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"She did not come from his rib": Questioning Agency and Empowerment in Islamic Feminism

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Abstract The aim of this article is to address the Western feminist gaze towards the Muslimwoman, a neologism miriam cooke[1] (2007) invented, which shares the same features of the Third World Woman depicted by Mohanty (1988). The idea is to shed light on productive ways of relating to religion when it comes to Islamic Feminism in particular. My argumentation proceeds as follows: after a brief introduction on the relationship between gender and religion nowadays, as a starting point for my analysis I will illustrate how religion can be employed as a source of agency and its empowering character. Agency has always been conceptualised as a form of resistance and subversion against power, however, other scholars suggest different perspectives. I will introduce and discuss them to deconstruct the idea that every religious woman needs to be saved. I will proceed by deconstructing the "Muslimwoman" neologism to provide a decolonial and intersectional reading of the relationship between gender and religion. To conclude, I will draw from the tools provided by Asma Lamrabet's reading of the Qur'an to explore the decolonial power of a pious but critical religious practice.

Keywords gender; religion; agency; decoloniality; Islamic Feminism.

1. Introduction

Before delving into the main topic of this essay, it is worth having a look at the relationship between gender and religion nowadays, a highly controversial one. As Ursula King affirms in *Gender, Religion and Diversity – Cross Cultural Perspectives* the gender-critical turn in religious studies is recent:

[1] The author spells her name in lower case.

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> It has been rightly pointed out that 'some fields of study are less receptive to feminist perspectives, and feminists in these areas have had to spend significant amounts of time and energy convincing their androcentric colleagues that their theoretical concerns are valid. The study of religion has been one of those disciplines resistant to feminist thought'. (Juschka 2001: 1, qtd. in King 2005: 5)

Nevertheless, the gender-critical turn was able to provide religious studies with new interdisciplinary and cross-cultural methodologies and a critical, self-reflective awareness of situated, embodied subjects. However, some aspects of the relationship between gender and religion are affected by what King calls a *double-blindness,* namely the fact that humanities remain religion-blind in certain aspects, and religious studies remain gender-blind. The author believes that unless the gender-critical turn is made, the embeddedness of gender throughout religion makes it hard to identify it and separate one from the other. Other than the religion blindness or gender-blindness there is also:

> a kind of feminist 'blindness' of, or resistance to, the importance of religion for women. On the other hand, there is a 'religious paradigm' type of feminist studies in which women are seen mainly through the lens of religion, especially in research done by Western scholars on Muslim countries. (Vuola 2001, qtd. in Salem 2013: 1)

Therefore, if we add the layer of diversity, or 'otherness', the question becomes even more complex:

> There is the multiple 'otherness' of religious differences within and across specific cultures; there is the 'otherness' of diverse methods and approaches in understanding such differences; there is the 'otherness' of one gender for another, especially the 'otherness' of women for men, as traditionally understood, and the 'otherness' of sexual orientation, as highlighted in some of the critical perspectives of this book. The social and political violence exercised by the west towards the 'otherness' of 'nonwestern' cultures, whether defined as imperialism, orientalism, or neocolonialism, has come under fierce criticism. (King 2005: 3)

It is this 'otherness' that I intend to address when it comes to Western Feminism and the "Muslimwoman" in particular. Muslim women are often portrayed as submissive beings, victims of a patriarchal tradition that they embrace without being aware of their subaltern condition. In this essay, I would like to explore the notion of agency to expand its meaning and adapt it to different historical

and socio-cultural contexts. In particular, the questions that come to mind in the reflection on gender, religion and Muslim women are the following: how can religion represent a source of agency and empowerment, considering that many view it as a source of oppression which contrasts directly with feminist values? What do we really mean by agency? In what ways can Islam empower women? In what ways can religious practice support decolonization? In what way can feminism and religion cooperate to create a decolonial practice? Can feminism really be intersectional when such an important part of so many women's identity as religion is dismissed? I believe it makes sense to address this topic because, as King states in the following paragraph, religion is an important cultural toolkit:

> Religions have provided myths and symbols of origin and creation; they offer narratives of redemption, healing and salvation; they encompass 'way-out' eschatological Utopias, but also express the deepest human yearnings for wholeness and transcendence; they are captivated by the lure of the divine and the all-consuming, all-transforming fire of the spirit. In and through all these, religions have created and legitimated gender, enforced, oppressed and warped it, but also subverted, transgressed, transformed and liberated it (King 2005: 8)

