

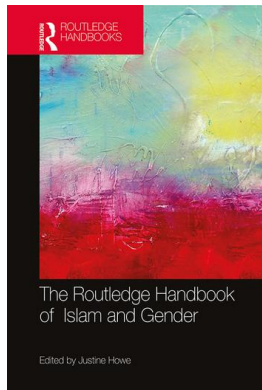
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## 3

## ISLAMIC GENDER ETHICS

Traditional discourses, critiques, and new  
frameworks of inclusivity*Zahra Ayubi*

What is the difference between what is Islamic and Islamic ethics and how does one study gender ethics? Islamic ethics is an academic construct, which scholars have used to describe the values imparted in various genres of the Islamic tradition, including Qur'an and hadith, which I treat together as the scriptural ethics tradition; the intellectual ethics tradition including jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufism, theology (*kalam*), philosophical ethics (*akhlaq*), and literature (*adab*). In addition to that which is prescriptive and originates from one of these scriptural or intellectual traditions, scholars also define Islamic ethics by Muslim praxis. What various scholarly descriptions of Islamic ethics have in common is that they describe moral values and/or practices that Muslims have distilled as the way to live a life according to an Islamic ethos, whether or not it adheres to any tangible theoretical or prescriptive discourse. In other words, people may still insist on something being Islamic even if it goes against something found in the Qur'an, hadith, law, etc. An idea deemed as Islamic based on one genre may not exist in other genres. So Islamic ethics is then best defined as an articulation of principles or values of what is Islamic for Muslims either in theory or praxis.

Rather than complicating this picture, paying attention to the category of gender in Islamic ethics actually helps clarify how a belief or practice which does not necessarily originate in scripture or law becomes Islamic. The origin of something believed to be ethical could be historical, an influence of something adjacent religiously or culturally – regardless, it is a deeply held belief that thinking philosophically can uncover. Paying attention to the underlying philosophy of gender or gender ethics is asking the question, whether historically or now, how is life that is lived in accordance with an Islamic ethos gendered or variable given a person's gender? It is to pay attention to the deeply held philosophical ideas about how someone's gender affects how they are to live as a Muslim in the world, even if they themselves might be focused on preparation for the hereafter or aspire to a gender-blind relationship with the Divine.

To be sure, attention to the category of gender emerged in Islamic studies through feminist work. Likewise, to study gender in Islamic ethics is to take a feminist standpoint – that is to focus on how the discussions about how to be Muslim while inhabiting a gendered body has been a normative male one. Most scholars follow the lead of medieval Muslim thinkers for whom the whole universe is male dominion to order according to Divine wishes.

Muslim feminist ethics is a category that we can use to classify Islamic ethics positions from decidedly feminist standpoints, even if the various moments in which Muslim feminists have used the term ethics have been disjointed. Kecia Ali's *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (2016) was among the first monographs to employ the category of ethics meaningfully. While Ali limits the scope of ethics to classical and contemporary jurisprudential discourses, the work is largely about the deeply ethical issue of Muslim women's consent in marriage, divorce, sexual relations, and other issues of bodily autonomy, while questioning the notion of what is and who are authoritative. Ali's work demonstrates that approaching the Islamic intellectual tradition on gender and sex from an ethical standpoint allows Muslim feminist discourses on sex to account for the "increasing gap between classical doctrines, present-day 'values,' and actual sexual practices;" discourses on authenticity and authority; and shifting values on sex and consent (Ali, 2016: xxxii).

