Female Autonomy in Traditional Islamic Spirituality & Contemporary Secular Feminism

by Kelly Brewer El-Yacoubi

B.A. in International Affairs, December 2009, University of Colorado

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

January 10, 2019

Thesis directed by

Mohammed Faghfoory
Professor of Islamic Studies
Acknowledgments

*Remember Me, I will remember You. Be grateful to Me, and do not deny Me.*  
(Qur’an, 2:152)

With heartfelt gratitude, I thank God for granting me the opportunity to know Him. I ask Him to keep me forever thankful for the countless privileges afforded to me by Him, especially those who serve as encouraging spiritual guides in my life. Without them, I could not have journeyed this far.

Two little boys in particular come to mind; there are many things I am proud of in life, but nothing beats being your mom.
Abstract of Thesis

Female Autonomy in Traditional Islamic Spirituality & Contemporary Secular Feminism

This study seeks to understand how the concept of female autonomy, particularly female spiritual autonomy, is constructed in traditional Islamic spirituality (Sufism), as compared to contemporary secular feminism.

The central argument is that the latter is limited in conceptualizing the full scope of autonomy available to women, whereas the former offers a higher and more expansive form of autonomy. Beyond argument, this analysis also seeks to appreciate the beauty of different dimensions of that higher form of autonomy.

After the Introduction in Chapter One, Chapter Two examines the basic notion of autonomy in moral philosophy, Islam, and feminism. Autonomy is generally defined as freedom or independence. The idea gains greater specificity and nuance when discussed in relation to the Creator, creation, and concepts of femininity and authority. The role of both birth and motherhood in relation to female autonomy is also seriously explored and considered in the section, and reappears again later.

Chapter Three explores the notion of female autonomy in traditional Islamic spirituality. This is done via a methodological-linguistic analysis of select verses from the Qur’an, as well as Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). A methodology of literary analysis is also then used to examine the tropes found in a few hallmark examples of Islamic spiritual literature. The appearance of specific saintly female figures within sacred and traditional literature is also referenced. Specific attention is paid to the concept of tazkiya (self-purification), a crucial lynchpin of Sufism, if not its central component. When
necessary, Islamic law is briefly referenced. Overall, based on these evidences, it is argued that the autonomy granted to women within an Islamic framework offers women unlimited spiritual independence and freedom because it is rooted in God’s infinite essence.

Chapter Four explores the notion of female autonomy in contemporary secular feminism. After defining the term “contemporary feminism,” the discussion questions the ability of contemporary feminist literature to understand the expansive notion of autonomy as discussed in Chapter Three. Several examples of such literature are provided and examined. Most concerning is contemporary secular feminism’s lack of familiarity with Islamic sacred texts and spiritual literature and their deeper analyses. This textual illiteracy, it is argued, prevents contemporary secular feminism from understanding the Islamic notion of female autonomy. It is also the result of imprisoning themselves in the prism of history.

Chapter Five ultimately sums up the argument that contemporary secular feminism is limited in scope and promotes a seriously truncated concept of Islamic female spiritual autonomy, whereas the framework of traditional Islam preserves the potential for female spiritual autonomy to remain expansive, if not unlimited, because it is rooted in God’s unending essence. Essentially, the definition of female spiritual autonomy in Islam is broader than that of contemporary secular feminism, because it provides for not only freedom of the self, but also from the self in God.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements............................................................................................................. iii
Abstract of Thesis................................................................................................................ iv
Table of Contents................................................................................................................ vi
Chapter 1: Introduction......................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: The Notion of Female Autonomy................................................................. 5
  2.1 - Basic Definition of Autonomy
  2.2 - Basic Islamic Perspectives on Autonomy
  2.3 - Basic Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy
  2.4 - A Special Note on Birth and Motherhood

Chapter 3: Female Autonomy in Traditional Islamic Spirituality............................. 13
  3.1 - The Feminine in Traditional Islam
  3.2 - The Example of Mary
  3.3 - The Example of Zulaikha
  3.4 - The Examples of Female Saints

Chapter 4: Female Autonomy in Contemporary Secular Feminism.......................... 29
  4.1 - Lack of Familiarity of Contemporary Secular Feminist Literature with Islamic Sources
  4.2 - Examples of Subtle Language in the Qur’an
  4.3 - A Need Within the Discipline

Chapter 5: Conclusion....................................................................................................... 46

Works Cited........................................................................................................................ 47
Chapter One: Introduction

The phrase “women in Islam” has remained a loaded expression in the Western world for centuries.1 As such, it carries with it a vast range of connotations, many of which are admittedly negative. The phrase has become increasingly charged in recent post-Renaissance history, as Western cultures have attempted to claim ownership of the discourse on liberty and freedom, based on Western secular and/or humanist principles.2

As this trend has developed, women in non-Western Muslim societies in particular, and all Muslim women in general, have become overwhelmingly “otherized.”3 Rather than being understood on their own terms, they are perceived in binary opposition to Western non-Muslim women. The result of this, in the context of a complex web of other relevant social, political, and linguistic trends (including but not limited to: colonialism, Orientalism, capitalism, feminism, and globalization) is a seemingly irremovable stain upon the West’s notion of Muslim women.

The crux of this stain is that Muslim women are essentialized as one thing: lacking autonomy, or “inautonomous.” In other words, they are understood in the most essential sense as dependent, subservient, powerless, and without agency or real authority. We could even go so far as to say that they are viewed as bereft of selfhood, a concept of particular importance that will be discussed further in Chapters Two and Three. The headscarf (hijab)

---

has been interpreted by many as a symbol of the Muslim women’s perceived lack of personal agency, while others argue that it symbolizes empowerment and individuality.

Muslim women (and men) are not immune from potentially adopting the same negative, defensive understanding of their own identity, and many in fact have, whether consciously or subconsciously. This can create, and has created, a complicated identity politics that are beyond the scope of this paper.

Understanding Muslim women as inautonomous is intentionally described as “stained” above in order to indicate that the notion is skewed, distorted, biased, or lacking. Indeed, such an essentialized and crude characterization of all the female adherents of one of the world’s largest religions should certainly give pause for thought. To paint Muslim women with such a broad, one-dimensional brush becomes even more disturbing when considering how articulate the self-advocacy is of women who self-select into remaining or becoming Muslim.

Both religious and secular scholars have examined and/or responded to the claim that Muslim women are inautonomous, using a countless variety of methodologies ranging from Qur’anic analysis (tafsir) to feminist critique. This has resulted in a plethora of research across a variety of disciplines. Yet one scholar, Lila Abu-Lughod, has somehow managed to sum up the entire search for answers in the ingenious title of her recent book,

---

6 See, for example, G. Willow Wilson’s *The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman’s Journey to Love and Islam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010).
“Do Muslim Women Need Saving?” Abu-Lughod’s title at once references and questions the notion of Muslim women as agency-less individuals.

Like Abu-Lughod, this analysis seeks to explore the concept of female autonomy in Islam. It does not, however, take a defensive, responsive, or even apologetic posture toward answering claims about the inautonomy of Muslim women.

Instead, this paper takes a more positive and self-directed approach. It asks how traditional Islam, here understood as Sufism and not fundamentalism, understands female autonomy, on its own terms. It does so by returning to the original source texts of the Islamic faith with special attention to Arabic language and overall theme. It also consults hallmark spiritual literature, which provides deep spiritual context for the source texts themselves. For contrast, these findings are later compared to those of contemporary feminism.

The worth of this approach as a methodology cannot be overemphasized; such an approach intentionally stipulates and recognizes that Islam itself is an autonomous and legitimate methodology, rather than insisting or acquiescing to the assertion that it can only be understood when viewed through or side-by-side with an alternative lens, especially a Western one.

The question “How is female autonomy constructed in traditional Islam?” is no doubt potentially useful in answering the assertion that Islam assigns no real autonomy to women. However, let it be clear that this paper does not ask the question for that reason, and bears no such defensive purpose in mind.

---

7 Abu-Lughod.
The profoundly influential female scholar of Islam and its mystical dimensions, Dr. Annemarie Schimmel, was once asked about such sticky Islamic politics. She concisely responded, “that’s not my world.” In the same sense, rather than responding to allegations, this paper asks questions so that those who truly seek to understand may go spelunking into the cavernous and kaleidoscopic meanings that exist infinitely within both traditional Islam (Sufism) and the principle of femininity.