I argue that shedding a light on Islam as an ethical practice brings us closer to the voice of those women who engage with it as a cultural toolkit, often building their identity on it. To do so I will address the question of the feminist gaze which, as Zine states, during the colonial period led to the same exoticisation as the male gaze:

> The continuity of colonial and Orientalist scholarship in contemporary representations construct Muslim women as a universal, ahistorical, and undifferentiated category who become essentialized through the uniqueness of their difference. Eurocentric discourses on Muslim women serve the continuing political intent of justifying western superiority and domination. This form of academic imperialism sets up a binary analytical framework that juxtaposes the West's "liberated" women with Islam's "oppressed" women. (Zine 2002: 12)

As Asmaa Lamrabet states in *Women and Men in the Qur'an*, it is the inclination for this critique, to be aimed almost exclusively towards Islam, that must be rejected, not the criticism itself, which may be fair. The risk is to project onto Muslim women the same features that characterise the Thirld World Woman

in the eyes of Western feminists. As Lamrabet affirms, women are not oppressed by Islam as a spiritual message, they are, rather, oppressed by the interpretations of male Muslim scholars and exegeses that usurped the sacred book and converted it into inextricable religious regulations. Moreover, as the author explains: "the discourse on women's rights in Islam is simplistic because it systematically forces them into particular frames of reference—rights, duties, and status." (Lamrabet 2018: 2). Such a selective approach is limited and does not tell us enough about the relationship between women and Islam, their spiritual practice or their own effort to recover the egalitarian call of the Qur'an. The point that I am trying to reach is that feminism cannot be intersectional if we do not engage with this topic from a decolonial perspective. Can we really call it a gender-critical turn in religion studies if we do not address the impact of the feminist gaze on Muslim women? As Jasmine Zine explains in "Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: Muslim Women and Feminist Engagement", after 9/11:

> Muslim women navigate between both racialized and gendered politics that variously script the way their bodies and identities are narrated, defined and regulated. Located within this dialectical dynamic, the rhetoric of Muslim women's liberation is all too often caught up in the vast undercurrents of ideological extremism on the one hand, and racism and Islamophobia on the other. Muslim women's feminist praxis is shaped and defined within and against these discursive terrains. (Zine 2016: 27)

Starting from this assumption, I argue that Islamic feminists had to engage in a decolonial practice in order to de-construct all the orientalist or fundamentalist assumptions that were assigned to their lifestyles and bodies. When I mention decolonial practice I mean the methodologies provided by feminist theory to create, with the words of Margaret A. McLaren:

> A sense of historical consciousness and specificity; a commitment to liberatory practices and values; and an awareness of the effects of colonization not only as political, historical, and economic forces but also as effects on consciousness, theories, research practices, epistemological frameworks, and ways of knowing. (McLaren 2017: 13)

Islamic Feminism is a multi-faceted, trans-national movement that takes the form of an anti-patriarchal reading of the sacred text, the *ʾaḥādīth* and related interpretations. The main thesis of Islamic feminism is that the Qur'an affirms

the principle of equality among all human beings, but the practice of such equality has been hindered and subverted by patriarchal ideas. Islamic feminism may seem like a contradiction to many; for many feminists in the Western world, Islam and feminism inhabit two mutually exclusive spaces, but, in fact, it is a movement of women who have maintained their religious beliefs while promoting an egalitarian ethic of Islam using verses from the Qur'an that support women in their struggle for their rights. Islamic feminists argue that there can be a feminist reading of Islamic theology and that patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an and the *ʾaḥādīth* can be effectively refuted by a feminist counter interpretation.

Several Islamic feminists, Arab and non-Arab, have continually argued that equality is deeply rooted in Islamic ethics. They read and grasp a different message in the sacred text from that grasped by proponents of an orthodox androcentric Islam. These Muslim women work within a system that marginalizes them, but in the process, they are becoming visible and audible. Islamic feminists insist that gender discrimination has a social, rather than a natural or religious origin, and they are not afraid to address the colonial component of it. I argue that the work they conduct, starting from a situated experience, is a form of decolonial practice in the sense that they affirm their identity and desire as Muslim women and fight the androcentric interpretation of the Sacred book, they also deconstruct the Western feminist gaze making their feminist theory and practice intersectional. As they express their voices as Muslim women and as decolonial feminists, they expand the notion of agency and freedom situating it in their own historical and socio-religious contexts. Many Western feminists believe that Islamic feminists use religion in a strategic way to reach extra-religious goals. I argue that their practice is also an authentic and conscious affirmation of their identity.

