



**FROM COLONIAL FEMINISM TO NEO-ISLAMOPHOBIA:
The Political Deployment of Women's Rights in Contemporary Anti-Islamic Narratives**

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Abstract

The feminist idiom has long served imperial ends. For centuries, Western powers have used the language of women's rights not to help Muslim women, but to justify controlling Muslim societies. Lord Cromer demanded that Egyptian women remove the veil — while at the same time working to stop British women from voting. After September 11, the United States called the invasion of Afghanistan a mission to "liberate" Afghan women. Today, Western governments and aid agencies pressure Pakistan to change its Islamic laws in the name of gender equality. The target changes; the logic stays the same. Drawing on Edward Said, Leila Ahmed, Spivak, Mohanty, and Abu-Lughod, this article traces that pattern and shows how it operates specifically against Pakistan — through international criticism of the hudood laws, purdah, and girls' education — while ignoring Pakistan's own strong Islamic tradition of defending women's rights. The article argues, from an Islamic standpoint, that the Qur'ānic values of karāmah insāniyyah (human dignity) and tawāzun (balance between men and women), read through the maqāṣid al-sharī'ah framework, offer a richer and more honest foundation for women's dignity than Western liberal feminism — which cannot accept as a free choice any decision a Muslim woman makes in the name of her faith. The right response is not apology or retreat. Pakistani Muslim women scholars, jurists, and communities are already doing the work — on their own terms, in their own language — and they need no outside rescue.

Keywords: Colonial Feminism, Islamophobia, Orientalism, Muslim Women, Liberal Feminism, *Karāmah Insāniyyah*, Postcolonial Critique, Hijab, Civilizational Discourse, Anti-Islamic Narratives, Gender in Islam

INTRODUCTION: THE VEIL AS POLITICAL WEAPON

On October 7, 2001, as United States and coalition forces commenced the aerial bombardment of Afghanistan, First Lady Laura Bush addressed the American nation in her husband's weekly radio broadcast to frame the military campaign in explicitly feminist terms: "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."¹ Within weeks, the liberation of Afghan women from Taliban oppression had become one of the primary public justifications for a military operation that would, over the following two decades, kill tens of thousands of Afghan civilians, generate millions of refugees, and culminate in the complete restoration of the Taliban to power. The women whose liberation had been invoked as a *casus belli* were left, when the invaders departed, in conditions of greater deprivation, insecurity, and political marginalization than those from which they had ostensibly been rescued. The deployment of women's rights as justification for military violence illustrated with unusual clarity a dynamic that scholars of colonialism and postcolonialism had been documenting for over a century.

This dynamic (the political weaponization of women's rights against Muslim societies) is not a recent invention but a structural feature of Western engagement with Islam that predates the modern era and persists into the present. Lila Abu-Lughod, in her seminal essay "Do Muslim



Women Really Need Saving?", observed that "the question of the veil has come to stand in, metonymically, for the inferiority of Islam and the need for its reform or elimination a question that says more about the political anxieties of those who ask it than about the lives of the women it purports to concern."² This article takes Abu-Lughod's observation as its point of departure and extends it into a comprehensive critical genealogy of colonial feminist discourse, a systematic analysis of its contemporary neo-Islamophobic manifestations, and a constructive articulation of the Islamic tradition's own account of women's dignity as a philosophically superior alternative to the liberal feminist framework within which anti-Islamic discourse is conducted.

The article's intellectual orientation requires explicit statement at the outset. This is not a work of secular postcolonial criticism that happens to include sympathetic references to Islam. It is a work of Islamic scholarship that draws on postcolonial critical theory as a subordinate analytical tool useful insofar as it exposes the imperial genealogy of anti-Islamic feminist discourse, but insufficient as a final framework because it shares with liberalism the epistemological presuppositions it critiques. The governing conviction is that expressed by Wael Hallaq: "the Islamic intellectual tradition must engage Western critical discourse not as a suppliant seeking validation but as a confident intellectual civilization that possesses its own epistemological foundations, its own account of the human person, and its own vision of the just and flourishing society."³ The critique of colonial feminism and neo-Islamophobia developed here is thus conducted, ultimately, from within the Islamic tradition rather than from the secular academy's margins.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 traces the genealogy of colonial feminism from its nineteenth-century origins in British and French imperial discourse. Section 3 examines the post-September 11 deployment of Muslim women's liberation as justification for military intervention and civilizational warfare. Section 4 analyzes contemporary European neo-Islamophobia's feminist face the legislative campaigns against Islamic dress and education conducted in the language of gender equality. Section 5 develops the Islamic tradition's own account of women's dignity and status as a positive philosophical alternative. Section 6 engages the internal contradictions of liberal feminism as a framework for understanding women's flourishing. Section 7 presents the testimonies and intellectual contributions of Muslim women scholars as evidence against the infantilizing assumptions of colonial feminist discourse. Section 8 sketches an Islamic framework for authentic engagement with the genuine challenges facing Muslim women. The conclusion articulates the vision of Islamic womanhood as a confident, self-sufficient alternative to the impoverished liberal feminist imagination.