---

Chapter Two: The Notion of Female Autonomy

**Basic Definition of Autonomy**

In the general sense, autonomy is “the quality or state of being self-governing” or “existing or capable of existing independently.” It can also mean “having the right or power of self-government;” for example, in international affairs an autonomous state is one that makes its statecraft decisions from a sovereign base of power. When understood in relation to an individual, autonomy is defined as “self-directing freedom and especially moral independence.”

Autonomy is simply an individual’s ability to act and make choices for herself, with special regard to when those choices entail great moral implication or consequence. Female autonomy is the ability for women to act and make these choices.

**Basic Islamic Perspectives on Autonomy**

Muslims believe the Qur’an to be the final, complete, and direct word of God *(Arabic: Allah)* as revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years that began in Mecca in the year 610 C.E. As such, the Qur’an is viewed by Muslims as the highest reference about the true nature of all existence. It consists of thousands of Arabic verses that together form a paradigm about the nature of God, man, the created universe, time, and more.

As such, the Qur’an holds the highest authority, followed by the true, authenticated sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, whom the Qur’an instructs believers to follow and

---


describes as a “mercy for all the worlds.”11 This is because of his epitomization of divine qualities, particularly the hallmark quality of merciful-love (rahma), is accepted by Muslims to be unparalleled at the human level, as evidenced by his righteous comportment and beautiful character.

It could be argued that the Qur’an recognizes that man is both autonomous and inautonomous—autonomous in a limited sense and inautonomous in an ultimate, existential sense. This is because while human beings have been given the opportunity to make choices in their lives, they only possess that ability because God has granted it to them.

Said otherwise, will is not law. Many Muslim philosophers new this, such as Ibn Sina, Farabi, Tusi, al-Ghazzali, Mulla Sadra, and others. This is a stark contrast to Kantian moral philosophy; the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) said in his famous dictum, “Autonomy of the will is the property the will has of being a law unto itself (independently of every property belonging to the objects of volition).”12 Such an idea stands in contrast to the essential Islamic monotheistic notion of tawhid (the oneness of God’s nature), which at its deepest level ascribes no will independent of the one true God.

Indeed, from the Islamic perspective human will itself is not law. Will is a gift freely given by the Lawmaker (God), who encourages human beings to use their choices in accordance with His moral law. This concept is far from a simple authoritarianism. God

says in the Qur’an, “I have only created jinns and men, that they may worship Me as servants (ya’budun).”¹³ This verse shows that the existence of man is valuable only in its relation to the Divine. Commentators have long described that this servitude (‘ubudiyya) is the ultimate form of love, for it entails lovingly surrendering one’s whole self to God. The process for such surrender is lifelong self-purification (tazkiya), which is the central teaching of both traditional Islam or Sufism. This surrender is also the quintessential meaning of the term “Islam.”

This is why one of the best and most honorable names in Arab Muslim culture for boys is “‘Abdallah” or “good servant of God,” and its counterpart version for girls, “Amatullah.” One scholar once translated the Arabic term ‘abd (crudely translated by some as ‘slave’ but more accurately ‘good servant’) as “the freest person,” alluding to the celestial freedom from the low, egoistic self that is found upon true surrender to God. In this sense, true autonomy is autonomy not merely of the self but from the self.

The Qur’an also says, in one phrase, “There is no power except by Allah.”¹⁴ This indicates that all autonomy essentially belongs to God, which means that He alone shares or assigns true earthly autonomy to any person, and no person ever truly exists independent of Him.

The Qur’an also constantly articulates the equal created nature of all human beings, stating “and man was created weak,”¹⁵ which contrasts with the perfect, uncreated nature of the God the Creator.

¹³ Qur’ān, 51:56.
¹⁴ Qur’ān, 18:38.
¹⁵ Qur’ān, 4:28.
The Prophet Muhammad taught in an authenticated tradition, “All children of Adam are frequent, persistent sinners. And the best of those who frequently sin are those who frequently repent back to God.” This again indicates the equal nature of all human beings, but this time with a marker for determining rank among humanity.

The Qur’an teaches the same notion in the verse, “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with God is the one who is most God-conscious. Truly God is All-Knowing, All-Aware.”16

These verses apply equally to both males and females. Men and women are equal in nature. Still, the Qur’an and the Hadith do distinguish the complementary roles of men and women that differ in greater society, motherhood being one of the most spiritually elite roles afforded to women that remains inaccessible to men. Verses such as “and the male is not like the female”17 confirm this overall construct.

Finally, Islam’s concept of human autonomy extends beyond earthly life and time. Human beings are mortal creatures on earth with eternal fate to be played out in a different realm that is not on earth. Therefore, from this viewpoint, it is possible and even probable that some seeming restriction of autonomy on earth could be directly related to an increase in spiritual autonomy in the afterlife realm. For example, Abu Sa’eed al-Khudri is authentically reported to have said that women in the Muslim community once said to the Prophet, “Schedule one day to preach to us.” He did, and on that day said, “Any woman who loses three of her children, they will all form a barrier for her to protect her from the

17 Qur’ān, 3:36.
fire.” One woman asked him, “What about a woman who loses two?” to which the Prophet replied, “It is so even if she loses two.”

This example is worth pondering, especially because the example is rooted in the unique experience of a mother losing her children, not the father. It speaks volumes about the interaction between the freedom or autonomy of a woman’s soul in the next life being linked to the journey in this life.

To sum up, the sacred sources of Islam, namely the Qur’an and hadith, present a notion of autonomy that is rooted in God’s all-able nature. Earthly choice and autonomy are gifts from God to humanity, and are only valuable when used in relation to God. Autonomy is expressed within a societal context, where features like gender provide different spiritual opportunities and challenges.

**Basic Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy**

Let us now consider feminist perspectives on autonomy. Natalie Stoljar asks the question, “Why is autonomy of interest to feminists?” and answers that it is because “failures of autonomy that appear to be linked to practices of gender oppression.” In a real-world context, feminists are interested in “how oppression interferes with the psychological states and social conditions required for autonomy.”

Stoljar’s article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy*, summarizes feminist perspectives on autonomy as the following:

> Autonomy is usually understood by feminist writers in the same way that it is understood within moral psychology generally, namely, as self-

---

18 *Sahih Bukhari* (Vol. 1, pp. 2, 9, 36, 124) and *Sahih Muslim* (Vol. 4, pp. 2028, 2632).


20 Ibid.
government or self-direction: being autonomous is acting on motives, reasons, or values that are one's own.\textsuperscript{21}

Many secular feminist thinkers have thus typically understood autonomy not just as the ability to act sovereignly, but also insist that for such actions to be truly autonomous they must be based on intentions or values that are also one’s own. Also, this definition makes the whole concept of autonomy absolute, which means that no man or woman is or can be absolutely autonomous.

This notion brings to mind a famous saying (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad, which the infamous scholar Imam Al-Nawawi (d. 1277) included as the first hadith in his collection of forty: “Truly, actions are based on intentions.”\textsuperscript{22} This statement alludes to a similar idea when constructing autonomy: actions themselves are only valuable because of the intended meanings behind them.

Yet it seems that despite feminists’ agreement about the nature of autonomy, they are not always in agreement about whether or not the whole notion of autonomy is in fact favorable to women. Early feminist writers, for example in the 1960’s, were especially cautious:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Early feminist literature regarded the notion of autonomy with suspicion because it was thought to promote unattractive “masculinist” ideals of personhood; that is, it was thought to presuppose a conception of the person as “atomistic,” as ideally self-sufficient, as operating in a vacuum unaffected by social relationships, or as an abstract reasoner stripped of distorting influences such as emotions. Recently feminists have sought to rehabilitate the notion of autonomy.}\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim.}
\textsuperscript{23} Stoljar, "Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy."
It could be argued that associating autonomy with masculine ideals of personhood is an idea that is culturally-influenced, as there are many cultures in which autonomy is primarily associated with women, such as in matriarchal contexts.

Regardless, what stands out from the above selection is the indication that over time, feminists have progressed from guarded disinterest in the notion of autonomy to piqued intrigue.

**A Special Note on Birth and Motherhood**

The ability to give birth and experience motherhood deserve special attention in a discussion of female autonomy, for this experience is reserved exclusively—indeed, autonomously—for women. The forming of human beings takes place exclusively within female bodies, a privilege that God has given to women to participate in the process, but not act, of Creation. At the same time, it would be naive to exclusively and absolutely assign all parts of pregnancy to female experience, for no pregnancy can occur without both a male and female.