2. Agency and Freedom

In her article "Doing Religion in a Secular World" the scholar Orit Avishai offers a reading of the concept of agency that challenges the Western idea that religious feminists utilize religion in a strategic way in order to further extra-religious ends. According to Avishai, religion can be perceived as an inquiry for authentic religious subjecthood. Her intention is to go beyond the binary view whereby agency in the framework of religion can only be associated with a purposeful conduct in which a subject represents a strategic agent or a passive target of religious discourses. Avishai believes that a religious lifestyle can be

the reflection of a mode of being, the performance of a religious identity. Moreover, according to the author, religion enables individuals to face the challenges of contemporary life. The scholar proceeds by affirming that dichotomizing subordination and subversion equates agency with resistance. However, as Saba Mahmood explains in "Feminist Theory, Agency and the Liberatory Subject" (2006), this idea of agency limits our understanding of religious women's sense of self and projects that are not imbued in a nonliberal way of thinking. If agency, identified with the political and moral autonomy of the subject, is only located in the face of power, then lots of women are left out. Mahmood strongly believes agency can be conceptualised as "the capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001: 203), therefore it is only after detaching the concept of agency from the logic of subversion and resistance, or from a strategic resignification of power that new ideas of agency can be revealed.

However, by inscribing agency in a binary logic without problematising why these women rely on religion in the first place, what kind of instrument religion represents for them and where this obedience is directed, we might overlook the agentive potential religion can have. For example, in the case of pious women, obedience can be directed towards a transcendental power that has nothing to do with men or patriarchy. The agency of religious women is historically and culturally specific and might be detached from the logics of progressive thought. Contextualities are important. As the author affirms, "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms." (Mahmood 2011: 15). Instead of Orientalising these women's motivations, desires and goals, it is important to analyse the discourses and practices through which they affirm their desire. Mahmood explains how, according to Foucault's understanding, power is a relation of force that not only subordinates, but can also be productive, in the sense that it produces desires, objects, relations and discourse.

Moreover, she adds, as subjects, we do not only produce power-relations, but we are also in a sense shaped by them: "Central to his formulation is what Foucault calls the paradox of subjectivation: the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (Mahmood 2006: 45). In other words, our abilities to affirm our agencies are not based on some kind of pre-constituted freedom but could be a product of power. For this reason, Mahmood believes that agency cannot be viewed as resistance, but rather as the space we have for

action provided by the dynamics we navigate. The author relies on Butler to reinforce the idea that even resisting the norm implies a submission to the norm itself:

> To the degree that the stability of social norms is a function of their repeated enactment, agency for Butler is grounded in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or re-signified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. This makes these formations vulnerable because each restatement/reenactment can fail [...] In other words, there is no possibility of "undoing" social norms that is independent of the "doing" of norms. (Mahmood 2006: 46)

Therefore, it is possible that religious women express their capacity for agency not only when subverting the norm, but also when they consciously reproduce it. As Orit Avishai states: "To see agency, one does not need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing. It suffices to note how members of conservative religions do, observe, perform, religion, wherever that might lead" (Avishai 2008: 429). For this reason, Mahmood dismisses the category of resistance as it inscribes the analytics of power in a progressive politics, thus, preventing us from identifying ways of being and acting that are not encapsulated by the narrative of subversion.

