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## Process Relational Theology and Islamic Feminist Thought: An Initial Exploration

### Süreç-İlişkisel Teoloji ve İslamî Feminist Düşünce: Bir Ön Araştırma

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#### Abstract

This article examines the potential contributions of process relational theology to Islamic feminist theology, arguing that such an engagement can significantly enrich existing efforts to reinterpret Islamic tradition through a gender-justice lens. Process relational theology, by emphasizing a dynamic, interconnected, and responsive God, offers a fertile framework that challenges traditional hierarchical views of divine-human relationships and gender dynamics found in mainstream Islamic theology that have strong patriarchal tendencies. The article suggests that integrating process thought into Islamic feminism can provide fresh perspectives on key Islamic theological concepts that can further fortify the discursive foundations of Islamic feminist theology. After outlining the history of feminist thought in modern Muslim contexts and reviewing recent contributions to Islamic feminism in the works of Asma Lamrabet, Sa'diyya Shaikh and Jerusha Lamptey Tanner, the article explores how process relational theology's emphasis on dynamic relationships and rejection of rigid hierarchies can offer new insights into Islamic feminist discourse. This integration aims to develop more gender egalitarian understandings of divine-human relationships, gender dynamics, and religious authority in Islamic theology, potentially expanding the metaphysical and theological foundations of Islamic feminism and Islamic feminist theology and opening new avenues for dialogue.

**Keywords:** Process-relational theology, Islamic feminism, Islamic feminist theology, Asma Lamrabet, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Jerusha Lamptey.

## Öz

Bu makale, süreç-ilişkisel teolojinin İslami feminist teolojiye muhtemel katkılarını incelemekte ve bu tür bir etkileşimin, İslamî geleneği cinsiyet eşitliği zaviyesinden yeniden yorumlama çabalarını önemli ölçüde zenginleştirebileceğini savunmaktadır. Süreç-ilişkisel teoloji; dinamik, her şeyle bağlı/bağlantılı ve duyarlı bir Tanrıya vurgu yaparak, hâkim olan İslâm teolojisinde yer alan ilâhî-insan ilişkilerine ve cinsiyet dinamiklerine dair, güçlü ataerkil eğilimlere sahip geleneksel hiyerarşik görüşlere meydan okuyan verimli bir çerçeve sunar. Bu makalede iddia edildiği üzere, süreç düşüncesinin İslamî feminizmle entegrasyonu, İslamî feminist teolojinin söylemsel temellerini daha da güçlendirebilecek temel İslam teolojisi kavramlarına dair yeni bakış açıları ortaya koyabilir. Modern Müslüman bağlamlarda feminist düşüncenin tarihini özetledikten ve Asma Lamrabet, Sa'diyya Shaikh ve Jerusha Lampsey Tanner'ın eserlerinde İslamî feminizme yapılan son katkılarını inceledikten sonra bu makale, süreç-ilişkisel teolojinin dinamik ilişkiler üzerindeki vurgusunun ve katı hiyerarşileri reddetmesinin İslami feminist söyleme nasıl yeni bakış açıları sunabileceğini irdelemektedir. Bu sentez, İslam teolojisinde ilahî-insan ilişkileri, cinsiyet dinamikleri ve dinî otorite konularında daha cinsiyet eşitlikçi anlayışlar geliştirmeyi, potansiyel olarak İslamî feminizmin ve İslam feminist teolojisinin metafiziksel ve teolojik temellerini genişletmeyi ve diyalog için yeni yollar açmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Asma Lamrabet, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Jerusha Lampsey, Süreç-ilişkisel teoloji, İslamî feminizm, İslamî feminist teoloji.

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## Brief History of Feminist Thought in Modern Muslim Contexts

In the evolution of feminist thought within Muslim contexts two distinct yet interconnected strands have emerged: secular feminism and Islamic feminism (Alak, Duderija & Hissong, 2020). These movements, while differing in their origins and approaches, share common goals and have increasingly found areas of convergence. Secular feminism in Muslim-majority societies took root in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Sirri, 2023). This movement was primarily driven by Muslim women who, as citizens of newly formed Muslim majority nation-states, sought to address gender inequalities within the framework of secular nationalism and modernization. While not explicitly framing their arguments in religious terms, these feminists nonetheless operated within a cultural context shaped by Islamic heritage. Secular feminism in Muslim-majority contexts drew upon a combination of Islamic modernist thought, secular nationalist ideologies, and humanitarian principles. Its primary focus was challenging patriarchal societal structures that denied women equal rights. Strategically, secular feminists often concentrated their efforts on transforming the public sphere, implicitly acknowledging the public/private divide in their societies (Alak et al., 2020).

