



Between Revelation and Autonomy: A Critical Examination of Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This article offers a critical, normative examination of Muslim feminist hermeneutics by situating it within the broader tension between revelation-centered authority and autonomy-centered moral reasoning. Rather than approaching Muslim feminist interpretations as a sociopolitical controversy, the study frames them as an epistemic and hermeneutical project that raises fundamental questions about moral authority, normativity, and the sources of ethical judgment in Islam. Drawing on an internal Islamic methodological framework grounded in wahy (revelation), disciplined reason ('aql), and the moral teleology of the Sharī'ah, the article analyzes how contemporary Muslim feminist readings frequently privilege liberal conceptions of autonomy, equality, and justice as pre-interpretive norms. Through a genealogical and conceptual analysis, the study demonstrates that while Muslim feminist hermeneutics presents itself as a reformist engagement with Islamic texts, it often operates within a moral horizon shaped by liberal feminist and critical-theoretical assumptions. This results in a hermeneutics of selective suspicion toward Islamic tradition and legal reasoning, accompanied by an uncritical adoption of modern moral categories. The article argues that this methodological asymmetry produces an epistemic displacement in which revelation is reconfigured as contingent, negotiable, or subordinate to external ethical commitments.

In response, the article advances the possibility of an Islamic hermeneutics of ethical reform that remains normatively anchored in revelation while retaining robust internal resources for moral critique, disagreement (ikhtilāf), and renewal. By distinguishing reform from epistemic rupture, the study contributes to contemporary debates on gender, authority, and interpretation in Islam, and offers a principled framework for engaging modern ethical concerns without eroding the moral coherence of the Islamic tradition.

Keywords: Muslim feminist hermeneutics, revelation and autonomy, Islamic epistemology, moral authority, uṣūl al-fiqh, gender and interpretation

1. Introduction: Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics and the Question of Normative Authority

1.1 Situating Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics in Contemporary Islamic Thought

Over the past forty years Muslim Feminist Interpretation (MFI) has evolved into one of the largest interpretive movements in modern Islamic thought. Emerged at the crossroads of Postcolonial Critique, Modern Reformist Discourse and Feminist Ethics, MFI seeks to provide a gender-just framework to interpret the Quran, Sunna and Islamic legal traditions. Advocates

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for MFI assert that historical interpretations of the Quran and Sunna are reflective of male authority rather than a manifestation of God's moral will; thus, MFI is positioned as a corrective approach to find an egalitarian ethical vision they believe exists in the Islamic texts, albeit concealed behind patriarchal ways of interpreting them (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). While MFI can be viewed within the broader history of Islamic Reforms, it is far removed from the paradigms used by previous reformists. Most previous reformers interpreted from established juristic and theological frameworks; however, MFI directly engages with contemporary feminist moral philosophy and Critical Theory's concept of power. This engagement is a paradigmatic shift not only regarding the conclusions of interpretation, but regarding the epistemological assumptions which govern the interpretative process. As such, the method raises deep-seated questions about moral authority, normativity, and the grounds for ethical judgments within Islam.

1.2 Beyond Sociopolitical Polemics: An Epistemological Framework

Academic discussions surrounding MFI currently exist between two poles. Supporters of MFI often see MFI as a liberating response to lived injustices and exclusions. Critics of MFI typically view MFI as a departure from Islamic orthodoxy because of its commitment to external ideologies. Both of these views tend to frame the discussion as being sociopolitical or theological, thereby obscuring the deeper epistemological dimensions of the discussion.

The purpose of this article is to present a different point of view and conceptualize MFI as a primary hermeneutical and normative project. Hermeneutics is recognized in philosophical literature as never a neutral recovery of text; it is always influenced by pre-existing moral commitments, ontological presuppositions and conceptions of authority (Gadamer, 1989). Thus, the central question is not merely whether scholars of MFI reference justice and equality, but how do scholars of MFI define, authoritatively establish and prioritize those concepts in their interpretive frameworks. By focusing on the epistemological structures of the interpretive frameworks, rather than the convergence of ideologies, this study aims to analyze the continuity and discontinuity of the Islamic interpretive tradition more accurately.

1.3 Revelation, Reason, and Moral Authority in Islam

Islamic hermeneutics was founded upon a distinct moral epistemology where revelation (wahy) served as the ultimate source of normativity and human reason ('aql) served as a controlled interpretive tool rather than an autonomous moral legislator. Islamic scholarship developed a complex methodology (i.e., *uṣūl al-fiqh*) to articulate the relationship between text, reason and moral intent. This methodology permitted for interpretive pluralism and principled disagreement while simultaneously maintaining the normative authority of revelation (Hallaq, 1997; Kamali, 2003).