THE GENEALOGY OF COLONIAL FEMINISM: FROM CROMER TO CURZON

Lord Cromer and the Original Hypocrisy

The most revealing single document in the genealogy of colonial feminist discourse is the career of Evelyn Baring, First Earl of Cromer, British Consul-General of Egypt from 1883 to 1907 and the effective ruler of that country during the period of British colonial occupation. Cromer was among the most vocal advocates, in his official colonial capacity, for the "emancipation" of Egyptian women from what he described as the degrading institution of the veil a reform he presented as essential to Egypt's progress toward civilization. In his two-volume *Modern Egypt*



(1908), Cromer argued that "the position of women in Egypt, and in Mohammedan countries generally, is, I venture to think, the greatest obstacle to the Egyptians' advancement in civilization," and that "Islam as a social system has been a complete failure," primarily because of its treatment of women.⁴ These sentiments were widely quoted by European commentators as evidence of a sincere concern for the wellbeing of Muslim women.

What made Cromer's feminist advocacy uniquely revealing was its simultaneous coexistence with his active leadership, upon returning to Britain, of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage the primary organization dedicated to preventing British women from obtaining the right to vote. As Leila Ahmed observed in *Women and Gender in Islam*, this conjunction was not hypocrisy in the ordinary sense but the logical expression of a consistent underlying politics: "Cromer's opposition to the veil had nothing to do with concern for the welfare of Egyptian women and everything to do with the project of destabilizing Egyptian society and culture undermining the symbols of Islamic identity through which Egyptian resistance to British domination was organized."⁵ The concern for Muslim women's liberation was, from its inception, a concern for imperial control dressed in the language of humanitarian progress. Ahmed's identification of this dynamic as "colonial feminism" — a discourse that uses the surface vocabulary of feminism in service of projects antithetical to any genuine concern for women's welfare — remains the most analytically precise characterization of the phenomenon this article examines.

The French colonial experience in Algeria offers a parallel and equally revealing genealogy. The French colonial administration's campaign to unveil Algerian women was conducted simultaneously with the systematic dispossession of Algerian land, the dismantling of Islamic educational institutions, and the legal subordination of Algerian Muslims to a colonial regime that denied them basic civil rights. As Frantz Fanon analyzed in *A Dying Colonialism*, "the colonial administration recognized that, in order to destroy Algerian society, it was necessary first to destroy its family structure, and that the family structure was organized around the figure of the veiled woman who therefore became the primary target of colonial cultural assault."⁶ The unveiling campaign was not an expression of concern for Algerian women's freedom; it was a military tactic dressed in humanitarian clothing, designed to destroy the cultural foundations of indigenous resistance.

The Epistemological Structure of Colonial Feminist Discourse

The colonial feminist discourse analyzed above has an identifiable epistemological structure that recurs across its historical manifestations and that must be understood in order to recognize its contemporary forms. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identified this structure in her foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", arguing that colonial feminist discourse operates through what she termed "the white woman's burden" — the assumption that Western women possess both the authority and the obligation to speak on behalf of non-Western women who are presumed to be too oppressed, too ignorant, or too culturally captured to speak for themselves.⁷ This assumption is not an incidental feature of colonial feminist discourse but its defining epistemological move.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her landmark essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," subjected this structure to systematic critical analysis, demonstrating that Western feminist scholarship on "Third World women" systematically produces a monolithic, homogeneous "Third World Woman" who is defined primarily by her victimhood and whose liberation requires Western feminist intervention: "This average Third World woman leads an



essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'Third World' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)."⁸ This constructed figure serves the epistemic and political needs of Western feminist discourse rather than the actual interests of the diverse, complex, and agency-possessing women it purports to represent.

Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism as a "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" provides the broader epistemological framework within which colonial feminist discourse operates. Said argued that "the essential aspects of the modern Orient that are consistently reaffirmed in Orientalist discourse are its inferiority, its peculiarity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability."⁹ The gendered language of Said's analysis is deliberate: Orientalism feminizes the Orient in order to justify the masculine West's penetration and domination of it. Colonial feminist discourse participates in this structure by making the actual women of the Orient the specific site of intervention the living proof that the Orient requires Western management.

