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Representations of Muslim Woman in Selected Works of Ayan Hirsi Ali, Leila Aboulela, Nisrin Taslima and Randa Abdelfattah: Debating Islamic Feminism

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at examining Islamic feminism as a new trend in both literary theory and writing. At the outset, it is essential to differentiate between two tracks of Islamic feminism. The first is Islamic feminism as an ideological movement whose proponents are engaged in theorizing and validating a view of Islam that gives women equal rights with men. Through their writings, these Islamic scholars attempt to reinterpret Islamic law and ideology outside the main framework of patriarchal dogma, thereby, providing a fresh insight into the true essence of equality in Islam. The second track is Islamic feminist creative writing and artistic expression, a newly burgeoning movement in literature and the arts, written by Muslim women who embody their own understanding of Islamic feminism within their fictional worlds. These works of art stand autonomously outside the ideological debate. And they have to be read, not as attempts to defend or celebrate Islam, but rather as works of art that represent facets of reality, of people facing their own destinies but who happen to be Muslim, practicing their Islam through their own understanding and interpretation. The study will show how, through literature, the pro-Islamic feminist writers attempt to challenge and counter the conceptions and attitudes of the anti-Islamic feminist writers.

1. Introduction

Liv Tønnessen in a public lecture, "Islamic Feminism" states that Islamic Feminism has been heatedly debated". On the one hand, secular feminists reject it because they argue that religions in general and Islam in particular are oppressive to women while many other Muslim women reject it because they feel that 'Feminism' is a secular invention imposed on them from the West. On the other hand, Islamic Feminism has also been widely embraced by both activists and scholars (Tønnessen 2014, 2). They regard it as a tool to counter these allegations and misconceptions. They try hard to refute these wrong attitudes by introducing new works that confront that misunderstanding.

Margot Badran (2001), in her article "Understanding Islam, Islamism, and Islamic Feminism", asks, what's in a name? What's behind a name? What is Islamic Feminism? She writes:

I am not a Muslim, but I find myself fascinated and genuinely interested in the question of women and Islam. I do not under any circumstances start my engagement with the topic from a position which neither reduces Islam to be monolithic and anti-women nor a position which states that secularism is the only route to women's empowerment. What interests me in this topic is the

dynamic nature of Islam exploring the different interpretations of the same text historically and presently and how Muslim women across the region frame their arguments within Islam in their attempt to bring about law reform. (p. 47)

The term Islamic Feminism began to surface in the 1990s in various global locations. It first appeared in the writings of Muslims. Iranian scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini, writing in the Teheran women's journal, Zanan (a Persian journal means women), founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1992, exposed the rise and use of the term Islamic Feminism by some women, as well as men (Sherkat). Saudi scholar Mai Yamani (1996) used the term in her book *Feminism and Islam*. Nilüfer Göle, in *The Forbidden Modern*, used the term Islamic Feminism to describe a new feminist paradigm emerging in Turkey (Göle 7). Also, South African activist Shamima Sheikh frequently employed the term Islamic Feminism in her speeches and articles.

According to Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2002) in her book *Islamic Law and Feminism*: *The story of a relationship*:

Muslim women, like other women in the world, have always been aware of—and resisted—gender inequality; yet the emergence of a sustained, indigenous feminism was delayed until recently. This delay at least partly reflects the complex relation between women's demands for equal rights and the anticolonial, nationalist movement of the first part of the twentieth century. At a time when feminism, both as a consciousness and as a movement, was being shaped and making an impact in Europe and North America, it also "functioned to morally justify the attacks on native (Muslim) societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe," as Leila Ahmed among others has shown. (p. 33)

She goes further in explaining how Muslim women could overcome those problems, being spurred to action by the rise of political Islam, those Islamist groups with fundamentalist and patriarchal views:

But as the twentieth century drew to a close, this dilemma disappeared. One neglected and paradoxical consequence of the rise of political Islam in the second half of the century was that it helped to create a space, an arena, within which Muslim women could reconcile their faith and identity with a struggle for gender equality. This did not happen because the Islamists offered an egalitarian vision of gender relations; in fact, they did not. Rather, their very agenda—the so-called return to sharia—and their attempt to translate into policy the patriarchal gender notions inherent in traditional Islamic law provoked many women to increasing criticism of these notions and spurred them to greater activism. A growing number of women came to see no inherent or logical link between Islamic ideals and patriarchy, no contradiction between Islamic faith and feminism, and to free themselves from the straitjacket of earlier anticolonial and nationalist discourses. Using the language of political Islam, they could sustain a critique of the gender biases in Islamic law in ways that were previously impossible. (p. 40)

