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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Decolonizing Arabo-Islamic Feminist Scholarship: A Theoretical Exploration of the Work of Olfa Youssef

LANA SIRRI

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My research interests lie at the intersection of religion, race, gender, and sexuality, with a keen focus on the critical exploration of Islamic feminism—an area often marginalized in both contemporary Islamic and feminist discourses. As a native Arabic speaker who studied feminism in Europe, I am constantly reminded of the absence of Arab and Muslim feminist writers. Therefore, my research endeavors to promote decolonial Arab feminist scholarship and delve into the uncaptured manifestations of Islamic feminisms. Moreover, it emphasizes the significance of engaging with non-Western forms of feminism. My commitment extends beyond the realm of Muslim feminists and Arabic scholarship, advocating for broader representation of Scholars of Color within Western academia. Through my scholarly activism, I aim to bridge the gap between academia and civil society, assuming this role not only as Vice President of the International Association for the Study of Religion and Gender and as an Associate Expert of the Center for Intersectional Justice (CIJ) but also through my involvement as a member and co-founder of the Berlin Muslim Feminists Group.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic feminism is often considered an oxymoron. It is contested by some Western feminists as well as some Western-oriented feminists from Muslim-majority countries, according to whom Islam and feminism are necessarily incompatible (Chesler 2017; Mojab 2001). For them, it is inconceivable that women asserting their attachment to Islam could at the same time involve themselves in an act of subversion (Moghissi 1999). However, Islamic feminists have begun to re-read the Qur'an to claim the rights afforded to them by Islam (Ahmed 1992; Badran 2009; Cooke 2001). They make references to the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, and question the notion of patriarchy as Islamic. Some of them promote a gender-sensitive Islamic interpretation to counteract the patriarchal

resurgence imposed in the name of religion, and develop gender equality and social justice grounded in re-reading the Qur'an and other religious texts (Barlas 2002; Mir Hosseini 2006). This approach challenges prejudices about representations of Islam and feminism as fixed and immutable systems of belief. Through their interventions, actions, and struggles, Islamic feminists seek to renew discussions and debates in Islam, and transform gender power relations. Central to this project is the practice of *Ijtihad*, the independent critical examination of religious texts, which enables Islamic feminists to shape and reform the understanding of Islam (Wadud 2006).

Moreover, Islamic feminism emphasizes women and other marginalized groups' specificities to present them as historical actors and reveal the discrimination to which they are subjected. A core understanding of Islamic feminism is that "different groups of Muslim women come from varying cultural and geographical backgrounds so that Jordanian Muslim women are often grappling with very different realities from Indonesian or Senegalese Muslim women" (Shaikh 2003: 148). Subsequently, the socio-cultural and political background of the reader and interpreter of sacred texts influences her knowledge production (Ali 2006). Her different life experiences and geopolitical positioning generate and inform different ways of (re)conceptualizing religion, gender, and sexuality, and lead to different knowledge production and different modes of resistance. Therefore, understandings of concepts such as "religion," "gender," and "sexuality" are created in, and dependent on, complex conditions of their production (Shaikh 2013). This is what Amina Wadud refers to as the "prior text" of the reader, which includes "the language and cultural context in which the text is read" (1999: 5). This, in turn, leads to the epistemological diversity of Islamic feminist thought as both a local and global academic and social movement. As such, to be able to theorize Islamic feminism, a global and holistic view of the work of Islamic feminists is required, one that covers a large geographic area that "reveal(s) characteristics associated with individual movements in different countries" (Grami 2013: 109).

This chapter contributes to the decolonization of Arabo-Islamic[1] feminism by engaging with the selected work of Olfa Youssef, a Tunisia-based scholar of Islam. I explore the intersection of women's lived experiences, feminist thought, and the production of egalitarian knowledge on gender and subjectivities within Muslim thought in her work. I begin by establishing the theoretical framework for decoloniality that situates Islamic feminism as a decolonial endeavor. Next, I present Youssef's work as a case study of Arabo-Islamic feminism and position her within the relevant geopolitical context of Tunisia to understand her knowledge production. The chapter then delves into Youssef's conceptualization of homosexuality to illustrate the methods and approaches she uses to challenge patriarchal and colonial knowledge on Islam.

ISLAMIC FEMINISM—A DECOLONIAL PROJECT

Decoloniality is a theoretical framework that critiques the power dynamics and knowledge systems imposed by coloniality, understood as the power and control over people and knowledge, and colonialism, understood as the process through which power and control are acquired, often through violence (Mignolo 2007, 2012). It seeks to expose how Eurocentric ideas and practices, such as modernity and feminism (in its mainstream white Americo-Eurocentric form), are imposed on marginalized groups and perpetuate their oppression. Decoloniality aims to reclaim and elevate the lives, lived experiences, cultures, and knowledge of Othered people as well as to decenter hetero-cis-normativity,

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gender hierarchies, and racial privilege (Mignolo 2007, 2012; Sinclair 2016). In this chapter, decoloniality is applied in the examination of Islamic feminism and its methods and paradigms. Islamic feminism is identified as a decolonial project that intends to re-learn the knowledge of its ancestors that has been forgotten, suppressed, or discredited by colonialism and the imposition of colonial-based modernity and feminism.