Resistance needs to be de-romanticised as it is inscribed in a progressive politics that does not represent the historical and cultural specificity of religious women's actions. Moreover, resistance needs to be delinked from freedom. The author proceeds by making a distinction between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom is that which we experience when no obstacle is restraining our will. Positive freedom is the capacity to act according to our desires and interests, realising our autonomous will. But what if this autonomous will is not linked to the notion of self-realisation, as liberalism suggests? What if it is simply procedural and does not reflect a desire? Detaching the concept of self-realisation from autonomy means creating space to "capture the emotional, embodied, and socially embedded character of people, particularly of women" (Mahmood 2006: 41). As Elizabeth Grosz affirms, the rational and liberal idea of autonomy excludes the body. For this reason, it is important to reaffirm how a desire for freedom is always embodied and culturally and historically located: the practical setting and body in which desire is produced must be taken into account. Mahmood invites us to re-think and expand the concept of agency, or in her words to delink it from the goals

of progressive politics. Moving on, in *The Politics of Piety*, Mahmood provides an example of how religious women affirm their role in male-defined spaces by using religious tools. Through religion, women obtain a public role. The author describes the desires of these women and their motivation(s) for participating in Islamic movements. The scholar suggests that these women might be willing participants of what we perceive as submission and docility, for example by problematising the practice of veiling, something which in Western eyes perfectly depicts women's condition of subalternity and sexual segregation. From the Western perspective, veiling as a symbol of submission is seen as a universal rule, no matter the country and socioreligious conditions involved. However, even if the veils worn might look the same, the meaning attached to them differs in every socioreligious context. Assuming that every veiled woman is wearing it for the same reason is reductive and useless. As Bautista explains reelaborating Mahmood:

> Veiling, rather, is a practice that is constitutive of a disposition of shyness. To veil oneself is a conscious act of self-cultivation in which the body is an instrument utilised towards piety. In other words, one's body is both the potential for as well as means through which forms of interiority (such as, but not limited to, shyness) is realised and cultivated. (Bautista 2008: 79)

The veil expresses the value of modesty and in this sense, it reflects the relationship between a norm and the body, making the materiality of the body a central point of an act. As Grosz explains, examining Bergson's view, Bergson did not understand freedom in terms of choice, alternatives available or consumption, but rather in terms of action connected to an embodied subject. Mahmood's work reflects a disappointment with the existing concepts of desire, freedom and agency that do not consider the political context in which they are inscribed or the role of the body. To expand the question of freedom and return to Mahmood's idea that freedom resides in the capacity for action, it is worth mentioning Grosz' conceptualisation of freedom. The author associates the question of freedom to the condition of, or capacity for, action in life, delinking it from a "freedom-from" and revisualizing it in terms of a "freedom to". According to Grosz, a "freedom-from" is not sufficient as it:

> entails that once the subject has had restraints and inhibitions, the negative limitations, to freedom removed, a natural or given autonomy is somehow preserved. If external interference can be minimized, the subject can be (or rather becomes) itself, can be left to itself and as itself, can enact its given

> freedom. Freedom is attained through rights, laws, and rules that minimize negative interference rather than positive actions. (Grosz 2010: 141)

Grosz explains further by proceeding with her analysis of Bergson, who affirms that free acts are those which come exclusively from the subject and express everything about that subject: "they are integral to who or what the subject is" (Grosz 2010: 144). Even in the most difficult and constrained situations there must be a cohesion between the subject's act and the conditions that made it possible, but only after the act has been completed can we retrospectively establish what caused a certain decision. Freedom as a pre-given condition of a subject implies that the subject is always the same, but:

> Acts are free insofar as they express and resemble the subject, not insofar as the subject is always the same, an essence, an identity but insofar as the subject is transformed by and engaged through its acts, becomes through its acts [...]. Bergson's point is that free acts come from or even through us (it is not clear if it matters where the impetus of the act originates—what matters is how it is retroactively integrated into the subject's history and continuity). (Grosz 2010: 146)

In this sense, from a non-deterministic perspective, freedom is never a pre-given condition but can only be part of a process or act. Grosz states that according to this understanding, freedom is more the exception than the rule:

> Freedom pertains to the realm of actions, processes, and events that are not contained within, or predictable from, the present; it is that which emerges, surprises, and cannot be entirely anticipated in advance. It is not a state one is in or a quality that one has, but it resides in the activities one undertakes that transform oneself and (a part of) the world. It is not a property or right bestowed on, or removed from, individuals by others but a capacity or potentiality to act both in accordance with one's past as well as "out of character," in a manner that surprises. Freedom is thus not primarily a capacity of mind but of body: it is linked to the body's capacity for movement, and thus its multiple possibilities of action. (Grosz 2010: 152)

As Mahmood also believes, only by analysing the corporeal and bodily practices retrospectively can we derive autonomy from an act. In Grosz's words, freedom understood as the relationship that the subject might have with the material world, instead of a transcendent inherent quality of the subject, can expand the variety of acts available to us and therefore the expressions of our agency.