Still, the Prophet Muhammad said, “Paradise is at the feet of the mothers.” We need to look no further than the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, to see the tremendous spiritual autonomy that women gain via the virtue of birth and motherhood. The example of Mary will be discussed again in Chapter Three.

Even in modern times, mandala-like stickers that read “Motherhood: The Shortest, Steepest Path to Enlightenment” can be found for sale at a liberal cafe or bookstore. While challenging and heart-wrenching, motherhood is not a form of interference for a woman’s ultimate spiritual development, although nearly all mothers can testify that on many days
it feels that way, sometimes overwhelmingly so.\textsuperscript{24} Recall the hadith about losing children shared above.

In her excellently articulated article “Motherhood as a Spiritual Path,” author Sue Delaney explores the concerns of some religious mothers who may worry that family is an impediment to spiritual life, feeling as if they have no path to God in lieu of their mundane caretaking duties. To this she insightfully replies that child-rearing years have the potential to serve as a cocoon in which the mysterious, inevitable process of spiritual development occurs.\textsuperscript{25}

Overall, giving birth and the dynamic experience of motherhood that follows is one of the greatest markers and forms of female autonomy. First, the nature of motherhood and the ability to birth makes mothers autonomous from men, as a rule. While some feminists may rightly point out that after giving birth mothers are less independent in light of their new responsibilities to their children, an Islamic perspective would suggest that it also creates the impetus for them to grow nearer to God in surrendering self in the service of their children, resulting in greater spiritual autonomy.


\textsuperscript{25} Sue Delaney, “Motherhood as a Spiritual Path” (The Way, 42/4 (October 2003): 8-20).
Chapter Three: Female Autonomy in Traditional Islamic Spirituality

The Feminine in Traditional Islam (Sufism)

In traditional Islam, by which we mean the traditional Islamic practice of Sufism and not a unilateral, fundamental, hardline reading of the faith, the concept of the feminine is given the highest regard, one reason being that the Arabic word for the essence of God (dhaat) is feminine. One of the most prominent spiritual scholars to pontificate on this significance of this was Shaykh al-Akbar, Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240 C.E.), but also more recent scholars like Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī (d. 1934 C.E.). It is even telling that one of the last books that Dr. Annemarie Schimmel wrote in her lifelong scholarship about Islam was entitled My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam.26

In this text, Schimmel stressed how some of the highest forms of spirituality (aka spiritual freedom) are found only in a feminine context. She explores vast troves of literature in which the black-draped Ka’aba is identified with the Beloved, the infamous male prototype Qais becomes “driven mad by unrequited love and become possessed (majnun)” in his love of Laila, who represents God.27 She even asks the reader to consider the following striking words of Ibn ‘Arabi in which he equates woman as a symbolic manifestation of God:

He is seen more perfectly in human materia than in any other, and more perfectly in woman than in man.28

---

27 Ibid, 99.
28 Ibn ‘Arabi in Schimmel, My Soul is a Woman, 103.
Yet Schimmel is keenly aware of critics who believe that Islam assigns no such lofty position to females, accusing the religion of stripping them of all forms of autonomy. To this assertion, she expertly replies

*The fact that the male principle repeatedly dominates, at least in the practical aspects of living, is a given in all religions and cultures, and it is undeniable that in Islam, too, much suffering has fallen to the lot of women because simple Quranic precepts have been interpreted more and more narrowly over the course of time [by men]. Moreover, customs and attitudes lacking any and all Quranic foundation have become increasingly rigid. This rigidity, in turn, has taken on an almost canonical character. Much of what is represented as “Islamic” today stems from these increasingly petrifying stratifications...Historians of religion should continue to observe the rule that requires ideal to be compared with ideal, reality with reality. That’s why I believe a careful study of the image of women in Islamic literature can help us better appreciate these ideals.*

29

The following examples try to follow that recommendation—examining the true estimation of women as put forth in the highest forms of Islamic spiritual literature—in order to help shed light on the true construction of the female and of female spiritual autonomy in Islam.

**The Example of Mary**

The Quranic story of Mary relates that when her mother is pregnant with her, she devotes the pregnancy and child to God. This leads her to assume that the child will be male, i.e. a man that can dedicate himself to worship of the Lord within the temple, a form of autonomy granted to men and not women during that time in society.

God then describes,

*But when she delivered her, she said, “My Lord, I have delivered a female.” And Allah was most knowing of what she delivered, and the male is not like the female. “And I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for* 

29 Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman*, 180-181.
her in You and [for] her descendants from Satan, the expelled [from the mercy of Allah].”

This verse indicates that God wisely selected Mary as the woman He wanted to be devoted to Him, eventually within the temple with relatively similar autonomy to men of the time. In fact, it could be argued that Mary was eventually granted even more autonomy because her caretaker, the Prophet Zakariya, found her enjoying the sustenance of ripe fruit in her private chamber, and could not comprehend how she had come to obtain such a blessing. She then instructs him, from a position of spiritual authority, about the “spiritual autonomy” afforded to her by God (i.e. the karama or spiritual gift) because of her devotion to Him and utter reliance on Him alone.

So her Lord (Allah) accepted her with goodly acceptance. He made her grow in a good manner and put her under the care of Zakariya. Every time he entered the mihrab [secluded area] to (visit) her, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said: “O Maryam! From where have you gotten this” She said, “This is from Allah.” Verily, Allah provides sustenance to whom He wills, without limit.

Mary serves an example of the ultimate pure soul in other places in Islamic literature as well, as she in one way represents that act of prayer embodied. Traditional Islam teaches that the “real value of prayer is to find consolation in the act of praying, by which human will is made to conform to divine will.” The great poet and spiritual guide Rumi described this pillar of Islamic spiritual life via the Qur’anic metaphor and poetical imagery of Mary giving birth in the following verses:

He turns the dried-up seed of prayer into a marvelous date-palm,
Just as in Mary's birth pangs her pain was rewarded by a shower of dates.

30 Qur’an, 3:36.
31 Qur’an, 3:37.
Overall, Mary serves as a classic, undeniable, and powerful Islamic example of how women can access unprecedented levels of spiritual autonomy through devoting their lives to God, despite the very female challenges of society, motherhood, and other circumstances.

**The Example of Zulaikha**

Surah Yusuf, the 12th chapter of the Qur’an, holds special status in both Islamic spirituality and popular piety because of its melodramatic narrative and rich mystical symbolism. Even God Himself says at the beginning of this chapter, “*We tell you the most beautiful of stories*” (‘aḥsan al-qaṣas). No doubt the chapter is one beautiful story, with twists and turns along the way.

One of the most interesting parts of this chapter is the relationship between Prophet Yusuf and Zulaikha, the high-society wife of the noble governor (‘āzeez; i.e. Potiphar) who purchases Yusuf to serve their household after his brothers have thrown him down a well and he has been sold into slavery. Zulaikha’s character stands out as a prominent, unforgettable female in the Qur’an, and the ways she expresses autonomy are unforgettable as the threads of Yusuf’s fate and her own become entangled. This section of analysis is considerably dense because of the profound intrigue that her character represents.

I became interested in this chapter, and its relation to the Islamic construct of the feminine, years ago when I learned of a deeply gnostic Muslim man who used to diligently write out the entire chapter by hand, in Arabic, when his wife was pregnant with each of their eight children. He insisted that Ya’qūb’s saying “*O my sons! Enter not all by one*

---

34 Qur’ān, 12:3.
gate: enter ye by different gates“\(^35\) refers to infant siblings entering Earth via the ‘door’ of their mother.

I was also profoundly affected by commentaries on Yusuf’s beauty. Particularly, I cannot forget the following sentence from Martin Lings’ translation of Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī: “Jacob’s exceeding sorrow was not for the person of Joseph, but…Joseph was for him a place of the Manifestation of the Truth…thus would the Beauty of the Truth manifest itself unto Jacob in the form of Joseph.”\(^36\)

In fact, one morning in my personal reading of this chapter, I came across the verse where Zulaikha cries, “Now the truth is manifest,” (al-ān ḥaṣḥaṣ al-haqq).\(^37\) While most translators explain this to mean that truth of her crime had come to light in society, at that moment I understood the verse, in a form of my own personal ta’weel, as Zulaikha articulating her own Hallājīan ecstatic experience – i.e. “at this very moment the Truth is divulging itself [to me in the form of Yusuf]!” However, I have not since come across further exegeses or scholarly analyses that mention this same interpretation.