Islamic feminism represents a complex and multidimensional decolonial project. One of its central aims is to "decenter" feminism (Lazreg 1994), by liberating it from its current form and context. This approach seeks to open new possibilities for feminism by highlighting how its development and dissemination have been shaped by the legacy of European colonialism, which positions the West as the central and dominant force and the non-West as peripheral. Additionally, Islamic feminism challenges the construction of the "Muslim woman" as the "Sister Other" (Barlas 2008). This construction, Moallem claims, references an imagined community of women who are victimized by the universal regime of patriarchy within Western feminism. In this context, the latter is referred to as yet another ideology mobilizing the oppressed in fighting their oppression (Moallem 2008). Jasmin Zine (2008: 116) claims that the politics of identity that govern the narration of the Muslim woman's body and subjectivity have been the product of deeply entrenched historical, political, imperial, and religious inscription, resulting in identity fragmentation and reduction:

> The Muslim industry has dissected my identity, pulled my subjectivity into fragments that I do not recognize (and which, like Humpty Dumpty, I need to piece back together), and at the same time, managed to reduce me to a singular trope. And so the struggle for agency and self-representation continues.

I refer to this as neo-colonial feminism (Sirri 2020), which reproduces colonial power dynamics, and reinforces the notion that the West is superior and that Western feminists need to "save" Othered women. Neo-colonial feminism constructs the Muslim Woman as an oppressed victim who needs to be rescued by Western feminists (Barlas 2008; Moallem 2008; Zine 2016). This ignores the agency of Muslim women and their ability to resist and challenge patriarchal norms within their own societies, and the vast number of organizations, activists, and scholars working for women's rights. Saadiya Shaikh (2003) observes that within the Muslim world gender issues have been indigenously engaged with, argued about, harmonized, problematized, synthesized, negotiated, and re-negotiated in varying ways throughout history.[2]

This chapter addresses how Islamic feminism seeks to illuminate the ways in which colonialism has influenced the understanding and interpretation of Islam within Muslim societies, and how this has contributed to the entrenchment of patriarchal structures. It also discusses how colonialism and patriarchy have formed a symbiotic relationship with religion, with colonialism actively promoting patriarchal values and practices, resulting in a rigid class and gender division, and the subjugation of women and other marginalized groups. Islamic feminism aims to deconstruct the link between colonialism and patriarchy by drawing upon pre-colonial knowledge and Islamic traditions, to promote more equitable and just social structures.

The insidious relationship between colonialism and patriarchy is particularly evident in the realm of family laws in many Muslim-majority societies. Family law, also referred to as personal status law, plays a crucial role in shaping gender relations and distributing rights and responsibilities. It establishes power dynamics between men and women, parents and children, and siblings, and these distinctions have a significant impact not only on the

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private sphere but also on public opportunities. Colonial powers placed an emphasis on regulating the family as they viewed it as a fundamental aspect of maintaining stability within their colonies (Htun and Weldon 2012). As Muslim-majority societies purport to derive their family laws from the principles of Shari'a, the relationship between them has become a subject of ongoing debate and contestation.

The colonial encounter brought about a significant transformation of the concept of Shari'a, which was historically understood as a moral and ethical code that regulated the private and public domains of Muslim life. Shari'a was increasingly designated as "Islamic law" and transformed into a form of statecraft that regulated various aspects of life such as property, inheritance claims, and governance (Htun and Weldon 2012). This gave rise to a discernible shift from a dynamic normative framework that was flexible enough to accommodate change and transformation, to a rigid legal system that required legal authority. The colonial entanglement with native and local customary laws could not have occurred without the significant cooperation and collaboration with local and Indigenous religious authorities in the formulation of Islamic law (Jeppie, Moosa, and Roberts 2010).

The encounter of European colonial powers with Muslim communities had an impact on family law and its administration, leading to various transformations. Islamic feminism challenges these changes, as exemplified by the "Abolish Article 153" campaign in Kuwait. This campaign aims to remove a law that permits a man who kills a female relative or her partner in an adulterous relationship to receive a sentence of no more than three years in jail and/or a fine (Omar 2015). Islamic feminists argue that this law is a relic of colonialism and has no basis in Shari'a (al-Shamma 2017). Other scholars also highlight the impact of European colonialism on Muslim societies, tracing the origins of certain misogynistic "Islamic" laws to colonial rule, arguing that pre-colonial Islamic judicial practices reflected daily life and were responsive, while British criminality was impersonal and top-down (Zaharia 2021). The British imposed the codification of Islamic law and family law, which many Islamic feminist organizations have contested in Muslim-majority societies. The landmark Moudawana amendment in Morocco, unanimously adopted in 2004, put women on equal footing with men concerning marriage and children, and was led by Islamic feminists, jurists, academics, and activists (Sidiqi 2010).

These examples illustrate that European colonial powers not only exerted influence on—supposedly Islamic—family law and its administration, leading to the transformation of Islamic judicial practices into a more rigid legal system, but also how Islamic feminist scholars and organizations continue to challenge the colonial legacy of family law that shaped gender power-relations in Muslim-majority societies, and advocate for its reform. The campaigns to abolish Article 153 in Kuwait and the Moroccan Moudawana (Mernissi 1991, [1985] 2011) reform are noteworthy examples of the ongoing struggle to achieve gender justice and equality within Muslim-majority societies.

