

Moroccan Feminists: Between Activism and *Muslima* Theology

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Abstract. *This paper rereads Moroccan feminism within a nascent methodological interpretive framework dubbed “Muslima theology.” Examining the work of Moroccan Muslim feminists Asma Lamrabet and Khadija al-Battar, it addresses the social and political implications of the emerging critical engagement of Muslima theologians with the old-anchored male hermeneutic tradition of the Sacred Texts. It puts into question the ideological basis of the principle of the “closure of the gate of ijtihad” by revealing how the interpretive tradition is heterogeneous and has been over history subject to religious considerations as well as political and patriarchal changing realities. Focus on the contribution of “Muslima theologians” aims at tracing, recouping some aspects of the systematically foreclosed female interpretive narrative, and subverting the exclusive male norms of interpretation conducive to the formation of a socio-cultural reality that validates in the name of Islam the low status of woman. Enlightened gender-inclusive interpretation of the Sacred Texts allows for alternative histories and agencies bringing to the surface new articulations based on particularities, gender, specific temporalities, contexts, and circumstances. The paper concludes that without Muslima theology as a liberating sub-branch of Islamic feminism, feminism in its activist form would fall short of achieving its objectives, for the traditionalist and literalist exclusive interventions will continue to shape cultural politics at an elitist and grassroots levels.*

Keywords: *Moroccan feminism, Muslima theology, Muslim feminism, Sacred Texts, gender-inclusive interpretation, gender equality.*

This paper addresses the social and political implications and functions of the contemporary body of critical engagement of “Muslima theology and theologians” with the old anchored male interpretive tradition of the Sacred Texts. It aims at revealing how the interpretive tradition is heterogeneous and has been subject not only to religious considerations, but also to ideological and patriarchal realities. As such, my focus on “Muslima theologians” is designed to trace some aspects of the systematically marginalized and foreclosed female interpretive rhetoric and challenge the hegemonic

and exclusive male norms of interpretation, affecting the social and cultural status of women in the Muslim societies in general and Moroccan society in particular.

As such interpretation is a social act as much as it is not a mere intellectual exercise, it rather has a direct impact on the male female dynamics. I would like to stress, following Gayatri Spivak's famous article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that women spoke and speak but they could not be heard because they do not own power structures (education, media, and decision-making positions for example). I shall put particular emphasis on the contribution of Moroccan Muslim feminists to the controversial debate over women's right to the reinterpretation of the Sacred Texts; these include Asma Lembrabet, and Khadija al-Battar; Fatima Mernissi's contribution would require a separate article. I contend that the feminist interpretive trend in countries like Morocco gained momentum during the last 25 years thanks to the revival of Enlightenment, modernist, liberal, and rational epistemologies, ideologies, and philosophies. Such trend, side by side with the growing influence of feminism, helped shake the long-anchored hierarchy of difference, giving way to the possibility for the transcription of a female intellectual, political, and religious subjectivity.

The systematic exclusion of women and their invalidation as interpretive communities in the long exegesis tradition has political causes and dangerous consequences. These include:

1. Many hadiths (prophetic tradition) were invented and are misogynistic; they don't chime in with the spirit of Islam. They are "inventions of the Umayyad period and other post-Prophetic dynasties, when legal regulations and theological doctrine promoted the intellectual and physical enslavement of Muslim women reflecting a culture of harems, where women needed to be controlled" (Wadud 2006, 42). Although the Hadiths were inauthentic, they legitimized in the name of Islam the long tradition of patriarchal tyranny of harem-life and political hegemony.
2. The Gnostic and literalist textual-interpretive line of Arab-Islamic civilization eclipsed the rational trajectory of thought, leading to the eclipse of women's contribution to rational and enlightenment narrative in spite of its presence at different phases of history. In the context of his reform project, al-Jabri proposes epistemological solutions to the eclipse of Arab civilization in the modern age by classifying the Arab-Islamic sciences as textual-interpretive (*ulum al-bayan*), gnostic (*ulum al-irfan*) and demonstrative-experimental (*ulum al-burhan*). The domination of the two former over the latter, he argues, resulted in the Arab world being surpassed in the

modern age. The adoption of a rational rethinking methodology of the religious heritage is meant to counterbalance the ideological and at times irrational interpretation and praxis.

3. More dangerously, the monopolizing male tradition of interpretation of religious texts validates the relegation of women to a secondary political and social position. I shall argue later that Muslima theologians and their act such as Amina Wadud's unprecedented performative act of leading a congregational mixed prayer is an act of addressing, redressing, and subverting the male politics of religion. Islamic texts or rather male interpretive traditions would be revived to legitimize the political exclusion of women in a way that would be dismissed as political absurdity if espoused by non-Muslim modern states. Fatima Mernissi uses the story of Benazir Bhutu's victory in Pakistani elections in 1988 to launch mordant criticism against the double talk of the male politicians in Muslim countries. When Benazir Bhutto was democratically elected Prime Minister of Pakistan after winning the 1988 general elections, "all who monopolized the right to speak in the name of Islam, and especially Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the then Opposition, the IDA (Islamic Democratic Alliance), raised the cry of blasphemy: 'Never - horrors! - has a Muslim state been governed by a woman!' Invoking Islamic tradition, they decried this event as 'against nature'" (Mernissi 1993, 1). She goes on to stress that Nawaz Sharif and his supporters "could not have waged a similar campaign against the candidate who won the election if he had been named Hasan or Muhammad. The resultant ambiguity (always a bearer of violence in matters of rights) only comes into play when it is a question of a woman" (Mernissi 1993, 1). Recourse to the seventh-century (Prophetic Tradition) to hone a misogynistic political status quo and absurdly invalidate a twentieth-century election was dismissed by many Muslima theologians and secular intellectuals and activists as a striking example of the politicians' manipulative utilization of religion for political purposes.
4. The place of women in Arab-Islamic countries has over centuries been prisoner on the one hand of male partial and partisan rhetoric and on the other hand of two reductive "radical perspectives": "one rigid Islamic conservative; the other western, ethnocentric and Islamophobic" (Lamrabet 2016). Several critics call for a "third way" approach or what I prefer to call "Double Critique" to use the term of Abdelkbir Khatibi to deconstruct and eventually help dismantle

