2)

With the value put upon carrying a pregnancy to term, the mother’s effort and struggles throughout the pregnancy are not left unrewarded. In Shi’a Islam, the promise of paradise to mothers who carry their pregnancy to term is complemented by the assurance that if a mother dies while she is giving birth, she will be granted immediate entry to paradise as if she were a martyr in the path of God (Shaykh al-Saduq 1989 ed., 194). Motherhood also allows for more leniency when it comes to practicing routine religious obligations. According to many Shi’a scholars, during pregnancy and breastfeeding, the mothers can deviate from compulsory routine responsibilities, such as fasting during Ramadan, if they fear that fasting might be harmful to their fetus or child (see, e.g., Ayatollah Khamenei n.d.). The mother can also breastfeed while praying without having to break their prayer (Tabasi 2008, 173). They can also postpone their (otherwise compulsory) fasting if they fear that it would affect their body or that of their child

(Shafaqna 2016). Nevertheless, the mother remains obligated to observe the rituals that they missed due to pregnancy or conditions relevant to maternity.

The pregnancy period can also be considered a period of exceptional purity for mothers. With the interruption of the menstrual cycle during the pregnancy, the mother does not have to adhere to the ritual purification routines that are necessary for menstruating women (I will discuss these in the following sections), except for a simple ablation rite (*wudu*). The menstrual blood, otherwise leaving the body, is sometimes believed to be saved during the pregnancy in order to feed the fetus (Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi n.d.). As the previous discussions show, the maternal body is also treated differently in the Islamic justice system as a direct result of its “maternity.” According to the Islamic ethics, the pregnant mother’s body should not undergo any form of trauma. As a consequence, many criminal sentences in the forms of physical punishment prescribed by the Islamic justice system cannot be carried out as long as the mother remains pregnant (Namazifar, Monireh, and Ghorbani 2011). This temporary suspension can be extended to the breastfeeding period, and sometimes up until a replacement is found for the mother’s milk (Javanmard 2012, 42). With the birth of the child, the maternal body enters a new phase that is discussed in the following section.

The Maternal Body After Birth: Milk, Blood, and Purity

Blood is an important indicator of pregnancy, or lack thereof, as the interruption of menstrual bleeding is considered a universal sign of pregnancy. Beliefs about the function of blood in female physiology are sometimes associated with beliefs about both the polluting and nutritive qualities of menstrual blood (Good 1980). Maternal blood and milk have historically been associated with each other and sometimes considered one. In classic Arab medicine, breastmilk was considered identical to the blood in the mother’s uterus (Gil’adi 1999, 119). In contemporary Shi’a, similar beliefs exist. Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, for instance, explains that “during infancy, often menstruation does not occur, because parts of the blood turn into milk to feed the infant” (Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi n.d.), considering milk and blood cognate.

Additionally, bodily fluids, including blood, are both connected to the notions of bodily purity. In Islam, pollution is a fact of life for all sexes, and females and males need to purify themselves. Only pure believers can pray or fast, touch the Qur’an, enter a mosque, or go on pilgrimage, or enter holy places (Jansen and Dresen 2012, 223). Muslims can become ritually “polluted” or “impure” in two primary ways: first, by coming into contact with a set of substances or animals (including but not limited to urine, feces, blood, and semen) and, second, by certain occurrences or acts (including but not limited to defecation, bleeding, and childbirth) (Ze’ev 2004, 51). Some Islamic ethics on female hygiene and purity rites revolve around menstrual blood. These ritual purifications are extended to mothers’ experiences with postnatal bleeding (*nifas*).⁴ Similar to guidelines applied to menstruation, a mother experiencing postnatal bleeding (also called postpartum period) may not observe daily prayers and fast. The occurrence of postnatal bleeding also makes other bodily rituals such as ablation and ritual washing (in the form of *wudu* and *qusl*) necessary. Ablution or ritualistic body cleansing that entails washing parts of the body in a specific order (Rahbari 2019) is obligatory for everyone to maintain a combination of hygiene and purity (*taharah*). Female-only rituals involve menstruation ablation that should be performed after the menstruation period is completed to enable the person to observe daily prayers, fast, enter sacred places, etc.