Next, I address the impact of colonialism on Islamic law and the interplay between colonial power and patriarchy, by incorporating another crucial aspect of the decolonization project: language. The predominately Western fields of social sciences and the humanities, and gender and women's studies in particular, neglect to engage or incorporate knowledge produced in non-European languages. Therefore, I examine Arabo-Islamic feminism through the case study of Olfa Youssef, thus contributing to the decolonization of Arabic knowledge production on issues of Islam, gender, and sexuality.

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OLFA YOUSSEF: A CASE STUDY OF ARABO-ISLAMIC FEMINISM

Olfa Youssef (1966) is a Tunisian Muslim scholar, linguist, author, and public figure who focuses on and has published in Islamic studies, women's studies, and psychology (2008, 2017).[3] She received her PhD in Arabic language and literature in 1987 and has held positions at various institutions, including a professorship at the Higher Institute of Languages in Tunis in 2007, and the general director of the National Library in 2008. Most of her work is written in Arabic and has not been translated into English.

Youssef is a media personality, hosting television programs and maintaining a presence on social media. Alongside her booklets and pamphlets that address common issues in accessible language, her TV program (*'ala hamesh il-sira*) engages a wider audience in discussions that have traditionally taken place only among scholars of Islam and religious leaders. Youssef is a scholar-activist committed to engaging with policymakers and civil society to promote the inclusion of women in social reform and democratization. In doing so, she debunks the widespread and flawed belief that academia and activism are mutually exclusive. This approach locates Youssef with feminist scholars who challenge this orthodoxy by drawing insights from Black feminism, which emphasizes the interdependence of academia and activism (Collins 2012). They too believe that operating at the frontiers of academia, advocacy, and activism can inform and inspire research, as well as ensure a dialogue between research theory, lived experience, and front-line practice (Sobande 2018). This is evident in the work of many international Muslim feminist organizations such as *Musawah* (for equality in Muslim families), *Karamah* (Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights), WISE (Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality), and WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Law). These networks and organizations identify the relevance of an Islamic framework for enhancing Muslim women's rights, and they emphasize the relationship between feminist scholarship and the lived experiences of Muslim women (Abirafeh 2020).

Youssef employs linguistics, psychoanalysis, sociology, and semiology to challenge traditional interpretations of Islamic texts. She seeks to reinterpret Qur'anic hermeneutics to subvert male authority and promote the inclusion of women in Islam. Although her work is labeled "Islamic feminist," Youssef self-identifies as a "Muslima." Jerusha Lamptey (2014) explains that Muslima implies being a female Muslim person who submits to God and positions herself as a believing and practicing Muslim; and it indicates her individual experience as a woman, not only as an experiential position but also theoretically. Youssef's work can be categorized as "Qur'an-based Islamic feminism" (Tohidi 2017).

I identify Youssef's work as Islamic feminism as she engages in feminist *Ijtihad* (interpretation of Islamic law) and uses methods similar to other Islamic feminists, such as historical contextualization, intra-textual reading, and the *tawhidic* paradigm.[4] In her analysis, Aysha Hidayatullah (2014) identifies these three methods as a recurring set of textual approaches employed by feminist scholars of the Qur'an. In addition, I include linguistic analysis; although it is alluded to in these approaches, it is the main tool Youssef uses.

As a native Arabic speaker and scholar, Youssef uses direct readings of the Qur'an to bypass its patriarchal and occasionally misogynistic interpretations. As a scholar of linguistics and psychoanalysis, she employs these disciplines to offer alternative interpretations. She engages with Islamic scholars to demonstrate that disputes between

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different interpretations have existed since the birth of Islam and that this legitimizes her engagement in such disputes. Youssef does not claim that her work reveals the true meaning of the Qur'an but criticizes traditional scholars for their lack of historical contextualization, on the one hand, and for downplaying the role of the human subject in the interpretation of sacred texts on the other. She also criticizes modern scholars for impoverishing the traditionally complex scholarly discussion, and highlights the historicity of the Qur'anic text itself while remaining aware of her own context. Youssef's use of psychoanalysis is relevant to Arab Tunisian society, which was, and still is, influenced by European colonialism, and is still dealing with colonialism's effects in a postcolonial era, where people are struggling to form an independent Arab Muslim identity.

Feminist thought takes account of the positionality and perspective of the scholar, which leads to different modes of resistance and knowledge production. Youssef's life experiences and geopolitical positioning have influenced her re-conceptualization of Islam, gender, and sexuality. She is the daughter of the Tunisian independence movement (1952–1956), led by Habib Bourguiba, who passed the Personal Status Code that abolished polygamy, advanced gender equality, and facilitated women's rights. Bourguiba also established the Faculty of Theology at the University of Tunis, allowing women to enter the academy and challenge Islamic fundamentalism. Many prominent scholars who studied religion in the 1970s, including Youssef, Amal Grami, and Latifa Lakhdar, emerged from this context.

