

Book Review

***The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women* (edited by Asma Afsaruddin). Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190638771.**

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The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women (Oxford University Press, 2023), edited by Asma Afsaruddin, offers a rigorous, multidisciplinary inquiry into the politicized discourses surrounding Muslim women. Bringing together leading scholars across fields, the volume interrogates the lived experiences, historical roles, textual interpretations, and global representations of Muslim women (Afsaruddin, 2023). The volume stands as a timely corrective to ideological framings that obscure the complexity, heterogeneity, and historical depth of Muslim women's realities. This review critically evaluates the work's contributions to Islamic studies, gender theory, and epistemologies of power, foregrounding its significance in contemporary debates on agency, reform, and religious authority.

In recent decades, the figure of the Muslim woman has become both a symbol and a battleground in global ideological discourses—variously framed as a victim of religious patriarchy, a threat to liberal secularism, or a marker of authenticity in postcolonial nation-building. *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women* resists such reductive tropes. It presents instead a nuanced, rigorous, and richly layered account of Muslim women's roles, voices, and representations across time and space. Comprising 32 chapters, the volume offers an impressive breadth of academic inquiry, encompassing historical, theological, legal, sociopolitical, and literary analyses.



Overall, the book is organized into seven major sections, with the opening chapter serving as an editorial introduction that outlines the overarching themes of the volume, namely *Deciphering Muslim Women's Lives: Religion, Agency, and Diversity*. The subsequent sections cover: *Foundational Texts and Their Interpretations*; *Women and Islamic Law*; *Deciphering Women's Lives: Women in History and Texts*; *Muslim Women's Activism in the Modern Period*; *Modern Narratives of the Gendered Self: Women Writing about Women*; and *Islam, Women, and the Global Public Arena*. This structure not only reflects a coherent and well-constructed editorial framework but also demonstrates a deliberate scholarly effort to foreground Muslim women as active subjects within Islamic history.

The section on *Foundational Texts and Their Interpretations* engages the Qur'an and Hadith through gender-sensitive hermeneutical frameworks. Contributions by Hibba Abugideiri, Feryal Salem, and Khaled Abou El Fadl challenge the assumption that sacred texts are monolithic or immune to reinterpretation; instead, they argue that these texts remain open to critical engagement grounded in ethical commitments to justice and equality. For example, Abugideiri's chapter adopts the *tawhīdic* paradigm as an ideal relational model to contest dichotomous and misogynistic readings of male-female dynamics in the Qur'anic corpus. She emphasizes ontological complementarity and moral co-agency between genders, thereby expanding the interpretive possibilities of gender discourse in Islam and reaffirming justice as a core ethical imperative embedded in divine revelation.

The section on *Women and Islamic Law* reveals the complex interplay between sacred texts, juridical interpretation, and the socio-historical contexts that shape women's rights and obligations. The Qur'an and Sunnah, as primary sources, have been interpreted predominantly by male jurists through *qiyās*, *ijmā'*, *'urf*, and the principle of *maṣlaḥa*, producing a pragmatic and pluralistic legal dynamism. While classical norms often position women as subordinate, legitimized through juridical authority, critical re-readings by contemporary female Muslim scholars are increasingly challenging the hegemony of traditional interpretations and advocating for more inclusive legal reforms. Although such reforms have been welcomed in several Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states, they also encounter significant resistance from perceived threats to established socio-legal structures. Thus, the study of women and Islamic law extends beyond

mere documentation of women's legal status, reflecting instead ongoing conflicts and negotiations between traditional authority and demands for gender justice within an evolving modern context.