Within this context, moral concepts such as justice ('adl), dignity, and responsibility were not external norms that could be placed upon the text; rather, these concepts were values whose meanings were articulated through revelation and the tradition of interpreting that revelation. Therefore, Islamic moral reasoning is teleological in nature; it directs ethical deliberations toward divinely-disclosed goals, rather than toward individual self-legislation. The distinction between these two moral horizons – revelation-based normativity and autonomy-based ethics – provides the analytical focus of this article.

1.4 Research Questions and Argumentative Structure

Drawing upon this epistemological framework, the article develops three related research



questions. First, what are the interpretive presuppositions that shape MFI, particularly with regard to moral authority and normativity? Second, how does MFI alter the relationships among revelation, reason, and ethical deliberation? Third, can the goals of gender justice articulated by MFI scholars be achieved without subjecting revelation to external moral frameworks?

The argument developed in this article is that, although MFI is often presented as an internal reformist reengagement with Islamic texts, it regularly works within a liberal moral horizon that gives priority to autonomy as a normative premise. Consequently, MFI frequently produces a methodological asymmetry in which the Islamic tradition is constantly called into doubt, while the normative status of modern moral categories is rarely questioned. Through highlighting this tension early in the article, the introduction provides the theoretical basis for the methodological evaluation that follows.

2. Methodological Framework: An Islamic Normative–Hermeneutical Approach

2.1 Internal Critique and Normative Standpoint

This research uses an internal normative-hermeneutic approach based on Islamic epistemology. "Internal critique" here refers to the evaluative position of criticism from within the moral, epistemic, and metaphysical aspects of the Islamic tradition, and not criticism according to external ideologies. Thus, internal critique is not based on an assumption of the absolute correctness of historical interpretations, nor does it assume that revelation can be treated as a flexible cultural product. Instead, internal critique assumes the normative authority of waḥy (divine revelation) and acknowledges the fallibility and contestability of human efforts at interpreting revelation.

Islamic intellectual history has demonstrated that critique, disagreement (ikhtilāf), and reform have been integral components of the Islamic tradition. Jurists, theologians and ethicists consistently applied rigorous reasoning to scrutinize established positions, without questioning the authority of revelation or the ontological structure that underlies Islamic moral knowledge (Hallaq, 2009). Therefore, the internal critical stance in this article is fundamentally different from the external critique, which critiques Islamic texts and practices using moral frameworks developed from liberalism, feminism, or secular moral philosophy.

Adopting an internal normative stance, however, does not mean apologetic advocacy for unjust social practices. Instead, it represents a committed evaluation of reformist claims based on whether they either preserve or replace the moral architecture of Islamic epistemology itself.

2.2. Hermeneutics as a Normative Practice

Hermeneutics is not simply a technical or neutral task of recovering texts, but an inherently normative practice shaped by prior commitments to ethics and to conceptions of authority. Philosophical hermeneutics has long argued that readers bring pre-understandings to their reading of texts that determine what constitutes reasonable meaning, coherence, and morally acceptable meaning (Gadamer, 1989). In religious traditions, these pre-understandings are part and parcel of broader ontological and moral worldviews.

In Islamic thought, interpretation is guided by an explicitly ranked hierarchy of epistemic sources where revelation provides moral direction, reason functions as a disciplined faculty for interpreting, and moral reasoning is oriented to divine purposes (maqāṣid). Thus, meaning is not generated by the subjective reader alone, nor is it limited to contingent historical



circumstances. Instead, meaning is generated through a regulated interaction among the text, the interpretive community, and the moral telos (Kamali, 2003).

This article views Muslim feminist hermeneutics as a normative interpretive project that develops substantial moral claims regarding justice, equality, and authority. The central methodological issue is not whether such values represent legitimate concerns, but whether they function as products of interpretation derived from revelation or as pre-interpreted norms governing interpretation from the beginning. Identifying this distinction is necessary for defining whether Muslim feminist approaches are reforming Islamic normativity from inside Islamic norms, or re-defining what Islamic normativity is.

2.3. Analysis Tools & Conceptual Approach

To achieve this normative-hermeneutic method, this paper utilizes three principal analysis tools. First, it will use comparative hermeneutics to identify how Islamic interpretive methodology is compared with the presuppositions of feminist and critical theory. This comparison will not be based upon the goals of social action, but rather, upon the underlying structure of an epistemology which defines the source of moral authority and the place of autonomy in moral decision-making.

Secondly, this research will complete conceptually defined analysis of a number of normative categories (i.e. autonomy, justice, equality, authority, reform) as those concepts exist in the discourse of Muslim feminism. The articles will analyze how these concepts are understood, justified, and weighted in each of the competing moral horizons. Through this approach, the study will protect against conceptual slippage in which the meanings of Islamic ethical terms are subtly re-defined using liberal moral philosophy and still retain Islamic vocabulary.

Third, the study will draw upon classical *uṣūl al-fiqh* and Islamic moral philosophy as evaluative criteria. Using principles such as the authority of revelation, the limits of discretionary interpretation, the role of moral teleology, and the legitimacy of disagreement as criteria for assessing contemporary hermeneutical claims, the article will provide strong ethical evaluations without breaking the epistemic link between tradition and reform.