Today, many feminists, while noting the advances for women made under Bourguiba, argue that this state feminism was part of a "culture of political patriarchy":

> Top-down approach emphasizes formal and legal advances but often disregards social realities such as domestic violence and economic inequality; it gives little space to independent women's associations; and it often uses women's rights as a form of state propaganda, a way to deflect criticism of its human-rights record. This has been the case in many Arab countries, such as Egypt and Syria.
>
> (Hind Ahmed Zaki, cited in Lindsey 2017)

Tunisia's second president (1987–2011), Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, continued to prioritize women's rights and implement reforms such as raising the minimum age of marriage and expanding women's rights in marriage contracts, alimony, and custodial rights. However, debates about women's rights and the role of Islam in society were divisive in Tunisia, with secularists and liberalists advocating for the French language, and the Islamist movement promoting Arabic as essential to Tunisian identity. The Al-Nahda movement, founded in 1981 and inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, gained popularity in the late 1970s and 1980s among students who supported the Iranian Revolution and their activism in the region. After the Tunisian Revolution in 2011, the Al-Nahda movement won a significant portion of the vote and formed a government.

Throughout the 2011 revolution, Youssef tenaciously remained an active participant in the political discourse, advocating for gender equality and speaking out against the preaching of the Imam of Sfax, who called for the hanging of homosexuals. She supported a wide range of sensitive issues, including Muslim women's right to marry outside their faith, and the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Youssef's progressive stance has played a crucial role in shaping Tunisia's discourse on Islamic norms and expanding the field of Islamic interpretation. Her sophisticated approach challenges simplistic and binary oppositions and provides a unique space in Tunisia.

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CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY AND GENDER POWER RELATIONS IN ISLAM

In *The Confusion of a Muslim Woman*, Youssef challenges the construction of gender in Islam by focusing on three topics: inheritance, marriage, and homosexuality. She engages in decolonial work, where she de-centers the act of reading and interpreting religious texts beyond the authority of religious leaders. This is an act of decolonization because it challenges the dominant power structures that have historically controlled the interpretation and dissemination of religious knowledge. By encouraging diverse voices and perspectives to engage with these texts, she moves towards a more equitable and inclusive understanding of Islam that is not limited by the constraints of colonialism and imperialism. This allows for a more secular approach to religious interpretation, which empowers individuals and communities to reclaim their own spiritual narratives and traditions.

Youssef moves beyond historicizing the religious interpretations of premodern writings and focuses on the characteristics of language to problematize these interpretations. While many in Tunisian society, and Arab societies in general, shy away from dealing with issues related to gender and sexuality, Youssef embarks on this mission arguing that such embarrassment departs from the attitude of the Prophet Muhammad (PBU), who discussed the topic of sexuality openly. She raises further concerns regarding the society she lives in, and the impact of Qur'anic interpretation and teaching on the youth in her country.

Youssef recognizes that certain individuals have distorted the teachings of Islam to justify heinous acts and human rights violations. However, she refers to them as Muslims and not Islamists, which serves to construct the Qur'an and Islam as a pure text that has been misused and manipulated for political and ideological purposes. Her approach emphasizes the need for intellectual discussion and debate to challenge and oppose the misuse of religious texts. Youssef offers her critique of contemporary Muslim societies in the form of a set of questions addressed to the (Muslim) reader. She criticizes the institutionalization of Islam—a religion that she claims should be based on individual reasoning and one's relation with the divine—and encourages the ordinary Muslim to engage in reading and understanding Islamic texts, reminding them that those who claim to know the truth are also human beings who make mistakes.

Youssef distinguishes between the diverse and open interpretations of the Qur'an and the narrow-minded views of some scholars. She stresses the importance of a nuanced and contextual approach to Qur'anic interpretation, arguing that the limited human understanding is subject to change over time and place. Youssef writes, "God confirms many times in His holy book that what is known to people is limited to their relative understanding, which changes according to time, place, and frame of context" (Youssef 2008: 226). Qur'anic interpretation is always influenced by the reader's norms, historical context, and psychological complexity, including her prior texts.

Youssef challenges common patriarchal interpretations ascribed to the Qur'an, and criticizes these claims of "truth." As Wadud (1999) suggests each reading of the Qur'an is embedded in a prior text of the individual reader, Youssef argues that the Qur'an is a linguistic utterance like any other, and is open to multiple interpretations. Those who claim to know a truth that only God can know are ignorant of their human limitations and truth's essential relativism. She regards the fundamentalist approach as a closed-minded way of thinking. Her goal is far removed from such a fundamental approach. She

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claims: "We do not want to offer ultimate answers. We relate more to the question before the answer, and to the confusion before the reassurance" (Youssef 2008: 1). As a scholar of psychoanalysis, Youssef is concerned with what she calls the "Muslim psyche": the connection between these interpretations of the legislation in Muslim-majority countries and the Muslim psyche. In other words, people construct their ideologies in a manner that is subconsciously informed by their culture. Despite exposure to various cultural influences, youth who grow up in Muslim societies become imbued with cultural norms and values that shape their worldview. As such, their cultural upbringing constitutes a formative "prior-text" that can prove difficult to alter or eradicate. The social subconscious, thus formed, can remain entrenched even in the face of new information or ideas that challenge established beliefs.