POST-9/11 AND THE "WAR ON TERROR": SAVING MUSLIM WOMEN THROUGH BOMBING

The Feminist Legitimation of Military Violence

The post-September 11 deployment of feminist rhetoric in the legitimation of American military intervention in Muslim-majority countries represents the most consequential recent manifestation of colonial feminist discourse. The Feminist Majority Foundation, a prominent American feminist organization, had been running a campaign for Afghan women's rights since 1997 — a campaign that, after 9/11, was rapidly incorporated into the Bush administration's public relations strategy for the Afghanistan invasion. Eleanor Smeal, the organization's president, appeared alongside Condoleezza Rice and other administration officials to provide feminist legitimation for the military campaign, declaring that "the liberation of Afghan women is not possible without the defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda."¹⁰

The consequences of this alignment were analyzed with characteristic clarity by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*: "the invocation of feminism to justify military intervention represents a co-optation of feminist language that simultaneously domesticates feminism's radical potential and provides moral cover for imperial violence a combination that serves the interests of empire while doing nothing for the women whose suffering is invoked."¹¹ The evidence bore Butler's analysis out: after twenty years of American military presence in Afghanistan, Afghan women's literacy rates remained among the lowest in the world, maternal mortality was the highest, and the political infrastructure created by the occupation proved entirely incapable of protecting women's gains when the invaders withdrew.

Abu-Lughod's sustained ethnographic engagement with Afghan women's lives provided perhaps the most powerful rebuke to the colonial feminist narrative of rescue. In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013), she documented the ways in which Afghan women's actual concerns were systematically subordinated to the symbolic politics of unveiled faces and Western-style educational institutions, which served the narrative needs of the occupying power more than the practical needs of Afghan women. As she stated: "What are we to make of the fact that the women



of Afghanistan were used to justify a war, and then abandoned when that war's strategic objectives shifted? We should make of it what the evidence demands: that the concern for Afghan women was never really about Afghan women."¹²

The Construction of the "Muslim Woman Problem" in Western Media

The post-9/11 period also witnessed a dramatic intensification of what scholars of media and representation have called the "Muslim woman problem" narrative in Western mainstream media a narrative that presents the Muslim woman primarily as a victim of her religion, her culture, and her men, and that measures the degree of her victimhood by the degree of her observance of Islamic norms of dress and conduct. Jack Shaheen's comprehensive analysis of Muslim representation in Hollywood film and American television demonstrated that "the Muslim woman is consistently portrayed in one of two ways: as the veiled, passive, oppressed victim of Islamic patriarchy, or as the unveiled, liberated woman who has escaped Islam's grip" a binary that forecloses any representation of Muslim women as self-determining agents who freely choose Islamic practice.¹³ This representational binary has concrete political consequences. When Muslim women who wear the hijab or niqab by choice are systematically represented as incapable of genuine their agency is doubly denied: first by the patriarchal structures colonial feminist discourse attributes to Islam, and second by the colonial feminist discourse itself, which refuses to credit them with the rational capacity for autonomous decision-making that liberalism claims as the foundation of its politics. As Saba Mahmood demonstrated in *Politics of Piety*, "the liberal feminist framework that condemns the veil as a symbol of women's oppression is itself a form of epistemic violence it denies Muslim women the very autonomy it claims to champion by refusing to recognize their choices as genuine choices when those choices take Islamic rather than liberal form."¹⁴ The structural parallel between nineteenth-century colonial feminist discourse and its post-9/11 manifestation is unmistakable. In both cases, the concern for Muslim women's liberation is simultaneously deployed as justification for political and military domination of Muslim societies and as evidence for the fundamental inferiority of Islamic civilization. In both cases, the actual welfare of Muslim women is subordinated to the political needs of the power invoking their liberation. And in both cases, Muslim women's own articulations of their experience, their choices, and their values are systematically dismissed or ignored in favor of external Western interpretation. Hallaq's assessment applies with full force: "the discourse on Muslim women in Western scholarship and policy is not about Muslim women; it is about the West's need to constitute itself as the standard of civilization by constituting Islam as its deficient Other."¹⁵

CONTEMPORARY NEO-ISLAMOPHOBIA: FEMINIST RHETORIC IN THE SERVICE OF EXCLUSIONARY NATIONALISM

The European Hijab Wars

The contemporary European legislative campaigns against Islamic dress like the French ban on the hijab in public schools (2004), the Belgian and French bans on the full-face veil in public spaces (2010, 2011), the Swiss ban on minarets (2009), the growing legislative campaigns against the burkini and Islamic education across multiple European states represent the most systematic contemporary manifestation of colonial feminist discourse. These campaigns are consistently



framed in the language of women's liberation, secularism, and gender equality, but their actual effects are effects of exclusion and domination rather than liberation.