In *Inside the Gender Jihad*, amina wadud employs the category of ethics in her approach to interpreting the Qur'an in order to advocate for gender equality on the basis of ontological equality (wadud, 2006: 29). Ali's analysis echoes amina wadud's assessment that "what is ethical is relative to context," and because the Qur'an does not outline an ethical system, "it must be formulated through human beings, the agents responsible for implementing and maintaining those systems in the first place" (wadud, 2006: 38). While Ali contends that the "Qur'an itself poses challenges for those committed to egalitarian social and intimate relationships" (2016: 195), wadud holds that the "responsibility of acting on the earth to fulfill moral agency involves acting in accordance with the guidance about right and wrong given in these two primary sources," the Qur'an and Sunnah (wadud, 2006: 37–38). Ali and wadud's works, both first published in 2006, emphasize that Muslim feminist ethics is an endeavor rooted in individual and collective interrogation of what is considered just and unjust in an Islamic framework.

More recently, in *Gendered Morality*, I offer reflections on philosophical problems that emerge from feminist close reading of the philosophical ethics (*akhlaq*) tradition with respect to the exclusion of women and non-elites in ethical refinement. I argue that there is a need for reimagining the philosophical definitions of what it means to be human that is inclusive of gendered, racial, and various marginalized experiences. The methods, or what sources scholars turn to define gender ethics in Islam have varied.

In this chapter, I describe the major ethical constructs associated with masculinity, femininity, and gender relations that scholars have distilled across the various genres of Islamic ethics. Many of these descriptions of gender ethics across the genres of Qur'an, hadith, jurisprudence, Sufism, and *akhlaq* are feminist-critical. I then discuss new ethics discourses within Muslim thought that seek to uncover or recover the ethical bedrock of Islam, which supports gender justice. In particular ethics of care and love ethics focus on contemporary Muslim women's activism. I argue that although these new ethics movements remain critical of gender ethics in the intellectual tradition, they are creating a new Islamic ethical tradition based on their experiences and what they believe a moral life today requires.

### Gender ethics in the Qur'an and Hadith

Male superiority, gender complementarity, and gender equality are the main three, distinct positions that faithful Muslims have taken in reading Qur'anic verses and hadiths about gender roles. While some argue that the Qur'an and hadith support absolute male superiority, others soften the patriarchal blow by arguing that the scriptural tradition supports equal status in the eyes of God, but that God has created men and women with different natures that are best suited to different roles. The complementarity thesis holds that within these differing roles,

men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because of their essential nature, and thus have been burdened with power, strength, and responsibility over women, whose roles are fulfilled in part by their nature to reproduce and nurture.

Proponents of equality in the scriptural and interpretive tradition have argued that male superiority is a historical, philosophical paradigm of gender ethics in which the Qur'an and hadith emerged and have been interpreted. Examining the relationship between historical context and the Qur'an has produced two distinct conclusions in feminist scholarship. On the one hand, Muslim feminist theologians have contextualized Qur'anic verses that propose hierarchical gender relations as a product of the social norms of 7th-century Arabia and propose that the universal, egalitarian ethos of the Qur'an should be prioritized over historically specific, gender-hierarchical verses. On the other hand, and as argued by Aysa Hidayatullah's analysis of Muslim feminist theologians' interpretive strategies, the prioritization of egalitarian verses over hierarchical verses is not instructed in the Qur'an. Thus, if interpreters acknowledge the historical context of verses in the Qur'an, then "from a contemporary perspective in the here and now, the Qur'an perhaps endorses a notion of sexual hierarchy as we define it today that is incompatible with sexual equality as we define it today" (Hidayatullah, 2014: 153). Hidayatullah's "radical uncertainty" in the Qur'an's ability to support contemporary notions of male–female equality suggests that "instead of putting so much pressure on the text to say things that we wish it to say, we must relocate the intensity of our demands elsewhere: to an honest interrogation of our interpretive aims and objectives" (Hidayatullah, 2014: 150).

Muslim interpreters of the scriptural tradition have utilized a few methods to arrive at gender equality. Feminist theologians such as amina wadud and Asma Barlas emphasize the overwhelming egalitarian worldview of the Qur'an and have critiqued the atomistic hermeneutical method of traditional male-centered *tafsir* that focused on linguistics of the Qur'an over its ethical core. Rather than values that are "external" to Islam, this ethical core of absolute egalitarianism emerges for them from the Qur'an itself and asking questions about what kind of society that is yielded by belief in a just God and in the oneness of God. This egalitarianism also extends to those with non-binary gender identities and diverse sexualities – the idea that according to Qur'anic ethics, all human beings are equal.