Youssef criticizes legislation in Islamic countries that claims to base its rulings on the Qur'an, such as the Tunisian law in the realm of private matters. Tunisian legislation, which is considered to be the most progressive in Muslim countries and is based on gender equality in the matter of inheritance, for example, still operates under the idea that "the male is to receive the share of two females" (Youssef 2008: 9). She presents a series of examples to challenge the claim of an "Islamic" framework in the legislation of Tunisian society. These examples show that pivotal foundational texts were excised from the historical record, driven by the prevailing social and cultural milieu of their time. She highlights how Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (583–644 CE), the second caliph after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and other eminent religious leaders boldly altered the interpretation of sacred texts to align with the exigencies of their epoch. Throughout the history of Islam, Muslims have negated the Qur'an on issues such as the abolishment of slavery or corporal punishment for crimes such as theft.

Youssef criticizes (mainly male) jurists, who put great effort into maintaining women's social and financial disadvantage and often withhold religiously given rights from women, children, and other marginalized groups. These jurists not only obstruct the path of Ijtihad but also seem to contradict the Qur'an (Youssef 2008: 57). Furthermore, the centralization of religious authority and knowledge production, as well as the emphasis on private or family matters under an Islamic legislation, which ostensibly seeks to protect women's interests, serve to reinforce a flawed interpretation of an Islamic framework. This leads to silence on many issues, and to competitive and conflicting jurisprudence that can only be explained by materialistic interests (Benyoussef 2017: 2). Consequently, she suggests revisiting certain verses and establishing that they do not apply to the context of Tunisia in the twenty-first century because gender roles have changed. For example, the emergence of women in the labor market has resulted in their increased contribution to the family's financial wellbeing, often serving as the sole breadwinners. This social transformation has the potential to significantly challenge and alter the traditional interpretation of *Qiwamah* (guardianship or authority) in profound ways.

Gender power relations are based on the idea that the husband is considered the *guardian* (*Qiwamah*) or the person in charge of his wife.[5] This, Youssef claims, is based on the condition that he is the main provider. But when the husband and wife share the burden of financial support, she argues, then guardianship, or the *Qiwamah*, should also be shared. Youssef is concerned with how this approach infiltrates language and remains engrained in the Muslim social imagination and legislation, even though women are part of the labor market and are often the primary providers.

Youssef's decolonial and feminist reading is specifically illustrated in her critical examination of the ways jurists have strengthened male authority in Muslim societies,

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particularly in the realm of marriage and sexuality. She discusses the use of language and its effect on the psyche in Tunisia. An illustration of this is the use of the phrase "he gave his daughter" to describe a woman getting married, reflecting the social imagination that views marriage as a contract of sale. This practice has a dual impact on the collective mindset: first, it refers to the guardian (the father) who gives his daughter in marriage, and second, it confirms the idea of giving an "object" to the husband. This maintains the gender hierarchy: "There is no doubt that incorporating the marriage as a contract of sale strongly relates to establishing authority inside the family. Thus, the buyer is the one making the decisions, and the object, being a commodity, is obliged to comply" (Youssef 2008: 160). She further claims that this is the reason why jurists prohibit *Mut'a* marriage (temporary marriage), even though it is not prohibited in the Qur'an, because it has the potential to give women more freedom to choose their partners, to initiate a quick divorce, and thus negotiate their agency.[6] Youssef contends that the representation of marriage in Muslim societies oscillates between legal constraints and social practices. She advocates for a critical appraisal of how male authority is upheld through marriage laws, which confer upon men the ability to unilaterally dissolve the union and assert claims over child custody. This underscores the prevalence of male dominance within the domains of marriage and sexuality, highlighting the need for greater scrutiny of existing legal frameworks and societal attitudes towards gender roles.

Youssef calls for a feminist interpretation of Islam's sacred texts to challenge male authority historically reinforced by jurists. She prioritizes women's perspectives and experiences, urging a re-examination of traditional interpretations of Islamic law to subvert entrenched gender inequities. In line with decolonial and feminist movements that prioritize marginalized voices and challenge existing power structures, Youssef's scholarship offers a vital contribution towards dismantling gender inequities and fostering greater inclusivity within Muslim communities. The ongoing discourse and analysis surrounding marriage in Islam carries significant weight, as it shapes gender power relations and dynamics. Moreover, as posited by Kecia Ali (2006), it gives rise to contemplation and examination of same-sex unions:

> Same-sex intimacy cannot be separated from discussions of other topics in sexual ethics because the rules making same-sex marriage unthinkable emerge not primarily, or at least not exclusively, from an explicit prohibition of same-sex activity but rather through the legal construction of marriage and sexual relationships as both gendered and hierarchical.
>
> (Ali 2006: 95)

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Like Ali, Youssef connects heterosexual marriage, sexual relations, and homosexual practices. She argues it is the socially condescending perception of women as merely objects of male desire that explains the negative attitude towards and denunciation of *liwat* (homosexual sex). Islamic scholars disapprove of *al-liwat* (regarding it as directly referring to male homosexual practices) because it transforms the male into an object of male desire and therefore bestows upon the objectified male the characteristics of a female, destroying the symbolic phallic sign that most exegetes consider to be natural (2008: 184). Here, both Ali and Youssef highlight that the intricacies of gender and its associated power dynamics are dissected and dismantled, their ripple effects extending beyond just the realm of gender. Indeed, the examination of gender has profound implications for various expressions of human sexuality.