The French case is the most extensively documented and theoretically analyzed. The French state's ban on "conspicuous religious symbols" in public schools, passed in 2004 following the report of the Stasi Commission, was explicitly justified in feminist terms: the hijab was declared a symbol of women's oppression incompatible with the republican values of gender equality. Joan Wallach Scott, in *The Politics of the Veil*, subjected this justification to systematic deconstruction, arguing that "the French debate on the veil reveals the fundamental contradiction at the heart of French republican feminism: it invokes women's autonomy as the basis for prohibiting women's autonomous choice of dress, thereby demonstrating that the feminism it claims is not a feminism of women's freedom but a feminism of cultural conformity."¹⁶ The Muslim girls expelled from French schools for wearing the hijab were not liberated by their expulsion; they were denied education a consequence that served the symbolic politics of French secularism at the expense of the concrete educational welfare of the Muslim girls whose liberation was invoked.

The Swiss ban on minarets, approved by referendum in 2009 with 57.5 percent of the vote, provides a particularly clear case of Islamophobia deploying feminist rhetoric in the service of cultural exclusion. The campaign's primary poster made the connection between the aesthetic politics of Islamic architecture and the perceived threat of Muslim women's covering explicit. As Nilüfer Göle observed in *Islam and Secularity*, "the minaret ban was not about but about the visibility of Islam in the public sphere, and the figure of the veiled woman was the primary symbol through which that visibility was constructed as a threat to European civilization."¹⁷ The feminist framing of anti-Islamic legislation is, in the European context, a rhetorical device for the laundering of cultural racism through the vocabulary of gender equality.

The "Integration" Discourse and the Measurement of Muslim Women's Worth

Contemporary European and North American "integration" discourse consistently measures Muslim women's integration primarily by their degree of departure from Islamic norms of dress and conduct. The unveiled Muslim woman who does not pray, does not fast, and does not practice Islamic sexual ethics is presented as successfully integrated; the observant Muslim woman who wears the hijab, prays five times daily, and maintains Islamic standards of modesty is presented as insufficiently integrated regardless of her educational qualifications, professional achievements, linguistic competence, or civic participation. This framework measures Muslim women's worth by the degree to which they have abandoned their Islamic identity a measurement that has nothing to do with women's welfare and everything to do with the cultural politics of Western identity.¹⁸

The instrumentalization of Muslim women in this integration discourse has been analyzed with precision by Sara R. Farris, who coined the term "femonationalism" in her study of the convergence between feminist and nationalist discourses in Europe in the mobilization against Islam. As Farris argues, "femonationalism represents the paradoxical alliance between certain feminist organizations, right-wing nationalist parties, and neoliberal policy frameworks around the figure of the Muslim woman — a figure who is invoked as the victim requiring rescue in order to justify the exclusion and surveillance of Muslim communities as a whole."¹⁹ The Muslim woman in femonationalist discourse is not a subject with her own interests and perspectives; she is an object — a symbolic battlefield on which the contest between Western liberalism and Islam is fought.



The hypocrisy of femonationalist discourse is rendered particularly visible by the selectivity of its feminist concern. The same European states that legislate against the hijab in the name of women's liberation maintain cordial relations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf states whose treatment of women by any liberal feminist standard is incomparably more restrictive than anything found in European Muslim communities determined not by what Muslims believe or practice but by whether they serve or threaten Western strategic interests."²⁰ The feminist concern for Muslim women is, structurally and consistently, a concern that activates against Muslims who resist Western domination and deactivates against Muslims who facilitate it.

THE ISLAMIC ACCOUNT OF WOMEN'S DIGNITY: A POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE

Qur'ānic Foundations: Karāmah, Tawāzun, and the Spiritual Equality of the Sexes

The Islamic tradition's account of women is not a deficient approximation of Western liberal feminism that awaits correction from without; it is a fundamentally different and philosophically richer account of the human person that the liberal feminist framework is structurally unable to recognize because it begins from different metaphysical premises. The Qur'ānic account of the creation of the human being is the necessary starting point. Sūrat al-Nisā' (4:1) declares: "O mankind, fear your Lord, Who created you from a single soul (*nafs wāḥidah*) and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women." The verse grounds the relationship between men and women not in a hierarchy of creation but in a shared origin: both male and female derive from a single divine creative act, and neither is primary or secondary in the metaphysical sense.