both the Islamic conservative stance and the Eurocentric binary perspective.

5. Interpretation of the Sacred Texts has a direct impact on the laws that regulate the relation between men and women. An orthodox literalist male interpretation can produce rigid codes as is the case of the 1957 Women's Personal Status that was drafted by a commission that consisted of ten male religious scholars in the total absence of women. Conversely, a more liberal, moderate, and more inclusive interpretation can produce a far less discriminatory law as is the case of the 2004 Family Code drafted by both men and women representing different ideologies.

Such restrictive politics that made women subject to double-bind articulation of conservative and Eurocentric hegemonic hierarchy led a group of Muslim feminists to reengage female alternative voices in the field of theology. I shall argue that Muslima theologians and the increasing acts of subversive observation of religious rituals such as women leading prayers and creating all-women's mosques affect not only theological gender equality, but also the politics of the space of worship.¹

Moroccan feminism operates at least at two different but mutually influential paradigm trajectories. As much is written about the former, I shall devote less space to it than to the latter. The first one concerns political feminist activism which can be traced to the early 1980's when Marxist Leninist activists led campaigns to empower women and subvert the male-dominated cultural politics. As the enthusiasm following the independence of Morocco in 1956 started to peter out, the gender issue which was not top priority during the State Building phase (1956-1974), came to top the agenda of the social movements. The feminists started off their rhetoric of difference discourse on the premise that "the subordination of women was not a class issue, but rather a gender one" (Miller 2013, 191); this paradigm shift from class to gender was supported by a growing regime of universal human rights and women's rights standards (e.g. the CEDAW, the UN Decade for Women). This movement gained momentum when a group of Moroccan secular feminists and associations especially the Marxist Leninist

- 1 Over the last few years, a growing number of women subverted the conventional religious practices. For example, Sherin Khankan started up an unprecedented Mosque run exclusively by women in Denmark called "Mariam Mosque." Khankan came to this decision as she thought that the Mosques as they were and are still run do not provide an environment where women can feel at home as they are male-dominated. She is also critical of the reproduction of patriarchy in religious spaces. Besides, Yemeni academic Ilham Manie gained media visibility when she delivered an unprecedented Friday khutbah (sermon) to a group of female and male Muslims in Switzerland. The prayer led by Halima Josay Hussein was intersected by pieces of music.

Union for Feminine Action, affiliated to the Democratic Political Action Organization championed a grass-root campaign by mobilizing women and human rights activists through the collection of one million signatures to revisit and reform the institutional patriarchal Family Code enacted in 1957 and slightly amended in 1993.

Fortunately for them, the endeavor to dismantle the dominant political and religious conservatism and push for more social and political visibility of women benefited from Morocco's ratification of the UN Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1993. As the women's rights and human rights' narrative was gaining more momentum, King Hassan II, in line with the Palace's unprecedented opening up to opposition parties, appointed Abderrahman El Youssoufi, leader of the long-opposition Socialist Union for popular Forces Party to form a socialist government in 1998. This government proposed the controversial National Plan for the Integration of Women in development. This plan was among other things designed to reform the discriminatory family code within the framework of the international covenants of human rights. This move was dismissed by the masses and by the Islamists, including the Party of Justice and Development currently in office and the Sufi-based opposition religious group Justice and Benevolence, as dictates from the West, just as they accused the socialist parties as horses of Troy used by the West to secularize the country and Westernize women.

The Islamists and conservatives marched in Casablanca in fierce reaction to the National Plan and to its supportive Rally of the liberal parties and groups in Rabat. The Rabat/Casablanca rallies showcased two seemingly polarized narratives. The government's withdrawal of the National Plan following the Islamists' "show of force" in Casablanca prompted the leftists and the feminists to reactivate their lobbying mechanisms in order to keep their liberalizing project alive. Two major players were involved for this end: the *ulama* (religious scholars) and the street (Salime 2011, 70). Facing the reaction of the Islamists to the draft reform of the socialist government, the liberals shifted their battleground from elitist to grass-root locations. They spearheaded their campaign towards the masses to counterbalance the growing influence and popularity of the conservatives among the ordinary people. Following this logic, it is the Islamists who played a crucial role in the major paradigm shift of the leftist/secular feminists from elitist political discourse to grass-root politics of the street so much so that, as Salime would argue, the Islamists and the liberals should be reconsidered not in terms of separation and binarism, but rather in terms of intersectionality and mutual influence.