CONCEPTUALIZING (HOMO)SEXUALITY IN THE WORK OF OLFA YOUSSEF

Homosexuality in Arab societies is increasingly being addressed from a human rights perspective, in response to the growing visibility of homosexual practices. Youssef acknowledges that the shift from silence to legislative action has been driven by the growing influence of concepts such as diversity, individual freedom, and the recognition of same-sex partnerships and marriage in Western countries. However, there remains a pervasive silence on the topic: "the discussion on homosexuality still embarrasses many Muslim societies," and therefore, it is important to highlight "the huge difference in the matter of homosexuality between some of the old jurists and scholars on the one hand, and the common position of contemporary Muslims on the other" (Youssef 2008: 223). Youssef is concerned about the mental health of many Muslims who engage in homosexual practices but choose to abide by the heteronormative system of their societies and get married to gain emotional and sexual stability and social approval. In a qualitative study on identity among gay Muslims in Canada (Minwalla et al. 2005), researchers found that same-sex attraction does not negate the cultural imperative for heterosexual marriage. Youssef understands this as a way of conforming to social norms. This reflects a different conceptualization of homosexuality, that is, not as an identity but as a sexual practice. Youssef engages with "sexuality" as part of a broader discussion of a postcolonial Arab formation and focuses her analysis on the politics of repression that modern Tunisia and its religious authorities have taken over, such as naturalizing Islam as heteronormative and homosexual practices as Western, ignoring the history of sexual openness and acceptance in precolonial Muslim societies. Her questions and concerns undermine the religious authorities that seem to inherit an imperial repression approach. Youssef deals with the paradox of "Arab religious identity" that re-inscribes an essentialist Muslim identity and thus limits efforts toward liberation, and deconstructs labels that maintain social inequities and exclusions and allows a formation of a new Muslim identity.

By severing the connection between sexual practices and identity labels, Youssef engages in an act of decolonization. She draws upon precolonial Arabo-Islamic culture to create a new understanding of sexuality that is not constrained by Eurocentric discourse. In this way, Youssef challenges the pervasive myth that Islam is inherently homophobic and brings to the fore a pre-colonial Muslim cultural heritage. Her work emphasizes the importance of taking precolonial perspectives into account, particularly when it comes to the representation of sexual practices within Islam.

Youssef's decolonization efforts extend to the realm of language, as she seeks to move away from Western-coined terms like "homosexual" and instead resort to precolonial Arabic terms. In today's Arabic, two terms can be used to refer to "homosexuality"—*shudhudh jinsi* and *mithlyah jinsiah*. The literal English translation of the former is a sexual abnormality, sexual deviance, or perversion, whereas the latter translates as sexual sameness or similarity. Yet before the twentieth century, Arabs and Muslims never used *shudhudh jinsi* to describe homosexuality. For more than a millennium, many learned elites, including religious scholars, linguists, and poets, discussed all kinds of sexual relations, including what they called *liwat* and *sihaq* (which refer to male and female sexual acts respectively), that were close to our modern understanding of homosexuality, without using terms like deviant, abnormal or unnatural (Alamer 2022). *Shudhudh* is a translation of a modern Western concept that was developed in the late nineteenth century within an emergent medical-scientific preoccupation with sexuality in Western

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Europe when anti-hedonist, Victorian morality of austerity, restraint, and prohibition on expressing sexual desires was dominant. Moreover, when it was first introduced in Arabic in the early twentieth century, *shudhudh* did not exclusively mean homosexuality. Instead, it was more of a scientific and medical category and included a wide range of sexual activities deemed "deviant," like masturbation, sadism, masochism, fetishism, and so on. And, contrary to what opponents of homosexuality often claim, *mithlyah* is not a recent translation of homosexuality that aimed to replace the term *shudhudh* and normalize homosexuality. Rather, it was the original term that earlier Arab translators chose for homosexuality, coined at the same time as the term *shudhudh* and within the same movement of translating modern European psychological and sexologist literature. It then took more than three decades for *shudhudh* to become a synonym of homosexuality and the favorite term in Arab anti-homosexuality discourse (Alamer 2022).

In response to criticism for promoting homosexual practices in Muslim societies, Youssef explains that she never uses the term *shuzuz jinsi*, since it is based on normative stipulations and not scientific research or serious intellectual theories. The term she uses is *mithaliya junsiya*. Youssef begins her discussion of homosexuality by criticizing another scholar of Islam, Raja bin-Salama, for arguing that the divine gender order is built on a clear binary and does not accept a third sex. Bin-Salama bases her argument on Sura 49 Al-Hujurat verse 13:

> O mankind! We have created you from [*min*] a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa (piety). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.

