

Diversity in Islamic Feminism

*A comparison of two Islamic feminists; Amina Wadud
and Asma Lamrabet*

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18-06-2021

Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

BA Religious studies

Thesis Lived Religion

Words: 10.700

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Abstract

The broad field of Islamic feminism is surrounded by diversity and misconceptions. Many Western feminists think feminism and Islam cannot be combined. There is a lot of material available on Islamic feminism. However, there is little comparative research done in the field. This paper compares two Islamic feminists contributing to the field, Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet, who aim to promote equality between men and women in Islam by reinterpreting the Quran. By analysing their work on Quran exegesis, activism and their position on feminism, the thesis shows a detailed picture of the feminist endeavours of the two scholars from within an Islamic paradigm. The thesis argues that the scholars have points and arguments that are similar and different, but in the end, the main goal of the scholars is the same; to improve the status of women through an Islamic paradigm. They state that the Quran is, in essence, a text that promotes equality. In doing so, the thesis illustrates the diversity in the academic field of Islamic feminism and fights the misconceptions surrounding the field.

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Introduction

When thinking of the concept of feminism, often images arise of women marching, vocally fighting for equal rights. When I told people I was writing my thesis on Islamic feminism, I often heard the phrase "well, that will be a short thesis because those two do not go together". When thinking of Islamic feminism, usually, people do not know what to imagine. The image surrounding Muslim women is often an image of suppressed veiled women living in a patriarchal system, afraid to speak up, which is the opposite of feminism.¹ This image is, however, incorrect. Many misconceptions are surrounding Islamic women, and especially on the topic of feminism. In this thesis, I will write about the practice of Islamic feminism and some of its misconceptions. Two great contributors to the field are Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet. Both Muslim scholars, one in the U.S. and the other in Morocco, advocating the rights of (Muslim) women. A debate within this field is that of Quran interpretation. An often-heard statement is that the inequality between men and women is embedded in the Quran. However, Wadud and Lamrabet propose that the Quran is, in fact, a text that promotes equality, rather than inequality and that the disadvantaged position of women in the Islamic world can be improved when *ijtihad*² is practised. Ijtihad means independent reasoning, and it is the practice of placing the Quran in context, where one should think for themselves instead of blindly following previous interpretations and adapt the text to the current situation.

Wadud and Lamrabet have both written books on this topic and are advocates of women's rights. In this thesis, I will compare the women to each other, their ideas of Quran re-interpretation, and conduct a discourse analysis to show the diversity in the field. The primary sources are *Quran and Women* by Amina Wadud and *Women and Men in the Quran* by Asma

¹ Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011.

² Margot Badran, 'Engaging Islamic Feminism,' *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*, edited by Anitta Kynsilehto (Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2008), 25–36.

Lamrabet. In these books, the scholars elaborate on the female perspective of the Quran and show that it is a female inclusive text that promotes equality between men and women. It has merely been interpreted wrong and through the dominant male perspective. There are also interviews done with the scholars that I will analyse to look at how they situate themselves within the social debate and how this translates to activism.

Besides similarities in their work, there are also differences between the two scholars. In this analysis, I will also look at the different backgrounds of the scholars. The relevance of the research lies in showing the variety within the field of Islamic feminism. Many voices surround the topic, and I want to show how two of these voices contribute to the fight for women rights, mainly in Muslim societies, and contribute to women's emancipation in the Muslim community. With this research, I also want to highlight the misconception surrounding Islamic feminism and how Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet propose the opposite. I also want to show how Wadud and Lamrabet challenge existing power structures. The comparative research in this field is limited, and I want to contribute to it. My ambition is not to generate new knowledge but to amplify two of the many voices in this debate of women emancipation in Islam. The focus of the comparison will lie on Quran exegesis. This leads me to the following main question;

“How do Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet propose to contribute to the emancipation of women through Quran exegesis?”

In order to be able to answer this question, I developed four sub-questions underlying this main question. In the first chapter, I will elaborate on the term Islamic Feminism, how it emerged, and the controversies surrounding this term. In the second chapter, I will analyse Amina Wadud and her work on Quran exegesis and her background. In the third chapter, I will analyse Asma Lamrabet and her work on Quran exegesis and her background. In the final chapter, I will examine how both scholars position themselves in the wider social debate of Islamic feminism and how they challenge misconceptions and hegemonic structures. Both scholars will then be put side to side, and I will compare them and show similarities and differences

in their work. I will end with the conclusion in which I answer the main question and summarise the analysis done.

Methodology

In order to gain a deeper insight into the diversity in the field of Islamic feminism, discourse analysis was conducted of two Islamic feminists scholars and their works on Quran interpretation and activist endeavours. An analysis was conducted on previous interviews done by other researchers with Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet to see how the scholars are positioned in the feminist debate and their social practices. The discourse analysis was done on the sources *Quran and women* by Amina Wadud and *Women and Men in the Quran* by Asma Lamrabet. Therefore, it is a qualitative study focussing on the discourse of Islamic feminism and the position of two scholars within the broader debate of Islamic feminism. The main focus of the analysis has been on the Quran interpretation of the scholars. I made this choice because the Quran is one of the most authoritative texts for Muslims, and reinterpreting can be a controversial practice surrounded by much discussion. Wadud and Lamrabet both have done extensive studies on the Quran. They argue with their work that it is a text that promotes equality. I deemed it interesting to zoom in on interpretations of them and see how they propose to contribute to the emancipation of Muslim women specifically. I chose Wadud and Lamrabet because they come from very different backgrounds, and I believe they illustrate the diversity in the field of Islamic feminism quite well. Both scholars are influential and seen as respected participants in the field of Islamic feminism.

For this thesis, I conducted discourse analysis. I used the method Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and especially the model of Fairclough helped

me show the diversity in the field of Islamic feminism³. Critical Discourse Analysis is a bridge between the linguistics approach and the social practice approach, so I examined the textual and social aspects of the researchers. Key terms within CDA are ideology and hegemony, and it studies how language contributes to hegemonic structures. CDA looks at transformations of social practices and hierarchy. Which fits this research because Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet are challenging existing power structures with their work. This method helped me answer my main and subquestions, specifically by using Fairclough's model of CDA consisting of three aspects.⁴:

1. Textual analysis: This can range from a linguistic to an interpretive approach to texts and can be a tool in analysing the structures of texts.
2. Analysis of discourse practice: This is the field between the textual and social and shows the production and consumption of the texts.
3. Analysis of social practice: looking at the socio-cultural practices that provide a broader contextual relevance. "The question is whether texts support particular types of social practice by reproducing a hegemonic agenda...".⁵

In the first chapter, the sub-question 'What is Islamic feminism, and what are the misconceptions around this term?' is investigated. This analysis provided a broad background of the thesis and provided more general information on Islamic feminism. This is necessary to place the thesis within a specific context. In order to answer this question, a textual analysis according to Fairclough's method has been conducted, which takes the form of a literary review, where I clarified key concepts and looked at the historical background. This chapter on Islamic feminism and the difference between religious and secular feminism has been in-depth and provides information on the term Islamic feminism. It also addresses why some

³ Titus Hjelm, 'Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution towards a Critical Sociology of Religion,' *Critical Sociology* vol. 40, no. 6 (2013): 855–872, doi:10.1177/0896920513477664

⁴ Hjelm, 'Religion, Discourse and Power,' 859.

