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Gender, Sexuality, and Islam in Muslim Women's English Literature

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This special issue, *Gender, Sexuality, and Islam in Muslim Women's English Literature*, emerges at a crucial juncture in contemporary socio-political discourse. In recent years, Muslim women's voices have gained increasing prominence in literary works that interrogate and disrupt established norms surrounding gender, sexuality, and identity. These narratives do more than challenge both western and Islamic patriarchal structures—they provide a sophisticated critique of the socio-religious constraints placed on women, while simultaneously celebrating their agency, resilience, and power. Through these literary explorations, Muslim women articulate forms of resistance and self-assertion that transcend simplistic binaries between victimhood and empowerment. They offer new perspectives on identity formation in contexts where religious, cultural, and gendered boundaries intersect.[1]

The current global climate, where debates about gender, sexuality, and religious identity are often polarized and reductive, further emphasises the timeliness of this issue. The intersectionality of these identities, as popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw,[2] provides a necessary lens through which to understand the multi-layered experiences of Muslim women, who are often subject to various forms of marginalisation. By drawing on this framework, the special issue addresses a gap in the existing scholarship, particularly in its emphasis on how Muslim women's narratives negotiate between secular and Islamic feminist discourses. We seek to foreground the complex ways in which Muslim women resist not only patriarchal norms within their communities but also Islamophobic stereotypes that circulate in the broader public sphere.

Muslim women's experiences, as evidenced in the works examined here, cannot be understood without acknowledging the unique trajectories of Middle Eastern feminisms.

[1] Muhammad Safdar and Musarat Yasmin, 'Love and Marriage: Reimagining Muslim Female Subjectivity in Kamila Shamsie's Salt and Saffron,' *Cultural Dynamics* 35, no. 3 (10 June 2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/09213740231183426; Moussa Pourya Asl, ed., *Urban Poetics and Politics in Contemporary South Asia and the Middle East* (IGI Global, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-6650-6; Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011); Kathryn Robinson, 'Islam and Gender Relations in Indonesia, with a Special Focus on Eastern Indonesia,' *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, no. 30 (2012), http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue30/robinson_intro.htm.

[2] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins : Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

Margot Badran[3] and other prominent scholars[4] have underscored the necessity of viewing these feminisms through an indigenous lens, which differs significantly from western feminist traditions. The articles included in this special issue are situated within this rich intellectual tradition. They draw on both secular and religious feminist paradigms to highlight the specificity of Muslim women's struggles and the multiplicity of their voices. The importance of this distinction becomes particularly salient when we consider how Islamic feminists reinterpret religious and cultural norms from within, resisting external impositions and asserting their agency through the reimagining of both religious texts and social practices.

Central to the contributions in this issue is the recognition of Muslim women's identities as intricately shaped by the intersection of gender, religion, and sexuality. The articles engage critically with the concept of resistance and explore how Muslim women, in both eastern and western contexts, challenge the stereotypes and expectations imposed on them. The veil, for example, emerges as a powerful symbol of agency and self-definition in several articles and destabilises the western narrative of the veiled woman as inherently oppressed. Similarly, other cultural markers—such as music, language, and silence—are reinterpreted by Muslim women writers as tools for resistance against both imperialism and patriarchy. These works collectively illuminate the nuanced ways in which Muslim women navigate the spaces between tradition and modernity and challenge and reconfigure dominant narratives about their roles and identities.

The contributions to this special issue also underscore the importance of literature as a site for negotiating citizenship, belonging, and sexuality. Muslim women, particularly those living in diaspora, often confront multiple layers of marginalisation as they navigate the intersection of their religious and gendered identities with the expectations of western societies. Yet, as the articles demonstrate, these women also forge new pathways for asserting their autonomy and redefining their sense of belonging. Through narratives of citizenship, they challenge exclusionary policies and cultural discourses. In this way, they assert their rights to exist and thrive in societies that frequently misunderstand or marginalise them.

By bringing together a diverse range of perspectives and methodologies, this special issue seeks to enrich academic discourse on gender and Islam, while offering new insights into how Muslim women use literature as a platform for social critique and personal expression. The works in this collection not only challenge existing scholarly paradigms but also contribute to ongoing debates about the role of Muslim women in shaping contemporary global cultures. By focusing on contrapuntal themes such as sisterhood, resistance, and solidarity, the articles offer fresh insights into how Muslim women writers engage with the complexities of identity formation in a world where their voices are often silenced or misunderstood.