From the moment she encounters him, Zulaikha’s intense love for Yusuf is inextinguishable and almost ineffable, for no one experiences it as she does. Zulaikha is “completely lost in her love of Joseph,”\(^38\) who is “the ideal of manly beauty and more than manly virtue.”\(^39\) Zulaikha aches for Yusuf and attempts to seduce him, but is unsuccessful.

All scholars agree that at face value, Zulaikha’s actions constitute grave sin within the moral framework of Islam, where engaging in sexual relations outside of the legal

\(^{35}\) Qur’ān, 12:67.  
\(^{36}\) Lings, 164.  
\(^{37}\) Qur’ān, 12:51.  
\(^{38}\) Schimmel, 429.  
\(^{39}\) ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, Yusuf and Zulaikha (Translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith, Truber & Co., Ludgate Hall, 1882. Accessed via Kindle (custom reprint), Loc. 47.)
contract of marriage is forbidden. Yet in recent years, Islamic modernists have promoted reductionist tafsīrs and lectures that contend that Zulaikha represents nothing more than a tempting, sinful adulterous with a passion for the forbidden.\textsuperscript{40} Such interpretations seem to suggest that women are dangerous when allowed to possess power, responsible for men’s sins, and incapable of controlling themselves. Masked in the garb of religious correctness, such extremist opinions may even reach the absurdity of arguing that women should possess no autonomy, and argue that is rightfully so.

Such one-dimensional misogynistic interpretations of her character have absolutely not been the norm throughout the march of Islamic scholarship and literature. Traditional practitioners of Islam knew that there is “an allegorical meaning in all experience.”\textsuperscript{41} They were “well aware of the positive aspects of womanhood,” and could easily recognize a higher prototype presented in Zulaikha’s character: a true lover of God.\textsuperscript{42}

Zulaikha is the lover who, upon witnessing a single glimpse of God’s unending beauty, becomes eternally desperate for a taste of God’s being. By virtue of the love that possesses her, Zulaikha is set upon a path of turmoil and pain in which she is continually stripped of self, for this is the only way to the Beloved. Hers is “a love which attains fruition only when the soul has passed through the hardest trials, and like Zulaikha, has been humbled, purified, and regenerated.”\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} In its more recent publications of the Yusuf Ali translation of The Holy Qur’ān, the modernist International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has removed the appendices that expound upon the allegorical interpretation of the Light verse as well as the allegorical interpretation of Yusuf and Zulaikha.

\textsuperscript{41} Ali, 592.

\textsuperscript{42} Schimmel, 429.

\textsuperscript{43} Jāmī, Loc. 47.
It is therefore no surprise that the mid-fifteenth century Sufi master ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492) selects the relationship between Yusuf and Zulaikha as the subject for his classic poem, which constitutes about 8,000 lines of rhyming hendecasyllabic couplets and employs the highest register of the Persian language, including beautiful plays upon words. Yusuf Ali writes, “The original Persian is so grand and instructive that it is a pity that our Islamic students do not study it with the attention which it deserves.”

Jāmī is often studied as the last great Sufi poet Persia produced, at least by Orientalist scholars. Jāmī was born in 1414 C.E. at Jam, a little town in Khorasan, and thus took his poetic name. By age five he received the name Nur al-Dīn (“Light of the Faith”) and later in life gained the title Maulana, or Master. He was a highly diligent student and distinguished scholar. This qualification is mentioned in order to stress that sources for constructing female autonomy can be found within literature that is not sacred so to speak, and still be highly authoritative.

While Jāmī is no doubt also known for other major works such Nafahāt al-Uns or Haft Aurang, this beautiful poem still holds its rightful place as a hallmark masterpiece of world literature. It epitomizes the role Zulaikha plays in Sufi poetry as “the symbol of the soul, purified by ceaseless longing in the path of poverty and love.”

Unfold, O God, the bud of hope:  
disclose from Thine eternal Paradise one rose  
Whose breath may flood my brain with odor, while  
The bud’s leaf-liplets make my garden smile.

44 Jāmī, Loc. 60.  
45 Ali, 594.  
46 Ibid.  
47 Schimmel, 429.  
48 Jāmī, Loc. 99.
This delightful imagery found in the prologue of the poem immediately offers the reader a taste of the heartbroken lover’s desire for nothing but One: The Beloved. The symbol of longing for one rose whose origin is Paradise prepares the reader to sympathetically encounter Zulaikha’s desire for one perfected human being (al-insān al-kāmil), Yusuf, whose existence is the unraveling of the Divine Existence—at least for her.

Annemarie Schimmel writes positively of Zulaikha’s role, calling her a “fine symbol for the enrapturing power of love, expressed by the mystic in the contemplation of divine beauty revealed in human form.”49 This powerful, admiring interpretation is a stark contrast to those that attempt to use Zulaikha as a means to strip women of power and autonomy.

The idea that divine self-disclosure (tajalli) occurs by means of another human being as a theophany deserves careful exploration. This notion plays a very important role not just in the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha, but often in other mystics’ experiences of God Himself.

For example, Ibn ‘Arabi, the great Andalusian wali (saint or vicegerent of God on Earth), was rendered spellbound by his sudden witnessing of the Divine being expressed via the young form of the Persian woman Nizām in a vision beside the Ka’ba. Similarly, in his early dream dictionary, Muḥammad ibn Sirūfūn (d. 653 AD) writes of the possibility of seeing God in a dream in the form of a man.

Interestingly, Jāmī writes that Zulaikha first sees Yusuf in her dream while still a young beautiful princess.50 Upon seeing this handsome man who was just as noble and

49 Schimmel, 429.
50 Ali, 594.
true, and she falls madly in love with him. “So deep and constant was her love,” Yusuf Ali writes, “that she pined away for the love of the ideal man of her dream. She nursed her love in sorrow and secret.”51 Here, Ali’s analysis acknowledges Zulaikha’s powerlessness in the face of God’s choice to make her heart fall in love. The power of that love, divine in nature, makes her own power null. In the poem Jāmī writes,

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
Never content is the lover; each hour  
His longing waxes in strength and power  
Ne’er to one wish for two moments true,  
A joy still dearer he holds in view.52
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

In the poem’s story, Zulaikha continues to have visions of Yūsuf and discovers in a vision that he is the Wazīr of Egypt, but does not yet know his name. She tells her father she must wed none other than the Wazīr, and he arranges it. Yet when she peeks past her curtain on her wedding day she realizes that the Wazīr is not the man of her dreams at all; he also turns about to be a eunuch; this is symbolism for worldly lovers.

After many years of sorrow, finally Yūsuf appears a slave being sold in the market. Zulaikha sights him for the first time, and bids highest in order to win him, for to her “Yūsuf was more than life itself.”53

Despite all his sympathy for Zulaikha the lover, the spiritual master Jāmī reminds his readers that we must distinguish between ‘ishq ḥaqīqī (true love) and ‘ishq majāzī (metaphorical love). He writes,

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
How blest is he who can close his eye  
And let the vain pageants of life pass by! –  
Untouched by the magic of earth can keep  
His soul awake while the senses sleep;  
Scorn the false and the fleeting that meets the view,
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

\begin{footnotes}
51 Ali, 595.
52 Jāmī, Loc. 4028.
53 Ali, 597.
\end{footnotes}
And see what is hidden and firm and true!\textsuperscript{54}

But, as Mevlana Rumi puts it in his own related poem, even if Zulaikhha “piled up a hundred thousand names – her meaning and intention was always Joseph.”\textsuperscript{55} Alas by the end of the poem, Zulaikhha is poor and old. She has lost all her wealth and beauty, features typically associated with a woman’s power, and has spent her life mourning, longing, and utterly consumed by her love of Yūsuf.

\begin{quote}
A cottage of reeds had she built by the side
Of the way where Yusuf was wont to ride;
And with reeds that uttered a plaintive sound
Like the voice of a flute, she had fenced it round
Whenever she uttered her wail and cry,
Each reed in concert gave sign for sign
When the fire of absence consumed her, the seeds
Of the wild flame fell on the pitying reeds
Heart-broken she dwelt in that hut, nor stirred
From the place where she lay like a wounded bird
Yet the thought of her love was so sweet a pain
That each reed was to her like a sugar-cane.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Yūsuf suddenly returns to the presence of Zulaikhha, and through the miracle of his presence her youth and beauty return. Her last wish is to marry him. At the end of the poem God addresses Yūsuf:

\begin{quote}
Mine eyes have seen her in a humble mood;
I heard her prayer when to thee she sued.
And the sight of her labours, her prayers, and sighs,
The waves of the sea of My pity rise.
Her soul from the sword of despair I free,
And here from My throne I betroth her to thee.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{54} Jāmī, quoted in Ali, 599.
\textsuperscript{55} Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Mathnawī 6:4022-37, quoted in Schimmel, 309.
\textsuperscript{56} Jāmī, Loc. 3965.
\textsuperscript{57} Jāmī, Loc. 4146.
Jāmī’s resolution to ultimately betroth Zulaikha to Yūsuf shows compassion for Zulaikha and a desire to give her what she pines for. Yet this occurs only after her total annihilation. In a greater sense, Jāmī’s story gives hope to all lovers on the path and alludes to the “wedding day” of the Sufi (i.e. death) when the soul finally returns to God. Jāmī’s immensely eloquent poem stands as a testament to the fact that God will grant His love in abundance to the meek, lowly, and sincere seeker who is willing to sacrifice everything for it.58

Yet one cannot help but ask the question: Why did God not include this ending in the Qur’anic story, where Yūsuf is joyfully reunited with his family but Zulaikha is mysteriously never mentioned again? Could it be, as some clerics contend, that God intended one of his most prominent characters in the Qur’an, Zulaikha, to be nothing more than a one-dimensional temptress?