Hence, Mir-Hosseini (2002) came to a conclusion that:

By the late 1980s, there were clear signs of the emergence of a new consciousness, a new way of thinking, a gender discourse that was and is feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and sources of legitimacy. One version of this new discourse has come to be called Islamic Feminism. (p. 41)

The Norwegian Feminist writer Liv Tønnessen (2014) asserts this idea:

By the mid-1990s, there was growing evidence of Islamic Feminism as a term created and circulated by Muslims in different parts of the world by women inside Muslim countries and in Muslim Diaspora. These scholars are the Pakistani-American Asma Barlas and, in convert communities in the West, with activists/writers such as the African-American Amina Wadud. According to Margot Badran, Islamic Feminism emerged out of a critique of both patriarchal Islam(ism) and secular Feminism. (p. 5)

One of the challenges that are related to the concept is its definition. It could be defined as, Mulki al-Sharmani (2014) suggests, a "knowledge projects…which are predominantly undertaken by Muslim women, have two broad aims: tracing and problematizing patriarchal religious knowledge that sanctions gender inequality; and producing alternative readings that are egalitarian while at the same time being based on Islamic ethical and theological principles" (p. 86). Ghaliya Djelloul, the social

scientist, is of her opinion that it is "legitimate to speak of the production of a new Islamic discourse" since Islamic feminists are "concerned with developing an ethical reading of the bases of Islam, namely the Qur'an and the Sunna, in order to find a form of religious exegesis that will support their feminist viewpoint" (*Islamic feminism: A contradiction in terms,* Djelloul 3). She further explains that "Islamic feminists are carrying out a critical review of classical commentaries to Islamic sources and providing new interpretations of the latter aimed at socio-political and economic equality with men" (Djelloul 4).

Al-Sharmani explains that Omaima Abou-Bakr, a professor at Cairo University and a founding member of the Women and Memory Forum, writes that the Islamic feminist project is a continuous attempt to un-interpret past gender biased readings done by male jurists and to offer alternative new perspectives toward justice and equality within Islam itself (Al-Sharmani, "Islamic Feminism" 12). In her analysis of the achievements of Islamic Feminism thus far, she says that "it has proven the possibility of undoing the doings of patriarchy" (15).

Abou-Bakr in her article "Islamic Feminism? What's in a Name?" embraces hermeneutical ponders of the Islamic interpretive convention. She uses a run of illustrative strategies, counting following the development of specific juristic or interpretative builds that ease patriarchal explanations through familial readings of the analytical convention. These readings distinguish and reflect on the differences in elucidations of person interprets and legal advisers, not to ruin them. In other words, they locate their translations within the setting of their times and world-views. It reveals the covered up voices and commitments of ladies within the interpretive convention. It also compares diverse writings within the convention (such as memoirs of Hadith instructors and transmitters, analytical works, or fiqh manuals) to distinguish the linkages and divergences between these writings and uncover elective talks that have been covered up or marginalized within the history of the interpretive convention. (Abou-Bakr,"Islamic Feminism?" 3)

According to historian Margot Badran, the concept of Islamic Feminism refers to a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm (2008, 27). She sees this discourse as specifically grounded in the Qur'an and "seeking rights and justice for women and men in the totality of their existence" (Badran, "Understanding Islam" 48). She argues that Islamic Feminism has emerged out of a critique of both patriarchal interpretations of Islam and secular Feminism. Badran, however, sees Islamic feminism as more radical and powerful than secular feminism because it seeks a religiously based gender equality and justice (Badran, "Engaging Islamic Feminism" 31). She elaborates confirming that there are also models which do not advocate gender equality. The first wave of feminism was preoccupied with women's entry into the labour force and also with women's political rights. Many of them argued for complementarity within the family, rather than equality.

The anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini, who is one of the pioneer scholars writing about Islamic Feminism, defines it as "a new consciousness, new way of thinking, a gender discourse that was feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and source of legitimacy" (Mir-Hosseini 2010: 640). Mir- Hosseini "was one of the first to use this term for the new gender consciousness and discourse that emerged in Iran a decade after the 1979 revolution had brought Islamists into power. I called this discourse 'Islamic feminism' because it was feminist in its demands and yet took its legitimacy from Islam" (Mir-Hosseini "Challenges of Islamic Feminism" 120).