⁵ Hjelm, 'Religion, Discourse and Power,' 861.

scholars do not appreciate being called an 'Islamic feminist', and it shows misconceptions. In order to conduct the analysis, I defined inductive codes, which are later linked to the work of Wadud and Lamrabet. An example of an often recurring code is "challenging misconceptions", which is also visible in what Lamrabet and Wadud are trying to do with their work.

For the second and third chapter, an analysis of discursive practices has been conducted. I studied how Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet relate to the discursive discussion of Quran re-interpretation and their place within the discourse, according to the second aspect of Fairclough's model of CDA. I analysed both authors on their works on Quran re-interpretation, and defined inductive codes, like "universality of the text", and "shared responsibility", the codes are discussed in the comparison of the scholars. Because their work has been extensive, I focused on three topics: marriage, creation, and agency. I chose to narrow down the wide variety of topics, and because both scholars have reinterpreted verses concerning these topics, can a comparison be made more easily. I also provided a contextual background of both scholars, to show the contexts from which they designed their work.

For the last chapter, I analysed social practices and the positions of the scholars on feminism. I looked at what both women intended to achieve with their work in a social aspect. Here I studied interviews of both scholars and what they said about it in their work to see how they situate themselves within the wider social debate and how they propose to challenge the misconceptions surrounding the topic with their work and activism. I also conducted the comparison between the two scholars and put them side by side based on the earlier defined codes and themes, which helped show the differences and similarities between the two. The comparison is done on three levels; exegesis, activism and the scholars positions on feminism.

Reflection

CDA helped to show how Wadud and Lamrabet challenged the power structures within Islamic feminism in Muslim societies. Fairclough's model

helped to analyse multiple aspects, and therefore I could make an in-depth comparison of the scholars. I coded the texts inductively, this provided me with a good overview of the work of the scholars and showed multiple codes and themes which were similar and distinctive within the works and activist endeavours of the scholars. Because of the diversity in the field, many codes were too distinctive to use for the analysis, which would become too broad then.

Being an atheist woman from the West, my position concerning the topic was something to consider when writing on Islamic feminism. Having little knowledge in advance, however, might have helped me to stay objective during the research. I did not intend to take a position during the research, I focused on mapping diversity. However, I am excited to read about the activism of the two scholars, aiming for the emancipation of women, therefore neutrality could be a struggle at points. I do not think, however, that this has influenced this thesis.

A limitation of the research was that it focussed on only two books of the scholars. In order to make a good analysis and show the total diversity and the position of the scholars within Islamic feminism, there must be a more detailed analysis done of all the works of the two scholars. This was unfortunately not manageable for this research.

Theoretical framework

Margot Badran is a scholar who has conducted much research on the topic of Islamic feminism. In her book *Feminism in Islam* she writes that feminism in Islam has long been presumed non-existent and that Islam itself would not 'allow' it ⁶. On the other hand, there is an Orientalist discourse in the West that uses 'oppressed Muslim women as a significant recurring theme to justify neo-colonial practices.'⁷ She states that it has long been a topic of confusion surrounded by misinterpretations. She contributes to the clarification of it. Saba Mahmood also presses the

⁶Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 1.

⁷Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 1.

importance of more feminist research on women's agency, especially considering the misinformed interpretation outlined by the western media, where women are portrayed as oppressed beings instead of individual and powerful agents.⁸

Malihe Maghazei States that Islamic feminism exists in two aspects: Epistemology and activism.⁹ Epistemology is expressed in studies and research on gender roles in the Islamic texts, such as re-reading the Quran. The activist aspect is expressed in activities and actions that promote gender equality in Muslim-majority societies.¹⁰ This theory applies to this thesis because I will analyse the two scholars in an Epistemological and activist way. I will show the epistemological aspect by analysing Wadud and Lamrabet's work, and the activist aspect by analysing their social practices.

Recent studies propose that Muslim women can be agents differently from the Western notion of agency. Mahmood is one of these researchers, and calls this pious agency. Within feminism, agency is an important concept. Saba Mahmood is critical of the model of agency that is often used in feminist academia. This notion of agency is mainly limited to notions of women in liberal, secular contexts. It is not regarded in, for example, women in religious contexts. Mahmood therefore redefines agency as "*a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable to create*".¹¹ This 'non-liberal notion of agency can challenge the hegemonic male cultural norms of Arab Muslim societies.¹² This is also

⁸ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 6.

⁹ Malihe Maghazei, 'Islamic Feminism: At the Periphery or Growing Trend?' in: *Peripheral Feminisms: Literary and Sociological Approaches*, red. Petra Broomans and Margriet van der Waal (Groningen: Globalisation Studies Groningen, 2012), 19.

¹⁰ Maghazei, 'Islamic Feminism: Periphery or Growing Trend?', 19.

¹¹ Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt,' *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* vol. 42, no. 1 (2006): 31-71, doi:10.33356/temenos.4633, 34.

¹² Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject,' 38.

applicable to Wadud and Lamrabet. They challenge hegemonic male dominance with their work, and propose new power structures.

Abdullah Saeed wrote on the contextualist approach of re-reading the Quran in the twenty-first century. This contextualist approach reads the Quran in its historical context, and thus aims to understand objectives.¹³ Saeed's approach can be seen as an alternative for the textual approach, which focuses mainly on the literal meaning of the text and is dominant in Quran exegesis. Central to the contextualist approach is what he calls the 'macro-context', which focuses mainly on the social, cultural, political, economic, and intellectual settings of the Quran.¹⁴ He states that this approach is crucial when discussing verses such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, which can be disadvantageous for women. The contextualist approach provides a better understanding of the intentions and objectives of a text, by looking at time, place, and circumstances. This theory is relevant for this study, because it applies to Wadud and Lamrabet. They, like many other Islamic feminists, use this contextual approach focussing on 'macro-context' for re-reading the Quran.

Badran sees Islamic feminism as 'a feminist discourse and practises articulated within an Islamic paradigm'.¹⁵ She provides an extensive and clear definition of Islamic feminism to which I will hold on as well:

*"Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all insan (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life."*¹⁶

¹³Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: a Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2014), 5.

¹⁴ Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 5.

¹⁵Margot Badran, 'Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?' *Al Ahram Weekly Online*, no. 569 (2002): 17–23.

¹⁶ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 11.

Chapter 1: Islamic Feminism

In the contemporary scholarly debate, Islamic feminism is a field that is surrounded by confusion, contention, and ignorance.¹⁷ It is often portrayed as two things that cannot be combined. There are assumptions about Islam, especially in the West, that it would not 'allow' feminism, and that Muslims are not capable of producing feminism. This is one of the misconceptions that I want to challenge in this thesis. Margot Badran is one of the first scholars to do this. The field of Islamic feminism is growing, with more and more scholars participating in it. However, what is Islamic feminism exactly, and why is there a need for some side notes around this term?

I want to begin by pointing out that the general term 'feminism' does not have one clear definition. It is not a simple movement that fights for political, economic and cultural emancipation for women worldwide. Not all feminists want the same or think the same.¹⁸ Because the term feminism is so diverse and interdisciplinary, it is sometimes difficult to know its meaning. In order to give a clear meaning of Islamic feminism, I will define the more general term 'feminism'. In this chapter, I would first like to clarify the meaning of 'feminism' for this thesis. Then I will elaborate on the more specific term 'Islamic feminism'.