For such clerics, and in fact from the exoteric perspective, love for a human or woman is identified and inseparable with possessing her physically; but that is when her temptation is conquered or controlled by a male figure, so no love is involved in that sense.

The closest answer I have found comes from Ibn ‘Arabi, who is similarly plunged into love, only to realize that the Love he seeks is both immanent in every thing and transcendent from every thing: the object of love is a Beloved who cannot be possessed.

There is an undeniable feminine metaphor here: to love a woman is not to possess her in a way that strips her of autonomy. Instead, the one who truly loves a woman will acknowledge and honor that woman’s inherent autonomy, granted to her by God. And God Himself is the most perfect at doing this.

58 Ali, 600.
If love doesn’t lead to total true freedom, it is not love.

Love, in relation to God, is always on His terms. All autonomy belongs to God, a meaning summed up in the frequent Muslim prayer rooted in the Qur’an, “There is no might or power except by Allah.” As mentioned previously, this fundamental principle has important impact on the notion of spiritual female autonomy in Islam: because all autonomy belongs to God, only He can share or assign true earthly autonomy to any person, and no person is ever truly independent of Him.

**The Examples of Female Saints**

The corpus of works that serve to inform about traditional Islamic spirituality extend well beyond the primary sacred texts of the Qur’an and Hadith. Centuries of now-infamous works compiled by elite seekers of God, or Sufis, abound. These works include many masterpieces written by scholar-saints, like Jami’s mentioned above.

Another interesting category of texts that speak about the level of female autonomy in Islam is hagiographical literature, or stories of saints. While many of these works are replete with example of male saints (awliya’) or Friends of God, there is no shortage of examples of famous female Muslim saints as well. One such example is the seminal hagiographic work *Tadhkirat al-Awliya’* (Memoirs of the Saints), arranged by Farid al-Din Attar (d.1221 C.E.).

The Qur’an says, “Verily, the friends (awliā’) of God, no fear is upon them nor do they grieve.” There are also many sayings of the Prophet that eulogize servants who fulfill religious obligations and perform altruistic deeds; they are the most beloved ones of God.

---

59 Qur‘ān, 18:38.
60 Qur‘ān, 10:63.
who receive His favor.\textsuperscript{61} The word \textit{wali} (pl. \textit{awliā’)} is usually what is translated as “saint,” and literally means “someone who is under special protection; intimate and very close friend.”\textsuperscript{62} In one beautiful description found within the pages of sixteenth-century Egyptian biographical dictionary of Sufis, a \textit{wali} is described as: “one who has been brought near to Him, granted special favour enabling him to be diligent in worship, purify his soul of its base passions, and receive mystical illumination.”\textsuperscript{63}

Sainthood is understood in both liberal and conservative ways in Islamic thought. There are those (often early) figures who have maintained the sober understanding that true sainthood is only gained by devout adherence to God’s way both outwardly and inwardly, and yet these two are not separate from one another but rather part of one fluid reality. There is no contradiction between the two; sainthood cannot be attained without obedience of the inner and outer forms.

An individual – no matter how impressive his words, demeanor, or miraculous feats – can never be an authentic saint if he or she departs from the laws of God and the \textit{sunnah} of His Messenger, even if others believe him or her to be saintly. In contrast to this early understanding, other later perspectives tended to be more accepting of a sainthood that defined itself in relation to saintly miracles (\textit{karamat}, which in Arabic literally means gifts generously given by God) witnessed in the presence of the person.

\textsuperscript{62} Schimmel, \textit{Mystical Dimensions of Islam}, 199.
\textsuperscript{63} Sharma, 10.
One of highly scholarly and highly spiritual Islamic literature, that relates to the idea of female saints, is the famous litany of prayers on the Prophet, *Dala’il al-Khairat* (Guide to Goodness), compiled by Imam al-Jazuli (d. 1465 C.E.).

The value of *Dala’il al-Khairat* as a source informing about traditional Islamic spirituality cannot be overemphasized, for it demonstrates to readers in the highest register of perfectly balanced Arabic poetry the incomparable role of the Prophet Muhammad in reaching God Himself. However, for the purposes of considering female spiritual autonomy, it is not the content of this book that concerns us but rather the impetus for its creation.

Legend has it that Imam al-Jazuli, the book’s compiler, was once searching for pure water with which to perform ritual ablution (*wudu*) so that he could perform his obligatory prayers. As he searched, he came upon a well. As he peered down the well, he could not figure out how to withdraw the water. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a voice calling to him. He looked up to find it belonged to a young girl sitting upon a mountain near him. The girl was aware of al-Jazuli’s famous religiosity and spiritual status and was therefore bewildered about why al-Jazuli could not find pure water—because it turns out that she could.

The girl descended down the mountain, bent over the edge of the well, and then spat. Almost instantaneously, pure sweet water came up and overflowed from the well. Consequent to performing prayer, al-Jazuli inquired to the means by which the girl had achieved such a high spiritual station.

---

The girl replied that it was simply by “making constant prayer for God to bless the best of creation by the number of breaths and heartbeats.” After this encounter, Al-Jazuli then resolved to write a work collecting litanies of prayers asking God to bless and show mercy and kindness to the Prophet Muhammad.

This astonishing account does not emphasize rights, privileges, or worldly power. Instead, it showcases a form of female spiritual autonomy gained through righteous practice and sincerity of heart. The account is all the more powerful because a young female figure is contrasted with a seasoned male scholar, yet the spiritual autonomy granted to her by God seems to be exceeding his.

And yet, we should not forget that in this example female autonomy eventually leads to or results in male autonomy. Because if the Qur’an describes that the male and female are complementary of each other, their autonomy (i.e. liberation), also depends on the autonomy of each other or of both. This why just as we need women’s studies, so too do we need men’s studies.

Another example is found in Rabi’a of Basra, or Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 801), fondly called the “Doorkeeper of the Heart.” She is the most famous female saint of Islam and one of the central figures in the early Sufi tradition. Poems and stories about her have come down to us through many writers including ‘Aṭṭār and al-Ghazāli. There are many tales of interactions between her and Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 782) that show her exceeding him in some fashion, indicating that God has granted her a greater level of spiritual freedom or autonomy, gained in her complete surrender to Him. Born as the fourth daughter into a

---

65 Ibid.
poor family, her devotion to God shone from her early in life as she, despite being sold into slavery and working hard labor all day long, would pray all night.

Finally, her master witnessed her standing in prayer at night with a magically light suspended above her head; realizing she was a saint, he freed her. Her significance lies in her utter love for God alone and its expressions. She is reported to have lovingly shared, “O God, Whenever I listen to the voice of anything You have made – the rustling of trees, the trickling of water, the cries of birds, the flickering of shadow, the roar of wind, the song of thunder, I hear it saying: “God is One! Nothing can be compared with God!”