Together, these analytical tools allow the article to critically examine Muslim feminist hermeneutics, to distinguish between ethical reform and normative displacement, and to clarify what is at stake in current debates surrounding gender, interpretation, and authority in Islam.

3. Genealogy of Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics

3.1 Intellectual and Historical Context

Muslim feminist hermeneutic's emergence was not in a vacuum, but at the crossroads of post-colonial critique, modern Islamic reform movements and Western feminist theory. After colonialism, Muslim scholars had to address two challenges simultaneously, to respond to Western representation of Islam as oppressive by nature, and to the internal social inequalities present within Muslim societies. Gender emerged as one of the most important sites of engagement in this process because criticisms of the status of women were used to justify both colonial domination and civilizational hierarchies (Ahmed, 1992).

In the course of dealing with the dual challenge described above, early reformist scholars attempted to reconcile Islamic norms with modern values by employing notions of ethics including justice and the public good. The reformist effort however, occurred within the established juridical and theological frameworks, and therefore treated revelation as the



ultimate source of normativity. Muslim feminist hermeneutic represents a more recent and more radical development that has been influenced by the globalization of second wave and third wave feminisms as well as post-structuralist critiques of authority, tradition and power. The academic environment of late 20th century academia, specifically the influence of postmodern hermeneutics and critical theory, played a central role in developing the approaches of Muslim feminists towards scriptures. Historical contingency, discourse and the social construction of knowledge provided tools for Muslim feminists to question the assumed objectivity of classical interpretations. Consequently, revelation came to be viewed not only as a divine guide but as a text that had been interpreted by historically located communities of interpretation. This change represented a significant change in how authority and normativity were conceptualized within Islamic interpretation.

3.2 Engagement with Feminist Theory and Critical Hermeneutics

One of the defining features of Muslim feminist hermeneutics is its engagement with feminist moral philosophy and critical hermeneutics that have primarily developed in Western intellectual environments. Feminist theories focus on patriarchy as a pervasive structural domination, combined with post-structuralist suspicions regarding claims of objective truth, inform a hermeneutical stance toward tradition as a site of power rather than a source of moral reasoning (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980).

Thus, within this framework, classical Islamic jurisprudence is typically viewed as a reflection of the male dominated social structures that produced it, rather than as the product of principled moral deliberation limited by revelation. Thus, hermeneutics of suspicion, originally developed to reveal the hidden power dynamics in secular texts, are now being applied to sacred texts and their interpretive traditions. This approach allows for the exposure of historical biases and exclusions; however, it also creates a methodological dilemma in that suspicion is applied asymmetrically, i.e., against Islamic tradition, while the moral assumptions underlying feminist theory are left largely without scrutiny.

Furthermore, this engagement with feminist and critical theory also changes the way the interpreter functions. Authority is transferred from the traditional interpretive disciplines to the moral agency of the contemporary reader, who will judge competing meanings based on his/her own sense of justice or lived experience. Therefore, interpretation is becoming more focused on producing ethically correct results than being restricted by the epistemic hierarchy typical of classical Islamic thought.

3.3 Key Figures and Interpretive Strategies

Although there is considerable diversity among Muslim feminist hermeneutics, they may be grouped into three broad categories of reformist, contextualist and revisionist interpretations. Reformist approaches attempt to identify what are seen as the Qur'ān's egalitarian principles by distinguishing between the divine intention behind scripture and patriarchal interpretations. Contextualist approaches emphasize the specific socio-historically conditioned character of scriptural injunctions, asserting that many gender related prescriptions were contingent responses to specific situations and therefore cannot serve as universal standards of behavior. Revisionist approaches take a step beyond contextualism and question the normative authority of large sections of the legal tradition and, in some cases, reinterpret scriptural texts in a manner that significantly deviates from previous consensus.



Common to all of these thinkers is the view that justice and equality should provide the key to interpreting revelation. Although these thinkers vary in terms of methodology and emphasis, they converge in the view that ethical commitments rooted in contemporary moral awareness should guide scriptural interpretation (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). The commonalities within the area of moral epistemology indicate a meeting point, despite divergent results from their individual interpretations.

What is similar among the different scriptural methods used by Muslim feminist scholars is the shared moral landscape of autonomy, egalitarianism and anti-authority. Identifying this genealogy will help determine whether this represents a new stage of Islamic reform or an alteration to Islamic normativity.

4. Revelation and Moral Authority in Islamic Hermeneutics

4.1 Revelation as the Source of Normativity

Islamic hermeneutic inquiry is based on a particular approach to moral authority that is shaped by a paradigm for understanding the authority of revelation (waḥy) in the Qurʾān and Sunnah. This means the Qurʾān and Sunnah represent normative authoritative sources from which humans derive guidance and direction regarding what constitutes morally correct behavior, as well as how to carry out legally binding obligations, in order to reach the ultimate ends provided by divine revelation.