There are claims that feminism is a 'western' or 'white' concept that has only later spread to the rest of the world.¹⁹ According to El Kaidi, however, at the same time that 'western' feminism developed, there was also a rise against patriarchy in Muslim countries and other parts of the world.²⁰ Muslim women also started to rise against patriarchy. Margot Badran states that those who claim that feminism is a purely Western concept do not know their history, she even calls these myths.²¹ In general, the term feminism

¹⁷ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 1.

¹⁸Youssef El Kaidi, 'Feminist Thought in the Muslim World: From Secular to Islamic Feminism,' *Inside Arabia*, December 21, 2020, insidearabia.com/feminist-muslim-world-islamic-feminism/ (accessed June 4, 2021).

¹⁹ El Kaidi, 'Feminist Thought in the Muslim World'.

²⁰ El Kaidi, 'Feminist Thought in the Muslim World'.

²¹ Badran, 'Engaging Islamic Feminism,' 30.

means "to advocate for equality of all sexes, therefore it means to protect the rights of women, transgender people, LGBTQ people, and even men, thus if a person believes in equality of sexes that person is a feminist".²² It is thus not restricted to fighting for women's rights, or securing equality for women. Feminism is a term that can encompass advocates of equality of all genders. It can take many forms, and there are many disciplines within feminism. One of these disciplines is Islamic feminism.

Islamic feminism or Muslim feminism is not a recently developed movement. It is said that Mohammed Abdu was one of the first Islamic feminists.²³ He was a modernist thinker in Egypt in the 19th century. According to Leila Ahmed, he was one of the first to state that Islam defended the position of the woman and her equality to men. He argued that the practices that marginalised the position of women were not Islamic of nature. He also said that these suppressing practices arose because of the wrongful interpretations of the Islamic laws as presented in the Quran and the *hadith*. These have influenced the laws on which people acted.²⁴

The term 'Islamic feminism' developed in the 1990s in the Middle East. There was a deep dissatisfaction about the somewhat new governments in the Middle-East, that failed to create stable, prosperous democratic states. Observers found that Islamic feminism emerged in places with an active Islamist movement, for instance in Egypt or Iran. Certain factors contributed to the rise of women emancipation.²⁵ For example, women became more and more educated. Also, with the growth of the Islamist movements, women became more aware of the second-class status they enjoyed and became displeased by this. These circumstances, among others, provided women with a voice, and they felt the need to emancipate. Other studies showed that Islamic feminism developed after the Iran revolution in

²²Ayush Verma, 'Gender, Power, and Resistance: the Diversity in Feminism,' *IPleaders*, January 10, 2021, www.blog.ipleaders.in/gender-power-resistance-diversity-feminism/ (accessed June 7, 2021).

²³Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 139-140.

²⁴ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 139-140.

²⁵ Badran, 'Engaging Islamic feminism,' 26.

1979, and became more specific after the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988. After participating and fighting in the revolution, the women were forced into a subordinate role. Women shaped their discourse from their own perspectives, and used the Quran to show their new Islamic voice. Islamic feminism offered a progressive discourse within a conservative narrative.

However, there is a distinction between secular feminists in Muslim societies and Islamic feminists. The Islamic feminist movement offered new tools to tackle the emancipation of women, which secular feminists could not offer. In essence, Islamic feminism can be defined as a form of feminism with a liberal view of Islam. Its primary focus is on the Quran, and Islamic feminists argue that a dominant patriarchal paradigm influences our image of Islam. In order to free ourselves of this patriarchal paradigm, we need to re-read the Quran and place it in the current social context. This does not mean to change the meaning of the text, but to practice *ijtihad*. The goal is to create gender equality based on the Quran. Islamic feminists argue, just like Muhammad Abdu, that Islam does not promote inequality, but that through hundreds of years of interpretations through male bias, it has turned into a woman suppressing religion. The Quran in itself is a text that promotes equality. Scholars like Wadud and Lamrabet contribute to liberating women of this patriarchal reading of the texts, and provide alternative interpretations and reconstructions of the past. Therefore they can be called Islamic feminists.

Secular feminism in the Muslim world, on the other hand, is also profoundly concerned with religion. This is in contrast with the Western forms of feminism. That is because in the Muslim world, it is hard to see religion apart from people's daily social lives.²⁶ There are multiple positions secular feminist can take, and these are quite diverse. This is however a representation of the Muslim world in itself, which is also drenched in diversity. Some examples of secular feminists that reject the role of religion are Fatima Mernissi and Haideh Moghissi. Mernissi states in her early work

²⁶ El Kaidi 'Feminist Thought in the Muslim World'.

that religion and feminism are irreconcilable because Islam demonstrates hierarchical models that suppress women and proves patriarchy.²⁷ She however shifted later on to a more moderate position. Moghissi is also sceptic about the compatibility of feminism and Islam, because she sees Islam as inhospitable to feminism. Secular feminism has generally been more action-oriented, focusing more on political and social action to reach change.

Even though the two feminist positions seem quite contradictory, they should not be seen as such, both brands plea for women's rights and societal changes in favor of women in Muslim countries. The paradigm and method of doing so are however different. Margot Badran also focuses on the differences between the two feminist positions in her book *Feminism in Islam*. She explains secular feminism in the Muslim world as demanding equal education, opportunity, and rights for men and women relying on mostly the Islamic modernist thought.²⁸ Islamic feminism however relies only on reinterpreting the Quran and the hadith in order to reach change. They are open to multiple interpretations of the holy texts. They argue that this is the goal of the Quran because Ali Ibn Abu Talib (the cousin of the prophet Mohammed) said that "*the Quran has many faces*" and is therefore open to interpretation.²⁹

The Islamic feminist agenda is not accepted by a lot of scholars or activists in the feminist field. Some do not see the need for the interference of religion in civic life. Moghissi, for example, does not believe in reinterpreting the holy texts in a contemporary context to be of any help for change and emancipation.³⁰ She states that it will not open possibilities for change in cultural and political contexts. She states that Islamic feminism portrays an ideal and romanticised image of Islam.³¹ Another critique is that feminism

²⁷ El Kaidi 'Feminist Thought in the Muslim World'.

²⁸ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 4.

²⁹ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 249.

³⁰ Haideh Moghissi, 'Islamic Feminism Revisited,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 1 (2011): 77, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2010-054>

³¹ Moghissi, 'Islamic Feminism Revisited,' 77.

is often linked to the Western model of gender relations, which treats Islam as the fundamental problem of oppression against women, instead of as a form of feminist agency. Therefore Islamic feminism is a term that is not embraced by many people, because of this association with the West and the additional lack of female agency. Badran argues that the main goal of Islamic feminism is to unite religion and women and function as a bridge between polarities such as 'East' and 'West' or 'religious' and 'secular'.

Amina Wadud was at first reluctant to be labelled an 'Islamic feminist'. However, she does not mind the label now and is more concerned with whether or not people understand her work.³² Where she does have an opinion on, however, is the label 'Western feminist'. She states that there is nothing wrong with being a Western Muslim (she lives in the United States) and that there are many Muslims located outside the Middle East.³³ Asma Lamrabet embraces the term 'Islamic feminist' but wants to clarify that the term is fundamentally different from the western notion of feminism.³⁴

Chapter 2: Amina Wadud

Biography

As a daughter of a Methodist priest, Amina Wadud, Born in 1952, always had a certain interest in religion. She was interested in various Christian movements at a young age, and she looked at the differences and similarities between them. Growing up, she got acquainted with multiple religions. She developed the awareness that there was more than just one religion. When she went to university, she was very interested in Eastern spiritual traditions. She decided to become a practising Buddhist and went to an Ashram. A year later, she started reading about Islam, joined the U.S. Islamic movement, and converted herself to Islam. She said that when she

³² Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 245.