There are countless additional examples of female saints in Islam, and it would be impossible to explore an exhaustive list. What is important to take away from this discussion is this key point: female saints in Islam represent the ability for women to gain ultimate spiritual autonomy, independence from creation, and status with both God and sometimes society/man, all through their peaceful surrender to God. Again, the term “Islam” itself means peaceful surrender to God, which is sometimes contrary to the notion of freedom in the Western feminist sense, as we will see in the next section.

\[67\] Upton’s translation, quoted in Helminski, 33.
Chapter Four: Female Autonomy in Contemporary Secular Feminism

Lack of Familiarity of Contemporary Secular Feminist Literature with Islamic Sources

An unfortunate characteristic of much of the current academic literature on feminism and Islam is its lack of reference to and familiarity with holistic, nuanced readings of the Qur’an in its original Arabic, of sayings of the Prophet in their original form, and of deep, careful readings of the highest examples of spiritual literature, which is part of why it is used as a comparative framework in this analysis.

More specifically, contemporary scholarship seems to have overlooked or simply does not have direct linguistic access to the Qur’an’s subtle connotations that are just as crucial as its exoteric legal maxims in constructing a virtue-ethical paradigm about women. The lack of discussion based on careful and close literary readings of the Quran in favor of supposedly less-volatile sociological and theoretical methodologies has diluted contemporary scholarship about feminism and Islam as much as it has supposedly benefitted it.

Calling attention to this disparity is not intended to fault scholars themselves (many of whom have contributed important keystone works to a rapidly growing field), but rather to call attention to the value of literary analysis and virtue ethics as approaches to understanding feminism and Islam. A look at contemporary literature in the field reveals that these approaches are currently undervalued.

In this section, we seek to expand thought processes about female autonomy in Islam as compared to in feminism through a simple discussion of certain Quranic verses. These verses are useful in understanding the feminine in Islam. While they might be
discussed in circles of personal piety or in works about Islam’s spiritual dimension (Sufism), such verses are often not examined within feminist discourse. To rectify this poor communication between disciplines requires scholars to have intimate familiarity with feminism, literary analysis of the Quran, and feminine virtue ethics in Islam – no small feat. However, as the relatively new fields of Women’s Studies and Islamic Studies grow, it is hoped that more of this crossover will occur.

Secular feminist analyses seem to have misunderstood and missed the deepest meaning of the feminine in Islam, explored in Chapter Three, by refusing to directly engage with sacred sources. Here we point out and acknowledge limitations of current feminist scholarship and the secular feminist paradigm for understanding the nature of female spiritual autonomy in Islam. In doing so it will answer the questions: How often are textual references and analysis of sacred literature included within contemporary secular literature about feminism and Islam? How does this affect the quality of that literature?

Next, we review the subtle ways in which female spiritual autonomy is established in the Qur’an as compared to secular feminism, this time through literary analysis of feminist literature and case studies. Then the analysis in this chapter will demonstrate how philosophical assumptions about female spiritual autonomy in contemporary secular feminism interacts with that of traditional Islamic spirituality.

Overall, a lack of knowledge of or attention toward sacred texts in secular feminist scholarship is indicated. This is not surprising in the least, as secular feminism is among the last frameworks in the chain of man-made ideologies, starting with 19th-century naturalism, followed by socialism, communism, etc. The only way that secular feminism
deals with the Qur’an is to refute it and hold it responsible for the “terrible” status of women.

Still, in light of such claims, referencing the Qur’an is important because it allows us to examine notions about women and Islam from the religion’s bedrock source. Reading the Qur’an carefully can help to conjure up a more detailed understanding of the feminine and autonomy according to the sacred text.

However, there is a discrepancy of Qur’anic references, and references of scholarly Islamic literature, in contemporary feminist literature. Much of the current literature on feminism and Islam does not seem to give due attention to inclusion of Quranic verses and their literary analysis. For feminists, the topic of the woman in Islam “is now in vogue. Feminists particularly are eagerly trying their hand at it, albeit very frequently without sufficient knowledge of the historical facts and, even worse, to a great extent ignorant of Islamic languages and literatures.”

This ignorance of Islamic literatures unfortunately can include the Qur’an itself. Bronwyn Winter’s piece “Fundamental Misunderstandings: Issues in Feminist Approaches to Islamism” is a classical, disturbing example. In this scathing piece on all things Islam, Winter conveniently includes no verses from the Qur’an and justifies this choice by asserting that she believes all religions are patriarchal, implying that examining them is not deserving of her time since they assign women, in her view, no autonomy whatsoever. Yet without even one textual reference, she blasts an assertion that all monotheistic texts

---

68 Schimmel, My Soul is a Woman, 9.
70 Ibid., 13-17.
are oppressive to women and that religion in itself is a political tool of social control, particularly controlling women.\textsuperscript{71}

Winter’s analysis then deftly switches to discussing “Islamism.” This is a move that we will see other authors who write on feminism and Islam make time and again. Is this because it is safer to write on “Islamism” – the shape-shifting phenomenon that does not need to be bound to any particular definition or sacred text – than it is to write on Islam – a religion constructed upon the Qur’an with over a billion adherents?

At one point, Winters finally acknowledges women’s agency and autonomy found in religion, only to quickly reserves her right to disagree with that agency and so-called autonomy, which renders her acknowledgement nothing more than a politically-correct tip of the hat to an opponent. Winter’s piece of a hallmark example of a contemporary feminist writing about Islam who, in fact, knows very little about the religion of Islam as contained within the sacred texts like those explored in earlier chapters of this paper. She also does not hide the fact that she is not going to reference the Qur’an. Therefore, in her scholarship we see that she assumes the Qur’an is irrelevant to her study and she believes that it is a text that does not warrant careful scholarly attention.

Ironically, Winter’s harsh approach is ineffective to her own feminist construct of female autonomy. If, as she posits, religion is nothing more than a vehicle for controlling women and stripping them of all independence and agency, then this must also mean that any woman who is religious may be deemed as controlled and inautonomous. Therefore, in this sense, Bronwyn Winter actually oppresses and strips empowerment from masses and masses of women who claim religion for themselves, the same group which she intends

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 12.
to empower through her contemporary feminist critique of autonomy and religion. Winter’s feminism is self-defeating and her discussion on Islam does not help her readership learn anything about Islam itself.

Another example is found in Lila Abu-Lughod’s popular new book, “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?” Abu-Lughod’s skilled writing and interesting anecdotes keep her readers continually interested and help her to clearly make many profound points. Yet this book, whose index has a whopping 15 line-entry for the term “liberalism,” does not even contain an index entry for the word “Qur’an” (or its alternate spelling, “Koran”)!

How can a book that claims to discuss Muslim women and the autonomy they do or do not have, not once mention the sacred text that Muslim women believe to be the direct word of God Himself? Some might say that because she writes from a sociological and anthropological paradigm, this is not her burden. Yet the Qur’an holds such integral influence on the human culture of the Islamicate world that it seems that even an anthropologist would consider at some point in her research. Abu-Lughod is so skilled and informed that it would be foolish to think that she did not consider the Qur’an.

Therefore, we must ask if she has some interest or benefit to be gained by not referencing it. Indeed, we see that like other contemporary secular feminists, it is convenient for Abu-Lughod to avoid having to expose her (1) lack of knowledge about the Qur’an, as it is also convenient to avoid (3) potentially avoiding engaging with Muslim women who advocate that they find great forms of autonomy in the faith. Thus Abu-Lughod’s text again serves as an example of literature being written about the feminine and Islam that does not even examine the Qur’an in relation to her topic.

---

A third and interesting example of an attempt by contemporary secular feminism to understand female spiritual autonomy in Islam is Margot Badran’s “Feminism in Islam.” This book is a great example of the interactive scholarship within the fields of feminism, women’s studies, and Islam over the last several decades. Badran studies not as a literary analyst but as a seasoned sociologist and historiographer. Badran’s book’s index contains an 11-line entry under the term “Islamism,” but also includes entries on *shari’a* (Islamic law), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and (Quranic) hermeneutics.73

A closer examination of her sections on these topics, particularly within her discussion of women in Nigerian society, reveals that she does not herself speak directly on or about these topics but rather showcases women she has spoken to that spoke to her about them.74 She also documents the historical participation of women in these fields, an acknowledgement that at least gives her discussion of women, feminism, and Islam more dimension that some of the previously discussed authors. One example of this is in her chapter “Between Secular and Islamic Feminism(s)” where she writes about 20th-century female scholar Nazira Zain al-Din, who “argued that women, because of their experience as women, were better equipped to render women-sensitive exegesis, precisely as the African-American theologian Amina Wadud would at the other end of the century.”

However, this discussion still does not engage in literary analysis of the Qur’an or sacred or scholarly literature sources but rather justifies this exclusion by the belief that studying the Qur’an from a linguistic and literary perspective is the sole task of feminists.