Another crucial movement moment in Moroccan feminist history is the terrorist attacks of Casablanca in 2003. A group of young Moroccans influenced by fundamentalist ideology perpetrated attacks in the economic capital of Morocco, claiming the lives of over forty people. These attacks compelled the State to take measures. On the one hand, it accelerated the reform of the religious field where women came to play unprecedented roles: the Higher Council of Religious Scholars includes women for the first time, and female religious guides / *murshidat* were appointed to meet the specific religious needs of women. On the other hand, the State started up a long process of reforming the Family Code, based on a liberal re-interpretation of the Sacred Texts and which takes human rights, women's rights, democracy, tolerance, and moderation as referential principles. This liberal orientation of cultural politics in favor of women's rights was even more reinforced thanks to the Arab Spring/Democratic Spring in 2011. The qualitative political visibility of women in the 20th of February Movement (the Moroccan version of the Arab Spring) has made the political debate over gender issues occur outside of the exclusive closed doors of the small close elite of the government and the monopoly of the religious interpretive community.

The ultimate achievements of the Moroccan feminist movement are the relatively advanced reform of the Family Code in 2004 and the recognition of the 2011 Constitution of more rights, especially symbolical Article 19. The latter reads as follows:

The man and the woman enjoy, in equality, the rights and freedoms of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental character, enounced in this Title and in the other provisions of the Constitution, as well as in the international conventions and pacts duly ratified by Morocco and this, with respect for the provisions of the Constitution, of the constants [constantes] and of the laws of the Kingdom. The State works for the realization of parity between men and women. An Authority for parity and the struggle against all forms of discrimination is created, to this effect² (Constitution of Morocco, 2011, 9).

The second trajectory to which I shall devote most of the rest of this paper is the emergent deconstructive interpretive tradition of theology that brings to the surface the work of female theologians who have been at best

- 2 The italics are mine. The Arab Spring brought the Islamist Party of Justice and Development to power in Morocco; this turn of events turned out to be a backlash against the rising positive advancements in women's rights. The post-Arab Spring government brought down the number of female secretaries of State from about 7 to one.

back-lined and at worst excluded of the privileged hermeneutic positionality and subjectivity.

The work and activism of female religious scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi, Riffat Hassan to name but a few announced the rise of a new sub-feminist intellectual and activist branch; this is namely “*Muslima* theology.” Increasing attention to this nascent theological trajectory prompted Ednan Aslan and Mercia Hermansen to edit a pioneering book entitled *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians* in 2013. The methodological and ideological delineations of the new sub-discipline are in the process of making, just as their delineations are not yet clear. It places women not only as subjects of study but at the heart of the interpretive process and as a category of theological knowledge-production, intellectual analysis, and interpretive communities.

Muslima theology calls for new discursive trajectories and interpretive subjectivities beyond the long-anchored gender hierarchies and gender blindness. Making use of the specificity of the Muslim feminists’ autobiographic moment Muslima theology also attempts to re-enact feminism outside the exclusive Eurocentric and Christian canons and historiography; it tends to rewrite feminism within a more encompassing perspective that takes into account “Muslim feminism” and the centrality of Islam in gender identity in Arab-Islamic countries. To grasp the performative and interpretive thread that runs through the work and action of these pioneering intellectuals, we have to always remember that their endeavor is deconstructive in a Spivakian way. That is to say a deconstruction that is not destruction but construction in that it stresses more intimacy than “critical distance” (Paulson 2016).

Muslima theology is “broadly defined to encompass a range of interpretive strategies and perspectives arising from multiple social locations, interrogates Islamic scripture and other forms of religious discourse to empower Muslim women of faith to speak for themselves in the interests of gender justice. Contemporary female Muslim ‘constructivist’ approaches articulate and religious pluralism, paralleling developments in womanist and *mujerista* readings of religious texts” (Aslan 2007). As such, this discipline/branch highlights difference and pluralism and calls for a more inclusive approach, just as it indicates an unequivocal stance towards gender equality, cultural politics gender visibility, and social justice as guaranteed by the Sacred Texts but foreclosed by male interpretive communities.

This challenging rhetoric has certainly a supportive logic within religion itself; social justice and equity. It is premised on the idea that Islam privileges the *Maqasid* of Sharia, that is to say the objectives of the legislation which capitalize on saving the interests of humanity and warding

off the threatening dangers. As a matter of fact, some of the *maqasid* of Sharia include justice and equity and it so happens that women have suffered for a long time the practical injustice and inequity caused by unjust male hermeneutic tradition. The emerging discipline aims at addressing and redressing the injustices of male theology. Muslima Theology is about “the growing role played by female Muslim theologians and academics working in the field of religious studies who are critically reflecting on their position within Islam through making interpretive contributions that challenge the prevalent patriarchal readings of religious tradition” and also that put into question the fixation and sacredness of male interpreters. Religion is divine, but interpretation is human and therefore it’s not a religious sin to subvert interpretation. As a matter of fact, the Muslima theologians’ objective is not to deconstruct Islam, but to radically *reconstruct* the tradition from within; it promotes the integration of *gender* as a category of thought and seeks to combat fixation and a historicity, as the divine always evolves within the limitation of mundane human. As Wadud puts it: “Allah cannot be fixed by any one moment, any one text, and any of the multiple interactions with that text. But as human knowledge and epistemology continues to develop, so do human ideas about Allah” (Wadud 2006, 112).