Youssef challenges the notion that there are only two essential genders, "female" and "male." Instead, she argues that each person embodies a range of biological and psychological characteristics, which can be fluid and can exist on a spectrum. Through an analysis of the Qur'an, Youssef reveals the potential for interpreting gender in a non-essentialist way. Rather than viewing the creation of humans as being strictly divided into male and female categories, Youssef argues that the grammatical function of the word *min* in "we created you *min* (from) a male and a female" allows for a more nuanced understanding. By interpreting the verse as meaning that all humans carry both male and female characteristics within them, Youssef bypasses essentialism and opens the possibility for a fluid, nonbinary understanding of gender. This decolonizes, as it challenges the colonial imposition of binary gender categories and allows for the construction of fluid and diverse gender identities.

The Qur'an, Youssef claims, legislates marriage, and indicates some forbidden sexual relations such as fornication and marrying those who are unlawful to you. However, it keeps silent about same-sex relationships, and about *suhaq* (sexual relations between two females) particularly. Nevertheless, Youssef challenges orthodox interpretations regarding female same-sex relationships, and refers to Sura 3 Al-Imran verse 14 to discuss female homosexuality as a legal matter:

> Adorned for human being [*lil-nas*] is the love of lusts, for women and offspring, and stored up heaps of gold and silver, and horses branded.

Youssef argues that the love of lust, which includes the lust for women, is embellished by God for all human beings. In her analysis of the verse, Youssef skillfully challenges

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orthodox interpretations and asks: "Assuming women are part of the 'human being', can one conclude that lust for women is adorned to women as well?" (Youssef 2008: 171).

Youssef's methodology involves examining the linguistic meaning and grammatical functions of specific words in a verse to challenge conventional interpretations and suggest new ones. In this case, she centers her analysis on the word *al-nas* (human beings, people), which is in contrast to *qawm* (folk, group), the word used in the Qur'an only to refer to a group of men. Youssef's scrutiny of the term "*al-nas*" is a pivotal aspect of her scholarship, as it exposes the erroneous male-centric interpretation that equated it with "men," thus constructing an entire gender binary and power dynamics based on this flawed notion. Youssef argues that such a conflation of *al-nas* with men has resulted in the negation of rights and opportunities that are explicitly granted to women and other marginalized groups in the Qur'an. By unearthing this interpretative mistake, Youssef's work clears the path for a more nuanced comprehension of gender in Islam, one that fosters greater inclusivity and equity.

Youssef cites the renowned scholar Al-Razi (865–925), who contended that God instilled in the hearts of *al-insan* (human beings) a natural love for a wife and children. She then extrapolates from Al-Razi's viewpoint, arguing that, unless Al-Razi allowed marriage between two females, this is evidence that scholars use "men" and "human beings" interchangeably to refer to both genders. Again, this means that medieval scholars referred to the male as the prototype for human beings, so they used the words *al-nas* (human beings) or *insan* (human being) as an indicator for "men." This makes it clear why they interpreted the verse as "Adorned for 'men' is the love of lusts, for women and seeds."

In comparison to medieval scholars, Youssef finds that contemporary scholars discussed the meaning of *al-nas*. She quotes Ibn-Ashur (1879–1973), who considered the lust for women as basic to all humans, but argues that this is a divine sign for the existence of gender since the verse also relates to reproduction. Youssef criticizes Ibn-Ashur for his inconsistency as he later discusses how the lust for seeds (offspring/children) is divine and inserted in women and men. In his interpretation of the same verse, Ibn-Ashur presents an alternative understanding of the term *al-nas* which does not rely on any conventional linguistic or contextual analysis. Youssef therefore asks: "Why is it not possible that the use of the general meaning of 'al-nas', which includes women, is a sign of the possibility of sexual desire between two females, based on the idea that women, being mothers, are the domain of first desire for every child, male or female?" (Youssef 2008: 180).

Youssef's Islamic feminist approach challenges the essentialized and misogynistic conceptualization of "woman." In her work, she demonstrates how the notion of "woman" is malleable and diverse, and cannot be reduced to a singular, monolithic entity. One aspect of this re-conceptualization is the recognition of female-to-female desire, which remains largely ignored by scholars due to its challenge to the phallic organization of the world. By recognizing the importance of *suhaq*, Youssef exposes the limitations of the binary categorizations of "feminine" and "masculine" and the restriction of women as mere objects of male desire. Instead, Youssef emphasizes the importance of a more nuanced understanding of sexuality and gender as a complex and multifaceted spectrum. By de-essentializing the notion of "woman" and reconstructing gender, Youssef's approach offers a powerful alternative to the restrictive and oppressive norms that have long dominated patriarchal societies.