Asma Barlas, however, is uncomfortable with the term 'Islamic feminism' because she rejects 'feminism' as an intellectual tradition that is inescapably entangled with the history of Western colonialism and the othering of non-western Muslim women (Barlas 16). In her article "Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing feminism as a master narrative" She states:

So far, I have called myself simply a "believer." But this doesn't mean that I'm always comfortable with the epistemological closure that this term implies either. But then belief isn't so much about certainty as it is about an open-ended willingness to go

on searching after what one considers the truth. Perhaps a more appropriate way to define myself therefore would be as a seeker of God's grace, a supplicant for it. (qtd in Anitta Kynsilehto 22)

In the same vein, Abu Baker, although not comfortable with the term, can see the validity of using the term Islamic Feminism:

About the term "Islamic Feminism," it is true I did not reject it because it depends on what you put under the name, how you define and qualify it, and what are the ideas and notions you subscribe under that name. It is true that the terms "feminism" and "gender" themselves are English and Western, but the ideas of egalitarianism, justice, equal rights, compassion, resistance to tyranny, activism . . . etc. are not a Western invention or a monopoly by the West. Especially the history of women in the Arab world in the 19th and 20th century shows their "feminist activism" and discussion of "gender" long before these terms came to the surface. (qtd in Tønnessen 2014: 10)

By insisting on using the term Islamic Feminism, the Muslim writers are trying to show that the West does not have the monopoly of defining Feminism. Omaima Abu Bakr argues that "Islamic Feminism allows me to qualify my own indigenous brand of Feminism and work out a feminist discourse stemming from within the culture and religion. There is an Islamic ethics of Feminism" (Tønnessen 14).

Moreover; Islamic feminists are critical towards the historical stereotypes which link the oppression of women among Muslims to Islam, and which define Muslim women as the other of 'Western' secular feminists:

The anchoring of the struggle for women's rights in a religious orientation to the world (as undertaken by Islamic feminists) also challenges the tendency towards monopolizing the struggle for women's rights (by Western feminists), and towards universalizing secular models of thought which have characterized 'Western' Feminism. So, although Islamic feminists accept principles of gender equality as stipulated in the universal human rights, they reject the idea of Feminism based on secularism. As such, they are demanding their rightful place in the history of Feminism. (Abu Bakr 2013: 22)

Islamic feminists want to convey a new trend of Feminism that takes Islamic teachings as a base to counter the misconceptions and wrong attitudes of western stereotypes. They assert that Islam and Feminism are not mutually exclusive.

Challenges to the concept are not restricted to the definition of the term or whether to be labelled as Islamic Feminist. Challenges to the term emerge from those scholars who refute the concept altogether critiquing Islamic feminism "as being an unsystematic and heterogeneous body of knowledge, as having weak methodological links to classical religious sciences and being politically insignificant, or even counterproductive, for women" (Al-Sharmani, "Islamic Feminism" 83-90).

A further challenge comes from the west exemplified in *Islamophobia*. As Christopher Allen (2010) states, "The most dangerous aspect of Islamophobia" is to caricature Islam as "entirely uni-dimensional and monolithic without any internal differentiation or opinion." He elaborates "The demonization of Islam and the representation of Muslim men as religiously and culturally misogynists and Muslim women as passive, powerless and quintessential victims of "Islamic patriarchy" arise from prejudice because Islam is generally singled out to be associated with women's inferior position and oppression" (Allen, *Islamophobia* 378).

Such attitudes towards Islamic feminism found its way to the literary field. Creative constructions of Islamic Feminism whether for or against it is the main focus of this dissertation. In order to demonstrate the impact of Islamic Feminism in the literary field the present dissertation will examine the works of four Muslim women writers namely; Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Taslima Nasrin, Randa Abdal-Fattah, and Leila Aboulela. The works of the first two of these writers, which represent anti-Islamic Feminism, will be examined in order to underline the validity and the importance of this new literary trend of pro-Islamic Feminism represented by the works of the latter two.

2. Objectives of the study

The present dissertation aims at examining Islamic feminism as a new trend in both literary theory and writing.

At the outset, it is essential to differentiate between two tracks of Islamic feminism. The first is Islamic feminism as an ideological movement whose proponents are engaged in theorizing and validating a view of Islam which gives women equal rights with men. Through their writings, these Islamic scholars attempt to reinterpret Islamic law and ideology outside the main framework of patriarchal dogma, thereby, providing a fresh insight into the true essence of equality in Islam.

The second track is Islamic feminist creative writing and artistic expression, a newly burgeoning movement in literature and the arts, written by Muslim women who embody their own understanding of Islamic feminism within their fictional worlds. These works of art stand autonomously outside the ideological debate. And they have to be read, not as attempts to defend or celebrate Islam, but rather as works of art that represent facets of reality, of people facing their own destinies but who happen to be Muslim, practicing their Islam through their own understanding and interpretation.