Some of the reasons that hindered women over the centuries from venturing into the “labyrinths” of reinterpreting the Sacred Texts outside of the mainstream male exegesis tradition is the amalgam between Sharia and fiqh.

Mir-Hossieni clearly eliminates confusion between Sharia and fiqh in the following citation:

In Muslim belief, sharia – revealed law, literally “the way” – is the totality of God’s will as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Fiqh – the science of jurisprudence, literally “understanding” – is the process of human endeavor to discern and extract legal rules from the sacred sources of Islam – that is, the Koran and the Sunna (the practice of the Prophet, as contained in hadith, Traditions). In other words, while the sharia is sacred, universal, and eternal, fiqh is human and – like any other system of jurisprudence – subject to change. Fiqh is often mistakenly equated with sharia, both in popular Muslim discourses and by politicians and academic and legal specialists, and often with ideological intent... (Mir-Hosseini 2006).

It is only with the denial of the divine nature of the fiqh that the religious field is more open to a wider range of intervention including women who came to be able to challenge male tradition within the scope of a secular human criticism rather than within a challenge of divine orders.

Jerusha Tanner Lamptey's attempt at laying down the contours of a growing discipline shows that the work of Muslim women interpreters of the Holy Quran represents an alternative conception of difference and is an essential resource for two major reasons:

First, women—whether silent, silenced or unheard—have generally suffered from interpretative “voicelessness” within Islamic history; the Islamic interpretative tradition has historically been dominated and controlled by men. Thus, the mere inclusion of a largely excluded voice has the potential to proffer new insights. Second, the central interpretative task of these scholars is the elucidation of a Qur’anic conception of human difference, specifically sexual/biological difference. Certain elements of this conception of difference can be generalized and utilized as a guide in articulating other conceptions of human difference (Lamptey 2007).

In the same vein, Meena Sharify-Funk and Celene Ayat Lizzio position themselves within a female-centric tradition critique of “purity norms;” an approach which favor “*femalestream* contemplations of piety, female-centric modes of leadership, and female epistemological authority, in this case as inspired by engagement with Islamic heritages.” However, the gynocentrism of *Muslima* theology is not meant at substituting the superiority of men by a superiority of women and exclusion of male engagement (Lizzio 2007).

The hermeneutic endeavor of *Muslima* theologians and Muslim feminists was possible thanks to the pioneering work of contemporary Arab-Islamic philosophers such as Fazlurahman, Mohamed Arkoun, Sadeq Jala al-Adm, Bouaali Yassin, Moahamed Abed al-Jabiri, Abdellah Laroui, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, to name but these, who put into question a whole tradition of ideological, theological, and intellectual legacy. The traumatic effect incurred by Western colonialism prompted the conservative and orthodox scholars (the curates of traditional ideologies) together with the masses of the Arab-Islamic world to dismiss the Western logosphere and epistemological foundations as a threat and disfiguration of the Muslim cultural order. Face to what they see as a parochial stance, the Muslim liberal scholars proposed open ways of negotiating Western thought and critically revisiting the Muslim heritage, criticizing on the one hand its epistemological and epistemic bases, and on the other hand, celebrating Western methodological and pedagogical frameworks. Arkoun, for example, suggests that “rational modernism breaks with dogmatic truths of traditional faith and dogmatic postulates of a closed system”³ (Arkoun 1996, 43). Laroui opines that Western civilization has achieved the best progress that humanity has

3 Unless otherwise indicated all translations are mine.

been able to reach so far and that various civilizations across history including Arab civilization have contributed to building up what he views as human or universal civilization. Western civilization as such is multi-handed; therefore, the Arabs and Muslims have the right and probably the obligation to import Western institutions to which they have contributed: democratic institutions, human rights, women's rights, technology, and values not as Western, but rather as human and universal. This position is meant as an answer back to the conservative rejectionist stance towards the West.

This deconstructive anti-conservative approach helped hone a revisionist line of thought and conduce modern Islam to "reconnect with its creative past and intellectual legacy that flourished during the period between the third and the fourth centuries [AH]. This was a prominent period I referred to earlier as Arab humanism" (Arkoun 1996). Interestingly, this citation implies that this rational narrative isn't borrowed from the West; it is rather inherent and intrinsic to the Islamic philosophical tradition. Elsewhere Arkoun bemoans the scholastic trend of the Arab thought. In his seminal study *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, he essentially ascribes the eclipse of innovative rational thought in the Arab-Islamic world to the triumph of the unthinkable and the conscious and unconscious praise of the limitation of the space of the thinkable. As he succinctly puts it: "when the field of the unthinkable is expanded... the intellectual horizons of reason are diminished and its critical function narrowed, and there is little space for the unthinkable" (Arkoun 2002, 12). The systematic shrinkage of the margin of (*l'impensé*) "the unthought" and (*l'impensable*) the "unthinkable" led to the a-historicity and a-spatiality of the very act of thinking and interpreting. The corollary guillotine of pluralism based on ideology and gender silenced the voices of difference and reason for long centuries.