³³ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 245.

³⁴ Merieme Yafout, 'Islamitisch Feminisme in Marokko,' in: *Activisme, Feminisme En Islam: Stemmen Van Marrokkaanse En Marokkaans-Nederlandse Vrouwen*, eds. Marjo Buitelaar, Moha Ennaji, Fatima Sadiqi, and Karen Vintges (Amsterdam: AUP, 2018), 96.

read the Quran for the first time, she "really fell in love".³⁵ So throughout her life, it is visible that she has been in deeper contact with multiple religions, and practising some of them.

Dr Amina Wadud is an activist, Quran exegete and Islamic theologian. Her research has been very interwoven with her activism throughout her life.³⁶ She is characterised as an American Muslim with a progressive interpretation of the Quran.³⁷ Her academic background has been extensive. She studied and taught at multiple universities in and outside the U.S.. Wadud is active in multiple civil society organisations and movements that promote women emancipation within the Islamic paradigm³⁸. An example of this is that she is one of the founders of the organisation Sisters in Islam, an organisation in Malaysia that advocates for equal rights for women from within an Islamic framework.³⁹

Objective of Book

Wadud wrote multiple books, chapters, and articles about the Quran and gender. Her book *Quran and Women* is the work I am focussing on in this thesis. She wants to protest the lack of female voices in the Quran. She criticises the male dominance in the text, which is, according to her, caused by the fact that the Quran has always been interpreted through male bias.⁴⁰ She states that this is not in line with the Islamic ideal of equality. Only Allah is exalted above humans. She states that the justice and inclusiveness and dignity Allah gave to humans is being abused. With her work, she fights to restore this, which she also calls 'Gender Jihad'.⁴¹ It has to be noted that

³⁵Carla Bernardo, "Lady Imam' on 25 Years of the Gender Jihad' *UCT News*, August 20, 2019, www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2019-08-20-lady-imam-on-25-years-of-the-gender-jihad (accessed June 10, 2021).

³⁶Amina Wadud' *Motief Vzw*, www.motief.org/over-motief/visie/amina-wadud/ (accessed June 8, 2021).

³⁷ Bernardo, 'Lady Imam on 25 Years Gender Jihad'.

³⁸Hera Diani, 'Meet Amina Wadud: The Rock Star of Islamic Feminists,' *Muslim Institute*, www.musliminstitute.org/freethinking/politics/meet-amina-wadud-rock-star-islamic-feminists (accessed June 5, 2021).

³⁹ 'Amina Wadud' *Motief Vzw*.

⁴⁰ 'Amina Wadud' *Motief Vzw*.

⁴¹ 'Amina Wadud' *Motief Vzw*.

everything she writes or says, is deeply motivated by her faith and her belief in Islam as a gender-equal religion. She does not want to change Islam, she just wants to restore it in the form Allah had intended.

The main goal of the book *Quran and Woman* is to demonstrate the relevance of the Quran to the lives of women in the modern world, through reading the text from a female perspective. She is critical of the earlier interpretations of the text because they are biased, and fail to reflect the overall intention. Which are, according to her, basic social principles of justice and equality.⁴² She wants to show the universality of the Quran, and bridge the gap between the original text and its intent.

Critique

Wadud has experienced in her personal and academic life a certain amount of discrimination and critique. As an African American openly Muslim woman who wears a Hijab, she has been critiqued for her appearance and work.⁴³ For some Muslims, she is a convert, an enemy of Islam, and a "tool of the West". For Americans, she is a marginalised black Muslim woman.⁴⁴ When she led a mixed prayer, on which I will elaborate more later, she got many critiques. Her work was banned in the United Arab Emirates, and organisers who wanted her to speak cancelled after being condemned by other Muslim leaders.⁴⁵ Opponents have accused Wadud of the prayer of "softening Islam" to make it more compatible with Western discourses of secularity and modernity.⁴⁶ Wadud and her followers described themselves first as interested Muslims who looked critically at Islam. She wanted to understand the role of women as promoted in the Quran.⁴⁷ She describes *Quran and Woman* as a conservative book, which happened not to support

⁴² Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxii.

⁴³ Kecia Ali, Juliane Hammer, and Laury Silvers, *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud* (USA: 48HrsBooks, 2012), 199.

⁴⁴ Ali, Hammer and Silvers, *A Jihad Justice for Amina Wadud*, 199.

⁴⁵ Bernardo, 'Lady Imam on 25 Years Gender Jihad.'

⁴⁶ Ali, Hammer and Silvers, *A Jihad Justice for Amina Wadud*, 199.

⁴⁷ Diani, 'Meet Amina Wadud.'

the patriarchal image of Islam, and she therefore became controversial. This was not her aim though, she stated "I am just interested in the truth".

Method

The approach she takes in studying the Quran is hermeneutical. She first looks at the context of the revelation of the text, then studies the grammatical composition and lastly the world-view, which she calls *Weltanschauung*.⁴⁸ Using this model, she can argue against traditional and influential interpretations of the Quran. An important argument she gives in the book is against the biological distinctions between men and women. Women are seen as weak and inferior, and unfit to carry out certain tasks. Where men are portrayed as strong, leaders and able to perform the tasks the women are not, this image leads to the confinement of functions for women related to just their biology.⁴⁹ So in order to diminish this image of women in the Quran, Wadud states that:

*"A reader must understand the implications of the Quranic expressions during the time in which they were expressed in order to determine their proper meaning"*⁵⁰

She advocates that to understand what was originally meant with a certain verse, the sacred text must be put in the context in which it was written. Throughout her book Wadud analyses some specific verses in the Quran. In the next paragraphs, I will regard the following examples of this practice: the creation, agency and ethics of marital union.

Analysis of Exegesis

Creation of Humanity

The debate surrounding the creation of humankind is mostly done on a linguistic level. A notion that is often stated is that men were created before women were, so men are better than women. Wadud rejects this, and rather presses that the creation of humankind is gender-neutral. The Quran does

⁴⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 3.

⁴⁹ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 7.

⁵⁰ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 4.

not implicate anything different.⁵¹ She zooms in on a specific verse where the creation is described and analyses specific terms used there.

"And from (min) His signs (ayat) is that He created you (humankind) from (min) a single soul (nafs), and created from (min) is its mate (zawj), and from (min) these two He spread countless men and women" (4: 1).⁵²

Here it becomes visible that there is no mention of gender. Wadud takes three concepts of the verse: *min*, *nafs* and *zawj*, and elaborates the linguistics to explain the approach. She states that there is little known about the literal meaning of the words which can be derived from the Quran directly. Therefore previous interpreters have considered the biblical verses on creation and have derived from that, that Adam had been created first.⁵³ Wadud also argues the notion that women are the source of evil, and writes that both women and men were wrong in defying God in the Garden, and both were also forgiven by God, as is said in the Quran⁵⁴. She concludes with the assumption that there are no essential distinctions in the Quran that would cause women to be unequal to men. However, it is pressed that men and women are equal, this does not mean that there are no distinctions between the two, they are distinct but compatible. However, there are no specific characteristics, social or functional roles attributed to women at the moment of creation in the Quran.