While secular feminists were informed by modernist interpretations of Islam, they typically did not employ overtly religious language in their advocacy. However, the rise of Islamist movements in the 1970s and their subsequent growth in the 1980s and 1990s presented new challenges for feminist currents in Muslim contexts. These movements often promoted strongly patriarchal interpretations of Islam, which prompted a re-evaluation of feminist strategies, and, in many ways, the rise of conservative and puritanical Islamist movements inadvertently gave birth to Islamic feminism. This is noted by Sirri who makes the following observation in this regard

The Islamic feminist movement developed as a response to rising Islamist movements. With the growth of global religious fundamentalisms, Islamic feminists emphasised the urgency of rethinking religion as a necessary path for feminist criticism within both majority- and minority-Muslim countries (Sirri, 2023).

Therefore, it is in response to this shift in the religious and political landscape in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Islamic feminism emerged as a distinct discourse (Alak et al., 2020).

Islamic feminist approach directly engages with religious texts and traditions, seeking to demonstrate that gender equality is not only compatible with Islam but is in fact mandated by its core principles. Again, as noted by Sirri (2023):

Islamic feminism is a discourse on women and gender which elucidates the message of gender equality and social justice as located within an egalitarian reading of Islam. It operates from within a faith-based position located in an Islamic paradigm. Working from a faith-based position means rather than rejecting religion, one identifies as a Muslim and works within Islamic texts, i.e., the Qur'an, Sunna, and Hadith.

Islamic feminists, therefore, argue that patriarchal interpretations of religion have distorted the egalitarian message of Islam, and they work to recover and amplify women's voices and rights within the Islamic tradition.

Islamic feminism has been primarily championed by *female* Muslim scholar-activists who ground their work in a comprehensive, gender-sensitive interpretation of the Islamic tradition. Over the last decade, however, increasing number of reformist-minded Muslim *male* scholars have also started to contribute to Islamic feminist thought which has further strengthened the aims and objectives of the movement and its credibility (Duderija, 2022).

It is worth noting that some pioneers of Islamic feminism have been uncomfortable with the label "feminist," for various reasons including the political. The appropriateness and utility of the term continue to be debated among scholars in this field (Sirri, 2023). Scholars like Lampsey (2018) have utilized an alternative terminology namely "Muslima theology" instead. I will discuss this concept below in some detail.

## A Sample of Major Contributors to Contemporary Islamic Feminist Theology

Over the last two decades feminist /gender egalitarian interpretations of Islam have flourished in western academia with many female Muslim scholars contributing to the field (Haqqani, 2024; Hidayatullah, 2014; Sirri, 2023). In this section I want to simply draw attention to and briefly discuss the works of Asma Lamrabet, Sa'diyya Shaikh and Jerusha Lamptey Tanner as important representatives of the broader spectrum of Islamic *theology*<sup>1</sup> in contemporary Islam.

### *Asma Lamrabet's feminist Qur'anic Exegesis*

Asma Lamrabet is an Islamic feminist and liberation theologian from Morocco. She has a background in both medicine and theology. In 2008, she became president of the International Group of Studies and Reflection on Women and Islam (GIERFI) based in Barcelona. In 2011, she was appointed as Director of the Center for Studies and Research on Women's Issues in Islam, which is affiliated to an official religious institution. Lamrabet is the author of various articles and books published in Arabic, French, English and Italian.<sup>2</sup>

As noted by Yachoulti (2023) "her approach and method of deconstructing the sacred texts have influenced the debate on women's rights not only in Morocco and Muslim countries but also all over the world." Contrary to some Muslim women who dismiss feminism as a Western secular imposition, Lamrabet contends that feminism is a universal legacy. She maintains that women from all cultures have the right to embrace and tailor feminist principles to their own unique cultural circumstances. In her words:

<sup>1</sup> Other scholars like Ziba-Mir Hosseini, Ayesha Chaudhry and Zahra Ayoub have primarily focused on Islamic law and ethics rather than theology so their important works are not discussed here. The works of Asma Barlas and amina wadud are already well known and have been discussed in a lot of details by many scholars including by this author elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.asma-lamrabet.com/publications/>