---

73 Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Religious and Secular Convergences*. (Oxford: Oneworld), 2009. Granted, her index spells the Arabic transliteration “shari’a” incorrectly; the marker for the letter ‘ayn is in the wrong position. It’s not clear whether this reveals being uncomfortable with Arabic on the part of her or her copywriter.
74 Ibid., 290.
who seek to produce original “re-interpretations” and translations. Thus, while Badran’s book performs a better blending of the field of Islamic sciences and feminism in order to truly understand autonomy, it still does not draw directly from the Qur’an’s literary articulation and even empowerment of the feminine.

One last example of contemporary feminist literature that grapples with the subject of female autonomy in Islam is Leila Ahmed’s book “A Quiet Revolution.” Ahmed again approaches the subject of feminism and Islam from a participant-observer standpoint, which particular emphasis on the headscarf (hijab). She draws on decades of personal and professional experience with Muslim women in the Arab world and US while also telling a historical story of the veil. This book, again, while very interesting to her readers, overuses the word “Islamism” without ever really defining it, probably as a way to discuss Islam without having to, well, discuss Islam proper.75 This strategy carries with it benefits for the author, as previously mentioned.

A quick perusal of the Ahmed’s index finally reveals a listing of the word “Quran.” It is followed by six lines of sub-entries: “Quran: on adultery; Bakhtiar translation; compulsion frowned upon; on diversity; interpretation and scholarship; Mattson’s work on; Qutb on; and women’s rights…”76 Like Badran’s book, Ahmed’s text has included discussions on female participation in scholarship and female interpretations of the Qur’an. In particular she examines Muslim women in America that are participants of ISNA (Islamic Society of North America).77 However, the book itself does not include any

76 Ibid., 349.
77 Ibid., 257.
literary showcasing, much less analysis, of Qur’anic verses or centuries of spiritual literature in their own right.

Overall, contemporary secular feminist literature that tries to understand female autonomy in Islam tends not to engage in direct reading or literary analysis of the Qur’anic verses, Hadith, or sacred literature that is so crucial to constructing a full, fair concept of female spiritual autonomy for Muslim women.

The ethics scholar Ebrahim Moosa notes that “the linkage between the Quran and ethical values should not be ignored.”\(^78\) The intricacy of the ethical theme developed by the Quran is noted by highly esteemed scholars that are both modernist (like Fazlur Rahman) and traditional (like Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali).\(^79\) These ethics are fundamentally spiritual in nature. In fact, the discipline of ethics has several synonymous nomenclatures in Muslim cultures, including the “science of innate dispositions” (‘ilm al-akhlâq), the “science of comportment or conduct” (‘ilm al-suluk) or “science of mysticism” (‘ilm al-tasawwuf).\(^80\) This last term is generally called Sufism in English. Paul Heck describes that ethics in Sufism, Islam’s spiritual and mystical tradition, “generally involves awareness of the universal presence of God,”\(^81\) although this vague definition needs more specificity; every clergy in the world claims this awareness yet many of them are against mystical teachings of religion.


\(^80\) Moosa, 237.

Why is this mentioned? Because when considering the concept of female autonomy in Islam and in the Qur’an, all of this should be kept in mind. Like man, woman is first and foremost considered as an embodied soul, whose ethics and morality, like all humans, depend upon her awareness and actions in relation to this universal, unending Divine Presence. In fact, for this very reason examples of ethical, pious women have been celebrated in Islamic Sufi literature. A recent translation of Abū ‘Abd ar-Rahman Al-Sulami’s “Dhikr an-niswa al-muta‘ābbidat as-ṣufiyyāt,” translated by Rkia Elaroui Cornell as Early Sufi Women, documents several astonishing lives and personalities of women whose ethical uprightness and devotion to God was profound.  

For many Sufi women, ethical correctness was not only their pride, but the means by which they participated in greater society, including with men. Said otherwise, ethics granted them greater autonomy. That society, including its men, could have valued women for this very reason. Schimmel documents that “in the early years women were not only female disciples of great Sufi masters, but they also participated in community gatherings devoted to recitations from the Quran and to do dhikr.” She describes that in the literature one can read of mystics who even appeared in public with their female disciples, and shares that one of the greatest Sufis of all time, Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi, studied under the tutelage of female masters. Of the 15 students on which he conferred or transferred his spiritual blessing, 14 were women.

---

83 Schimmel, My Soul is a Woman, 42.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 45-47.
We certainly do find any inclusion of historical instances like these in much feminist literature, but if a young graduate student can discover these sources for her thesis, they should certainly not be difficult for scholars in the field to discover! Yet, when feminist literature does include references to the Qur’an, often those references are limited to the same few verses that contain explicitly stated roles of women in certain legal contexts. These verses might include those that discuss men and women who commit adultery, those that describe how a woman should cover herself, or perhaps those that describe the role of women as witnesses and the status of their testimony. Even literature that does not specifically reference the Qur’an, like some of those mentioned in this paper, may write from a general knowledge base that is informed only by such verses and lacks a broad, informed paradigm about Islam from which to properly understand them. Such topics are often the extent of the Quran discussed in current mainstream media, contributing further to poor scholarship. It makes sense here to note that these verses happen to be among those that are quickly and easily searchable, especially for the researcher who does not care to actually read the entire Quran with careful consideration and analysis.

Understandings such as these are very problematic as they seriously simplify and truncate the holistic concept of feminine spiritual autonomy as developed by the Qur’an. Authors who speak of them tend to use a pejorative tone, or avoid speaking about them at all. Many Muslim men and governments themselves commit horrible crimes against women and perpetrate incorrect gender-role stereotypes based on such shallow readings of this sacred source. “The fact that the male principle repeatedly dominates, at least in the practical aspects of living, is a given in all religions and cultures, and it is undeniable that
in Islam, too, much suffering has fallen to the lot of women because simple Qur’anic precepts have been interpreted more and more narrowly over the course of time.”\(^{86}\)

**Examples of Subtle Language in the Qur’an**

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the Quran’s understanding of women is not so simple. It is above all a virtue-ethical one that draws from a whole host of images, female characters, and subtle words from the highest register of the Arabic language that masterfully create a refined feminine concept.

To identify a comprehensive index of all these literary and linguistic elements in the Qur’an that help develop its virtue-ethical philosophy on women – i.e. through grammar, association, syntax, word connotation or root structure – is the scholarly work of a lifetime or many lifetimes. Below is a brief sampling of stories and instances that help demonstrate how complex the Quran’s virtue-ethical paradigm is in regard to women.

These examples contain what will be referred to as “subtle linguistic framing.” That is, they lend themselves toward an ethical concept of woman through their subtle use of language. This in itself is a beautiful stylistic feature that should give us pause for thought. In many ways, in an Islamic paradigm, women are often considered to be subtler than men. To the seasoned reader it is therefore not surprising that the Quran would present an ethical-philosophical notion of woman in indirect, subtle forms of language. Scholar A. Kevin Reinhart might agree that the Quran’s subtle, sometimes even seemingly silent approach is an important to its construction of ethics surround woman. He notes that “as important as

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 180.
what the Qur’an says, is what it does not say.” If a Muslim woman’s beauty is in some way associated with interiorized secrecy, why not also camouflage verses speaking toward the most beautiful aspects of her character in indirect contexts that are only perceived by the sincere?

Any discussion of virtue ethics in Islam would be remiss to begin with other than the most paramount virtue celebrated for both men and women within the Qur’an and hadith: ḥayā’. The Prophet Muhammad said, “Every religion has its distinct characteristic, and the distinct characteristic of Islam is ḥayā’.” He moreover taught that “All of ḥayā’ is good,” and, “Ḥayā’ is not present in anything but it beautifies it.” He also instructed, “Ḥayā’ and belief are together. If one of them is removed, the other is removed.”

So far the term ḥayā’ has been left intentionally undefined in English in order to evoke a sense for the concept of the word in its contextual definitions. The root letters of this term (ḥā, yā, hamza) are related to the very closely pronounced word ḥayā (which differs only in its lack of glottal stop), a term that means “life” in Arabic. This close connection reveals a philosophy of language in which the virtue of ḥayā’ is as valuable and essential to the ethical and virtuous worth of the human being as life itself.

What, then, does ḥayā’ mean? Lane’s Lexicon, one of the oldest and most comprehensive Arabic morphological dictionaries in the English language, denotes ḥayā’

89 Muslim, Riyad as-Salihin (Book 2, Hadith 682. Accessed at https://www.sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/2/2)  
as meaning “shame; a sense of shame; shyness, or bashfulness; [and particularly, but not always, honest shame, or pudency, or modesty] … a shrinking of the soul from foul conduct.”