Mahmood analyses the role of embodied behavior in the formation of the subject, stating that the experience of Muslim women, and in particular of the women of the pious movement she studies, is highly influenced by Islamic ethical practice. The author gives an example based on her experience during the observation of the pious movement. The desire of these Muslim women to be pious was severely obstructed by secular ethos, for example when it came to engaging in interactions with male coworkers, having to move in spaces occupied by men or in the case of overhearing impious conversation. Furthermore, they often had to deal with resistance that came from family members that opposed their deep form of devotion. This devotion, often expressed through modesty and shyness, was not natural to them, they had to learn it, they made themselves shy and humble even if they had to create it in order to fulfill the potential that religious conduct entails. The relationship between these women and the norm exemplifies the relationship between a performative behavior and the inward disposition. In the case of the veil, instead of an innate will causing bodily behavior, it is action that shapes desire. In this sense, in the words of Mahmood: "action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them. Furthermore, it is through repeated bodily acts that one trains one's memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct" (Mahmood 2006: 53). But the act of embodying these established standards follows an intention. Performativity becomes one of the factors that influences subject formation. The pious movement uses the body as a medium for fulfilling their ethical potential. Their expression of agency is strictly related to the body. If ethics is grounded in discursive practices, procedures and exercises, as Mahmood affirms in drawing from Foucault, then the relationship between the self and the norm creates the self through bodily practices. All of these practices have as their ultimate goal modifying or transforming the subject in order to fulfill their potentialities.

The intention that pervades all the acts towards and because of God are called *khushu.* Bautista, drawing from Mahmoud's experience, provides an example. A religious woman conferred with one of the pious women to seek guidance about an issue she was facing with the prayer practice. The young woman was having trouble waking up early in the morning to perform the first prayer. The pious woman suggested that her action had to be intentional and that she had to draw from her love for God in order to make this act voluntary instead of a task. The pious woman understood that desire is not innate, but rather that it can be created through obedience. Religious conduct is a medium through which the self is realised. Acts of obedience are a way to achieve a goal

that brings them closer to self-realisation: it is a conscious act in the formation of their subjectivity. It is important to bear in mind that Mahmood's commitment to investigating the pious women's movement is not motivated by a blind surrender to cultural relativism, but it is prompted by the aim to debunk "the universalization of a secular conception of desire" (Bautista 2008: 77), proceeding from the fact that Muslim women in the first place might have contributed to strengthening the ideas advanced by progressive politics, creating the genre of "the Muslim woman speaks out" (Bautista 2008: 77). Her scope is to find a more complex answer to complex questions without falling into simplistic binarisms, starting from the following questions:

> why would women participate in Islamist movements when, or so it is supposed, it manifests a grand patriarchal plan to subordinate women and is, in that respect, against their welfare and interests? Why would rational, intelligent and articulate women agree to be associated with interests or habits that would supposedly entrench them into forms of submissive participation? Why would 'modern' enlightened women choose to veil themselves? (Bautista 2008: 76-77)

Mahmood's intention is to provide a more nuanced understanding of agency that goes beyond the liberal feminist concern for their "Muslim sisters", in the words of Bautista. The genre of "the Muslim Woman Speaks out" complicit to the Euro-American discourse is not the only authentic perspective we should explore. The author does so by delving into the different possible forms of desire. Taking as an example the relationship between a pianist challenging themselves to acquire the knowledge needed to become an expert, Mahmood draws a parallel with the embodied agency of pious women who, as Bautista states, craft moral values enacting bodily techniques, and the bodily techniques enacted are the result of a "goal-oriented, reasoned and calculative decision making" (Bautista 2008: 76) and thus, of an agentive behavior.