I believe in a plural feminism. Western feminism can't be limited to one movement. In its universal definition, it is a historical dynamic which believes that feminism is the product of a continuous struggle of women against patriarchal oppression. Therefore, feminism around the world is in fact a continuity of this struggle in the human history out of any historical or geographical context....So as a woman living in the South and in the Muslim world, I can share the universal principles of feminism which are dignity, liberty and no discrimination for all women. But I want and must have my own model because my sociocultural context is different. If the principles can be common, each feminism (or each context) has its own priority and model (Lamrabet, n.d.).<sup>3</sup>

She describes her approach as “the third way” positioning it as an alternative to both secular Western feminism and religious conservatism. This third way, as she describes it, strives to reconcile Islam with gender equality, employing a humanistic and ethical approach. Her aim is to demonstrate the compatibility of Islamic principles with the concept of gender equality (Lamrabet, n.d.).<sup>4</sup>

Lamrabet argues for an urgent need for reinterpretation of Islamic texts, that need to be stripped of misogynistic interpretations. She actively encourages Muslim female scholarly engagement in production of Islamic knowledge production to achieve this end. For this process to yield desirable results, however, requires re-interpretation of the Qur'an in accordance with four dimensions: the global ethical dimension, the humanistic dimension, the egalitarian conceptual and normative dimension, and the social dimension. Lamrabet's interpretive framework has been summarized by (Yachoulti, 2023) on which I will expand with ideas from Lamrabet's major work on men and women in the Qur'an (Lamrabet, 2018).

**1. Ethical Dimension:** Lamrabet posits that the core ethical principle of Islam, the ‘Oneness of The Creator,’ inherently implies human liberation and equality. She argues that this fundamental tenet has been obscured by centuries of political instrumentalization of religion, which has promoted subservience to rulers and, by extension, wives to husbands.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://din.today/asma-lamrabet-on-islamic-liberation-theology/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://din.today/asma-lamrabet-on-islamic-liberation-theology/>

**2. Humanistic Dimension:** Central to Lamrabet's interpretation is the Qur'anic concept of *insan* (human being), which she contends transcends gender distinctions. This concept places humanity at the center of creation, emphasizing the equality of men and women in Islamic ontology.

**3. Social Dimension:** Lamrabet recontextualizes verses often cited to justify gender discrimination (e.g., those pertaining to polygamy, inheritance, testimony). She argues that these verses, when isolated from their broader ethical framework, have been misinterpreted to construct a discriminatory women's status in Islam (Yachoulti, 2023).

**4. Egalitarian Conceptual and Normative Dimension:** Lamrabet identifies several key Qur'anic concepts that underpin her egalitarian interpretation:

- a) *Nafs wahida*, the undifferentiated original essence of humanity denoting the common origin of men and women. In this respect Lamrabet asserts that "it seems that God created man and woman from a single substance, with these two human beings later constituting the sexual components of a single reality" (Lamrabet, 2018).
- b) *Amana* (trust) and *Khilafa* (stewardship): The equal responsibility and privilege Qur'an bestows on both genders in relation to human civilizational development. For Lamrabet, exercising this responsibility entails revitalizing the awareness of spiritual dignity and the responsible freedom granted by God to all individuals, regardless of gender. This freedom allows humanity to fulfill, in an exemplary manner, a mission that is fundamental to their nature (Lamrabet, 2018).
- c) *Taqwa* (moral integrity)

Lamrabet argues that the Qur'anic vision of "the equality of all human beings in the eyes of the Creator is absolute, transcending all particularities, race, ethnicity, skin color, or sex. The sole merit in the eyes of God is that which the Qur'an defines in this verse as *taqwa*" (Lamrabet, 2018).



For Lamrabet, *taqwa* does not, however, just signify piety or fear of the Creator as understood traditionally. It should, rather, be understood and experienced as a spiritual value of love and of respect of God, which should be embodied in the everyday conduct of each human being. Moreover, *taqwa* for Lamrabet also connotes the unceasing openness of the spirit that aspires humans toward the Creator. As such *taqwa* is the process of becoming closer to God through acts of virtue. It is the awareness of always being with God, everywhere, through one's heart and acts (Lamrabet, 2018).

- d) Wilaya (mutual alliance between men and women in both public and private spheres)

In Lamrabet's exegesis, wilaya, which she understands to mean a unification of hearts and deeds, fundamentally represents the actualization of gender equality. This egalitarian principle, she argues, finds its expression in the fabric of everyday existence through tangible acts of human solidarity. Within this framework, Lamrabet contends that the sole relevant metrics for evaluation of human conduct become diligence, probity, and ethical rectitude, thereby eschewing any gender-based distinctions that are found in mainstream Islamic theology (Lamrabet, 2018).