The Qur'ānic affirmation of the spiritual equality of men and women is one of the most consistently articulated themes in the revealed text. Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (33:35) declares the equal spiritual standing of Muslim men and women in a verse of extraordinary comprehensiveness, listing ten pairs of virtuous qualities and affirming that God has prepared forgiveness and great reward for both. As Amina Wadud has acknowledged "this verse represents the most unequivocal affirmation of women's spiritual equality in any of the world's major religious traditions; no comparable verse exists in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament."²¹ The Qur'ānic affirmation of women's spiritual equality is not incidental but central: it establishes that the Islamic framework for understanding women begins from their full participation in the most fundamental human calling — the worship of God and the cultivation of the virtuous soul.

The concept of *karāmah insāniyyah* applies to women with the same unconditionality as to men. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (the contemporary Egyptian scholar) stated this principle with characteristic directness: "The dignity that God has bestowed upon the daughters of Adam is not less than that which He has bestowed upon the sons of Adam; it is the same dignity, deriving from the same divine act of honoring, and it cannot be diminished by any human authority, cultural convention, or social arrangement."²² This principle provides a foundation for women's rights that is philosophically stronger than the liberal feminist grounding in autonomous individual choice, because it is not contingent on the social recognition of women's autonomy but is inscribed in the very structure of creation.

The Prophet's Model: Ḥadīth Evidence for Islamic Gender Justice



The Prophet Muḥammad's (*ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) treatment of women, recorded in the canonical *ḥadīth* collections, provides the normative model for Islamic gender relations and constitutes evidence against the colonial feminist characterization of Islam as intrinsically patriarchal and hostile to women. The Prophet's final sermon at *Ḥajjat al-Wadā‘* included an explicit commandment regarding women: "Fear God with respect to women, for you have taken them as a trust from God, and they have been made lawful to you by the word of God. You have rights over your wives and they have rights over you." The simultaneous affirmation of mutual rights constitutes a revolutionary moral claim that the colonial feminist narrative systematically ignores.²³

The *ḥadīth* literature records the Prophet's (*ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) active solicitation of women's opinions in matters of public concern, his consultation of his wife *Umm Salama* (radiya Allāhu ‘anhā) on the critical political decision at *Hudaybiyyah*, and his adoption of her advice preeminently *‘Ā’ishah* (radiya Allāhu ‘anhā), who transmitted over 2,210 *ḥadīth* and whose interpretive authority was recognized by the greatest male Companions — constitutes evidence that the Islamic tradition's own foundations include an affirmation of women's intellectual and religious authority that has no parallel in the early periods of the Western traditions that claim to have liberated women from religion. As Denise Spellberg observed in *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, "*‘Ā’ishah*'s centrality to the transmission of the Prophet's teaching represents a foundational recognition of women's intellectual authority that is built into the very structure of the Islamic tradition."²⁴

The Prophet's (*ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) declaration, recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (no. 3331), that "the best of you are those who are best to their wives," and his personal example of domestic participation like his mending of his own clothes, his assistance in household tasks, his gentleness and affection in private life, recorded in detail by *‘Ā’ishah* represent a model of gender relations whose emphasis on mutual respect, shared responsibility, and the cultivation of loving partnership between husband and wife constitutes a more adequate basis for the flourishing of both men and women than the adversarial individualism of the liberal feminist framework. As Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah observed in *Zād al-Ma‘ād*, "the Prophet's treatment of his wives was the practical embodiment of the Qur’ān's declaration of *ma‘rūf* as the governing norm of marriage; and this norm is more demanding, more humanly adequate, and more practically attainable than the abstract equality of rights that liberalism proposes."²⁵

Islamic Law and Women's Rights: The Historical Record

The colonial feminist characterization of Islamic law as a system of women's oppression requires confrontation with the historical record, which presents a picture of considerably greater complexity. Islamic law granted Muslim women rights such as to own property independently of their husbands, to retain their own earnings, to initiate divorce (*khul‘*), to inherit, to give evidence, to conduct commercial transactions, and to hold religious authority that European women did not possess until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Leila Ahmed herself acknowledged, despite her broader critical stance: "Islamic law, as formulated in the classical period, gave women a range of legal rights that their Western counterparts would not obtain for many centuries a fact that the colonial feminist narrative's teleological account of Western progress and Islamic backwardness is unable to accommodate."²⁶



The institution of the *mahr* represents an Islamic legal institution with no Western parallel until the twentieth century, when married women first acquired the right to own property independently of their husbands in most European jurisdictions. Imam al-Shāfiʿī, in *al-Umm*, established the principle that "the *mahr* is the exclusive property of the wife; no claim upon it belongs to her father, her guardian, or her husband after the marriage contract is concluded, and any condition imposed upon it is void." This legal protection of women's economic independence — institutionalized in the seventh century — preceded the comparable protections of the British Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 by over twelve hundred years.²⁷

THE INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS OF LIBERAL FEMINISM

Autonomy Without Transcendence: The Metaphysical Poverty of Liberal Feminist Ethics