It is also important to point out that just as there are Islamic feminism supporters (pro-Islamic feminism), there are Islamic feminism opponents (anti-Islamic feminism), whose works of art present a picture of an oppressive, misogynist Islam.

It is, thus, the purpose of this dissertation to examine camps, evaluating their works and attempting to divest the false claims and allegations of anti-feminism camp.

Through a close comparative study of five representative novels of both proponents and opponents of Islamic feminism, the present study will explore the arguments posited by each of these camps. Nisrin Taslima's *Lajja(Shame* 1993) and Ayan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* (2006) have been chosen to represent the anti-Islamic feminism camp. Randa Abdel Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005) and Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) have been selected to represent the pro-Islamic feminism camp.

First, the study will closely analyze the two anti-Islamic feminist novels to identify and evaluate the problems these writers present regarding the status of women in Muslim societies.

Next, through a careful, analytical examination of the two Islamic feminist novels, the research will attempt to identify the salient features of Islamic feminist works of art, pinpoint the most important concerns and controversial issues these works present and question, and, finally, chart out the main strategies their writers have followed in order to substantiate the attitudes of Islamic feminism that assert and uphold a view of Islam which is just, balanced and gender equitable against anti-Islamic feminists' rejection of the concept. Investigating and analyzing Islamic feminism as reflected in the selected novels, will also reveal the benefits and relevance of Islamic feminism for Muslim women nowadays. In addition, the dissertation will look into the debates on Islamic feminism that negate and deny the existence and usefulness of Islamic feminism.

On the whole, the dissertation raises important questions that need to be answered. For example, is Islamic feminism an oxymoron? Is it a way to control women or to free them? What are the arguments of the other point of view that go against Islamic feminism? To what extent can they be corroborated? Is there evidence that refutes these contentions against Islamic feminism? And, most importantly, is Islamic feminism innate to Islam or is indebted to western feminism?

To sum up, the dissertation will show how, through literature, the pro-Islamic feminist writers attempt to challenge and counter the conceptions and attitudes of the anti-Islamic feminist writers.

3. Review of Literature

The term Islamic feminism gained currency in the 1990's as a label for a brand of feminist scholarship and activism associated with Islam and Muslims. There has since been much discussion and debate and a growing literature on Islamic feminism.

The topic of Islamic Feminism has been explored through a variety of Muslim women works which have brought significant insights into the feminist debate, both for and against it, in the Islamic world. To develop the understanding of the religious context of Islamic feminism and its main characteristics, I have primarily referred to the books of some of the most prominent and influential writers who tackled that new Trend.

Margot Badran, historian and senior fellow at the Christian-Muslim Centre for understanding at Georgetown University, has authored a number of essays and books interpreting Islam from a feminist perspective. Badran may thus be considered a specialist in women and gender studies in Muslim societies and particularly in Islamic feminism.

Her writings include articles and talks published on various websites, such as "Islamic Feminism means justice to Women" (2004), "Islamic Feminism: what's in the name?" and "Islamic Feminism revisited" (2006).

She also wrote some significant books about Islamic feminism such as *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (2009) and *The Future of Islamic Feminism* (2010). She defines the term as women under the rulings of Islam.

For such feminists, or religious activists, religion is the solution rather than the problem. One of the most multi-faceted western works of the twenty-first-century Islamic feminism is *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (2001), by Miriam Cooke. Cooke argues that Islamic feminism produces a new trend that is between the two contradicting groups.

In a similar track, the works of Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Nayareh Tohidi play a great role in defining the term of Islamic Feminism, Hosseini in her book *Islam and Gender justice* (2007) and Tohidi in her book *Islamic Feminism: perils and promises* (2001). They regard Islamic Feminism as an inevitable and necessary step to push the issues of women to be in the front to meet the demands of Muslim women today.

South African-born (of Indian origin) Sa'diyya Shaikh is a good example of feminist scholars who have taken part in the world-wide network on women's issues. In her book *Islam, Feminisms and the Politics of Representation* (2003), she uses the term feminist as a description of Muslim women activities.

At the other extreme, an anti-Islamic feminism group represented in the works of Haideh Moghissi, Shahrzad Mojab and Hammed Shahidian are mainly based on the argument that Islam and feminism are two essentially and ideologically different realms that cannot meet each other as a movement (Haideh 140).

Moghissi's book *Feminism and Islamic Fundementalism: The Limit of Postmodern Analysis* (1990), Mojab in her book *Theorizing the Politics of Islamic Feminism* (2001), and Shahidian who is cited in Mojab's books regard Islamic Feminism as an oxymoron. They consider Islamic feminism as an arm of Islamic fundamentalism that serves the interests of patriarchies.