Asma Lamrabet's approach to Islamic feminism represents a significant contribution to contemporary Islamic feminism, especially in relation to Qur'anic exegesis. Her "third way" methodology, which seeks to reconcile Islamic principles with gender equality, offers a nuanced alternative to both secular Western feminism and religious conservatism. By reinterpreting Quranic concepts through ethical, humanistic, and egalitarian lenses, Lamrabet challenges traditional patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts. Her emphasis on concepts such as *nafs wahida*, *amana*, *khilafa*, *taqwa*, and wilaya provides a framework for understanding Islam as inherently supportive of gender equality. However, Lamrabet has not systematically engaged in discussions pertaining to philosophy of religion and how principles and worldview underpinning process relational philosophy and theology can be integrated into Islamic feminist theology.

### *Sadiyya Shaikh's Ibn Arabian Sufi-Approach*

Sa'diyya Shaikh, a prominent South African progressive Muslim scholar, has made significant contributions to the field of Islamic feminist studies. She is currently the Director of the Centre for Contemporary Islamic Thought at the University in Cape Town. She has written widely on gender, sexuality, and Islam related topics.<sup>5</sup> Her work is grounded in a fundamental commitment to justice as the spiritual core of Islam and is informed by a feminist hermeneutics.

For Shaikh, the term “feminism” encompasses three essential elements: awareness, activism, and vision. It signifies a critical consciousness regarding the structural marginalization of women within society, and it involves efforts aimed at transforming gender power dynamics. The ultimate goal of feminism for Shaikh is to create a society that promotes human wholeness, grounded in the principles of gender justice, equality, and liberation from oppressive structures (2012). Islamic feminism contextualizes these issues within a theological framework, emphasizing a relationship with God as central to understanding justice, freedom, and equality. In her words:

“Islamic feminism,” in particular, addresses questions of human wholeness from the perspective of a foundational God- human relationship that roots the process and goals of individual, societal, and political life in the attainment of a right relationship with God. Questions of justice, freedom, and equality, therefore, are always situated and valued vis- à- vis a larger framework for understanding the nature of reality (2012).

Shaikh observes that while some Muslims avoid the term “feminist,” an increasing number have begun to embrace it as a self-descriptor. She argues that the retention of the term “feminism” allows Muslim women to position their praxis within a global political context, thereby fostering greater opportunities for alliances, exchanges, and mutually beneficial interactions among diverse groups of women. In this respect Shaikh contends that the utilization of feminist terminology is advantageous as it provides a nuanced vocabulary for articulating a complex set of ideas associated with a critical awareness of gender politics (2012).

<sup>5</sup> <https://humanities.uct.ac.za/contemporary-islam/faculty/director-sadiyya-shaikh>

Moreover, Shaikh posits that her approach represents an integral component of Islamic feminist scholarship, aimed at destabilizing patriarchal gender constructs and offering alternative interpretations of Islamic tradition informed by a religious commitment to gender justice. As such, her work provides counter-narratives to dominant, gender-unjust ideologies that have long pervaded traditional Islamic scholarship. She describes her approach as follows:

Broadly, my project contributes toward a rethinking of Islamic tradition to invigorate contemporary Muslim approaches to gender issues..... Given that language and its nuances invariably convey an entire intellectual genealogy and more subtly the relationship between knowledge and power, I have chosen not to describe my work as feminist “theology” but rather to cast it as a feminist rethinking of tradition that crucially involves theological reflections, among other things (2012).

Shaikh has employed the term “hermeneutics of suspicion” as part of her commitment to feminist hermeneutics to describe her methodological approach, which serves to illuminate discriminatory structures and values embedded within texts that emerge from an exclusively male experiential reality and “that that critically analyses patriarchal biases in the texts and destabilizes accepted interpretations of truth” (2012). Moreover, Shaikh also uses the feminist concept of “hermeneutics of reconstruction” to uncover alternative egalitarian gender narratives within texts. She engages in a process of unearthing underlying images of women from predominantly male-centered records. Her dual objectives in this endeavor are to address the broader silences and marginalization of women’s lives, while simultaneously retrieving powerful and empowering images of women (2012). In her reconstructive approach, Shaikh emphasizes the importance of maintaining vigilance in detecting inconsistencies and moments of disruption within the texts. Consequently, she creatively engages with instances of resistance to patriarchy in its various manifestations.