As Mahmood puts it, pious women's faith is neither a blind nor uncritical prostration. The point is that if we do not expand our idea of agency and freedom, we miss the opportunity to recover these women's voices and to fully understand that what we perceive as a blind act of obedience might be an intentional act of obedience with a rewarding purpose:

> From a methodological perspective, what is most prevalent about Mahmood's work is the assertion that the frameworks of gender equality to which some liberal feminists ascribe are simply inadequate in

> approximating the depth and breadth of the lives of Muslim women. (Bautista 2008: 79)

If freedom is seen only in the terms defined by liberal, political theory, according to which we are free when our actions are the result of our own will and not mediated by culture and tradition, we assume that there is a disjunction between social norms and the realisation of the self. But what if it was not the case for these women? What if, to them, religious conduct represents a way to fulfill their true potentialities? Deconstructing the mainstream idea of freedom helps us to interrupt the silence between feminism and religion and challenge the binary between the secular and the spiritual. As Sara Salem (2013) explains, framing the debate only in terms of choices made by women or forced on women as rights granted or taken away, links the conception of freedom to the controlling power of the other, granting no autonomy. Instead of observing Muslim women through the lens of autonomy in its liberal framework, it makes more sense to value their true intention and start recognizing the role of religion as a cultural toolkit (Rinaldo 2014) for individuals.

However, it is important to mention that the concept of compliant agency described above, as developed and presented by Mahmood and Grosz, has been criticized, as Rinaldo affirms, for giving a definition of agency which is too broad. For this reason, the author carries on by providing different views of the relationship between Muslim women and religion. Rinaldo suggests that religion must be understood with the role of a "cultural toolkit" that serves individuals. Furthermore, the scholar completes her analysis by describing the limit of the "compliant agency" approach. The limit of this approach might be that it does not take into account individuals who are not religious, and for this reason Rinaldo suggests later in the text that the two approaches should be combined together to show how a pious attitude, combined with a critical approach to religion, can create a practice that the author calls "Pious critical agency" that is adopted, for example, by Islamic feminists, as we will be able to explore later:

> From this perspective, religions are powerful cultural schemas that shape how individuals understand themselves, while simultaneously providing a range of resources that allow people to take action in different ways. In this framework, pious and feminist agency are two forms of agency among others. (Rinaldo 2014: 829)

The pious critical agency approach draws from Mahmood's pious agency concept and shows how piety and feminism can co-operate, without overlooking the matter of being critical towards religion and colonialism. To explore its decolonial aspect, it makes sense to have a look at the concept of the *Muslimwoman* (cooke 2007), the neologism that I am going to problematise in the next paragraph.

3. The "Third-World-*Muslimwoman*"

When it comes to the *Muslimwoman* – a neologism created by miriam cooke (2007) that fuses the two aspects of these women's identity (gender and religion) into one to show how their sense of self is reduced to the so-called "primary identity", making them easier to read – we risk falling into the trap of the Third World Woman vision. King explains that according to the researchers Fatme Gocek and Shiva Balaghi, when dealing with the Third World, critical studies use an Orientalist approach that treats societies as static entities. The author reaffirms with the words of Edward Said that "there is a consensus on "Islam" as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns" (Said 1981: xv, as cited in King 2005: 182). My aim in this part of the essay is to draw a parallelism between the neologism forged by miriam cooke and the concept of Third World Woman investigated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) to show the process Muslim women undergo when they are categorised as submissive by the feminist gaze.

As Sara Salem believes, even categorising certain women as subaltern and others as emancipated is an exercise of othering, as it is taking for granted that religion is always a patriarchal static entity: "the act of defining constitutes an exercise of power that creates certain women's experiences as patriarchal and others' as emancipatory" (Salem 2013: 1). This approach discursively colonises "the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of these women" (Mohanty 1988: 334), therefore producing a singular *muslimwoman*.

When speaking of Muslim women by putting them under the same category, as if there was only a single way to be Muslim, the risk is to overshadow the diversity of Muslim women as far as origins and lifestyle are concerned. These women are trapped between these two forces: either they are pitied by neo-Orientalists or they are oppressed by Islamists who want to control their bodies. As Chandra Mohanty explains, imposing the identity of a Third World Woman on religious women is arbitrary and does not examine their voices and experiences. On the contrary, it discursively homogenises and

systematises oppression, making the West the implicit referent and Muslim women the Other. The attention is placed on gender which is read as sexually constrained and being Muslim (submissive, oppressed, subaltern, passive target of male domination). Mahmood's vision of religious practice as historically and culturally specific echoes Mohanty's words. Putting these women in the same pre-constituted group, assigning them the same characteristics no matter the context, socioeconomic class and ethnicity and assuming the reason why they engage in certain practices is oppression, structures their experiences in dichotomous terms. Why is this vision of the Muslim woman in binary terms problematic? Because it posits the existence of two different, pre-constituted, ever-lasting categories: on the one hand, in Mohanty's words, the commonality of the Third-World Woman/ *muslimwoman's* struggle, no matter the socioreligious context, class, ethnicity, cultural differences, etc., and, on the other hand, the existence of a general oppressor. This vision opposes the powerful and the powerless and the risk is to overcome the subalternity by re-establishing a system based on the same binary pattern. In Mohanty's words, the ultimate risk is that it: "erases all marginal and resistant modes of experiences" (Mohanty 1988: 352).