The changing social, economic, and ideological conditions faced the colonial reality in the beginning of the twentieth century followed by major intellectual and ideological shifts starting from the second half of the twentieth century kindled by the 1967 Arab defeat known as the Nakba polarized the Arab-Islamic world into vehement curators of the "the sacred traditions" and the liberal secular holders of reformist ideologies. It is in this conjuncture that women as a sociological, interpretive, intellectual, political and activist category came to power. Although the liberal line of Arab thought did not address women's issues or addressed them only at a secondary level, it opened up horizons of cultural politics that are not monopolized by colonial and patriarchal epistemological ideologies.

It is within the pluralistic and gender-inclusive approach that I will examine Moroccan Muslim feminists: Asma Lamerabet and Khadija al-Battar. The former rereads the Holy Quran from a Muslima perspective

and the latter rethinks the male Hadith tradition from a gender perspective with particular focus on al-Bukhari's Sahih.

I have to clarify here that while it is significantly important that women like Amina Wadud addressed Islamic perception of woman by an immediate and unmediated exploration of the Quran outside of man's mainstream hermeneutic tradition, it should be pointed out that such reading is incomplete, for Muslim theology, sharia and fiqh are not exclusively drawn from the Quran. The other source of theology that Wadud excluded, particularly in *Woman and The Quran*, is the Prophetic Tradition (Sunna). The latter is examined in the work of Muslima scholars like Asma Lamrabet and more particularly Khadija al-Battar.

The reason that makes imperative the examination of the Quran and the Hadith side by side rather than in separation is that are both revealed and that "the truth does not contradict the truth;" indeed the prophet's tradition is itself a revelation. In Sura an-Najm, Allah said: "Your companion [Muhammad] has not strayed, nor has he erred (53:3). Nor does he speak from [his own] inclination. It is not but a revelation revealed" (53: 5). Accordingly, the egalitarian and equity rhetoric and social justice that permeate the Holy Quran cannot be contradicted in the Prophetic tradition that vilifies women and spreads a misogynistic patriarchal discourse.

In Morocco, a new generation of Muslim feminists aims at rereading the Sacred Texts outside of the patriarchal and the colonial hermeneutic machines. For example, Asma Lamrabet, director of the Center for Feminist Studies in Islam affiliated to the religious institution Rabita Mohammedia of the Ulema, operates within the principles of a growing school of holistic, gender-inclusive, and subversive modern methodology that is facing strong resistance on the part of the traditional conservative institutions and figures. Lamrabet identifies twenty problematic and controversial questions that have been at the basis of the perpetuation of a misogynic tradition in Islam, on the one hand, and the Western misconceptions of Islam on the other hand. These questions include: the origins of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, (in)equality between men and women, men's authority over women, violence against women, stoning as punishment of adultery, women's dress code and the Hijab, interfaith marriage, testimony of women. She argues that women need to promote an innovative reformist discourse as "a third way" to counterbalance both the colonial ideology and the traditionalist Islamic discourse. On these grounds, she thinks that wearing the veil is not an obligation, inheritance laws should be revised, and more importantly the educational system, especially Islamic tracks, must be reconsidered in the light of the advancements in the universalistic democratic promises of democracy, human rights, and modernity.

She warns us however that while discrimination against women is a common characteristic of all cultures, it is almost exclusively associated with Muslim societies. She rightly stresses that in “our post-modern and hyper-globalized world, the correlation between patriarchy and ultraliberalism has resulted in new forms of exploitation and domination of women” (Lamrabet 2016, 5). Besides, like Fatima Mernissi, especially in her later work, she argues that criticism should not be launched against Islam as “a spiritual message;” for her it’s not Islam that is oppressive to women, but rather its “*different interpretations and legal rulings* founded by interpretative ideologies many centuries ago”⁴ (Lamrabet 2016, 6).

In her revisionist revisit of the Sacred Text, Asma Lamrabet, like Amina Wadud, builds her critical articulations on the premise that the Qur’anic rhetoric is often linked to the time and context of its revelation and its teachings should be negotiated in line with the circumstances of different communities and temporalities. There is no wonder that in societies like Morocco that are still dominated by conservative cultural politics, such a re-interpretive act would be encountered by a strong rhetoric of resistance. Needless to say that in a social and cultural environment where the rates of illiteracy are inauspiciously high more particularly among women, Moroccan Muslim feminists’ engagement with the Sacred Texts and with the male misogynistic *fiqh* tradition remains elitist. It did not go grass roots as is the case of feminist political activism which managed to mobilize the masses around their conservative Islamist ideology at different movement moments starting from the early 1990’s.