Furthermore, in the Islamic world-view, moral knowledge is not independently produced by human reason, however, the reception, interpretation and application of moral knowledge occurs through engagement with the revelatory sources. This epistemological posture produces a hierarchical view of morality in which divine command and will serve as the ultimate معيار (criterion) of moral assessment.

In classical Islamic scholarship, the scholars have repeatedly emphasized that justice (ʿadl), compassion (raḥmah) and dignity (karamah) derive their normative status from their foundation in revelation and not from independent moral intuition. Ethical reasoning is a major part of the process of interpreting revelation, however, within an ontological framework in which God is the origin of all values and meanings. Thus, revelation not only supplies specific precepts, but also a moral grammar that frames the processes of ethical deliberation and limits the discretionary power of interpreters (Auda, 2008).

4.2 Reason and Its Place in the Process of Interpretation

Islamic hermeneutics assigns a central role to human reason (ʿaql) in the process of interpretation, however, the role assigned to reason is specifically defined. Reason is viewed as a crucial interpretive faculty that enables the comprehension of revelation, analogical reasoning, and drawing of moral conclusions. However, human reason is not seen as a morally autonomous legislator of moral norms. Classical jurists rejected both extreme literalism and unrestrained rationalism and developed methodologies to discipline reason through textual evidence, juristic precedent, and the purpose of ethics.

It was precisely due to the need to establish a balance between revelation and reason that the science of uṣūl al-fiqh was articulated. Through principles such as qiyās (analogical reasoning), istidlāl (inference), and consideration of maṣlaḥah (the public good), scholars attempted to provide divine guidance to new situations without diminishing the authority of the revelatory sources. A critical aspect of the legitimacy of reason was that it was based upon its use in service of revelation and not on claims of moral autonomy (Hallaq, 1997; Kamali,



2003).

Islamic epistemological structure is very different than that of contemporary moral philosophy with respect to rationality's role within it; while contemporary ethics views rationality as self-determining and norm-generating, within an Islamic context, rationalization remains bound to a superior order of norms and moral creativity is confined to the degree to which one may creatively express oneself while remaining faithful to the divine will.

4.3 Moral Teleology and The Will Of God

Another significant aspect of Islamic moral epistemology is its teleological nature; ethical reasoning seeks to accomplish the divine goals (maqāṣid al-sharī'ah) of protecting faith, life, intellect, lineage, and property. These goals are not abstract moral ideals that lie beyond the revelatory sources, but are instead derived inductively from the textual sources and juristic traditions and provide the basis upon which interpretive directions are provided and do not themselves serve as autonomous moral authority.

The framework of the maqāṣid serves to allow for flexibility in applying moral norms and for situational awareness without collapsing normativity into personal preference. By grounding ethical assessment in the divine purposes, Islamic hermeneutics is able to accommodate change while maintaining continuity. Moreover, the process of maqāṣid-based reasoning assumes the authority of the revelatory sources and therefore cannot be used to justify the overturning of explicit texts or the introduction of external moral norms as "higher" objectives (Auda, 2008).

The teleological structure of maqāṣid-based reasoning is central to understanding how the Islamic tradition has historically managed moral complexities. Additionally, this structure is an internal resource for assessing moral criteria that can be employed without requiring the submission of revelation to contemporary moral intuitions.

4.4 Authority, Tradition, and Disciplinary Disagreements

Islamic hermeneutics acknowledges the existence of plural interpretations as an inherent quality of engaging with the revelatory sources. Juristic disagreements (ikhtilāf) are not viewed as an indication of the failure of the tradition but as a demonstration of the intellectual vitality of the tradition. However, such disagreements are disciplined by the common epistemic commitments, the methodological constraints, and the recognition of the authoritative sources.

Tradition (turāth) is viewed as a body of knowledge that contains the accumulated results of moral reasoning conducted in accordance with the revelatory sources. The tradition is not viewed as an infallible depository of conclusions, but as a collection of moral reasoning that is conducted in accordance with the revelatory sources. The scholar's interaction with the tradition is characterized as critical appropriation and not as a total rejection or passive acceptance. As Hallaq (2009) noted, historically Islamic legal authority did not reside in centralized institutional systems, but in a consensus regarding moral-epistemic issues that was sustained through scholarly practice.

This understanding of authority makes possible the processes of reform and critique while ensuring a continuous epistemic basis. This understanding of authority exists in tension with interpretive paradigms that assign primacy to individual moral judgments and those that view tradition solely as a locus of domination. Understanding the relationship between authority



and critique is necessary to evaluate contemporary hermeneutical projects that seek to reform Islamic ethics.