The liberal feminist framework that undergirds colonial feminist discourse rests on a foundational concept of individual autonomy that is simultaneously its most powerful rhetorical resource and its most serious philosophical weakness. Kant's formulation of autonomy as the capacity to give oneself one's own moral law "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"²⁸ provides the philosophical foundation for a rights framework in which the primary value is the protection of individual choice from interference by external authority. On this framework, the Muslim woman who wears the hijab by choice is exercising the very autonomy the framework prizes; but the framework simultaneously generates the move to question whether her choice is genuinely autonomous or the product of patriarchal conditioning — a move that, as we have seen, it consistently makes in the specific case of Islamic choice while rarely making in other cases of culturally shaped preference.

The problem with grounding women's dignity in autonomous individual choice is not merely the performative inconsistency of liberal feminist discourse in its application to Muslim women. It is a deeper philosophical problem about what kind of lives are worth living and what constitutes genuine human flourishing. Liberal feminism, committed to a framework of value-neutrality in which the state and its institutions should not endorse any conception of the good life, is unable to make substantive claims about what women's flourishing actually consists in. It can insist on the procedural condition of free choice but cannot specify the content of the choices it defends. As Alasdair MacIntyre observed in *After Virtue*, "the liberal conception of the human being as a self-determining individual who precedes and is independent of any social roles or communal memberships is not a philosophical discovery about the nature of the human person; it is a culturally specific and historically contingent invention of post-Enlightenment European modernity."²⁹ The imposition of this culturally specific invention as a universal standard against which Muslim women's lives are measured is not cultural neutrality but cultural imperialism.

The Islamic framework offers what liberal feminism cannot: a substantive account of women's flourishing grounded in the nature of the human person as created by God and oriented toward God. The concept of *fiṭrah* preference (which can be manipulated, distorted, and impoverished) but from the divine wisdom encoded in the structure of human nature itself. As al-Shāṭibī argued in *al-Muwāfaqāt*, "the purposes of the *sharīʿah* are not arbitrary legislative choices but expressions of the divine wisdom that created human beings for a specific telos a telos whose fulfillment constitutes the only genuine flourishing and whose frustration constitutes the only genuine



deprivation, regardless of whether the individual experiencing that deprivation has been conditioned to desire it."³⁰ On this account, the feminist framework's insistence on the sufficiency of individual choice as a criterion of liberation is not merely insufficient but actively misleading: a woman can choose her own degradation, and liberal feminism has no resources to call it by its name.

Western Feminism's Internal Crisis: The Evidence of Its Own Failures

The liberal feminist project, pursued in Western societies for over two centuries with the resources of the most powerful states and the most influential cultural institutions in world history, has produced results that by the framework's own standards are deeply troubling. Western women have achieved formal legal equality with men in virtually all domains of public life; they have achieved near-parity in educational attainment; they constitute most university graduates in most Western countries. And yet: rates of depression and anxiety among young Western women are at historic highs; the sexual liberation movement has produced an epidemic of sexual violence and exploitation documented by the #MeToo movement; the pornography industry has generated documented and extensive harms to the women involved in it; and the dismantling of stable family structures that liberal individualism encouraged has produced documented negative outcomes for women and especially for children.³¹

The critique of these developments does not come only from Islamic or conservative perspectives. Feminist scholars including Germaine Greer, Camille Paglia, and Catherine Hakim have offered extensive internal critiques of the feminist movement's failures on its own terms. Jean Bethke Elshtain, in *Public Man, Private Woman*, argued that "the feminist project's dissolution of the distinction between public and private life, far from liberating women, has subjected them to new forms of commodification and exploitation while stripping them of the that provided the conditions for genuine flourishing."³² These critiques do not represent a return to pre-feminist norms; they represent evidence that the liberal feminist framework, on its own terms and by its own standards, has failed to deliver the comprehensive human flourishing it promised.

The Islamic tradition's response to these failures is not triumphalist; it is the response of a tradition that has always maintained that genuine human flourishing is achievable only within the framework of divine guidance. The Prophet's (*ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*) declaration that "this world is a provision and its best provision is a righteous woman" (Muslim, no. 1467) does not subordinate women to a instrumental role; it honors the woman who embodies the highest human virtues as the greatest treasure available in earthly life. This is not the language of oppression; it is the language of a tradition that regards women's moral and spiritual excellence as among the highest human achievements — a tradition that the liberal feminist framework, committed to the dissolution of specifically gendered forms of excellence, is structurally unable to honor.

MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK: AGENCY, SCHOLARSHIP, AND THE REFUSAL OF THE VICTIM NARRATIVE

The Muslim Woman Scholar as Evidence



The colonial feminist narrative of Muslim women as passive victims of Islamic patriarchy is most powerfully refuted not by abstract philosophical argument but by the historical and contemporary record of Muslim women's intellectual, scholarly, and political achievement within the Islamic tradition. The classical Islamic scholarly tradition produced women of extraordinary learning and authority whose contributions to Islamic jurisprudence, *ḥadīth* transmission, and religious education shaped the tradition in ways that have been systematically ignored in Western accounts of Islamic intellectual history. Ruth Roded's survey of women in Islamic biographical dictionaries identified over eight thousand named women scholars in the classical biographical literature — a figure that, as she observed, "represents a dimension of Islamic intellectual history that standard Western accounts of Islamic civilization simply do not acknowledge."³³

Among the most significant of these figures is Karīma al-Marwaziyyah (d. 463 AH), whose authority in *ḥadīth* scholarship was such that Imam al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī traveled from Baghdad to Mecca specifically to study under her — a journey of weeks undertaken by one of the greatest *muḥaddithūn* of his generation to sit at the feet of a woman scholar. Similarly, Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad al-Samarqandiyyah (d. 581 AH), a Ḥanafī jurist of the first rank, whose legal opinions her husband refused to issue without first consulting her. The existence of these figures is not a curiosity or an exception; it is structural evidence that the Islamic tradition's engagement with women's intellectual authority has roots that predate Western feminism by a millennium. As Muhammad Akram Nadwi documented in his comprehensive forty-volume study *al-Muḥaddithāt*, "the Islamic tradition of women's scholarship is not a marginal footnote but a central thread in the fabric of Islamic intellectual civilization."³⁴

Contemporary Muslim women scholars have consistently articulated a vision of women's dignity grounded in Islamic principles that is neither a capitulation to Western feminist demands nor an apologia for patriarchal practices carried out in Islam's name. Ingrid Mattson, the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America, stated this position with characteristic clarity: "Muslim women do not need to be saved by Western feminism. We have our own tradition of scholarship, our own history of women's authority, and our own account of women's dignity that is deeper and more demanding than anything Western liberalism has produced."³⁵

The Hijab as Chosen Identity: Empirical Evidence Against the Victim Narrative

The colonial feminist narrative requires that Muslim women who wear the hijab be understood either as victims of false consciousness or as subjects of social pressure so overwhelming as to preclude genuine choice. This narrative is directly contradicted by the empirical evidence on the motivations of hijab-wearing Muslim women in Western contexts. Sociological research conducted among Muslim women in Britain, France, Germany, and North America consistently finds that most hijab-wearing Muslim women in these contexts report wearing the hijab as an expression of their own religious conviction and identity, rather than as a response to family or community pressure.³⁶

Leila Hessini's research on women's perspectives on Islamic dress in Morocco found that "for many young educated women, adopting the hijab is experienced as an act of empowerment a declaration of Islamic identity in a context of Western cultural pressure, a refusal of the sexualization of women's bodies that Western consumer culture enforces, and an assertion of the right to be recognized as a full person rather than as a physical object."³⁷ Hessini's finding is a finding that the colonial feminist framework has no resources to process, because it inverts the



narrative structure on which that framework depends. The Muslim woman who wears the hijab because she finds in it a liberation from the male gaze is not making a choice that the liberal feminist framework can recognize as genuinely free, because it is a choice that challenges the values on which that framework rests.

AN ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK FOR AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT WITH WOMEN'S ISSUES

Distinguishing Divine Principle from Cultural Practice

The Islamic response to colonial feminist discourse must be clear-eyed about a distinction that anti-Islamic narratives systematically exploit: the distinction between the divine principles of the Islamic tradition and the cultural practices of Muslim societies that may deviate from, distort, or contradict those principles. The violence against women documented in some Muslim societies cannot be defended by reference to Islamic sources and represents a betrayal of the Islamic tradition rather than its expression. The Prophet's (*ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*) declaration "do not harm and do not cause harm" (Ibn Mājah, no. 2341) and his specific commandments regarding the just treatment of women constitute an unequivocal condemnation of violence against women in any form, cultural or otherwise.

Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, in *al-Sunnat al-Nabawiyyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa-Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, argued with characteristic forcefulness that "much of what is practiced in Muslim societies in the name of Islam with respect to women is not Islam at all — it is the residue of pre-Islamic tribal patriarchy that was never fully displaced by the Qur'ān's revolutionary transformation of gender relations, or the accumulation of cultural customs that have been given an Islamic veneer by scholars more concerned with preserving existing power structures than with realizing the Qur'ān's demands."³⁸ The acknowledgment of these failures is not a concession to colonial feminist discourse; it is an expression of the Islamic tradition's own most demanding standards. The tradition's internal critique of patriarchal Muslim practice is not Western feminism's gift to Islam but Islam's own demand upon its adherents.