For Asma Lamrabet, Muslim scholars as well as laymen built on the Qur’anic concept of “*quiwama*” to legitimize the superiority of men over women. This refers to verse 4:34: “Men are in charge ‘*qawamun*’ of women because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property.” The male abusive interpretation of *quiwama*-decrees in the name of God the absolute material and moral authority over women, which is articulated in the family (wife’s obedience to her husband), in politics, and in economy. Lamrabet comes to the conclusion that *quiwama*, as is the case of other Qur’anic concepts, is meant to evolve over time especially that the Quran did not assign specific social roles for men and for women. For that matter, it should lend itself to evolving (re)interpretations. As Morocco is undergoing major socio-economic transformations, the interpretation of the Quran should be fine-tuned to the practical demands of life. “Both spouses” she writes “are today confronted with daily reality in which financial co-responsibility has become a fact on the ground”

4 Italics are the author’s.

(Lamrabet 2016, 21). It should be stressed here that 21% of the households in Morocco are run by women and that there is a growing number of single mothers. On these grounds, Lamrabet doubts that in such cha(l)len(ge)ing times in the job market the husband alone can support *quiwama*. She calls therefore for “mutual support and shared responsibility” between the two spouses and a more egalitarian partnership in the marriage institution in accordance with the Qur’anic commandments of social justice. This falls into place with the relatively “progressive” provision of the Moroccan Family Code which articulates the shift from the wife’s minor status (1957) to the status of partnership between the two spouses (2004).

Although Lamrabet seems to be avant-gardist in her gender-inclusive theological intervention, her views can still be dismissed as conservative both by Western and Arab liberal-secular scholars and activists. For example, she still views women as minor agents that need even in the present time “additional measures of protection” equating them with vulnerable beings such as children and the elderly. She is trapped between the demands of the liberal narrative and the constraints and resistance of a powerful orthodox ideology.

In the same logic, Asma Lamrabet addresses the even more controversial question of hijab. Ever since the early 1990’s, the issue of the Hijab in Morocco and elsewhere including in the West became more visible, contributing to a growing polarization between feminists and Islamists. She warns us in the beginning as to the common misconceptions about the term “Hijab.” She convincingly stresses the slippage and discrepancy between the Qur’anic use and the conceptual and practical interpretations of the term. Going through the seven instances where the Quran refers to “Hijab” she shows that it in no instance indicates the scarf that covers the hair.⁵ In a

5 For Fatima Mernissi, the veil (*Hijab*), which is derived from *hajaba*, meaning cover and hide, is a three-dimensional concept. The first one is visual, that is hiding something from sight; the second one is spatial, that is separating, marking a border, establishing a threshold. The spatial dimension of the male-female dynamics (the *budud*, borders) is central to most of the work of Mernissi. The third dimension is ethical; it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. The three dimensions cannot be separated from one another and are mainly connected to the wives of the Prophet (See Mernissi 1991, 93). For Marnia Lazreg, veiling is both a discourse and a practice. “As a discourse,” she contends “it lies at the interface of politics, culture, and agency. As a practice, veiling cannot be detached from history.” By means of a funny but poignant anecdote, she gives veiling a more social and practical signification outside of the overwrought religious dimension. Veiled young girls reminded her of an experience she had when she was seven as she was playing outside of her home with friends: “A boy... had pulled my braids from the back while making lewd movements with his body. Alerted by my cries for help, my mother opened the door of our house and took in the scene. Since time was of the essence, she could not go back inside and put her white veil. Instead, she pulled one of her clogs off her foot and threw it at the boy, missing him. The clog landed on my forehead, making a bloody gush. I had a half-inch scar for many years to remember

very controversial move, she argues that the verse commonly used to prove the “obligation” of the Hijab: “O you who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal... And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a separation (Hijab).” Quran 33: 53 is addressed to the Prophet’s wives and it was subject to specific causes of revelation, aiming at respecting the private life of the Prophet. A quick conservative or even layman critical reaction to this argument is that the Prophet in Islam is a model to be followed by the Muslims and his wives are called Muslims’ mothers who are meant likewise to be taken as models in faith, behavior, and social roles.

In her view, the Qur’an does not set up a particular dress code for the Muslim women. In the course of her interpretive analysis of the Qur’anic regulations of the hijab, Lamrabet discusses another verse that denotes the scarf:

And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not to expose their adornment (zinatahunna) except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers (Khumurihinna) over their chests (Juyubihinna) and not to expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons (Quran 24: 31).

This divine command was subject to a multiplicity of interpretations or rather misinterpretations. On the one hand, the Quran uses the term “*khimar*” rather than hijab which is dominantly adopted by religious and conservative scholars. On the other hand, the *khimar* was used by pre-Islamic Arab women “to uncover their neck and upper chest” (Lamrabet 2016, 47). Lemrabet deliberately indicates a milder form of divine command to refer to the divine order of veiling: “The Quran,” she tells us, “invites the believing women to fold their scarves (*Khimar*) over their chests (*Juyubihinna*) to hide the upper part of their busts when they are in public”⁶ (Lamrabet 2016, 47). The slippage between the invitation and order leads her to conclude without enough convincing historical, political, theological, and linguistic data and explanation that a deliberate semantic shift from “*Khimar*” as part “of the Qur’anic message of liberation and a symbol of dignity” (Lamrabet 2016, 48) to “Hijab” is a way of “separation” in order to “show them [women] their

the incident by. Had my mother not been thoroughly socialized in the culture of the veil, she would have simply walked the twenty feet or so that separated her from my attacker” (Lazreg 2009, 3).

6 Italics are mine.

place in society, and exclude them, in the name of Islam, from the socio-political sphere” (Lamrabet 2016, 48). She implicitly accuses the male exegetical tradition of invention; an invention that was politically and socially disempowering to women, for by imposing the veil on women in opposition to the divine message “they will lose all the rights acquired at the advent of Islam. And the ‘veil’ or Hijab will remain the single powerful indicator of the deterioration of Muslim women’s legal status, since they will be secluded and excluded from the public space, in the name of this symbol” (Lamrabet 2016, 48). Imposing the veil on women falls short of the teachings of the Quran premised on the general principle: “No compulsion in religion.” As a matter of fact, Lemrabet does not fully cover her hair.