5. Autonomy and the Liberal Moral Horizon in Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics

5.1 Autonomy as an Ethical Starting Point

Muslim feminist hermeneutics identifies moral autonomy as an ethical basis, drawing on liberalism to understand the individual's capacity to create their own moral values, independent of the authority of others. The legitimacy of a moral decision comes from the individual's self-authored moral choice, rather than from a commitment to a higher-order morality. Thus, the liberal-feminist perspective provides an anthropological account of the human condition, including the moral identity of the individual, based on freedom from the authority of religion and tradition. By moving this anthropological account into the Islamic context, it fundamentally changes the relationship between the interpreter and the revelation. Instead of asking what the revelation reveals about the moral condition of humans, Muslim feminist hermeneutics asks what humans' existing moral condition reveals about the revelation.

This move is analytically important, as it shifts the initial conditions of interpretation. That is, instead of beginning with the question of how the revelation shapes human moral agency, Muslim feminist hermeneutics begins with the question of how human moral agency, shaped by the liberal-feminist moral anthropology, relates to the revelation.

5.2 Framing the Revelation of Islam through Autonomous Moral Reasoning

The priority of autonomy as a moral premise before interpretation has fundamental implications for the way in which one approaches the revelation. Qur'an verses and Islamic legal traditions that contradict present-day egalitarian intuitions are continually interpreted, contextualized, and relativized so as to be consistent with autonomous ethical commitments. Contextualization is a legitimate method of interpretation within Islamic hermeneutics, however in this instance, contextualization is utilized as a mechanism for subordinating the revelation to the prior moral decisions made by individuals. Thus, the revelation is treated more as a source of material, the meanings of which are developed through the application of modern sensitivities to ethics. Moral reasoning thus becomes focused on outcomes, with justice and equality being defined apart from the Islamic moral tradition, and subsequently applied to the revelation. This therefore reverses the conventional hermeneutic relationship between text and ethics, where understanding is derived from the revelation, as opposed to being imposed onto it (Mahmood, 2005).

The cumulative impact is a transformation of authority: the legitimacy of interpretation is becoming more and more dependent on the degree to which the interpretation is coherent with liberal moral intuitions, as opposed to the degree to which the interpretation is faithful to the existing disciplines of interpretation.

5.3 Justice and Equality as Prior Moral Premises

Justice and equality serve as critical evaluative standards in Muslim feminist hermeneutics. However, both concepts are defined in a strict egalitarian sense, and in terms of rights-based obligations, consistent with modern political philosophy. Equality is defined solely as moral and legal equivalence, whereas justice is evaluated solely in terms of the degree to which social relationships are hierarchical. Definitions of equality and justice consistent with modern liberal political theory are certainly compelling from a moral perspective, yet they do not



necessarily equate to the Islamic conceptions of justice, which emphasize moral responsibility, complementarity and the will of God.

Given that justice and equality are defined as pre-interpretive moral premises, Muslim feminist hermeneutics runs the risk of translating Islamic moral discourse into the language of modern liberal ethics, while maintaining the vocabulary of Islam. The translational process may obscure the distinction in moral ontologies, such as the emphasis in Islam on teleology, obligation, and accountability to God. As a result, the resultant ethical reasoning seeks to be justified in Islam, but utilizes a moral grammar that is foreign to the Islamic tradition (Asad, 2003).

5.4 Conflicts with the Teleological Nature of Islamic Ethics

The autonomous, moral horizon of Muslim feminist hermeneutics generates fundamental conflicts with the teleological nature of Islamic ethics. In Islamic ethics, moral actions are directed toward realizing divinely revealed goals, as opposed to maximizing individual self-determination. Individual freedom exists to facilitate moral responsibility and obedience to God, rather than as an end in itself.

When autonomy is recognized as a foundational ethical principle, the teleological aspects of Islamic ethics are either diminished, or redefined in functional terms, divorced from their metaphysical roots. Ethical assessments become predicated on the degree to which an individual affirms their own moral views, as opposed to the degree to which an individual aligns their behavior with the divine intention.

The difference in reasoning logic is important when assessing the normative assertions of Muslim feminist hermeneutics. The relevant issue is not seeking justice or rejecting injustice, but whether those objectives are sought through an Islamic moral framework or through the de facto substitution of a liberal moral anthropology that redefines the concept of moral authority.

6. Hermeneutics of Suspicion and the Question of Power

6.1 Power as an Explanatory Category in Interpretation

In addition to the hermeneutic skepticism toward Islamic texts and their interpretation, another key methodology used in Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics is the hermeneutic of suspicion in terms of how these texts were interpreted in the first place. In particular, this methodology uses Critical Theory and Post Structuralist thinking in the way it views power relationships (specifically patriarchal relationships) as the major explanation of how religious knowledge was created. As a result of this approach, traditional interpretations of Islamic law (the development of jurisprudence), the general consensus among interpreters of the Quran and Sunna (exegetical consensus), and the establishment of legal authority are viewed as a reflection of the socially constructed power relationships that existed at the time of those interpretations, rather than as the outcome of careful moral reasoning.