The section on *Deciphering Women's Lives: Women in History and Texts* highlights women's pivotal yet often overlooked roles in Islamic history. While official chronicles marginalized their contributions, premodern biographical sources reveal women's active participation in intellectual, religious, cultural, and economic life. Şaḥabiyyāt, female scholars, writers, and patrons appear as influential agents in prosopographical records. Recent scholarship traces a historical decline in the recognition of their agency, reflecting shifting gendered narratives. Women's transmission of *ḥadīth*, devotional practices, and engagement in artistic and economic networks demonstrate their integral role in shaping Islamic intellectual and cultural heritage. These insights contest patriarchal historiographies and call for a gender-inclusive reconstruction of Islamic historical narratives (Barlas, 2009).

The section on *Women's Lived Realities and Their Religious and Social Activism in the Modern Period* elucidates complex dynamics across diverse global contexts. For centuries, women's identities, particularly as mothers, have profoundly shaped their lived experiences, despite cultural attitudes frequently undervaluing the burdens and demands of motherhood. Beyond traditional roles, elite and educated Muslim women have attained high political offices, influenced by a range of historical and socio-political factors. Since the late nineteenth century, a feminist consciousness has emerged with an emphasis on egalitarian interpretations of the Qur'an, fueling women's activism across the Muslim world—from anti-colonial struggles led by figures like Huda Shaarawi in Egypt to modern reformers in Malaysia, the United States, and conflict zones such as Palestine and Iran. Muslim women's activism encompasses religious leadership, juridical reform, and political participation across regions, including Southeast Asia, the Gulf, and Turkey, often invoking Islamic texts and history to legitimize their claims to public space and rights. This diversity of activism reflects ongoing negotiations between gender, religion, and power within varied socio-political contexts.

The section *Modern Narratives of the Gendered Self: Women Writing about Women* explores how contemporary Muslim women represent their own

identities and lived experiences through various literary forms, marking a critical shift from the premodern period dominated by male-authored narratives. In the contributions by Ruqayya Y. Khan and Miriam Cooke, women emerge as both subjects and authors who consciously reconstruct historical memory and reinterpret the roles of women in Islam. These authors revisit figures such as the *Ṣaḥābiyyāt* and the Prophet's wives as exemplary models of female agency and emancipation. By contrasting the relative autonomy enjoyed by early Muslim women with the restrictions faced by women today in many Muslim-majority societies, these writings critique patriarchal norms that are often presented as religiously binding but are, in fact, inconsistent with the ethical principles of Islamic justice. These "subversive" narratives thus serve as vital discursive tools through which women articulate demands for social reform and advance gender justice within contemporary Muslim contexts.

The section *Islam, Women, and the Global Public Arena* offers a critical analysis of enduring stereotypes surrounding Muslim women, particularly in Western Muslim-minority contexts where the hijab is often reduced to a symbol of Islam's perceived deficiencies. Media and ideological actors across the spectrum instrumentalize the veil, ignoring the agency of women who adopt it as an empowered expression of faith and identity. Scholars such as Anna Piela and Katherine Bullock have exposed how Muslim women's bodies are politicized, becoming sites of cultural and geopolitical contestation. Dominant narratives frequently silence these women, portraying them as passive victims defined by oppression. This discourse is rooted in colonial histories where the "saving" of Muslim women served imperial agendas (Abu-Lughod, 2002), a legacy later reactivated by U.S. foreign policy, particularly post-9/11, through Islamophobic rhetoric. Within the "clash of civilizations" framework, veiled Muslim women are cast as symbols in a binary opposition between a monolithic "Muslim world" and the "West," reinforcing orientalist paradigms that exoticize and dehumanize Muslim femininity.

One of the strengths of this volume lies in its refusal to homogenize either Islam or women. Instead, it embraces complexity, contradiction, and plurality. The contributors engage not only textual traditions but also ethnographic realities, thereby bridging the often-segregated domains of textual scholarship and lived religion. The rigorous methodological diversity, including historical, philological, feminist, and anthropological approaches, adds to the scholarly richness of the

volume. That said, certain thematic areas, such as the intersections of gender with race, disability, or class, could have been developed further. Nevertheless, these are minor gaps in what is otherwise a landmark publication.

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