Agency

Wadud also dedicates a paragraph on women as individuals. In her discussion, she notes that the Quran looks at women in two ways: individual and member of a societal system. When looking at women concerning the group, they are seen as equal members of a societal system. However, the Quran does not dismiss the functional differences between men and women, which are important to maintain a society.⁵⁵ Wadud states that mutually supportive relationships between men and women are an important goal of

⁵¹ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 15.

⁵² Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 17.

⁵³ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 20.

⁵⁴ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 25.

⁵⁵ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 8.

the Quran concerning society.⁵⁶ She then states that it is important to look at women individually, because the Quran treats individuals the same way. Women are individual agents in the Quran with the same capacity as men. She specifies this with the relation of the individual with Allah, which is the same for men and women alike. Men do not have more rights on spirituality than women. All individuals on earth are given "responsibility and capacity".⁵⁷ Concerning their potential relationship to Allah, they are all the same. There is no distinction being made between the personal capacity of men and women.⁵⁸

Marital Union

Another example is the matter of marital union. Wadud discusses a verse where she shows how an interpretation can be misused.

“So good women are qanitat, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear (nushuz), admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, do not seek a way against them.” (Quran, 04:34)

According to this verse, women must obey their husbands, if they fail to do so, they can be scourged (beaten). Wadud goes into the meaning of some of the words in this verse to clarify the actual meaning. She begins with the word *qanitat* which characterises a good woman. This is often falsely translated, and turned into 'obedient, which is then linked to 'obedience to the husband'. Wadud then shows how the word is being used in the rest of the Quran, which is often done regarding both men and women. Throughout the Quran, it is used to describe the personality traits of those who believe in Allah. *Qanitat* can also be explained as subordination towards Allah, and is not used between "created things".⁵⁹ Also the word *nushuz* is used for both male and female in the Quran, and therefore it cannot mean 'disobedience to the husband'. The Quran offers three kinds of solutions that can solve marital problems; First, the couple has to try to solve the problems

⁵⁶ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 8.

⁵⁷ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 34.

⁵⁸ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 34.

⁵⁹ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 74.

verbally, together or with the help of others they must engage in an open discussion. If that does not help, separation is prescribed, this is a more radical solution. Only in extreme cases the 'scourge' is allowed. The Quran does however give limitations to the use of the scourge. This cannot cause more marital problems, because marital harmony is important to regain. Wadud states that the Quran gives a strong preference to the first solution; verbal discussion of problems. This is also in line with the broad theme of mutual consultation in the Quran.⁶⁰ So, women are not obliged to be obedient to their husband by the Quran. However, when this verse is put into cultural context, Wadud notes that in the 7th century CE, the time of the revelations, women were dependent on their husband and his income. Women who deemed their husbands capable of providing for the family believed they deserved to be obeyed. According to Wadud, however, there is no reason to believe that a husband could 'scourge' his wife into obedience.⁶¹ Wadud concludes the chapter by stating that the Quran favours marriage, and it is seen as a protection for both men and women. There is a possibility for struggle within the marriage, but suggestions are made to resolve the struggle. If that fails, divorce is permitted.⁶²

Conclusion

In the conclusion of her book, Wadud states that the interpretation of the text will most likely continue, in multiple forms. She encourages this process, and presses the importance of multiple interpretations, because only then "can the wisdom of the Quran be effectively implemented."⁶³ Wadud believes that the Quran is a text that can be adapted anywhere and anytime, just like four centuries ago when it was adapted to the original Muslim community, it can also be adapted to contemporary Muslim communities. The Quran never says that striving to be like the original Muslim community is the main goal. Wadud says that no community can be like another. The main goal of the Quran, according to Wadud, is to pursue

⁶⁰ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 75.

⁶¹ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 77.

⁶² Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 78.

⁶³ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 94.

the main principles of the sacred text: Justice, equality, harmony, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and development.⁶⁴

Chapter 3: Asma Lamrabet

Biography

Dr. Asma Lamrabet (60) studied medicine in Morocco and was a medic in Rabat's academic children's hospital. She is married to a diplomat, and lives in an upper-class area in Rabat. By day she worked in the hospital, and by night she studies and writes about feminism and Islam. She has also been a volunteer in hospitals in Spain and Latin America.⁶⁵ After returning from this, she became more and more interested in the role of women in Islam.⁶⁶ She is now retired as a medic. While living in Morocco, she as a Muslim, founded a study group for women who looked at the sacred texts. They particularly looked at the role of women within Islam. ⁶⁷ After that, she started to focus on the academics of Islamic feminism.

Objective of Book

Lamrabet has written multiple books, chapters, and articles on women and Islam. The book I am going to focus on here is *Women and Men in the Quran*. She states that with her book, she will attempt to uncover the meaning of certain verses in the Quran that promote gender equality. She will return to the basics of Islam and its spiritual message. She will emphasise the passages that promote the importance of "Shared responsibility, mutual support, and respect between a man and a woman".⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Wadud, *Quran and Woman*, 95.

⁶⁵ 'Biografie,' *Asma Lamrabet*, www.asma-lamrabet.com/biographie/francais/ (accessed May 31, 2021).

⁶⁶ Kaja Bouman, "'Marokko Is Een Parel Kwijt.'" *Feminist Asma Lamrabet Verliet Onlangs Haar Land*, *De Kanttekening*, November 5, 2019, www.dekanttekening.nl/interview/marokko-is-een-parel-kwijt-feminist-asma-lamrabet-verliet-onlang (accessed June 11, 2021).

⁶⁷ Bouman, "'Marokko Is Een Parel Kwijt.'"

⁶⁸ Lamrabet, Asma. *Women and Men in the Qur'ān*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 105.

She will attempt this by deconstructing the verses of all previous interpretations, ideas and references that surround many of them.⁶⁹ In a sense, she will be stripping the verses from all previous biases, interpretations and cultural customs. However, what is important in doing this is the regard for sociopolitical and cultural conditions from the time in which the Quran was revealed. These have a great influence on the intention of verses.

She has a great number of followers in multiple Arabic countries due to her provocative statements on the position of women in Islam. Her followers consist of men and women, who are displeased with the dominant Islamic discourse, which is according to Lamrabet, 'macho and patriarchal'.⁷⁰ Her solution to this is; re-reading the texts critically, identify the patriarchal natured verses and give an alternative interpretation. However, it has to be noted that she does regard the traditional interpretations and the historical contexts.⁷¹ She adds that the Quran is the word of God, but that the teachings in the text are only practised in a specific historical context, which is therefore not applicable to contemporary Muslim societies. She pleads for the re-interpretation of Quran verses in today's social contexts. She aims to reform the social injustice Muslim women often face.

Lamrabet is very vocal about her disapproval of western ideology being imposed on Muslim women. In the introduction of her book, she mentions that there is an image regarding Muslim women as submissive and overlooked. This is, according to the western paradigm, because of the Islamic ideology. The 'need' to deliberate these women from a tyrannical religion with 'barbaric' intentions follows.⁷² Lamrabet reacts to these assumptions with two 'pieces of evidence that must be taken into account.'⁷³

⁶⁹ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 5.

⁷⁰ Martina Sabra, 'Islamic Feminism in Morocco: "We Have to Re-Appropriate the Source Texts,"' translated by Steph Morris, *Qantara*, <https://en.qantara.de/content/islamic-feminism-in-morocco-we-have-to-re-appropriate-the-source-texts> (accessed June 6 2021).

⁷¹ Sabra, 'Islamic Feminism in Morocco'.

⁷² Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 1.

⁷³ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 2.