Another method for arriving at gender equality within Muslim feminist theology is through a comparative religion approach. Jerusha Lamptey compares scholarship on the "Word" of the Qur'an and the "Word" of Jesus to offer theological, constructive, and comparative reflections on shared feminist concerns, such as the role of the "Word" in a contemporary context. In recognizing that Muslim feminist theology has both highlighted the egalitarian ethos of the Qur'an and noted its gender egalitarian limitations, Lamptey draws on Christian scholar Kwok Pui-lan's work on feminist imaginings of Jesus to propose that Muslim feminist theologians adopt a hybrid approach towards the Qur'an. That is, viewing the Qur'an as a "site of relationship" and embracing its complexities and ambiguities (Lamptey, 2018: 69). In doing so, readers are able to recognize that "the Qur'an is divine and of this world. It is universal and revealed in response to a particular context. It is egalitarian and marked with androcentrism and patriarchy" (2018: 68). Lamptey proposes that such an approach allows for additional egalitarian interpretations "by refusing to privilege historical meaning or accumulated tradition," and approaching historical meaning and tradition as a "responses to aspects of Qur'anic hybridity, but they are not the only possible or legitimate responses" (2018: 70).

In addition to cultivating strategies for defining, defending, and critiquing gender egalitarianism in the Qur'an, feminist scholars have examined scriptural exegesis as a normatively male tradition. Ash Geissinger argues that pre-modern exegetes brought

their pre-existing gender biases to *tafsīr*, or interpretive analysis of the Qur'an, and further marginalized women through their engagements with hadith. Geissinger's survey of "cultural work" performed by gender in pre-modern *tafsīr* illustrates that constructions of gender are fluid and contextually specific, but exegetes defined any kind of social authority, including interpretive authority, as masculine. Consequently, pre-modern exegetes framed the authority to interpret the Quran "over/against femaleness, which they associate[d] with intellectual, physical, moral and spiritual deficiency" (Geissinger, 2015: 25). By both marginalizing women's roles in exegetical materials and their roles as hadith transmitters, pre-modern interpreters constructed "the Qur'anic text so that it appears to virtually refuse the possibility that a woman could possess the authority to legitimately interpret it" (Geissinger, 2015: 25).

In tandem with Geissinger's analysis of pre-modern interpretive and religious authority as normatively male, Fatima Mernissi argues that hadith and the chain of transmission (*isnad*) that attributes hadiths back to the Prophet or his companions served as formidable political weapon used to maintain the power of male elite after the death of the Prophet. Mernissi argues that the manipulation of hadith to uphold male authority was a "structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies. Since all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false traditions" (1991: 9). In examining the historical context and methodological issues that arise in examination of frequently cited hadith used to justify hierarchical gender relations and misogynistic attitudes of highly accredited transmitters, Mernissi argues that women's rights have never been incompatible with the Prophet's message or Qur'an, "but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite" (1991: ix).

Ethics, in the valence of praxis, which stems from engagements with the Qur'an and Islamic religious knowledge, refers to people's real-life experiences and actions they believe are in accordance with Qur'anic principles. Sa'diyya Shaikh's research on Muslim women domestic violence survivors argues that Islamic gender ethics are not only derived from *tafsīr* by traditional and feminist scholars, but informed by Muslim women's lived experiences, or a "*tafsīr* of praxis." Shaikh examines how participants' experiences with domestic violence led them to contemplate their humanity, Islam, and Islamic ethics, which resulted in a "Islamic ethical and theological framework that challenged misogynist and utilitarian religious views on women and explicitly interrogated the abusive relationships on a religious basis" (Shaikh, 2007: 80). Through their experiences with oppression and contemplation of their religion and humanity, participants were able to derive Islamic ethical frameworks that condemned patriarchal interpretations of 4:34 by their husbands and local religious leaders. Shaikh's work demonstrates that the contemporary gender ethics derived from the Qur'an are in "an arena of engaged, dynamic, and polysemic encounters" (2007: 89). Thus, women's lived experiences are a "source of understanding and knowledge production within religious traditions" (2007: 89). The notion of *tafsīr* of praxis points to a possibility of an Islamic feminist ethics that is not confined by the gendered intimate and social relationships described in Islamic texts.

### Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) as ethics and its limits

Islamic jurisprudence is probably the most tangible and obvious genre of Islamic thought that dictates gender ethics but also responds to Muslim praxis, in the second sense of ethics as people's practices, through the apparatus of *fatwas* or legal responsa. Discourses on gender in Islamic jurisprudence are frequently discussed in relation to family and marriage law, for

example women's right to divorce, inheritance, maintenance, education, and employment. *Fiqh* has responded to contemporary debates on gender and women's rights through *fatwas* that either uphold, amend, or recontextualize classical Islamic jurisprudence on marriage and family law. However, based on analysis of classical *fiqh* on marriage, Kecia Ali argues that early jurists viewed *fiqh* on marriage as a contract (2003). The parameters of this contract were based on jurists' environment and premised on the notion that women's maintenance was a condition of their sexual availability, as demonstrated on early rulings that compared marriage to slavery or a contractual sale. Feminist scholars, like Ali, have identified two contemporary approaches for responding to gender hierarchical *fiqh*, neo-traditionalist or gender complementarity (Mir-Hosseini, 2003) and "feminist apologist" (Ali, 2003: 175).

Neo-conservative or neo-traditionalist scholars who have taken the complementarity position concede that from the perspective of Allah, all human beings are equal – that is they have been created by Allah in the same way and will be judged by Allah using the same standards of their weighing their deeds and misdeeds in the hereafter. However, such scholars primarily understand that equality is limited to the Divine perspective in the hereafter and not God's intent for earthly gender relations. On Earth, they contend that according to the Qur'anic verse 4:34 God intended complementary roles for men and women. In the complementarity thesis men are the protectors and especially financial maintainers of women (*qawwamun 'ala an-nisa*), who in turn are suited to feminine domestic roles. Ziba Mir-Hosseini identifies a complementarity approach towards Islamic gender relations that emerges out of Muslims authority figures' contradictory need to both defend and uphold traditionalist *fiqh* models of family and gender relations, while also being aware of, and sensitive to, criticism of the patriarchal basis of Islamic law and the desire to ground gender egalitarianism as inherently Islamic, not Western or imported (2003).

The contradictions that arise from the gender complementarity thesis are illustrated when a single text argues "for gender equality on one issue (for example, women's education and employment), but rejecting it on another (for example, divorce)" (Mir-Hosseini, 2003: 16). In addition, women's biological disposition or nature towards domestic work are often cited to support gender complementarity and defend classical *fiqh*. However, Ali points that such arguments are inconsistent with classical *fiqh* as early jurists concluded that domestic work was not a wife's responsibility, just sexual availability (2003: 175). Ultimately, these tensions expose the "internal contradictions and anachronisms in *fiqh* rules" on gender, which Mir-Hosseini attributes to classical jurists misconstructions of the concept of *qiwamah* (traditionality translated as male guardianship). Based on an analysis of classical jurists use of *qiwamah* in family and marriage law, *qiwamah* developed in accordance to pre-Islamic marriage contracts and have "mistakenly been understood as placing women under men's authority, with the result that they have become the building blocks of patriarchy within Muslim legal tradition" (Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani and Rumminger, 2015: 18).