To sum up, the dissertation will explore the arguments against and pro-Islamic feminism to provide a well-rounded comprehensive outlook of the two camps. This will be done through the analysis of the works of the chosen writers.

4. Islamic Feminism

For many people in the West, Islam means terrorism. A number of frightening terrorist acts carried out in western countries by people who claim the Muslim faith has understandably prompted westerners to associate Islam with terrorism and has given rise to the idea that they are living in an "age of terror," one in which Muslim threats are ever present. The west is largely influenced by deep–rooted assumptions that Islam is a monolithic religion controlling all aspects of its adherents' lives. They dismiss the idea of Islamic feminism because they think that Islam is a religion of oppression. Islam and feminism cannot meet together, and hence the controversy around the term "Islamic feminism," its usefulness, and even its very existence has divided many Muslim feminists and scholars into two camps. Valentine Moghadam, an Islamic feminist activist, sees the camps as split between those

who defend the importance of Islamic feminism as a movement and theory and those who oppose its legitimacy, value and use and deny its existence (Moghadam, 22).

As for the opponents of Islamic feminism, they argue that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron because Islam and feminism are in essence incompatible with each other. Therefore, Islamic feminism is criticized for jeopardizing reformist movements with socialist and Marxist bends since it is seen as an example of "bargain (ing) with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti 317). It does not offer a solid ground for a total social reform or a social, political and ideological breakthrough. This second camp, which includes Margot Badran, Afsaneh Najamabadi, NayerehTohidi and Miriam Cooke, argues that Islamic feminism is a middle–ground between secular and religious feminisms, (absolutism, Salavis and fundamentalism) an agent in geographies where modernization is ongoing, and is an alternative discourse to the orientalist and colonialist viewpoints of western feminism towards Muslim woman and women living in the middle East and North Africa in general (Hossieni 18). Badran argues:

I see Islamic feminism at the center of a transformation within Islam struggling to make head way. I call this a transformation rather than a Reformation. The Islamic transformation is not about the reforming of patriarchal claims and practices that were insinuated into Islam; it is about the transforming of what has passed as 'Islam' through a real of Islam with the Qur'nic message of gender equality and social justice. … [and thus this] transformation is about restoring the deep Qur'anic message to the surface of awareness and articulation. (11)

Badran asserts that Islamic feminism emerged as a new discourse of women, gender and equality in Islam. It was born of the intimate combination of women's existential knowledge and their re-readings of the Qur'an and other religious texts. In the last years of the 20th century, Islamic feminism burst upon the scene of the global umma (Muslim community). Badran explains how Political Islam as a movement (Islamism) was well underway at the time and was bent on re-imposing, in the name of religion, patriarchal thinking and practices. At the same time, many women had been primed by education, training and an intensified gender consciousness to re-read Islamic religious texts for themselves and stand by their positions. Islamic feminism is the first theology–driven feminist discourse to have been broadly received by ordinary and privileged women alike (Badran22).

It is worth saying that Miriam Cooke coined the term "Muslim woman" which is highly significant and reflecting of the oriental point of view fuelled after 9/11 in order to understand the opposition against Islamic feminism. Using this term (Muslim woman) creates an image of a monolithic Muslim-woman or identity that assumes that being a Muslim woman is in essence something oppressing, and Muslim women are victims of Islam's patriarchal essence and inevitably are oppressed (Cooke 142). Hence, Islamic feminism in Cooke's point of view is related to her analysis of this image:

Whenever Muslim women offer a critique of some aspect of Islamic history or hermeneutics, they do so with and/or on behalf of all Muslim women and their right to enjoy with men full participation in a just community, I call them Islamic feminists. This label is not rigid; rather it describes an attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women (Cooke 91).

From this perspective, Cooke assures that all women will benefit from the critique of (traditional) Islamic history and hermeneutics because it will provide a positive change in the efforts to create a just community for Muslims. Cooke asserts that multiple and different identities of Muslimhood in terms of ethnicity, politics and socially can come together with Islamic feminism in order to claim "simultaneous and some contradictory allegiance even as they resist globalization, local nationalisms, Islamization, and the pervasive patriarchal system" (Cooke 108). Therefore, Cooke, Mir- Hosseini and Badran agree on that Islamic feminism transcends the limits "of both the inside and outside dimensions of a woman's movement. By exceeding those limits, Cooke stands for how a subalternized group can assume its essentialized representations and use them strategically against those who have ascribed them" (Cooke 101). Therefore, Islamic feminists challenge the traditional, orthodox reading of the religion of Islam for a more just socio-political order for women and men alike (Cooke 98).