First, she mentions the great diversity within the Muslim world. According to her, there exists just one image of Muslim women, which is, according to her, a cultural stereotype.⁷⁴ The second evidence she mentions is often overlooked, she states that women's rights are not only neglected in the Muslim world. All over the world, inequality between men and women exists in some form or another, varying in different degrees in all cultures and civilisations.⁷⁵ She continues that it is very important to see the differences between Islam as a spiritual message and Islam as a culture, where institutions, interpretations, and ideologies play. Islam as a spiritual message does not neglect the rights of women, but the old laws the *ulama*⁷⁶ still impose do, which are eventually turned into rigorous laws.⁷⁷ To this is added that the failure of generating laws that provide equality and reforms does not come from Islam, but from the inability to promote political democratisation. When a country is democratic, only then there is room for reforms, such as gender equality.⁷⁸

Critique

Outsiders have critiqued Lamrabet. First of all, by conservatives, she has been accused of blasphemy.⁷⁹ Because she wants to reinterpret the texts to present-day society, which would lead to different practices, such as changing the inheritance law. Another point of criticism she encountered came from more secular critics. They stated that Lamrabet's work does not condemn violence against women strong enough.⁸⁰ Conservative Muslims have accused her of lacking theological knowledge to interpret the Quran correctly.⁸¹

⁷⁴Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 2.

⁷⁵Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 2.

⁷⁶The *ulama* ("the learned ones") are the traditional interpreters, transmitters and guardians of religious knowledge in Islam.

⁷⁷Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 3.

⁷⁸Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 4.

⁷⁹Sabra, 'Islamic Feminism in Morocco.'

⁸⁰Sabra, 'Islamic Feminism in Morocco.'

⁸¹Sabra, 'Islamic Feminism in Morocco.'

Method

The approach Lamrabet applies in analysing the Quran, is putting verses back into the Quranic framework. In this manner, the verses are regarded from within the Quranic framework. This translates itself into a global vision of humanity, because the verses on women will be regarded next to the verses of men. In this way, it can be understood what the Quran says holistically about men and women.⁸² With her approach she wants the Islamic sources to “speak for themselves”, which will then show the equal and just meaning of the text.⁸³ Lamrabet distinguishes three levels of reading verses in the Quran. 1. Verses of universal scope (most verses) 2. Situational verses (linked to a historical event) 3. Specific verses (revealed to a particular group or person).⁸⁴ She especially elaborates on the Last level in her book, the specific verses. These types of verses are usually the basis for the negative image that Islam has. Lamrabet looks in her book at these types of verses and gives another meaning to them regarding the historical and socio-cultural context of the revelation. ⁸⁵ In the next paragraphs, I will regard the following examples of this practice, the creation, agency, and ethics of the marital union.

Analysis of Exegesis

Creation of Humanity

The creation of humanity is often associated with the bible stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Quran exegetes have followed this image almost unanimously. The real story in the Quran, however, is quite different from this image according to Lamrabet. She analyses the following verse, because it is the central verse on the subject of creation:

“O mankind! Reverence you 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.” (Quran 4:1)

⁸² Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur’Ān*, 21.

⁸³ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur’Ān*, prologue.

⁸⁴ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur’Ān*, 21-24.

⁸⁵ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur’Ān*, 26.

Lamrabet shows with this verse that there is no trace of Eve being created from one of Adam's ribs. She focuses on the 'single soul', which means that the first man and woman have the same origin and were created as equals. She even states that this verse aims to confirm the equality between the first men and women on every level.⁸⁶ She continues on a more linguistic level and zooms in on some terms used in the Quran that the classical interpretation uses differently. *Nafs* (self) indicate the man, and *zawj* (couple) as an indication for the woman. Facing this is the reformative interpretation that interprets *nafs* as the original essence, and *zawj* as 'spouse' without mentioning gender.⁸⁷ Because of the creation of both men and women through one unified soul, the Quran inherently denies the possibility of segregation, of race, sex or ethnicity.⁸⁸ Lamrabet also touches upon Eve being responsible for the sins and being dismissed out of the Garden. This was according to the Quran, a shared responsibility. Lamrabet states that the Quran even shows the importance of this shared responsibility. What follows is that both humans share life on earth, with the first realisation of freedom that God teaches them as a part of their human abilities. There is also no distinction between man or woman, and because they come from the same origin, God teaches them to be equal.⁸⁹

Agency

God placed the two humans on earth to create civilisation and more humans. God made this the responsibility of the first man and woman. He provided the man and woman with a huge task, and made this their shared responsibility, states Lamrabet. With this empowerment of humans, there was no distinction in gender when giving this empowerment by God. Therefore, women and men were provided with the same amount of agency. The only differentiating factor is *taqwa* (a form of piety and fear for the creator), besides that every human being is equal. There are six verses in the Quran that are addressed to both men and women. There are some accounts of different women who were not satisfied with the majority of the Quran

⁸⁶ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 35-40.

⁸⁷ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 35-40.

⁸⁸ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 35-40.

⁸⁹ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 35-40.

being addressed to men, like the prophet's wife. Lamrabet identifies this feminine demand for inclusiveness in the Quran as the birth of a new female consciousness. Women were fully aware of their rights and demanded more equality. Women agency is very visible here, women actively participating in religious life, and demanding a place in the Quranic discourse.⁹⁰

Marital union

Many of the verses regarding the marital union in the Quran are directed at men in a critical tone. According to Lamrabet, this was because of the practices used in the pre-Islamic era, which were very degrading and discriminatory to women. These practices arose in the Pre-Islamic era, before the revelation of the Quran, and Lamrabet proposes that the coming of the Quran was a huge improvement for women's rights in relation to men. The Quran states that the marital union is not a prison, but rather a place of harmony between husband and wife. The first revelation on this topic was on the woman's property, who had the right to have her own money. It was prohibited for men to misuse this money or any other property that legally belonged to the woman.⁹¹ The Quran also describes marriage as a place where brutality or violence is not permitted. Lamrabet says that it is disappointing that in Muslim societies the Quranic ethic of the marriage union is not reflected.⁹² One of many examples of this in the Quran is obedience. The Arabic word for obedience (*ta'a*) is a principle that has taken on the meaning of a wife that should obey her husband and be submissive to him, even though there is not a single mention of *ta'a* in the Quranic verses on the marital union.⁹³ There are more examples of misinterpreted terms, thus resulting in poor treatment of women. This is very regrettable, states Lamrabet, because they are identified as Islamic 'values' that reflect the exact opposite of what is described in the Quran. Marriage is described as a relationship between the body and the soul of two people, where two

⁹⁰ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 54-55.

⁹¹ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 61- 84.

⁹² Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 61- 84.

⁹³ Lamrabet, *Women and Men in the Qur'Ān*, 61- 84.

people can rely on each other and trust each other. This *mithaq ghalidh* (solid bond) is also expressed as a commitment between two people where total equality and mutual acceptance is in order. Lamrabet presses however that while the Quran describes marriage as a union between two people where mutual respect and trust are important, this is often not the case. Some say that this vision is idealistic, and that many marriages suffer disappointments. Lamrabet wants to remind those people that the Quran contains foremost a spiritual message which paints an ideal portrait of how marriage, for example, should be. Pious Muslims should, however, strive to the ideals of the Quran, and in times of injustice or discrimination, remember that this is not embedded within the Quranic message.