As a result of this view of history, the structure of gender hierarchy is seen to be a part of the interpretive tradition (of Islamic law), rather than as some form of contingent or accidental occurrence. Consequently, many of the legal norms and exegetical positions that are developed throughout Islamic history are frequently analyzed as ideological tools that serve



to justify male authority, rather than as a rational attempt to determine the will of Allah. Thus, within this paradigm, the analysis of power becomes the primary way in which to analyze the meaning of religious texts and legal positions (Foucault, 1980).

While recognizing the importance of analyzing power dynamics as a way to understand historical exclusions and social inequalities, elevating power as the most important analytical tool to explain meaning and religious values can result in reducing the complexity of the debate over moral and legal issues to simple explanations of dominance. Reducing the debate to simple explanations of dominance also results in a loss of the rich epistemological content of Islamic legal reasoning and the normative constraints under which classical legal scholars worked.

6.2 Selectivity and the Reduction of Hermeneutic Inquiry

Another defining feature of Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics is the selectivity of the application of hermeneutic suspicion. In other words, the Islamic tradition (including the Islamic texts, jurists, and institutions) is subjected to continuous, critical inquiry, while the moral and epistemological assumptions of modern feminism and liberalism are generally spared similar scrutiny. Modern notions of autonomy, equality, and liberation are viewed as self-evident moral norms rather than as historically situated moral constructs shaped by specific social and philosophical contexts.

These epistemological differences have significant implications. Because Muslim feminist hermeneutics assumes the universality and/or neutrality of modern moral categories, it risks reproducing the same forms of epistemological domination it seeks to criticize. Liberal feminist moral norms are therefore de facto universalized, while Islamic moral concepts are de facto relativized and historicized. The result is not merely criticism of Islamic law, but rather a reorganization of epistemological authority in which modern moral intuitions are the ultimate criterion of ethical legitimacy (Asad, 2003).

Selective hermeneutic suspicion therefore eliminates the opportunity for meaningful internal critique because it precludes evaluating feminist moral assumptions using an Islamic normative framework. Therefore, critique is one-way: It targets tradition and does not assess the external criteria by which it is evaluated.

6.3 Consequences for Revelation and Moral Transcendence

The repeated use of power as the primary lens through which to understand Islamic texts and traditions has serious implications for the nature of revelation. When revelation is understood primarily as a discursively produced entity mediated by power relationships, its claim to moral transcendence is severely diminished. Divine speech is therefore redefined as a historical artifact whose authority is dependent on current moral approval.

This transformation of the role of revelation from a source of moral judgment to an object of moral evaluation significantly alters the locus of ethical authority. Divine command is replaced by the autonomous interpreting subject, who serves as the final authority in determining the meaning and value of revelation.

Although this transformation may fit well within the epistemological sensibilities of secularism, it constitutes a significant deviation from Islamic epistemology, in which divine command is the source of accountability for moral responsibility (Mahmood, 2005).

Furthermore, the redefinition of revelation as a product of power laden discourse also threatens the possibility of moral obligations that exist outside of social preferences. Without



moral transcendence, critique risks devolving into relativism, in which the justification for making an ethical claim is based primarily on its alignment with current sensibilities rather than its connection to a lasting moral order.

6.4 From Critique to Normative Replacement

Ultimately, the accumulation of the use of a hermeneutic of suspicion governed by an ethics of autonomy results in neither simply reinterpretation nor merely reform of Islamic law; it results in the substitution of an alternative ethics-based system of justice, authority, and obligation for the original Islamic system of justice, authority, and obligation. Often, the substitution of this new system is masked by the continued use of Islamic language and terminology, thereby creating the illusion of reform when in fact there exists a deeper epistemological change.

It is imperative to understand this process to distinguish between critique of Islamic law that occurs within the moral logic of Islam and critique that replaces it. The issue is not whether power exists within religious traditions, since it clearly does; the issue is whether power becomes the sole or primary lens through which revelation and moral authority are understood. If suspicion replaces faith in the moral intelligibility of revelation, then the possibility of faithful reform is fundamentally undermined.

7. Epistemic and Ethical Implications

7.1 From Interpretation to Epistemic Displacement

The cumulative impact of the methodological changes mentioned above leads to a movement away from the religious tradition as the locus of moral authority. Muslim feminist hermeneutics is typically presented as a corrective within the Islamic tradition, however, its commitment to autonomous ethical principles, its use of liberal notions of justice, and its application of a "hermeneutic of suspicion" ultimately creates a shift that goes far beyond the scope of interpretive revision. In this case, while the Quran and Sunnah remain authoritative voices, they become just one of several voices in the formation of moral reasoning; they are subject to evaluation based upon external commitments to ethics (Mahmood, 2005; Asad, 2003).