Central to Shaikh’s approach to Islamic feminism/feminist theology is the assertion that the strong androcentric model of an ideal human being, which permeates classical Islamic thought and is often uncritically

accepted in contemporary Muslim discourse, stands in contradiction to the core of gender egalitarian Qur’anic ethics. Through her contextualist, feminist “hermeneutics of suspicion and deconstruction,” Shaikh advocates for an alternative “religious anthropology” of the human person in Islam inspired by the thought of Ibn al Arabi (d.1240 CE).

In her scholarly analysis, Shaikh delineates the intricate interrelationships between religious anthropology, ontology, and cosmology within Islamic thought, and their profound implications for gender dynamics. She posits that these philosophical constructs, often operating implicitly, significantly shape and inform traditional Islamic perspectives on gender roles and hierarchies. More specifically, Shaikh elucidates how ontological inquiries into the nature of existence and cosmological understandings of the universe’s structure and purpose fundamentally influence Islamic religious anthropology. This anthropological framework, she argues, has historically been characterized by a binary and hierarchical conceptualization of gender. Within this paradigm, women are frequently associated with corporeality, emotionality, and irrationality, while men are aligned with spirituality, intellect, and leadership. Critically, Shaikh demonstrates how this gendered dichotomy, manifests in practical religious contexts. She cites the debate surrounding women’s imamate as a prime example, wherein arguments against female leadership in sacred spaces often stem from these underlying anthropological assumptions. Such arguments, she contends, reflect and reinforce a patriarchal order that naturalizes male authority in religious domains while positioning women as potential disruptors of “sacred” spaces.

As alluded to above Shaikh argues in favor of an alternative conception of human nature in Islam based on the approach of well-known Sufi philosopher Ibn al-Arabi which she describes as follows:

The Islamic tradition in fact possesses some rich, multitextured, and deeply grounded approaches to gender with regard to politico- legal issues. The thirteenth- century Muslim polymath Muḥyī al- Dīn ibn al- ‘Arabī offers precisely such an approach when addressing the issue of women’s imamate. Within an Islamic cosmology, Ibn ‘Arabī the contemplative mystic asserts, men and women have equal capacity to

attain the divinely ordained vision of spiritual completeness. Indeed, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the equal ontological capacity for spiritual completeness shared by men and women defines an Islamic view of human nature (2012).

By explicating the connections between abstract ontological concepts and tangible gender dynamics, her work provides a crucial framework for understanding and addressing gender issues in Islamic contexts (2012). Shaikh argues that her approach represents “part of an Islamic feminist approach that destabilizes patriarchal gender constructs and provides alternative approaches to the tradition informed by a religious commitment to gender justice” (2004). As such it offers counter-narratives to dominant constructions of gender-unjust ideologies and advocates for an alternative Ibn Al Arabi inspired view of human nature in Islam in “which humanity, male and female, is presented in ways that are holistic, non-hierarchical and egalitarian” (Shaikh, 2004).

Shaikh’s contributions to Islamic feminist studies offer a nuanced and deeply contextualist approach to gender issues within Islamic thought. Her work, grounded in a commitment to justice as the spiritual core of Islam and informed by a feminist hermeneutics, provides a compelling framework for rethinking Islamic traditions through a gender-justice lens. Shaikh’s methodology, which combines a “hermeneutics of suspicion” with a “hermeneutics of reconstruction,” allows for both critical analysis of patriarchal biases and the recovery of egalitarian narratives within Islamic texts. However, although acknowledging the importance of the intricate interrelationships between religious anthropology, ontology, and cosmology in defining human nature and its gender-based implications, Shaikh has not explored how process relational philosophy and theology can contribute to Islamic feminist thought. In other words, while her approach with focus on Sufi philosophy opens up important new avenues for understanding and addressing gender issues in Islamic contexts through an alternative religious anthropology, I contend it can be further extended and enriched by integrating insights from process relational philosophy and theology in relation to Islamic feminist thought.

*Jerusha Tanner Lamptey's "Muslima Theology"*

Jerusha T. Lamptey is a Muslima /Muslim woman theologian, scholar, and public educator. Currently she is Assistant Professor of Islam and Ministry and Director of the Islam, Social Justice, and Interreligious Engagement Program (ISJIE) at Union Theological Seminary in New York.<sup>6</sup> Her work and writing focus on Islamic feminism, interreligious engagement, religious pluralism, and social justice. "Muslima theology" (Lamptey, 2018) is a term she employs to describe her scholarly, theological, and activist endeavours as a Muslim woman. For her this Muslima designation emerges not in opposition to, but in dialogue with diverse feminist formulations.