Conclusion

In the book's conclusion, Lamrabet presses again the regrettable fact that the ethics and ideals revealed in the Quran are almost absent from contemporary Muslim ideology. The real lived experiences are very distinct from the Quranic ethics. In her book Lamrabet tried to identify the rupture between the Quranic message and real-life experience. She states that a big factor in the inequality experienced in Muslim societies by women today is socio-cultural dimensions like cultural norms, history and earlier interpretations. Besides that, she presses that no civilisation nowadays and in history is free from inequality and patriarchy. She states that it is a universal property of societies, however in some more than others. Lamrabet looks at the verses in her book that promote this inequality, and highlights the cultural and historical context in which these were revealed to the prophet. Many of them are interpreted wrong and were understood through the cultural lens of patriarchy and slavery. There was a huge influence of cultural and ancestral customs on the interpretations, and the true egalitarian meaning of the Quran got lost.

Chapter 4: Social Practices and Comparison

In the previous chapters, I have highlighted some of the works of Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet. I have shown the context from which they

conducted their research, and elaborated on three concepts from the Quran which they reinterpret with their methods and approaches; the creation of humanity, the notion of agency and the marital union. In this chapter, I will analyse some social practices of both scholars to see how they situate themselves in the social debate and propose to fight the misconceptions and inequality that exist in the field of Islamic feminism and within the Muslim world in general. I will also show how the two scholars challenge power structures existing in the feminist discourse and the Muslim world. I will do this with the help of interviews that previous researchers have conducted with them. Then I will place both scholars side by side to show the differences and similarities that became visible after analysing and coding their work and activism in the previous chapters.

Amina Wadud

Amina Wadud described herself first as an interested Muslim who looked critically at Islam. After her PhD she went to Malaysia in 1989 and joined the Sisters in Islam organisation. It was here, she says, that her interest in theory and theology transformed into a certain kind of activism, and she started to see the social relevance of her work.⁹⁴ It was not until 2009 that she embraced the term Islamic feminist. She was initially very critical about the shaping of feminism because it was too secular and 'white' for her to relate to the term feminist.

This gradually changed, but Wadud still faced misconceptions on the term. Islamist called her a secular feminist, and secular feminist called her an Islamist. Wadud states that she was neither, and therefore had to define and clarify an identity for herself. Her reaction was that Muslim women had the right to exercise the definition of feminism and more general Islam, themselves. They had the authority to do so, and must be seen as agents. With this, Wadud and her peers challenged existing hegemonies in the feminist discourse. They defined a new form of feminism and Islam themselves, which challenged the existing dominant forms of feminism.

⁹⁴Diani, 'Meet Amina Wadud.'

In 2009 Wadud initiated the launch of *Musawah* which became a part of the global movement of Islamic feminism. They teach the methodology of combining Islam with human rights in order to fight for the dignity of women.⁹⁵ The organisation focuses mostly on family law because this is within Muslim countries or societies often where issues that concern women in the family sphere are being handled. Within these courts, men are in charge and have the right to decide matters that concern women's rights.⁹⁶ The goal is to break down this patriarchal system where men's superiority is established. This is done by challenging the laws in a didactical way, and show that these laws are based on notions that are in reality contradictory to the intention of Islam.⁹⁷ This form of activism is a tool in challenging the existing hegemonic laws within Muslim societies or countries, which is a good example of challenging power structures.

Wadud became instantly famous when she led the Friday prayer in Cape Town in 1994. This was the first woman-led khutbah in a Mosque. A general rule applied in the Muslim communities, where only men were allowed to lead mixed prayers. Therefore, this performance was met with a lot of backlash and criticism on the one hand, but also with huge enthusiasm and praise, particularly by Muslim, women on the other hand.⁹⁸ She attributed the backlash to the fact that she presented an idea that broke with a male-centred approach to Islam. Wadud was the first to state publicly that women also have the right to lead a mixed prayer, which had not been done since the 7th century.⁹⁹ This was also a form of challenging hegemony by defying the patriarchal rules men made and reclaiming women's rights.

Asma Lamrabet

Lamrabet describes that her field of interest is broader than just Islamic feminism. Her interests lie in what is necessary to create an equal society.

⁹⁵Diani, 'Meet Amina Wadud.'

⁹⁶Diani, 'Meet Amina Wadud.'

⁹⁷Diani, 'Meet Amina Wadud.'

⁹⁸ Bernardo, 'Lady Imam on 25 Years Gender Jihad.'

⁹⁹ Diani, 'Meet Amina Wadud.'

That includes women, freedom and equality. She has been involved in many projects and organisations concerning women's rights in Islam. She participated in international conferences and gave multiple lectures regarding this subject. In 2010, she was appointed as the head of the "International Group in Reflection and Research on Women's Issues in Islam".¹⁰⁰ This institute researches women's rights in Islam based on texts and interpretations. The goal of this institute was to create a new female Muslim consciousness. Their main occupation is the re-reading of religious texts from a feminist, ethical and reformatory perspective.¹⁰¹ However, in March 2018, Lamrabet had to leave the board of this institution. The institute was connected to the Moroccan *ulama*, which did not approve the opinions Lamrabet had on the inheritance laws, of which she is a big advocate of reform.

These inheritance laws were reformed in Morocco in 2004. Men and women did not obtain equal parts from an inheritance, which was unequal treatment of women according to Lamrabet. There were more reforms in favour of women implemented by the government, however in reality, this is not visible enough yet.¹⁰² Lamrabet argues that these reforms need to be taken seriously to make Moroccan women's lives easier. Lamrabet proposes that Islamic feminism is a good tool to encourage the debate on women's rights. Islamic feminism can unite equality and women's rights with Islamic values, which is the goal of her activism. Besides participating in the debate on inheritance laws in Morocco, she is also concerned with other restricting laws. For example, she spoke critically on national television about the law prohibiting eating and drinking in public during Ramadan. In her opinion, these kinds of laws need to vanish. She states that people can only develop socially when their relationship with religion changes.¹⁰³ Lamrabet speaking up publically against the established laws is a form of activism challenging hegemony and breaking power structures.

¹⁰⁰ Bouman, "Marokko Is Een Parel Kwijt".

¹⁰¹ 'Biografie'. *Asma Lamrabet*.

¹⁰² Bouman, "Marokko Is Een Parel Kwijt".

¹⁰³ Bouman, "Marokko Is Een Parel Kwijt".

Lamrabet has been critical of Western feminists. This movement has been dominating the feminist cause.¹⁰⁴ She states that they can not speak for Muslim women or Islamic feminists, and force ideas and values on them. Islamic feminists are capable of challenging their own problems, which they know better than Western feminists. Islamic feminists must be given a choice to 'understand their own brand of feminism'.¹⁰⁵ Lamrabet encourages Arab women to have their own fight for equality, and follow their own path, because it is too distinct from western feminism. She challenges the dominant Western feminist discourse by conducting her own type of feminism within an Islamic framework.

Comparison

The comparison between Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet will show the diversity in the field of Islamic feminism in a more detailed manner. I will focus on certain aspects in which they overlap or divert. While the scholars essentially aim to reach the same goal, which is the emancipation of (Muslim) women, some diversity is visible in their work and activism. The analysis will consist of three levels. First, I will compare the exegesis of the scholars on the three topics discussed previously, then their activism, and lastly, their relation to feminism.