When it comes to maternal sexuality and its link to blood-related rituals, according to Shi’a fiqh, during postnatal bleeding, sexual vaginal intercourse is forbidden (Ayatollah Sistani n.d.). Despite this ban on vaginal intercourse during menstrual or postnatal bleeding, sex in general

is not banned (Mazuz 2012). Vaginally, nonpenetrative sex and intimacy in any form, including any form of intimacy that leads to orgasm, is allowed (Islamquest 2015). This regulation is thus more oriented towards hindering the assumed “contamination” and impurity caused by blood rather than limiting women’s sexuality. In traditional Muslim perspectives, the sexuality of the women is sometimes associated with and confined to satisfying their husbands’ desire and reproduction (Dialmy 2010). However, Islam has recognized both women and men as having sexual drives as well as rights to sexual fulfillment (Ilkkaracan 2002). Thus, as seen in the case of postnatal bleeding, while limitations and guidelines on sex and sexuality exist, the sexual rights of mothers are recognized.

Besides blood that demarcates embodied practices for the mothers, Islamic ethics revolve around milk produced by the maternal body and the practice of breastfeeding. Breast milk, also referred to as “white blood” (Fortier 2007), is considered the second most vital fluid of the maternal body. Similar to blood through which kinship lines are established, milk alone can create parental ties with a child (Jansen and Dresen 2012). The concept of milk parent-hood/motherhood in Islamic kinship is referred to as a bond that is created between the child and a person who breastfeeds them and is not their biological mother (Rahbari 2020a). Milk motherhood not only establishes a form of milk kinship between the child and the milk mother but also between the child and the milk mother’s biological family members. A mother’s milk, therefore, has, similar to their blood, the capacity to establish new lines of kinship (Rahbari 2020a). Breastfeeding an infant has been considered a critical spiritual, religious, and cultural practice that helps the conception of a family (Bensaid 2019). Islamic scripture has talked about women’s embodied hardship as a result of lactation and breastfeeding and have thus promised mothers spiritual and divine rewards for their maternal work, including breastfeeding. A prophetic hadith, for instance, states that for each sip of milk from the mother’s breast, the mother will receive a reward (Payande 2003, 260). While blood and milk are connected, unlike blood, milk does not interrupt purity, and thus no specific rituals are associated with breastfeeding.

There is a general consensus that Islamic ethics acknowledges the hardships of breastfeeding and the value of the mother’s sacrifice. There is also relative consensus regarding the arbitrary nature of breastfeeding. Contemporarily, a dominant majority of Shi’i *mujtahids* do not consider it a religious obligation for mothers to breastfeed their children, and it is up to the mother to decide whether they want to breastfeed (Nazari Tavakkoli and Karachian Sani 2016). The overall evidence in Qur’anic verses and hadith collections rules out the existence of any form of obligation to breastfeeding as long as a suitable substitute can be found (Rahbari 2020c). Despite this, suckling is discussed in religious sources (Jansen and Dresen 2012), and women in Muslim societies are sometimes strongly advised or even obliged to breastfeed for a period of two years (Moran and Gilad 2007). Historically, the emphasis on breastfeeding was reinforced by medical perspectives that highlighted the superiority of breastmilk over other forms of food for a newborn (Rahbari 2020a).

Unlike the abundant discussions on pregnancy, blood rituals, milk, and breastfeeding, when it comes to caretaking and nurturing activities, the amount of ethical guidelines becomes dramatically thinner. While there are occasional references to the mother’s struggles, there are not many specific guidelines to mothers, but rather to Muslim parents and the society as a whole, to make sure that they raise the children according to Islamic guidelines.

Discussion: Towards a Matricentric Lens on the Maternal Body

This chapter explored Islamic Shi’i ethics on the maternal body, focusing primarily on Islamic canonical texts, such as Hadith and Qur’an, as well as prominent current Shi’i resources

extracted from the rulings of contemporary mujtahids. This chapter did not entail empirical exploration of historical or contemporary, real-life practices around the maternal body and should, therefore, not be considered representative of Muslim practices. It instead drew on contemporary ethical, biopolitical, and theological discourses revolving around the maternal body delineated by contemporary Islamic scripture, scholars, and Shi'i institutions. For this, the study can be complemented by "actual" practices observed by Shi'i mothers. Additionally, as McGuire (1990, 288) discusses, culture shapes even experiences of biological events, such as childbirth and menopause, and female embodiment is not sufficient to predict the individual's experience of self even during such intensely biophysical processes. It is safe to assume that different variants of the ethical Shi'i guidelines on the maternal body are neither perceived nor observed in a monolithic way and vary broadly across Shi'i communities.