In June 2017, Asma Lamrabet shelled the literalist traditionalist theologians by scathing criticism. She insisted that the religious reformist project in Morocco is fragmented and disorganized, calling on the decision makers to put into place mechanisms that institutionalize the reformist act of interpretation. She reiterated that in spite of the dominance of the literalist theologians of the religious scene, *ijtihad* is inevitable. The literalists’ interpretation cannot meet the requirements of the Muslims in the present time. Her reformist perspective departs from the necessity to desacralize the interpretative heritage without desacralizing the Sacred Texts themselves. This process should bring together sociologists, economists, historians etc.... to start up an inclusive, realistic, and enlightened rethinking of Muslim theology. As it is expected, her “daring” reformist engagement has incurred on her the wrath of a huge number of Moroccan internet users.

Here I shall provide some random samples of reactions following Lamrabet’s lecture on “What is our Position vis-à-vis the Reformist Reflection on Religious Thought” in Casablanca in June 2017:

1. You are calling for equality in inheritance, the ban of polygamy, recognition of homosexuality... an Islam light!!! I have a better solution for you. Why don’t you simply go live with your Judeo-Christian masters!!! (in French)⁷
2. I should tell Lemrabet: “Ijtihad is just like the hijab you are wearing. Half of your hair is uncovered!!! Fear God. (in Arabic)
3. These women aim at dismantling Islam from inside; they are more threatening to the Islamic nation more than the military of the enemy. They combat Islam on behalf of the colonial West. (in Arabic)
4. We want separation between religion and laws; we want a secular state, and we want religious marriage and secular marriage separated. It’s time to make things clear and fight corruption! Who wants

7 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

Islam follows it, and those who don't want to should follow secular law! We are fed up of feminists trying to impose their distorted ideas on Islam. (in English)

5. The Islamic Sheikhs excelled at poking their nose in every single detail of public and private lives of our societies. Over history, they prohibited painting, photography, music, arts, philosophy, printing, coffee, television, telephone, pants and things nobody can think of. Today, they are combating intellectual freedom, secularism and demonize difference. They use all forms of oppression and terrorism; they imprison and kill atheists, thinkers, and innovators. But we let them know that their endeavor will fail. Humanity has overridden you and you won't be able to control and silence ideas... Enlightenment is coming and change will happen, and you won't manage to stop the deluge... (in Arabic)

This gives us an idea about how the Moroccans from different walks of life, ideological affiliations, and social backgrounds address the gender-inclusive interpretation of the Sacred Texts. This issue requires a fieldwork study for a better insight into the sociology of religion in Morocco.

In her intrepid *Fi Naqd al-Bukhari*, Moroccan theologian Khadija al-Battar launched caustic criticism against one of the most established compilers of the Prophetic Traditions, al-Bukhari and his Sahih. She called for the desacralization of al-Bukhari who she claims has invented many Hadiths less for religious purposes than for political and patriarchal motivations. In Muslim theological tradition, it's very adventurous to attack this most established compiler; he has the accolade of being the "commander of the faithful" of the hadith and his *Sahih* as second only to the Quran. According to her, these titles are undeserved and fail to the first test. The enlightened religious scholars of Islam such as Mohamed Ibn Yahya al-Dahli, al-Abani, Ibn Dahya, al-Kawthari, al-Ghumari to name but these have, in her opinion, undermined these fake titles and have demonstrated that al-Bukhari was not erudite and showed considerable inabilities in Hadith sciences.

One of the major factors the religious scholars have based their scathing criticism against him is that the content of his compiled Sahih contradicts the Quran, the noble prophetic biography, and the rational spirit of Islam (al-Battar 2003). Likewise, she stresses that the Sahih is replete with contradictions and mainly with misogynistic statements that are in stark opposition to gender equality, social justice, and the high status with which Islam endowed woman. For example, he inserted hadiths that woman is created of a crooked rib at a time when the Quran says that men and women are created of the same soul. Besides, al-Bukhari includes in his compilation

a hadith about the circumcision of woman, one associating augury with women, and one about the decrease in mind and religion. The hadith reads as follows:

Prophet peace be upon him left for the prayer to the mosque for the Eid (Adha or Fitr) and then admonished the people and command them to pay charity, therefore called out "O people do pay alms" and then passed by women and called out to them: O assembly of women, do pay alms for I see you making up the majority in Fire (Hell), and he was asked why/how is that O Messenger of Allah, he replied: (You women do) excessive La'na (Cursing) and ingrate to husbands (refusing them), and Naqisatu Aqlin Wa Din-in (females decreased in religion and mind).

Khadija al-Battar backs her refutation of this vilifying prophetic saying by referring to established religious scholars like al-Shawkani, al-Nawawi, and al-Jaziri who argue about a lot of injustices to woman and to the Prophet whose statements are revealed by God.