Building upon this foundation, we aim to move beyond simplistic readings of Muslim women's literature as either purely resistant or purely compliant. Instead, this collection offers a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Muslim women writers employ literature to navigate—and often subvert—the multiple systems of oppression they face.

[3] Margot Badram, 'Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s : Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond,' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005).

[4] Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,' *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002), https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783.

The contributors to this issue engage with critical feminist and postcolonial frameworks to explore how Muslim women articulate agency, not only through overt resistance but also through subtle acts of negotiation, reinterpretation, and self-definition. In doing so, they reveal the intricate ways in which gender, religion, and sexuality intersect in the lives of Muslim women.

Ultimately, this special issue seeks to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that recognises the importance of intersectional identities in shaping the lived experiences of Muslim women. The articles offer valuable insights into how Muslim women resist and reshape the narratives imposed upon them, whether by western imperialist discourses or by patriarchal structures within their own communities. By centring Muslim women's voices and experiences, *Gender, Sexuality, and Islam in Muslim Women's English Literature* contributes not only to the academic study of literature but also to broader debates about social justice, identity, and agency in the contemporary world. The significance of these contributions is profound, as they challenge essentialist notions of Muslim women's experiences while opening up new possibilities for future research and scholarship.

For instance, Joy Mazahreh's 'Contrapuntality and the Veil in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*' employs Edward Said's concept of contrapuntality to examine how Muslim women characters, like Nadia, resist Orientalist stereotypes, particularly through their relationship with the veil. This analysis of contrapuntality ties into broader explorations of how Muslim women subvert imperialist narratives and challenge Islamophobic discourse, a theme that resonates across several other articles.

In contrast, Lynsey Haught's 'The Music of the Hemispheres: Halide Edib's Transnational Voice and the Sound of East-West Fusion in Late Ottoman Constantinople' delves into how cultural tensions are navigated in Halide Edib's novel *The Clown and His Daughter.* Through musical metaphors, Edib reimagines the role of Muslim women in harmonising East and West, reflecting their struggle for identity within broader socio-political contexts. Like Mazahreh's study, Haught examines how Muslim women use cultural elements as forms of resistance and expression in a colonial and postcolonial world.

Extending these discussions, Behzad Pourgharib, Moussa Pourya Asl, and Somayeh Esmaili, in 'Muslim Women's Sisterhood and Resistance in Nadia Hashimi's The Pearl That Broke Its Shell,' highlight how sisterhood becomes a mode of resistance against patriarchal oppression in Afghanistan. Their analysis draws on bell hooks's feminist theory to explore how solidarity among Muslim women combats societal structures that silence them, further reinforcing the theme of collective resilience present in both Mazahreh's and Haught's analyses.

Muhammad Safdar's 'Farizan's If You Could Be Mine: Home, Citizenship, and Homosexuality' shifts focus to the experiences of Muslim queer women, examining the challenges faced by Sahar, a Muslim lesbian, in navigating Iran's oppressive policies toward homosexuality. Safdar's study of resistance against religio-political constructs parallels the broader theme of Muslim women's resilience, as seen in the other works.

In Muhammad Sohail Ahmad's 'Dislocation and Silence: A Quest to Break Transgenerational Patriarchal Chain in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride,*' the focus is on the psychological trauma and silence endured by Muslim women in patriarchal societies. Ahmad's exploration of the protagonist's struggle against patriarchal norms echoes the themes of resistance and survival discussed by Behzad Pourgharib, Moussa Pourya Asl, and Somayeh Esmaili adding psychological depth to the understanding of how silence can both oppress and empower.

Finally, Suhana Simran's 'The Politics of Love and Choice in the Muslim Chick-Lit' offers a lighter yet equally critical exploration of Muslim women's agency in mainstream western culture. Through an analysis of rom-coms like Uzma Jalaluddin's *Ayesha at Last* and Sabina Khan's *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*, Simran discusses how love and romantic comedy serve as platforms for political expression, pushing boundaries on topics of identity, choice, and sexuality. This playful engagement with identity politics reinforces the broader thematic concern of how Muslim women negotiate complex societal roles.

Together, these works form a cohesive exploration of how Muslim women, across diverse settings and narratives, negotiate identity, resist patriarchal and colonial constructs, and redefine their place in both eastern and western contexts.

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