In the last decade and within such a context of representation of Islam and Muslim women in the west, "a number of novels have been written in English by women authors and published in western countries. These novels tell a different story about Islam and about Muslim women" (Ameri 3).

5. Islamic Feminism in Literary Studies

The first collection of Arab and Muslim women's feminist writings published in English was *Opening the Gate: a Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (1990), edited by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke. This collection presents over fifty pieces covering a number of different genres of discourse-short stories, essays, folktales, poems, film scripts, lectures and speeches by Arab Muslim women. The amount of contributions translated from Arabic into English suggests how Muslim women are aware of the injustice against them and have started resisting oppressive practices so as to make a difference in their conditions (Ameri 13).The Muslim feminist writers feel a sense of social responsibility in advising their readers on these problematic social issues.

Another important work in the same vein is *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (2001) by Miriam Cooke. The writer surveys the literature, fiction and memoirs of contemporary Islamic feminist writers. She also examines how these women through their work as well as through involvements in some governmental and non-governmental organizations, challenge their being left out from the discourse of history, war, exile, emigration and religion (Cooke 98).

Studying the works of a range of writers as different as Zaynab al Ghazali, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Abouzeid, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Leila Aboulela shows how these women who claim Islam as their identity and use Islam as a tool of self-empowerment, develop a gendered Islamic epistemology which challenges both the indigenous male authority in the interpretation of Islamic doctrine and colonial racist discourses about Muslim women. In the same vein, Cooke, asserts that Islamic feminists' critiques of foundational stories are reshaping their self-representations.

Their writings demonstrate how "new players are networking within the space of globalized movement, forcing it to take account of local realities. Those moments of pleasure and rapture and decentering allow for new configurations of historical Islam and feminism that disturb the calculations of power and knowledge" (Cooke 155). In these women's writings, the stubborn image of the passive, oppressed woman is being challenged, destabilized and rendered as a construct. To change these images, "Islamic Feminists are working from within to transform those stereotypes. These writings convey the possibilities for the construction of a society founded on a transformed sense of justice for all" (Cooke 156).

In addition to theorizing Islamic feminism, many Muslim writers are creating a new genre of fiction and other works of art which may be labeled Islamic feminist literature/art. Suzanne Gauch, in her book Liberating Shahrazad: feminism, postcolonialism and Islam (2006), focuses on the works of North African and Magherebian women writers and film makers. She argues that the legendary Shahrazad uses her art of story-telling to combat injustice and transform the perceptions of Shahryar. These contemporary artists, through their artistic creations, are affecting the perceptions of both local audiences and those outside Muslim cultures (Ameri 13).

The Indonesian feminist writer Helvy Tiana Rosa claims that the feminist writings about Islam reflect two important thematic lines, namely their love of God and the struggles of the oppressed. Rosa sets their narratives within the domain of Islamic literature because she believes it is indeed accommodative to such themes (Ameri 14). For Rosa, Islamic Literature is defined as unlimited literature in which all writings are accommodated to the belief in God. Ameri describes Rosa's point of view that it's very simple. But such definitions should not limit us in our writings. Islamic literature is indeed liberating: It is how we can call for goodness implicitly and explicitly within the framework of aesthetics. (…) Islam is universal and a blessing for the whole universe and the concept I am following is that writing should enlighten its readers (Arimbi 101).

In other words The Islamic feminist writers want their writings to function as a source of knowledge about the true spirit of Islam. These ideas can be seen in the work of some women feminist writers like Abouzeid, the Moroccan writer, who argues in her novels that female emancipation can co-exist harmoniously with Islam. Abouzeid blames female subordination on patriarchal values instead of Islam (Segran 8).

Ameri also asserts that literature centered on religious themes has, for several centuries, been part of the canon of literary traditions around the world, and English literature is no exception in this regard. A significant proportion of English literature has been engaged with themes, subjects and symbols from Hellenistic religions and from Judaism and Christianity. The religion of Islam, a minority in English-speaking countries, has enjoyed a great interest in recent years. Mohja Kahf (a great Syrian novelist) argues that in post-colonial times, English becomes the official language in some of the colonized countries; hence, it is natural for some Muslim writers from these countries to give their own accounts of Muslim issues and characters in the English language.

Amin Malak, in his book, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2005), reports that Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, published in 1940, was a major novel of this kind (19). He also says that *Sultana's Dream* (1905) by Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, should be given the credit for being the first fictional contribution by a Muslim to English literature about Muslim characters and themes (30).