As for male homosexual practices in Islam, Youssef argues that in contrast to *suhaq*, *liwat* is not only located within the phallic organization of the world, but it also transforms the male into an object of desire for the male. Therefore, *al-liwaṭ* transgresses the limits

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of phallic organization and even destroys that form of organization, given that the latter can only be sustained through the existence of a single possible object of masculine sexual desire: the woman. Youssef engages with the Qur'an, to re-read the story of the prophet Lut to question the common interpretation of the story and its immediate connection to homosexuality. Her analysis of the verses that mention the *fahisha* of the people of Lut also rely on the tawhidic paradigm. The Qur'an allows for many possible readings, particularly when dealing with general and ambiguous phrases that can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Youssef concludes:

> What is most important in our opinion is to realize that the abomination of the people of Lut was not only sexually approaching men, but extended to committing other acts that threatened the peace of other people and the safety of their selves and bodies. We can go even further than that and ask whether the abomination of the people of Lut was to sexually approach men or whether it was to force themselves sexually on men without the latter's consent, in addition to beating and insulting them and throwing stones at them.
>
> (Youssef 2008: 189)

Scott Kugle (2010) comes to similar conclusions, and argues that the story of Lut does not concern homosexual acts "but rather [addresses] male rape of men in particular." He claims this is "analogous to soldiers using rape as a weapon or to interrogators using sexual acts as tools of domination. … The mob's attempt to rape the men was motivated by their wish to reject the Prophetic authority of Lot and assert their egoistic status and power, rather than by sexual desire and bodily pleasure" (54).

Throughout her work on same-sex relationships, Youssef uses diverse Islamic feminist methodologies and frameworks, including intra-textual linguistic analysis to promote the idea of sexual diversity as divine to allow for diverse sexual practices in Islam. She refers to Islamic history to prove that homoerotic practices and performances were celebrated in pre-modern periods in Islamic societies. Youssef brings to the forefront Islamic voices that engaged in a discussion on homosexual practices and performances outside the Eurocentric discourse of homosexual identity. Through her work in rebuilding and rediscovering precolonial knowledge, Youssef effectively challenges the dominant heteronormative and gender hierarchal structures that persist in postcolonial Tunisia. By centering alternative perspectives and narratives, she offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse on gender and sexuality in the region.

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CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I explore the intersection of decoloniality, language, and Islamic feminism, and draw two key conclusions. Firstly, Islamic feminism is a decolonial project that challenges patriarchal power dynamics imposed by colonialism and coloniality. These dynamics have marginalized Othered people and their knowledge production. By drawing on precolonial knowledge and Islamic traditions, Islamic feminism seeks to promote more equitable and just social structures that challenge dominant Western discourses and offer a critical perspective on gender power relations in Muslim societies. I synthesize the tripartite relationship between geopolitical positioning, lived experience, and knowledge production to contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive theorization of feminism, gender, and sexuality.

Secondly, I highlight the importance of language in the decolonization process, specifically in the context of works written in Arabic and situated within the Global South. Through the work of Olfa Youssef, I emphasize the significance of expanding our understanding of Islamic feminism beyond English-language scholarship and towards non-Western knowledge production. It is worth mentioning Samar Habib's (2007) book on female same-sex sexuality in the Middle East. While this book was praised as the first to discuss female homosexuality, it is important to note that Arab (Muslim) scholars had already written about female homoeroticism in both academic settings and in fiction. However, their contributions were not acknowledged by Western scholars, and English-language scholarship hardly references works written in Arabic.

Youssef's use of psychoanalysis and direct readings of the Qur'an offers a unique perspective on the conceptualization of religion, gender, and sexuality rooted in the socio-political context of the Global South, and the "Muslim World" in particular. By recognizing the significance of Arabic-language scholarship in the field of Islamic feminism, we can move towards a more global and holistic view of the work of Islamic feminists, one that considers the diversity of experiences and contexts in which this knowledge is produced.

In summary, this chapter represents a significant milestone in the ongoing conversation around the dynamic interplay between Islamic feminism and language, particularly in the context of decolonization. By establishing bridges between Muslim women writers in English and Arabic, this work seeks to unite divergent perspectives and promote a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of feminist theory, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, this contribution not only enhances our understanding of Islamic feminism but also offers a crucial step forward in bridging the gap between feminist theories originating from the Global North and those from the Global South.

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NOTES

1. In this chapter, "Arabo-Islamic" refers to the cultural and historical connections between Arab and Islamic societies, including their shared history, traditions, and contributions in fields such as architecture, art, literature, and science. It emphasizes the importance of the Arabic language in Olfa Youssef's work within this context.
2. For more on the ongoing tension between Western notions and applications of feminism and the perspectives of female Muslim scholars, Muslim pride, and the deconstruction of the "Muslim Woman" figure, see Cooke (2008) and Abu-Lughod (2002).
3. When I started researching Olfa Youssef's scholarship in 2010, Youssef's work was only available in Arabic. It was only in late 2017 that a translation of her book by Lamia Benyoussef was published, which was a much-needed work. Nevertheless, as I undertook to translate Youssef's work for my own writing, I have used my own English translation of the original Arabic text.
4. The *tawhidic* paradigm, according to Wadud (2006), represents the relationship between Allah and human beings as a triangle. Allah is at the top, and human beings are held in a horizontal line of equality. This paradigm promotes equality and justice under God in a metaphysical sense.
5. Amina Wadud (1999) opposes the misconception that *Qiwamah* implies to men's superiority over women, and provides an extensive gender-sensitive interpretation to the concept of *Qiwamah*. See also Wadud (2004, 2006) for work on the rights of Muslim women.
6. For more on the Islamic practice of *Mut'a* marriage, see Mir Hosseini (2003) and Haeri (2014).

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