Exegesis

A similar point in the works of Wadud and Lamrabet is the approach. As described by Saeed, most Islamic feminists work with a contextualist approach to show the Quran's meaning. Both scholars look at the 'macro-context' of the Quran in order to define its true meaning. They show that many verses that underlie women's inequality were understood through the cultural lens of patriarchy. Lamrabet emphasises that the essential egalitarian meaning of the Quran got lost, and that there is a gap between

¹⁰⁴ 'Meet Asma Lamrabet, Morocco's Feminist Polymath,' *Your Middle East*, January 12, 2017, www.yourmiddleeast.com/2017/01/12/meet-asma-lamrabet-moroccos-feminist-polymath/ (accessed June 9, 2021).

¹⁰⁵ Sabra, 'Islamic Feminism in Morocco.'

this ideological message and the reality in contemporary Muslim societies. Something that Wadud emphasises in her work is that she wants to show the universality of the Quran. She states that the Quran applies to modern times and that it is relevant to women's lives, but therefore needs to be reinterpreted. Both scholars agree that the Quran emphasises basic social principles like justice and equality and that the Quran must be put in the historical context to understand certain verses' intentions.

Creation of Humanity

Wadud argues that there are some big misconceptions about the creation in the Quran, like men being superior because they were created first. In order to give the 'right' meaning of the text, she looks at it mostly linguistically. The central verse on creation (4:1) is dissected, and with that, she shows that the verse is in reality a verse that promotes equality. She concludes that the Quran does not mention anywhere that men were created before women, nor that a woman was created out of a man's rib. Therefore this verse can be seen as gender-neutral.

Lamrabet comes to the same conclusion as Wadud. However, she focuses on a different concept within this central verse on creation (4:1). The concept of the 'single soul' is how Lamrabet disproves the misconception that men were created before women and therefore superior. With this, she means that God has created man and woman as equals, from the same origin, which is the 'single soul'. Because they have the same origin, they are equal.

Agency

The concept of agency is not explicitly touched upon by Wadud and Lamrabet in their works. However, it was implicit in their texts. Wadud mentions in her book that God sees women in two ways in the Quran; as individuals and as members of a social system. So in the Quran, Women are seen as agents. Wadud presses that it is important to treat them that way, because God does not distinguish between individuals, men or women. The only thing that is judged is the relation with God.

Lamrabet also considers the shared responsibility of men and women, to create civilisations and more people. She also touches upon the subject that men and women were given the same agency, and where God only differentiated was a form of piety like Wadud.

Marital Union

Wadud shows how wrongful interpretations of the Quran are nowadays used to legitimise marital violence against women. She addresses a Quranic verse (4:34) in which she proves that women are not obliged by the Quran to be obedient to their husbands. The word *qanitat* is often misinterpreted as 'obedience to the husband', which means something as 'subordination towards Allah'. Then she addresses the 'scourge' and shows that this is the last resort according to the Quran and is only allowed if verbal discussion or separation does not resolve marital problems.

In her book, Lamrabet is brief on violence against women and elaborates more on the legal property of women, which a husband cannot touch according to the Quran. The Quran states that the marital union is based on mutual respect, trust and equality. This is also acknowledged by Wadud. She touches briefly on the Arabic term for obedience (*ta'a*) which is mentioned nowhere in the Quran, which proves equality in a marriage. She states that the Quranic message is an idealistic spiritual idea and that pious Muslims must strive for these ideals.

Activism

As Malihe Maghazei stated, Islamic feminism exists in two aspects: Epistemology and activism. The comparison made above shows the epistemological aspect of the two scholars. Here I will compare the activist aspect shortly. Wadud and Lamrabet are aiming to improve social injustices that women face with their exegesis and activism. There are also some distinctions in the activism of the scholars. Lamrabet is concerned about the debate on women's rights and equality in Morocco in particular; she is vocal and publicly addresses certain laws that need to be reformed to create equality. In an interview, Lamrabet stated that all her

efforts are for her country.¹⁰⁶ Wadud's activism is more from a theological paradigm. For example, she defied the general rule where women were not allowed to lead a prayer, performing as a female imam. Her actions are not directed at one country specifically. However, her goal is to break down patriarchal systems where men's superiority is established. An example of similarity of the scholars' activism is their participation in several organisations that promote female equality within Islam, like *Musawah* and the "International Group in Reflection and Research on Women's Issues in Islam".

Relation to Feminism

Badran and Mahmood wrote that Islam and feminism have long been presumed non-existent. The Western feminist discourse is drenched with misconceptions about Muslim women. Both scholars challenge these misconceptions and are critical of the Western feminist movement who sees it as their responsibility to emancipate Muslim women. Wadud argues that Muslim women have the right to exercise the definition of feminism themselves. Lamrabet adds to this that Muslim women are capable of fighting for their rights. Even the West is not free of inequality and patriarchy, and that they must focus on this before they impose their ideology on the Muslim world.

Conclusion

By analysing two Islamic feminist scholars, Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet, on multiple levels, I aimed to show the diversity in the field of Islamic feminism. I focussed on two books by the scholars that challenge the patriarchal meaning of the Quran, the activism of the Scholars and their relation to feminism. In the analysis of their works, I have shown that Wadud and Lamrabet both argue that the Quran is a text that promotes equality between men and women. They go against the mainstream interpretations of the text, which according to the scholars, do not reflect the true intention and message of the Quran. With their work, the scholars

¹⁰⁶Bouman, "Marokko Is Een Parel Kwijt."

aim to show the text's true meaning and promote female agency and gender equality in the Muslim world.

I started the analysis with a more general background of Islamic feminism. I showed that there is some diversity in the field. In essence, Islamic feminists are open to multiple interpretations of the Quran and aim to promote women's rights from within an Islamic paradigm. Then I analysed the work and life of Amina Wadud. With her book *Quran and Women*, she wants to protest the lack of female voices in the Quran. She criticises male dominance in the interpretations. Wadud emphasises the universality of the text and argues that the text can be adapted anywhere and anytime. Then I showed Asma Lamrabet's background and version of Quran interpretation in the book *Women and Men in the Quran*. Lamrabet pleads for the re-interpretation of the Quran in today's social context to uncover the gender-equal meaning of the text.

I analysed how the scholars are positioned in the social debate by looking at their activist endeavours. Both scholars have been involved in many organisations that aim to improve Muslim women's status. Wadud founded *Musawah*, which focuses on reforming family laws to emancipate women, and has the goal to break down patriarchal systems through an Islamic paradigm. Lamrabet is addressing laws and traditions in Morocco that need to be reformed. She thinks reforms in Morocco are progressing too slow. She states that Islam is, in essence, an equal religion. However, there still exists a gap between this ideological message and the reality in contemporary Muslim societies. The activist endeavours of the scholars are challenging existing power structures in Muslim societies.

I also looked at the positions of the scholars in relation to feminism in general. Both scholars are quite critical towards Western feminism. Wadud proposes that Islamic feminists are able to create a form of feminism for themselves, and do not need the help of the Western feminists. Lamrabet is also quite critical of Western feminists, and shows

the great diversity in the Muslim world, and tries to force the Western ideology on Muslim women to "save" them.

Both scholars are trying to challenge misconceptions and promote agency amongst women. In order to map the diversity in Islamic feminism, more research has to be conducted. Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet are just two voices that contribute to the elaborate field of Islamic feminism. With their work, they have challenged misconceptions surrounding the topic and proved that feminism and Islam can be combined and can contribute to the emancipation of women. They have made a good start by defying the interpretations that underlie the patriarchal system. Unfortunately, they face many people who do not agree with them and there is a long way to go until female agency, and gender equality is accepted in every Muslim community.

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