To sum up, these Islamic feminists aim at highlighting women's roles and status within their religious communities. Through their writings, they deliberately link their religious, political, and gender identities so as to resist globalization, local nationalisms, Islamization, and the patriarchal system that pervades them all (Cooke 60). Moreover Islamic feminist discourse tries to construct a new and egalitarian understanding of religion in order to change old mind-sets and cultural practices that purport to Islam (Bardan 250).

Hence, Muslim women writers tackle issues which are related to Muslim women. Through their works they try to portray how women confront the problems they are consistently forced to face. They convey through their writings new interpretations of Islamic values and concepts through a feminist perspective. They also show the struggle of women characters in the novels in a bid to come out of their problems.

6. Rationale for the chosen writers

As far as the selected writers are concerned, many studies have already examined and expounded the characteristics of Islamic feminism. Yet no studies have attempted to place the anti- and pro-Islamic feminist writers vis-a-vis. The selected works “challenge” and impugn the contradicting attitudes and misconceptions of the anti-Islamic feminists as well as try to produce a new space for understanding the issues of Muslim women in the light of Islamic conceptions to destabilize the allegations of anti-feminist writers. Therefore, the present research is an attempt to place the anti and the pro-Islamic feminist writers vis-a-vis. The four chosen writers, Ayan Hirsi Ali, and Taslima Nasrin, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Leila Aboulela, represent two contradicting camps of Islamic feminism. They also represent different Muslim countries: Egypt, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Somalia, and the Sudan. They have contributed to Islamic feminism by using their creative writings as a vehicle to express their ideas and opinions about Islam and women. These writings have had a great influence on their readers and the feminist movement as a whole and on Islamic feminism in particular.

Taslima Nasrin and Ayan Hirsi Ali represent the anti-Islamic feminism camp. Taslima was born in Bangladesh to a Muslim family but was brought up in a secular environment. She got her degree in Medicine and worked in hospitals. She started writing in magazines in 1980s and 1990s. She criticized Islamic oppression of women. She received some awards for her works and her

novels and books were translated and published in many Indian and European languages. She published her novel *Lajja* in 1993- She claims that religion drivers people to madness, at which point they do not hesitate to abandon even basic humanity: Lajja means shame.

As for Ayan Hirsi Ali, she is a native of Somalia and was a member of the parliament of the Netherlands until 2006. She is the author of *Infidel* (2006).She has come to be widely regarded as the most influential spokesperson for Muslim women worldwide (Hussien I). Her novel, *Infidel,* is an autobiography of Hirsi Ali. She states that Muslim women are oppressed became Islam is like a mental cage. "At first, when you open the door, the caged bird stays inside: it is frightened. It has internalized its imprisonment. It takes time for the bird to escape, even after someone else has opened the doors to the cage" (Ali 286).

The clash between Islam and the Enlightenment remains her focus. She regards Islam as the main reason for women's oppression and backwardness. She calls for adopting the values of the west.

In contrast, Randa Abdel Fattah and Leila Aboulela represent the other camp which uses Muslim feminism as a tool to confront and disperses the adopted concepts and conception of anti-Islamic feminism.

The first Islamic feminist writer is Randa Abdel Fattah. A Muslim of Palestinian and Egyptian parentage, Abdel Fattah was born in Sydney, Australia in 1979. She wrote *Does My Head look Big in This?* (2005), *Ten Things I Hate about Me* (2006), *Where the Streets Had a Name* (2008) *Noah* (2010), and *No Sex in the City* (2015) (Wikipedia) In her novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* she wants to denude the common misconceptions about Muslims and allow the readers to enter the world of average Muslim women and see Beyond the headlines and stereotypes--to realize that Muslim women are experiencing the same dramas and challenges of life as their non-Muslim peers (www.randaabdelfattah.com).

The second proponent of Islamic feminism is Leila Aboulela. She is a Sudanese-born writer whose work, written in English, has received critical acclaim and a high profile for its distinctive exploration of identity migration and Islamic spirituality. She highlights the challenges facing Muslims and portrays characters who struggle to make choices based on Muslim ethos. In her novel *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) she tackles the themes of identity, jihad and Sufism.

To sum up, the works of these writers suggest the compatibility of Muslim women's being modern, progressive and free while at the same time cherishing their religion and religious identity. In other words, they explore the possibility of being at once a true believer in Islam and a critic of specific views about Islam (Tuppurainien 198).

Section 1

Islamic Feminism:

1-1 Positive image of Muslim Woman (The pro camp)

1-2 Negative image of Muslim Woman (The anti-camp)

This section will provide the theoretical background information needed. It will be divided into two sections. The first section will expound the concepts of Islamic Feminism. The second section will elaborate the different attitudes towards the term of Islamic Feminism. In other words, it will examine the contradictory points of view between the pro- and the anti-Islamic Feminist term, situating the selected writers each in her context.