> The Muslimwoman is not a description of a reality; it is the ascription of a label that reduces all diversity to a single image. The veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape. The neologism Muslimwoman draws attention to the emergence of a newly entwined religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even philosophical diversity. (cooke 2007: 140)

As Anne Sofie Roald observes, the identity of a Muslim woman has different components that have to do with how one views oneself and not just with how one is perceived by others:

> In certain situations, self-definition might concur with others' perceptions. In minority/majority conflicts, however, others' perceptions tend to be expressed in stereotypical terms. Self-definitions also tend to change according to circumstances. For an Arabic-speaking Muslim woman living in a western European country, her self-awareness of being a Muslim would be pronounced in an environment of non-Muslims, whereas her nationality would be conspicuous in an environment of Muslims from other countries. In her own home, her identity as a woman would define her role, behaviour and work. A Muslim immigrant woman would often

> stress her Muslim identity in her meeting with western researchers. (King 2005: 186)

As Zine (2002) explains, marking these women as victims of Islam's repression justifies actions under "the trope of liberation". For this reason, it is important to recover their own experiences and accounts to decolonize feminist critique and oppose the imperialist view. Zine examines contemporary feminist writing to discover the paradigms imposed on Muslim women such as the "oppressed Muslim woman" and "rescued Muslim maiden", or perhaps "Muslim maiden in need of rescue" (Zine 2002: 16). Zine does so because she believes it is important to know the process through which these paradigms are created in order to act against essentialisation, as Islamic feminists try to do by engaging in decolonial practice.

4. Islamic Feminism as a decolonial practice

The decolonial practice starts by deconstructing the epitome of the *Muslimwoman*, putting into question its very accuracy, as Asma Lamrabet does in *Women and Men in the Qur'an*:

> Here, the question that begs an answer is, which Muslim woman are we talking about? The Asian or the African? The North African or the Middle Easterner? The Muslim women of the Gulf or those from Balkan states? Western Europeans or North Americans? Residents of Dubai or those living in the Egyptian countryside? The Bengali Muslim woman who lives like a slave in the palaces of Riyadh, or the young Turkish woman living in the suburbs of Istanbul? (Lamrabet 2018: 9)

Asma Lamrabet believes Muslim women's trauma when it comes to colonialism was enhanced by the feminist "white man's burden" approach who put them all under the same category and according to which they needed salvation. She strongly believes that one of the main reasons Muslim women have been excluded from feminism is due to the effects of colonisation. The western liberation project of Muslim women was for a long time perceived as a colonialist project. But when we define these women as passive, we lose the chance to discover all the ways they express their agency, for example by exercising power over knowledge production through the interpretation of the sacred Qur'an. Islamic feminists engage in the practice of hermeneutics and hexegesis to challenge male Islamic ideas, re-writing what Muslim femininity is,

and they do so by engaging in a cosmopolitan, transnational and intersectional feminist practice:

> Muslim woman cosmopolitanism works across borders to weave a hybrid cultural system that disturbs the hegemony and desired homogeneity of both neo-Orientalism and religious extremism. To counter this instability, neo-Orientalists and Islamic extremists must constantly resort to a homogenising rhetoric that reinforces and reproduces their own dominant paradigm and asserts it to be natural, unlike the unnatural hybridity of new Muslimwoman identities and desires. (cooke et al. 2008: 98)

An example of the empowering character of Islamic feminism is Asma Lamrabet's interpretation of the creation of humanity that redefines gender roles. In *The Creation of Humanity,* Lamrabet presents the Qur'an's portrait of the creation of humanity. Through her interpretation, the author challenges the predominant idea of Eve as a symbol of all sins who was created from Adam. In Lamrabet's understanding of The Creation, women and men were created from the same essence through different stages: "O mankind! Reverence your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate, and from the two has spread abroad a multitude of men and women" (Lamrabet 2018: 36).