Second, scholars who adopt a feminist apologist approach emphasize the importance of stipulations and practical applications of marriage contracts. For example, the inclusion of stipulations that guarantee a woman's right to education and outside employment within marriage contracts. However, Ali argues that such an approach "misses the forest for the trees" (2003: 164) and "though potentially quite effective in securing for women's rights that are not respected today, it runs the risk of further cementing the authority of the traditional opinions" (2003: 181). Thus, Ali proposes that a critical appraisal and analysis of the methods and rules of traditional jurisprudence will demonstrate "that its doctrines are entirely inadequate to serve as the basis for laws governing Muslim families, communities, and societies today" (2003: 182).

Like the scriptural ethical tradition, feminist scholars have identified the limits of jurisprudence in defining and defending egalitarian gender ethics. These limitations are a consequence of the historical context in which schools of jurisprudence emerged. However, pre-modern jurisprudence has contemporary consequences, and forces feminist scholars to ask whether a tradition formed to support patriarchal social structures is capable of producing egalitarian gender ethics.

### Sufi ethics meets feminism

Often scholarship about women and gender in Sufism notes that Sufism is not a social movement but that the focus is on the spiritual and not the embodied – even if discipline of the body is the way to the divine. Feminist literature on Sufism and gender ethics aims to bridge this gap, demonstrating that engagement with the Divine and the refinement of the soul are not only spiritually accessible to women, but dependent on just and egalitarian social relationships.

For example, Sa'diyya Shaikh proposes that Sufi discourses on ontology and metaphysics offer Muslim feminists an alternative, faith-based approach for critiquing Islamic law and gender inequality (2009). Shaikh draws on Sufi narratives and Ibn Arabi's work, one of the foremost Sufi scholars, that challenge gender inequality to argue that Sufi ontology, which can be understood as pertaining to the spiritual elements of being Muslim and cultivation of the soul or *nafs*, is inherently egalitarian. Reading Ibn Arabi's work and Sufi narratives from a feminist lens, Shaikh makes two important ontologically based defenses of gender egalitarianism within Sufi discourses. First, with the Sufi mission to cultivate "soul at peace" (*an-nafs al-mutma'innah*) through complete submission of God and the purification of the heart posited, Sufi narratives demonstrate that "the commitment to a constant awareness of God's absolute sovereignty counters the human instinct to claim power, including male claims to authority over women" (Shaikh, 2009: 792). Thus, any claim of social or physical authority over another being signifies an uncultivated and impure soul (*an-nafs al-ammara*). Second, Ibn Arabi's references to women's spiritual equality in response to hierarchical Islamic law and hadith serve to recognize women's social inequality, question the applicability of gender-hierarchical hadiths, and connect "women's ontological capacity for perfection to agency in the social realm and specifically, in the law" (2009: 811).

Laury Silvers's historical mystery novel, *The Lover*, offers a fictional, but historically sensitive account of gendered engagement with mysticism in tenth century Baghdad (Deighton, 2019). Following the life of the lead character Zaytuna, a Nubian wash woman whose mother was a famous mystic, and other servant-class characters in their pursuit to uncover information about a murdered local boy, *The Lover* is an example of Sufi gender ethics that insists upon deep mystical engagement with the Divine, while being conscious of gendered experiences and embodiment while trying to live a fulfilling life. Through Zaytuna and other characters, Silvers depicts how gender and socio-economic status impact both characters' lived experience and engagements with the Divine and displays "the full range of cognitive and embodied dissonance that can emerge when the doctrines designed to keep us 'right with God' give rise to our trauma" (Deighton, 2019). Although it is fiction, the novel's themes are a commentary on how women encounter the ethical/Muslim life in gendered ways.

Feminist engagements with Sufism posit an understanding of gender ethics that is equally concerned with addressing gender hierarchies in both the physical and metaphysical world. In doing so, gender hierarchies can be approached as a characteristic of women's social

relationships, as well as their relationship with the divine. In light of such understandings, one is forced to ask whether the soul is gendered and examine how social oppression both inhibits women's access to religious authority and the ways in which women have imagined new means of fostering spiritual refinement in response to such conditions.