The displacement of revelation is not accomplished by an explicit dismissal of its authority; instead, its authority is marginalized functionally. That is, ethical evaluations are made at the outset of interpretation and scripture is then read in light of those evaluations. Therefore, the hierarchy of knowledge that has long characterized Islamic hermeneutics — i.e., revelation serves as the orienting principle for reason and deliberation regarding moral issues — is reversed. Ultimately, what is created is not reform of an Islamic moral structure but a reformation of the very structure itself (Hallaq, 2009).

7.2 Fragmentation of Moral Authority and Interpretive Instability

Another consequence of the adoption of autonomy-based hermeneutics is the fragmentation of moral authority. With interpretive legitimacy predicated primarily upon an individual's moral conscience or sense of personal experience, the collective authority of the interpretive community is undermined, and the interpretive community is no longer a site of common moral reasoning. Tradition loses its status as a means of providing accountability and becomes simply an archival repository of potentially useful pieces of information.

Ultimately, the fragmentation of moral authority results in a greater degree of interpretive instability. Without some set of common epistemological constraints, there is little basis for



evaluating competing interpretations and a proliferation of different interpretations ensues. The discipline of moral disagreement that had previously been maintained through the study of the *usul al-fiqh* and scholarly consensus gives way to relativism, in which the reader's preference for interpretation supplants normative justification. The instability that results undermines the potential for sustained moral discussion capable of creating obligations that extend beyond the individual's own endorsement (Taylor, 1989; MacIntyre, 1984).

7.3 Ethical Claims Without Ontological Coherence

While pursuing gender justice within the context of Muslim feminist hermeneutics often occurs without sustained reflection upon Islamic moral anthropology, concepts such as justice, dignity, and equality are often invoked as ethical imperatives, yet the ontological grounding of these concepts within an Islamic conception of the human person as a morally responsible agent who will ultimately be held accountable by Allah is frequently left unexamined. Thus, ethical claims may be made in Islamic terms, but they are disconnected from the metaphysical commitments that have given them normative force throughout history (Nasr, 2002).

Islamic ethics situates moral responsibility within a teleological framework focused upon divine purpose and ultimate accountability. When this teleological framework is replaced by autonomous moral reasoning, the coherent nature of the resulting ethical claims as Islamic norms is undermined, regardless of whether the claims themselves are articulated in Islamic terminology. Justice becomes an end to be attained, rather than an orientation of the self towards the divine. Ultimately, the question arises whether the resulting ethical vision may meaningfully be characterized as Islamic (Auda, 2008).

7.4 Gender Justice and the Limits of Moral Translation

The implications of this epistemological shift are perhaps most clearly evident in debates concerning gender justice. While Muslim feminist hermeneutics seeks to address legitimate experiences of injustice, its reliance upon liberal moral translation may also occlude alternative forms of critique that exist within the Islamic tradition. In assuming the universality of modern egalitarian norms, Muslim feminist hermeneutics may thereby preclude forms of critical thinking that are rooted in moral responsibility, differentiated obligation, and teleological purpose.

It does not follow that the Islamic tradition is impervious to critique or incapable of moral renewal. Rather, it highlights the need to distinguish between reform of an ethic that maintains normative coherence and reform that substitutes one moral ontology for another. If this distinction is not maintained, the pursuit of justice may unintentionally undermine the epistemological foundation that renders moral obligation intelligible within Islam (Hallaq, 2013).

8. Toward an Islamic Hermeneutics of Ethical Reform

8.1 Ethical Self-Critique within the Islamic Tradition

In opposition to the belief that ethical criticism of the inherited norms of a society requires the abandonment of the authority of religion, the history of Islamic scholarship demonstrates that ethical criticism has been part of the Islamic tradition since its inception. The classical jurists, theologians and ethicists were able to subject their own interpretations of the faith to examination by changing social contexts, by moral reasoning, and by perceived injustices and yet still remained faithful to the authority of the revelation. In fact, practices such as *Ikhtilaf* (disagreement based upon reasoned argument), *Işlah* (moral purification/rectification), and



Tajdid (the process of renewal) demonstrate that there is a long-standing understanding among scholars of the Islamic tradition that being faithful to revelation is not the same thing as being unyieldingly committed to stagnant interpretations (Hallaq, 2009).

This internal critical stance did not assume that previous interpretations of the faith were morally impeccable nor did it treat the Quran as if it were nothing more than a frozen legal code. Instead, it understood the Islamic tradition as a living moral discourse directed at realizing divine purposes. Thus, ethical criticism was carried out within a common moral world view and therefore maintained continuity despite disagreements.

The historical evidence here also contradicts the idea that contemporary ethical issues -- especially those dealing with gender justice -- necessitate the use of some external moral framework(s) in order to be effectively addressed.