Al-Battar concludes in an unequivocal manner that incurred on her the wrath of the general public and the orthodox scholars that al-Bukhari is the embodiment of extremist and irrationalism in Islamic theology. He guillotined the principles of enlightenment and reason that are at the heart of Islam. His fundamentalist ideology that has shaped cultural politics in the Muslim societies over history, being one of the most influential hadith compilers, has among other things denied women's rights and institutionalized the patriarchal male-female dynamics. Al-Battar's deconstructive act is certainly one of the major interventions in the process of shaking the bases of patriarchal injustice in the name of Islam.

As it is expected in such revisionist interpretive cases, the conservatives, in opposition to the teachings of the Quran "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice, and debate with them in the most dignified manner" (Quran 16: 126) attacked al-Battar accusing her of heresy. A considerable number of Moroccan *ulema* (religious scholars) have used conservative outlets such as an-*Nour* Journal and *al-Tajdid* newspaper to dismiss her allegations. The fact that she chose the leftist *al-Abdath al-Maghribiya Publications* that they claim is affiliated with the Union of Socialist and Popular Forces Party to publish her book is seen as a thinly veiled sign that her act is ideological. She is used by the left to shake one of the major foundations of the Islam. Besides, they claim that her study is plagiarized; she is said to have drawn her material from "her chief who taught her magic" Mohamed Arkoun. Although al-Battar is the least mediatized of the Moroccan *Muslima* theologians, she succeeded in making herself more visible

in so much as she attracted the attention of the *ulema* due to her audacious reflections on al-Bukhari.

Conclusion

This paper has shed some light on the importance of innovative gender-inclusive interpretation of the Sacred Texts which resides in shaking the long exegesis tradition preserved by the notion of “the closure of the gate of *ijtihad*.” The *ijtihad* as *jihad* was possible thanks to the enlightened work of a number of Muslim scholars in the light of the latest developments in humanities, history, linguistics, hermeneutics, anthropology, history, feminism, cultural studies, philosophy, and post colonialism. Focus on alternative histories and agencies brought to the surface new articulations based on particularities, gender, specific temporalities, contexts, and circumstances.

It can be argued that without Muslima theology as a liberating sub-branch of Islamic feminism, feminism in its activist form would fall short of achieving its objectives. As long as male orthodox theologians monopolize the religious field, feminism will be incomplete, for the traditionalist and literalist exclusive interventions will continue to shape cultural politics at an elitist and grassroots levels. The gender turn of theology is seen as an answer back to Islamophobia. In a BBC interview on March 19, 2017 with SherinKhenkan the founder of the Mariam Mosque, the first-led female mosque in Scandinavia, she proudly indicates that “I think that it is very difficult today to hold on to the narrative that Muslim women are oppressed when they can see that we have Imams.” Her ending note is very powerful: “the future of Islam is a woman.” In Morocco, the feminists address daring issues but they didn’t push through to the question of the imamate or political leadership of a woman. The future of feminist activism is gender-inclusive interpretation of the sacred Texts.

There are signs in the Moroccan social movements’ horizon that the re-interpretive process of gender equality is going grassroots. In June 2017, the Democratic Association for Moroccan Women launched a campaign called *O3lach la?* (Why not?) to denounce the failure of the implementation of the provisions of the 2011 Constitution, especially Article 19. They call for more equal rights concerning inheritance and the expansion of the scope of *ijtihad* to end the injustices done to women.

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Maroko feministai ir feministės: tarp aktyvizmo ir *Muslima* teologijos

Santrauka

Atsižvelgiant į iškilusį metodologinį interpretacinį *Muslima* teologijos reiškinių, šiame straipsnyje permąstomas Maroko feminizmas. Analizuojant Maroko musulmonių feminisčių Asmos Lamrabet ir Khadijos al-Battar darbus, aptariamas kritinis *Muslima* teologijų požiūris į hermeneutinę Šventųjų Raštų tradiciją, kurioje dominuoja vyrai. Straipsnyje kvestionuojamas ideologinis „*ijtihad* vartų uždarymo“ principas, atskleidžiama, kad interpretacinė tradicija yra heterogeniška: ji visada priklausė nuo besikeičiančių religinių, politinių ir patriarchalinių sąlygų. Sutelkiant dėmesį į *Muslima* teologes, siekiama atkurti kai kuriuos sistemiskai ribojamus moteriško interpretacinio naratyvo aspektus ir sugriauti išskirtines vyrų interpretacines normas, padėjusias formuoti sociokultūrinę realybę, kurioje Islamo vardu pateisinama žemesnė moterų padėtis. Šventųjų Raštų interpretacijos, įtraukiančios lyties dėmenį, atveria alternatyvias istorijas bei jų veikėjus ir atskleidžia naujas lyties ypatumų, savito laikiskumo, kontekstų bei aplinkybių artikuliacijas. Autorius teigia, kad, jei feminizmas neatsižvelgtų į *Muslima* teologiją, kaip islamiško išlaisvinančio feminizmo atšaką, jis negalėtų realizuoti savo politinių tikslų, nes kultūros politiką tiek elito, tiek eilinių piliečių lygmeniu ir toliau formuotų tradiconalistinės ir išskirtinai tiesioginės Šventųjų Raštų interpretacijos.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Maroko feminizmas, *Muslima* teologija, Islamo feminizmas, Šventieji tekstai, lyties dėmenį įtraukianti interpretacija, lyčių lygybė.