### **Hierarchies in *Kalam* and *Akhlaq* and their gender ethics implications**

Although *kalam* (theology) is not directly about people, much less gender, many of the debates within this genre are relevant to gender ethics in Islam. The central questions in the genre of *kalam* is what is the nature of God and what does that nature tell us about Divine intent for the universe and humanity? The way Muslims have imagined God, as documented in the *kalam* genre, becomes about *human* relationships to God as well as access to God, authority to speak or act on behalf of that God, and so on.

There are a few vital issues regarding the concept of God that manifest in Muslim understanding of gender and gender roles; namely, the gendered male language and understanding of God in masculine terms; the concept of oneness of God (*tawhid*); and relatedly, the notion of God's absolute authority/will and how that will is embodied and enacted by humans (*khilafah*).

Language and pronouns for the Divine were among the first issues that feminist theologians (across religious traditions) grappled with in coming to terms with the patriarchal nature of scriptural interpretation. In questioning male pronouns used in *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) and in everyday language and thought, Muslim feminist theologians were not just questioning a patriarchal intellectual tradition, but exposing a deep theological and philosophical assumption that many Muslims make – that God is male. Although the Muslim tradition rejects anthropomorphization of God, using female pronouns seems absurd to many, revealing the idea that the use of the male pronoun is not arbitrary, but rather normative.

The ramifications of male normativity in the conception of God has had consequences as far as Muslim men's self-perception as representatives of God's plan for humanity, society, and their families and in the form of the male-oriented concept of *khilafah* (vicegerency of God). Consequently, Muslim men have viewed themselves in their descriptions of God and God's intent for humanity. Although the Qur'anic concept of *khilafah* can be construed as a gender neutral responsibility of every human being to be a "trustee" or "moral agent" of God's justice, as wadud has argued (2006: 35), in practice, the role of *khalifah*, or the public title that involves being God's stewards of Muslims/society, has only been played by men. This fact also relates political leadership, which is often construed as a peripheral concern for Muslim women, to the fundamental idea about their status and relationship to the Divine.

Relatedly, the idea that Divine authority has been invested only in men manifests as justification for male superiority – of their intellect, strength, and rulership over women. A salient critique of gender hierarchy as mandated by the Divine is wadud's perspective on Muslim belief in *tawhid* (Divine unity), which she calls the *tawhidic paradigm*. She argues that the most fundamental aspect of Islam, that is belief in one God, requires gender equality. She reasons that all humans must be equal if there is a singular Lord – that is no humans "lord over" others, including men over women or free persons over the enslaved. Consequently, "when a person seeks to place him- or herself 'above' another, it either means the divine presence is removed or ignored, or that the person who imagines his or her self above others suffers from the egoism of *shirk* [idolatry]" (wadud, 2006: 32). Thus, gender hierarchy violates *tawhid* because it invests moral and spiritual superiority in men, despite the impossibility for Muslim women to believe in any superior power other than God.



In the adjacent genre of philosophical ethics (*akhlaq*), women are likewise excluded from the path of ethical refinement. As I have shown in *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*, pre-modern Muslim ethicists cut women off from the creator's plan for humanity as they invested *khilafah* in elite men on the basis of their higher rational capacity, while prescribing an instrumental role for women to serve their husbands on the basis of their deficient capacity for rationality. I argue that this seemingly time-bound marital arrangement has far-reaching consequences on Muslim understandings of how existence and roles in life are gendered and hierarchical (Ayubi, 2019: 172–173). Elite men are also meant to rule over the lower classes of men in the homosocial male public arena, as well as all enslaved persons because of their supposedly higher intellects (Ayubi, 2019: 217–220). While hierarchy may seem like a logical or natural order for society, often the criteria used to determine who counts as elite or worthy of occupying higher status perpetuates the exclusion of women and non-elites (Ayubi, 2019: 270–272). It is also based on a definition of rationality that is as cyclical as it is exclusionary: elite men are most rational, and rationality is defined as perfected manhood.