Section 2

This section will centre on the two anti-Islamic feminist novels. First, Bangladeshi writer Nisrin Taslima's novel *Lajja* gives a negative image of the Muslim woman in a big Islamic fundamentalist country in the Islamic world. She portrays a true image of the suffering women endure in a male-dominated society where customs and traditions play a massive role in forming women's

beliefs. Second, Ayan Hirsi Ali's *The Infidel* also conveys a negative image of a Muslim woman. In it, Ali criticizes the tyranny of the Islamic patriarchal norms that are imposed on Muslim woman.

Section 3

This section will concentrate on Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* This analysis will render Abdel-Fattah as a positive supporter of Islamic feminism. Abdel-Fattah in this novel tries to debunk the common misconceptions about Muslims and, thus, allows readers to enter the world of the average Muslim teenage girl and see past the headlines and stereotypes to realize that she experiences the same dramas and challenges of adolescence as her non-Muslim peers. "It is the first time to see the Muslim females appear as heroines. They were as escapees of the Taliban, victims of an honor killing, or subjects of the Saudi royalty! I wrote *Does My Head Look Big In This*? Because I want to fill that gap" (Abd el-Fattah 5).

Section 4

This section will tackle Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015). The novel implies that the writer translates Islam into a properly felt system of beliefs. It tries to convey the correct meaning of some thorny issues in Islam like the concept of jihad and Sufism. She also shows the impact of Islamophobia on Muslims who live in the west. Aboulela conveys a positive image of a Muslim woman who is aware of her Islamic identity.

Section 5

This concluding section will include the findings of the research. These findings will show that Islamic Feminism is a controversial term and has two camps, a pro-camp and an anti-one. The dissertation will try to show the need for more Muslim women writings to impugn the adopted attitudes and claimed allegation against Islamic feminism.

Sample analysis:

Nisrin Taslima's novel *Lajja* and Ayan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* represent the anti-Islamic feminist wittings. The two novels covey that Islam and feminism cannot meet together because is an oxymoron. For example, Infidel portrays Hirsi Ali's relationship with Islam when she was a devout Muslim as a young girl, and goes to portray the time when she felt disappointed with Islam. She advocates the rights of Muslim women oppressed under Islam. She not only blames Islam for the oppression of women but directly criticizes the tenets of Islam and the prophet Mohammad himself. She describes the life of a Muslim girl who feels oppressed in a Muslim culture, so she finally rebels against her religion and culture, escapes to the west, finding freedom and happiness there. In her novel Ali demonizes everything that is indigenous and valorizes everything that is Western. Her main argument about Islam is that 'In Islam, you are Allah's slave. You behave well because you fear Allah'(Hirsi, 281), and love and affection are absent from the religious life and experiences she describes. She claims that the relationship of the adherents of other religions such as Christianity with God is about' dialogue and love' while in Islam this relationship is about 'fear and submission'(Hirsi, 215).

On the other extreme, "The Kindness of Enemies" by Leila Abouela tackles themes of identity, jihad, and Sufism from Islamic perspective. She criticizes the racist treatment of the West to everyone who is Arab and Muslim. The novel goes through two parallel narratives, one set in contemporary Scotland and Sudan, the other in nineteenth century Imperial Russia and Caucasus. She is proud of her history and Muslim heritage. She also shows the falseness and the wrong image of Muslims in the Western media and the negative consequences of Islamophopia on Muslim people in the West. She tries to covey new correct concepts of Islam like jihad and Sufism.

In the same track, An Australian-born-Muslim-Palestinian-Egyptian, Randa Abdel-Fattah based her first novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This*? on her own experiences. The story is about an Australian Muslim teenage girl who decides to wear the hijab,

or headscarf, full time and the cultural ramifications that follow. Randa, herself, was a teen when she decided to wear the hijab full-time. "I wrote *Does My Head Look Big in This?* because I wanted to allow readers to step into the world of an average Muslim teenage girl born in the West," says Randa. "I wanted to allow readers to identify with her experiences and journey, and realize she is not a walking headline or stereotype (Abdel-Fattah.Website).The main character Sixteen-year-old Amal makes the decision to start wearing the hijab full- time and everyone has a reaction. Her parents, her teachers, her friends, people on the street. But she stands by her decision to embrace her faith and all that it is, even if it does make her a little different from everyone else. The dissertation shows the representations of Muslim women from two contradicting point of views through some selected novels.

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