The *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* framework provides the jurisprudential architecture for this internal critique. The preservation of human dignity (*ḥifẓ al-karāmah*), identified by Ibn 'Āshūr as a fundamental objective of the law, demands the elimination of practices that violate women's God-given dignity regardless of their cultural prevalence or their claimed Islamic legitimation. As Jasser Auda argued, "the *maqāṣid* framework is not a framework for the preservation of the status quo; it is a framework for the active realization of human flourishing, and it demands reform of any practice that falls short of the divinely intended standard."³⁹

Islamic Feminism vs. Islamic Gender Justice

The concept of "Islamic feminism" has attracted considerable scholarly attention and represents a genuine attempt to address women's issues from within the Islamic tradition. Scholars including Margot Badran, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas have made significant contributions to the scholarly literature in this framework. However, this article argues that "Islamic feminism" as a category is ultimately incoherent, because it attempts to graft onto Islamic sources analytical



categories derived from an epistemological tradition that is fundamentally incompatible with the Islamic framework at the level of metaphysical foundations.⁴⁰

The more appropriate framework is what may be called "Islamic gender justice" — a framework that derives its account of women's rights and women's dignity exclusively from Islamic sources: the Qur'ān, the *sunnah*, and the classical jurisprudential tradition, organized through the *maqāṣid* methodology. This framework differs from Islamic feminism in that it does not accept the liberal feminist premise that women's liberation consists primarily in the maximization of individual choice and the elimination of specifically gendered roles; it accepts the Islamic premise that women's flourishing consists in the fulfillment of the divinely intended human telos — a telos that includes, without being limited to, the specifically gendered dimensions of the female person. As Saba Mahmood argued, "the framework of liberal individual autonomy is not the only possible framework for thinking about women's agency and women's freedom; the Islamic tradition provides an alternative framework in which agency consists not in the maximization of choice but in the cultivation of virtues that enable the human being to fulfill her divinely intended purpose."⁴¹

CONCLUSION: CONFIDENCE, NOT DEFENSIVENESS

This article has argued that the deployment of women's rights in anti-Islamic narratives represents not a sincere concern for Muslim women's welfare but a consistent political strategy for the legitimization of domination, exclusion, and cultural imperialism. The genealogy is clear, the structural pattern is consistent, and the effects on actual Muslim women are documented and devastating.

The Islamic tradition's response to this challenge must be, as this article has sought to demonstrate, a response of intellectual confidence rather than defensive accommodation. The tradition possesses, in the Qur'ānic account of *karāmah insāniyyah*, the prophetic model of gender relations, the classical jurisprudential protections of women's rights, and the *maqāṣid* framework for principled reform, a more adequate foundation for women's genuine flourishing than anything Western liberal feminism has produced. This is not a claim that Islamic tradition has always or even usually realized this foundation in practice; the failures of Muslim societies in their treatment of women are real, documented, and condemned by the tradition's own most demanding standards. It is a claim about foundations: the Islamic foundation for women's dignity is philosophically deeper, more humanly adequate, and more practically sustainable than the liberal feminist foundation in individual autonomy.

The Muslim woman who wears the hijab, who prays five times daily, who builds her life within the framework of Islamic ethics, and who finds in that framework not oppression but is not a victim who needs saving. She is a witness to the adequacy of the Islamic tradition's account of human flourishing. Her testimony deserves to be heard — not through the distorting filter of colonial feminist discourse that can process her only as either a victim or a token of successful assimilation, but on her own terms, within the framework of the tradition she inhabits. As Hallaq states with uncompromising clarity: "The Islamic tradition does not need Western feminism's validation to know that it affirms women's dignity; it needs only the courage to articulate that affirmation in the face of those who deploy women's liberation as a weapon of domination."⁴²

The path forward for Islamic engagement with the genuine challenges facing Muslim women is not through the adoption of Western feminist categories but through the rigorous application of



Islamic principles to the conditions of Muslim women's lives: the *karāmah* principle that demands women's unconditional dignity; the *tawāzun* principle that demands equity between the rights and responsibilities of men and women; the *maqāṣid* methodology that demands the reform of any practice that falls short of the divinely intended standard; and the prophetic model that demonstrates, in the life of the most perfect human being who ever lived, what the Islamic account of gender relations looks like when it is actually realized. This is the tradition's own standard, and it is a standard more demanding, more comprehensive, and more genuinely liberating than anything colonial feminism has ever offered. The confidence to articulate and to live by this standard is both the challenge and the calling of the present moment.

ENDNOTES

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