### Ethics of care

Ethics of care has its roots in feminist philosophy, but has made an appearance in Islamic thought. Coined by Carol Gilligan and further detailed by Nel Noddings, “the focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility” (Held, 2007: 10). An ethics of care offers a framework to derive moral values from Muslim women's work to resist oppression and address the needs of their communities.

For example, wadud frames African American Muslim women's grass-roots initiatives that respond to community needs, like T.R.U.T.H. and Muslim Women United, as an ethics of care that pre-dates slavery and is reflected in the African idiom, “It takes a village to raise a child” (2006: 103). wadud identifies two dynamics present in an ethics of care: “the need of one member, one family, or the communities; and the development of collective help and support” (2006: 103). In detailing the work of black Muslim women leading grass-roots initiatives to address food insecurity, raise funds for medical care, and create support networks for fellow Muslim women, wadud proposes that these leaders' work reflects an ethics of care defined by an approach to leadership that is “in concert with other Muslims,” does not impose authority, and emphasizes a unity that is “never used for uniformity, as demonstrated in the inclusive nature” of organization events. wadud's assessment of black Muslim women's community work suggests that a Muslim ethics of care is concerned with addressing community needs in a manner that does not recreate social hierarchies or oppressive power dynamics.

Like wadud's framing of black women's community leadership as representative of an ethics of care, Amaraah Decuir uses a Muslim ethics of care to frame women's leadership in Islamic schools. Drawing on interviews with Muslim school leaders, Decuir proposes that participants' leadership represents a critical ethics of care that uses the act of caring to “transform a community” and resist everyday oppression (2019: 8). Decuir proposes that school leaders' commitment to establishing equitable school practices, resisting oppression within and outside of their school communities, nurturing or “other mothering” students, and approaching their work as an Islamic obligation to address community needs represents a “Muslim-centered conceptualization of a critical feminist ethics of care” (2019: 20). This Muslim ethics of care is also consistent with black feminist critical ethics because school leaders' social justice advocacy is displayed in their choice “to lead in ways designed to establish equity in the presence of injustice” (DeCuir, 2019: 19).

wadud and Decuir's assessment of Muslim women's community leadership offers an example of the morals and values that have the potential to define equitable social relationships. Their work demonstrates social relationships derived from an ethics of care prioritize community needs over maintaining authority, and center social justice advocacy over establishing uniformity. Ethics of care offers a distinct methodology for deriving Muslim feminist ethics, one that supplements the moral values derived from Islamic intellectual tradition with the moral values reflected in Muslim women's social justice work to define egalitarian social relationships relevant to Muslims' contemporary lives.

### Love ethics

Muslim love ethics is a new current of gender ethics that seeks to subvert oppressive practices out of love for the tradition and fellow Muslims with an eye toward the future. Muslim love ethics is not just concerned with assigning moral language to everyday women's resistance, as is the focus of an ethics of care, but in its contemporary use is concerned with imagining the moral language that characterizes an egalitarian future. This definition of Muslim love ethics draws on contemporary and black feminist scholarship that approaches love and love politics as a guide for identifying the values and practices that *ought* to define a utopian future (Nash, 2011) and assign "normative moral language for what should and should not be the case" (Fitz-Gibbon, 2011: 41).

For Muslim feminist ethics, love ethics turns its focus to the moral language and values represented in Muslims' work to create and imagine alternative communities absent of oppression, rather than focusing on the moral language derived from their experiences of oppression. For example, Iman AbdoulKarim's work on Muslim women's participation in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement finds that Muslim women are creating "their own practice of a love ethic, one that aims to create alternative communities and spaces that ... adopt a radiating approach towards inclusion that works to center the margins of the marginalized" (2017: 67). AbdoulKarim argues that BLM activists' commitment to centering the margins of the marginalized is a moral value that defines their vision of an egalitarian community. Her work demonstrates that love ethics can be used to consider the moral values Muslim women develop in an attempt to create egalitarian communities, in addition to those derived from their work to resist oppression.