It is true that the term ْحَمْأَةُ is most often translated as modesty, bashfulness, or shyness. But these simple, direct translations somehow still do not capture the dynamic meanings contained in the Arabic nor the value placed on ْحَمْأَةُ that is revealed in Hadith.

Here is a good place to stop and note that contemporary secular society, and the feminism of that society, does not exactly praise the virtue of ْحَمْأَةُ in anyone or anything, let alone in women. Capitalism’s increasing influence on the West and the world in general has made ideas like “kill the competition” accepted. Beginning in the 1970s, the feminist movement brought with it a slew of slogans that seem to be juxtaposed against the ideas of modesty and bashfulness: “girl power,” “a woman’s place is every place,” “a woman’s place is in the house…and the senate,” “well behaved women rarely make history,” “girls just wanna have fun,” or even “girls just wanna have fun – damental human rights.” These slogans seem to rely on bold, declarative statements rooted in personal autonomy that seem to leave bashfulness behind as an antiquated patriarchal value.

Modern secular feminist activism, especially radical feminism, sometimes also takes on a decidedly immodest bent. The Telegraph news article “Topless protesters disrupt Muslim conference on women,” describes how two female activists belonging to the FEMEN group hid under the guide of modest ُعَبَايُ (long, loose-fitting dresses), but then took them off and, while topless, commandeered the stage of a fundamental Muslim conference when its organizers began to apparently discuss the topic of punishing wives. Both had messages painted on the front of their chests that read “Nobody subjugates me”

---

and “I am my own prophet.” Later in the year the 22-year-old leader of FEMEN Inna Shevchenko made an appearance at a major church in Kiev, Russia after a Russian female punk band was jailed for performing a punk rock prayer to the Virgin Mary. Shevchenko wielded a chainsaw while topless and successfully felled the church’s giant crucifix. This type of activism purposefully juxtaposes itself against religious virtues and ethics, specifically those of modesty and bashfulness for women. It also positions itself against religion’s reactionarianism.

This virtue of ḥayā’ is celebrated as a beautiful quality several places in the Qur’an. In Islamic literature God Himself is sometimes described as possessing and demonstrating the quality of ḥayā’ toward His creation. One interesting place where the Qur’an uses a derivative of this term is in relation to the Prophet Moses, who is mentioned often. In his early life, he flees the pharisaic society he grew up in after he mistakenly kills a man. He goes far into the desert until after much travel he discovers a tree providing shade underneath which he rests. Nearby he sees a well by which many men are providing their sheep water. He notices in the distance two women seeking to water their sheep who cannot access the water. The Quran then describes that suddenly,

“...one of the two women came to him walking with shyness [tamshī ‘ala astaḥyā’]. She said, "Indeed, my father invites you that he may reward you for having watered for us." So when he came to him and related to him the story, he said, "Fear not. You have escaped from the wrongdoing people."”

---


94 Qur’ān, 28:25.
The implications of the linguistic phrase “tamshī ḥā’alā astaḥyā” are tremendous and might only be realized by someone who understands the high register of Arabic used in the Quran. This phrase literally translates as something like “walking upon the virtue of seeking to be shy.” It shows that these two women were walking in a bashful way. Yet the word “walking” can also more generally imply that the primary virtue or ethical principle that their entire conduct was based upon was modesty. This is a beautiful, literary way of showing how modesty can part of a woman’s conduct. Related to this is the important fact that “according to certain accounts [Moses himself] insisted on walking in front of her out of modesty,” further associating the virtue as beautiful for both men and women.

Yet more interesting about this verse is that although it associates these two women with this trait of modesty, it also informs us that they were active, working (caring for sheep), participating in society, frustrated and/or mistreated by men who weren’t giving them their due rights, and approaching and speaking to a man (Moses). Therefore, modesty is not necessarily juxtaposed against these things! Later in the story one of these women actively expresses her desire to marry Moses and in fact advises her father as such. The women end up symbolizing modesty with beauty, righteousness with activity, and virtue with forwardness. What feminist texts acknowledge this example?

**A Need Within the Discipline**

Overall, studies of feminism and religion often, in one way or other, contribute answers to what Rita M. Gross identifies as a central, linchpin question: “Are the world’s major religions inevitably sexist and disadvantageous to women, or are they inherently

---

95 Nasr et al., 952.
egalitarian and reformable, despite their patriarchal veneers? Yet contemporary feminist thought tends to be limited or reductionist regarding feminine autonomy in Islam, creating an “us vs. them” mentality. Leading Muslim feminists, who have an entire faith-based perspective to add to this discussion that is beyond the scope of the analysis of contemporary secular feminism here, note that one should not have to participate in this binary.

Perhaps what Schimmel noted, as we mentioned earlier, about how familiarity with literature can create a more nuanced picture, is just what we need. Scholarship that incorporates literary analysis and virtue ethics may be a better methodology for understanding Islam, because it looks at it on its own terms without forcing it to surrendering its own theoretical values, thus losing what is has to offer.

The current field of contemporary feminism and Islam could benefit from more expertise in the area of religious studies and scholarly study of religious texts. For example, a reader with little to no knowledge of Islam who is broadly interested in Abu-Lughod’s recent book “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?” may never have reason to come across the second appendix entitled “The Feminine Element in Sufism” buried in the back of Annemarie Schimmel’s book “Mystical Dimensions of Islam.”

Contemporary literature lacks reference and understanding of the Qur’an, especially from a perspective of literary analysis, preventing it from understanding female spiritual autonomy is the way it is presented in the original sources of Islam. Literature on

---

96 Gross, 2.
97 See, for example, Ibtissam Boachrine, Women and Islam: Myths, Apologies, and the Limits of Feminist Critique (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), xiii.
feminism and Islam could benefit from knowing more about this. Nonetheless, an increase in new scholars of Islam in the West could change this. In the concluding remarks of her chapter “Feminism and Islam” found within the book *Feminism and World Religions*, female Muslim scholar Riffat Hassan establishes that

"the Qur’an, which is the primary source on which Islam is founded, consistently affirms women’s equality with men and their fundamental right to actualize the human potential that they possess equally with men. Seen through a non-patriarchal lens, the Quran shows no sign of discrimination against women. If anything, it exhibits particular solicitude for women, much as it does for other disadvantaged persons."³⁸

This statement shows that the Western academic study of feminism and Islam is slowly beginning to reference and read the Qur’an from a non-secular perspective that honors the approach of Islamic thought. This might align with a new western Muslim “feminist” activism that will creatively challenge patriarchal norms.³⁹

However, this quote still shows that Quranic analysis in this field is limited to its verses related to rights and equality. The field still needs more analysis that takes from the Qur’an based on a holistic, literary reading that appreciates the subtle use of image and language that occurs in relation to women. This type of understanding will allow feminist literature to appreciate the deep ethical-virtuous value assigned to women that is typically celebrated in historical and modern Sufi literature. Such an approach could greatly enrich the field of study about female spiritual autonomy in Islam.

³⁹ Ahmed, 291.
Contemporary secular feminism is limited in scope and promotes a seriously truncated concept of Islamic female spiritual autonomy, whereas Islam’s original sources and others that construct the framework of traditional Islamic spirituality, i.e. Sufism, preserve the potential for female spiritual autonomy to remain expansive, if not unlimited.

This is because the elements that speak toward autonomy in these latter sources are rooted in a concept of God’s unified and unending essence, a beautiful concept that extends the notion of autonomy to also be one that is open, infinite, and unending, as all true love and true freedom/liberation/autonomy is meant to be.

Essentially, this study has argued that the construction of female spiritual autonomy in Islam is broader than that of contemporary secular feminism, because it provides for not only freedom of the self, but also from the self in God.

Contemporary secular feminism is limited in conceptualizing the full scope of autonomy available to women and unfamiliar with the subtle and beautiful meanings found within the classical sources of Islam. In traditional Islamic spirituality (i.e. Sufism), constructed based on Islam’s original sacred sources as well as related spiritual literature, female figures, characters, and saints, are granted high honor and autonomy by their righteousness and worship of God, not in spite of it. This autonomy is unlimited in potential because it is understood to be soul-based: not limited to life in this world, but rather linked to the eternal life of the soul and to the eternal, infinite essence of God Himself.
Works Cited


Raja, Rahat. "Western Women and Islam: Embracing and Negotiating Muslim Identity."