The study showed that Shi'i ethical guidelines regarding the maternal body revolve not only around the optimization of the female reproductive activities but also the body's hygiene, purity, pleasure, pain, and punishment. What is evident in Shi'i jurisprudence are the effects of historical suppression of women's voices, as women's bodies are interpreted as in control of their husbands and God. In her critique of the patriarchal institution of motherhood that allows for such subjugation of mothers, Andrea O'Reilly has suggested moving towards a "matricentric" lens. For her, taking up a matricentric lens is not to be understood as a replacement to the traditional feminist thought; instead, it is to emphasize the roles motherhood plays in women's identity and to understand this role from mothers' perspective. That the category of mother, she explains, is distinct from the category of woman and that many of the problems mothers face – social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth – are specific to women's role and identity as mothers (O'Reilly 2016). This is an extension of the feminist critique of patriarchal motherhood, as feminists have often overlooked the compulsory nature of parenthood and its relevance for the full understanding of the structural and ideological foundations of women's secondary status (Gimenez 2019, 160). This perspective can be extended to the studies of major religions in general and Islam in particular, where a strong critique of the existing normative motherhood imperative drawing on patriarchal religious narratives has not attracted substantial attention from researchers.

Maternity itself, as an embodied experience, an array of works, and an identity, if conceived as a taken-for-granted dimension of women's normal adult role, becomes one of the key sources of women's oppression (Gimenez 2019, 159). In some Muslim contexts, religious scripts have been used to control female bodies and, consequently, populations (Khan 1998). In the case of Shi'a, this has sometimes been done with encouraging procreation and control of the maternal body, enforced by political views on Shi'i population's minority position throughout the Islamic history (Chatziprokopiou and Hatziprokopiou 2017). However, as the discussions on ethics of the maternal body, rituals, and notions of sin, purity, and pollution as linked to the maternal body showed, the interpretive approach in Shi'a Islam has allowed for diverse standpoints. The multiplicity of these standpoints and the centrality of individual reasoning (*'Aql*) mean that many of the existing ethical guidelines are subject to change. Islamic culture can certainly not be viewed as a monolithic pronatalist framework that justifies the usage of women's bodies as procreative forces (van Rooij, van Balen, and Hermanns 2004; Pappano and Olwan 2016).

There is a "progressive" turn in Shi'a theology that is being witnessed with sources of emulation, such as Ayatollah Saanei publishing fatwas that are not only sensitive to women's rights issues but also revolutionize Shi'i interpretation practices by deviating from long-established conservative interpretive practices. The question is, however, whether this form of seemingly progressive religious authority is a serious challenge to the existing patriarchal order. Some scholars have argued that in contemporary societies, standpoints which do not *explicitly*

challenge pronatalism become *implicitly* supportive of it because of the objective conditions that determine not only their emergence but also their socially accepted meaning (Gimenez 2019, 163). Therefore, while it is not possible to generalize Islam as a whole as a pronatalist religion – as the ethics and rulings on maternity and childbearing differ throughout the Islamic world – it is possible to discuss that some of the contemporary Shi'i rulings and ethics on the maternal body have both pronatalist and materialist tendencies. A matricentric lens, in this context, will not be possible unless the voices of women in jurisprudence, as well as women as mothers, are centralized.

Notes

- 1 In English, different terms are used to refer to Shi'a Islam. Shia, Shiism, and Shi'a are all variants. In this chapter, I have used Shi'a when referring to the branch of Islam and the population, and Shi'i as the adjective form.
- 2 Seyyede Nosrat Beygom Amin (i.e., Lady Amin, 1886–1983) was perhaps the most prominent Iranian female theologian of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a Shi'i scholar who had great knowledge of hadith, fiqh, and usul, the principles of jurisprudence (see e.g., Rahbari 2020c).
- 3 Translations of all Qur'anic verses in this chapter are adopted from <http://corpus.quran.com/>. But when referring to God, I have opted for they/them/their, instead of he/him/his in the original text, as God does not have a specific gender in Islam.
- 4 As far as the period of occurrence is concerned, any blood which is discharged within ten days of childbirth is nifas. So if a woman who saw no blood during or after the childbirth sees blood nine days later, that blood will still be regarded as nifas (Al-Islam n.d.).

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