Love ethics's emphasis on assigning moral language to oppression-free communities is also reflected in the emergence of Muslim futurism in contemporary art movements that propose a gender and race inclusive ethical framework. Drawing on Afro futurism, Muslim futurism is concerned with the practices, events, and trends that characterize a future in which Muslims emerge from and evolve past contemporary social conditions of oppression. Under the banner of queer Muslim futurism, artist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's multi-media and performance series, "Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth," centres the narrative of a Muslim drag character leading a queer rebellion who discusses "contemporary politics in a future that signals a different dimension" to present a reimagined, future expressions of Muslim masculinity where "gender and sexuality are undefined and identities are left unclear" (Yer-ebakan, 2018). Like Bhutto's aim of redefining the parameters of a Muslim identity, Mipsterz's, an artist and culture collective, short film, *Alhamdu*, aims to reimagine a Muslim future through "a vibrant and joyous future where Muslims exist unapologetically" (Mipsterz, 2019). In the film, various expressions of Muslim identities are embodied by a racially diverse cast dressed in gender and ethnically fluid clothing. The film is set in urban New York City and a California desert and accompanied by a song that combines hip-hop

and Egyptian musical styles in a manner that further emphasizes the film's aim to imagine a future absent of a uniformed expression of a Muslim religious identity.

Mipsterz and Ali Bhutto's works not only resist mono-dimensional constructions of Muslims, but echo love ethics's focus on identifying the moral language that characterizes oppression-free communities. By using art as a medium, Mipsterz and Ali Bhutto's work suggest that an egalitarian Muslim future is characterized by fluid religious and gendered identities and a constant interrogation of what expressions of Islam are privileged over others. Muslim futurism and love ethics propose that Muslim feminist ethics can derive egalitarian moral values by not only defining what is and is not representative of an Islamic ethos, but through embracing that a single definition of Islam and what it means to be Muslim may not be possible.

Ethics of care and love ethics make two important contributions to Muslim feminist ethics. First, both frameworks allow feminist scholars to explore what moral language and virtue practices can be defined through social relationships and Muslim women's social justice work, not just textual analysis. Thus as I discuss above, if the Islamic intellectual tradition emerged within patriarchal social conditions and produced gender ethics that privilege and maintain male authority, assigning moral language to Muslim women's acts of resistance and imaginings of an oppression-free futures offers a new, woman-centered method for deriving moral values that support egalitarian social relations within an Islamic framework.

As I propose in *Gendered Morality*, moving forward, attention to the category of gender requires a reimagination of Islamic ethics that is inclusive of women, non-elites, and individuals who may be marginalized on the basis of their gender, race, sexuality, physical or cognitive abilities, etc. (Ayubi, 2019: 273–274). New currents in Muslim ethical thought and praxis such as love ethics and ethics of care are frameworks that are already doing this work: with origins in black feminist theory, they require Muslim feminist ethics to account for race, sexuality, and other marginalized aspects of human existence in considering the moral language that support radically egalitarian social relationships. In accommodating the varieties of human experience that are gendered, at stake is accessibility to the good life according to a Muslim ethos.

### Further reading

- Ali, K. (2016). *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications. A ground-breaking exploration of multiple topics related to sexuality and the ethics and lawfulness of sex in the Islamic tradition such as sexual relations in marriage, outside of marriage, homosexuality, and more.
- Ayubi, Z. (2019). *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*, New York: Columbia University Press. This book is an extended feminist critique of pre-modern Islamic philosophical ethics treatises that argues for feminist philosophical engagement with the perennial philosophical questions that the texts raise.
- wadud, a. (2006). *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications. This book raises several feminist ethics questions of Muslim approaches to the Qur'an, relationship with the Divine, and gender justice work in Muslim communities.

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