The author explains that regardless of religious tradition, the belief that Eve, the mother of all sins, was created from Adam's rib remains ingrained in our collective consciousness. The feminist anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'anic text, on the other hand, attests to spiritual equality, as symbolized by the creation tale of women and men from the same essence, the "original single soul", as stressed in the above verse. There is no evidence of culpability attributed to Eve for her banishment from Paradise. Eve is not perceived as a source of evil, nor as a sinner. It is the interpretation of most misogynist exegeses that assign upon her the role of temptress. Lamrabet proceeds by saying that, according to the Qur'an, the two beings are both equally responsible for their disobedience. Their act is pardoned by the Creator as an act that signifies their first exercise of agency and choice. God teaches them to be equally free and responsible. This is a very eloquent example of Islamic feminists' capacity to interpret the religious sacred text and build their own instruments to take control of their own narrative and seek emancipation if they believe they should, without needing any patronising interference from the West. For this reason they fight for equal access to the interpretation of the Qur'an and I consider this fight a decolonial practice, inasmuch as instead of

letting the "colonizer" dictate what their liberation should look like, they build and rely on their own tool to provide multiple and self-conscious critiques as they deal with several axes of discrimination at once:

> Within the Eurocentric paradigm, liberation for Muslim women is measured by the degree to which their dress codes conform to standards acceptable in the West. This is not to deny the fact that the policing of women's dress by repressive regimes is unjustifiably oppressive. However, to accept conformity to a set of cultural codes determined by the West means that Muslim women will be subjected to yet another hegemonic worldview and will continue to be denied the opportunity to define for themselves what liberation an empowerment mean and whether or not this includes the veil. (Zine 2002: 15).

5. Conclusions

Kimberley Crenshaw (1990) uses the term intersectionality as a way to designate the multiple layers of discriminations women suffer because of their multifaceted identity that the category of gender alone is unable to encompass. If religious identity is not considered in the fight for equality, can the feminist practice really be considered intersectional? If religious identity is not acknowledged as a point of departure for empowering women, as a cultural toolkit, how many women's experiences are we leaving behind? It is important to center their experiences, their actual lived realities and explore new facets of feminism. An intersectional practice is a type of practice that addresses the way multiple positionalities work. Reconceptualising religion as a positionality is one of the solutions that could possibly grant this approach. Creenshaw states that at times categories might prove empowering. Only through a context-specific analysis can we generate new transnational practices and strategies. An intersectional approach listens to the voices of women in order to unravel their narratives and experiences. The focus is on their voices and not on our preconceived assumptions, and only through intersectional research can their voices emerge. As Allison Weir believes, it is important to engage in a politics of listening:

> If the point of knowledge is to appreciate our place in the universe and to guide our actions, to guide us in our interactions with each other and with the world, then this kind of knowledge has served very well. […] The practices of knowledge oriented toward stories rather than truth claims, toward deep listening and being with rather than distanced observation,

> testing, and skeptical questioning, are rooted in Indigenous spirituality. (McLaren 2017: 393)

Even if the author is referring to Indigenous experience, which shares the same struggle of being doubted and colonised as Muslim women do, the point that I intend to make is that instead of imposing our view of pious Muslim women on them, we should be open to listening to their stories and drop the Western feminist gaze in order to engage in a politics of listening. The relationship these women have with the Divine tells a story, a story of piety, of identity, a story of love. As Roald (2001 as cited in King) explains, through religion many women have the possibility to express the intense emotions related to the Divine. Many women, during prayer or when they connect with God, experience emotions similar to those one might encounter in a romantic relationship. To conclude, identifying the faith and lifestyle of religious and in this case of Muslim women as a strategy or as a condition of subalternity is reductive and prevents us from really uncovering their voices, their agency, their critical ability, the narrative of love, of piety and the stories that shaped their identity:

> If we understand the world's religious traditions as narratives, and if we are willing to use language that expresses our own experiential and spiritual positioning within one or several of those narratives – however confusing or ambivalent that might be – we become part of a dialogue in which the language of prayer, spirituality and longing for God are not forbidden by the diktat of secularism. (King 2005: 74)

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