8.2 Reform Without Epistemic Breakdown

A hermeneutic for ethical reform in Islam must make a distinction between revising specific interpretations and breaking away from the epistemological underpinnings of those interpretations themselves. Reform will become epistemologically problematic when revelation no longer serves as the structural source of moral normativity and is replaced by pre-interpretive moral commitments from autonomy-based moral philosophy.

Reform without epistemological break down occurs when there is a critical engagement with previous interpretations while maintaining the hierarchical structure between revelation, reason and moral purpose. Therefore, within this context, ethical reasoning is not positioned above or outside of revelation but rather seeks to determine how the divine guidance revealed in the Quran can be applied to new situations using principled interpretive strategies. Concepts such as *Maṣlaḥah* (public interest), *Istihsan* (preferential juristic decision) and *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (the objectives of the Shariah) represent internal mechanisms for evaluating morality and maintain accountability to divine intention (Kamali, 2003; Auda, 2008).

Thus, this method of reform enables the correction of unjust practices without re-defining what constitutes justice in terms of external moral ontologies. Ultimately, this approach acknowledges that failures of justice can arise from human interpretations of the Quran rather than in the Quran itself; and therefore maintains the potential for critique without diminishing the authority of the normative.

8.3 Re-centering Revelation in Contemporary Moral Discourses

Re-centering revelation is not equivalent to dismissing the concerns of contemporary moral debates, nor does it mean disengaging the Islamic discourse from broader international discussions about justice and human dignity. Instead, re-centering revelation means restoring the Quran to its original position as the central reference point from which all ethical ideas, principles and values are developed, challenged, and applied. Consequently, when Islamic ethics engages with modern moral thinking, the dialogue between them is dialogical, rather than one-sided and/or submissive, and therefore, Islamic ethics is able to engage with liberal dominant moral paradigms in a way that is respectful and open-minded.

Therefore, pursuing justice for women in a manner that is grounded in accountability to Allah, rather than as a moral project of self-authorizing, represents an example of how an Islamic hermeneutic for ethical reform can pursue justice in a way that is both morally transcendent and engaged in a meaningful critique of injustice.



An Islamic hermeneutics of ethical reform thus presents an alternative to both uncritical traditionalism and autonomy-based revisionism. The approach presented here affirms Islam as a living moral-epistemological tradition that is capable of renewal without self-redefinition, and that reform is an act of faithfulness rather than rupture. By locating ethical critique within the normativity of revelation, such an approach presents a rational and principled response to the many challenges facing the Muslim community today, while preserving the integrity of Islamic moral reasoning.

9. Conclusion: Between Revelation and Autonomy

This article has demonstrated that Muslim feminist hermeneutics, is best understood as an interpretive project, rather than a mere collection of alternative interpretations of Qur'anic texts. The hermeneutic project of Muslim feminist scholars operates from a unique horizon of thought, defined by a particular view of morality and knowledge. As a reformist effort that defines itself internally, much of the hermeneutic project of these scholars is based on a priori principles of autonomy, egalitarian justice and liberal notions of moral self-authority. Therefore, the resultant tension between revelation and autonomy, is not incidental or secondary; it is instead, the central structuring problem of the discourse.

In understanding the genealogy of Muslim feminist hermeneutics and in examining the methods used by Muslim feminist scholars, this article has illustrated how the ethical authority of the tradition, is being gradually moved away from revelation centered normativity to autonomous forms of moral reasoning. This transition does not necessarily involve an explicit rejection of divine revelation; it occurs via interpretive strategies that establish the authority of scripture, based on the extent to which it conforms to a variety of external moral commitments. The result is not just reinterpretation, but a significant re-ordering of the epistemological hierarchy of the tradition's historical forms of moral reasoning.

While the author of this article has avoided framing the issue as a dichotomy between reform and tradition, Islamic intellectual history has demonstrated that ethical critique, disagreement and renewal, have long been part of the tradition, and are embedded in the traditions normative structures. Therefore, the problem is not the pursuit of gender justice per se, but the loss of ontological and epistemological cohesion that results from the separation of justice from the moral anthropology, teleology and accountability that define the tradition of Islamic ethics.

The alternative developed in this article Islamic hermeneutics of ethical reform — seeks to preserve the possibility of moral renewal, while avoiding the epistemological rupture associated with such a project. In doing so, this alternative preserves revelation as the primary horizon of normativity and retains the disciplined form of moral reasoning. Such an approach views Islam as a living moral – epistemological tradition, capable of addressing contemporary issues without the need to displace the tradition.

Finally, the question raised by Muslim feminist hermeneutics, is not only about how gender justice can be articulated, but also about who has moral authority. Depending on how this question is resolved, the possibility of articulating reform, as an extension of the Islamic ethical tradition, may be replaced by the quiet replacement of the tradition, by reform. The preservation of this distinction is important for any discourse that wishes to speak



meaningfully in the name of Islam, and at the same time address the moral claims of the modern world.

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