The main objective of Muslima theology for Lamptey, like in in Islamic feminism is the same. In this context she has stated that.

In Muslima theology and Islamic feminist interpretation in general, the obvious overarching goal is to articulate interpretations that affirm the humanity, dignity, and equality of women" (Lamptey, 2018).

Therefore, while Lamptey acknowledges the feminist nature of her work, she seeks to emphasise specific attributes of her positionality, methodological approach, and areas of concern by employing the term "Muslima theology" to it.

The term "Muslima" (denoting, in Arabic, a female adherent to Islam) is utilised by Lamptey to underscore her personal positioning as a woman, a Muslim, and an individual dedicated to the critical reassessment and interpretation of Islamic tradition in pursuit of egalitarianism and justice. Furthermore, this label serves to highlight her theoretical stance as a scholar who engages with gender theory and feminist discourses to interrogate the ascribed value of various forms of human difference, encompassing, but not limited to, gender and biological sex.

This terminological choice, moreover, reflects her nuanced approach to feminist Islamic scholarship, one that acknowledges the broader

<sup>6</sup> <https://utsnyc.edu/wp-content/uploads/Publications.pdf>

feminist discourse while asserting a distinct identity rooted in Islamic tradition and contemporary gender theory. In other words, by adopting the term “Muslima theology,” Lamptey situates her work within a specific cultural and religious context while simultaneously engaging with broader academic and activist debates on gender, justice, and religious interpretation.

The “theology” part signifies an intellectual project aimed at formulating integrated interpretations concerning God and God’s relationship to creation, with a particular emphasis on humanity. The primary objective of this theological approach is to contextualise discussions of women and gender within a more expansive theological framework that escapes the confines of patriarchy. This framework which she acknowledges is informed by scholarships of more senior Muslim “feminist” scholars like Barlas, wadud, Shaikh and Lamrabet, encompasses explorations of the Divine nature, the multifaceted interactions between the Divine and humanity (including such fundamental concepts as creation, revelation, prophethood, morality, and ethics), and the essence and purpose of humanity itself (theological anthropology). In Lamptey’s words:

Theological exploration serves to problematize and destabilize assumptions that have gained traction in the tradition. The Muslima approach uses theological concepts and the integration of these concepts to assess existing [patriarchal] practices, laws, and interpretations and to suggest new practices, laws, and interpretations (2018).

Muslima theology, moreover, represents a distinct manifestation of comparative feminist theology and as such it is inherently comparative in its methodology. It actively engages with diverse religious discourses on women and gender, particularly those articulated by women from other faith traditions. This interfaith dialogue enriches the discourse of Muslima theology and situates it within a broader context of feminist religious thought.

Furthermore, Muslima theology maintains a critical stance towards universal and hegemonic feminist paradigms. This critique acknowledges the potential limitations and cultural biases inherent in certain feminist

frameworks, particularly those that may impose Western-centric perspectives on diverse religious contexts (Lampsey, 2018).

Lampsey, as other feminist minded Muslim scholars like wadud (1992) and Barlas (2002) emphasises the importance of tawhid or unicity of God for developing Islamic feminist /Muslima theology. In her scholarly analysis Lampsey posits that tawhid serves as a critical theological foundation for numerous Islamic feminist arguments pertaining to gender equality, individual agency, and the legitimacy of diverse voices within the Islamic tradition. She contends that this ontological principle inherently precludes the theological justification of human hierarchies predicated upon biological sex or socially constructed gender distinctions, notwithstanding the historical reality of such stratifications (2018).

As such Lampsey argues that according to this tawhid based theocentric paradigm, male individuals do not occupy a position of greater proximity or heightened privilege in relation to the divine. Rather, she posits that the doctrine of tawhid implies an egalitarian anthropology wherein all human beings are endowed with commensurate capacities for moral agency and spiritual attainment. In her view, therefore, this theological framework establishes an undifferentiated ontological relationship between the divine and all human subjects, irrespective of gender (2018). Furthermore, Lampsey elucidates that within this conceptualisation of tawhid, the divine, while maintaining its transcendent uniqueness, is understood as immanently accessible to all human beings without gendered mediation. Consequently, she asserts that any theological or jurisprudential claim seeking to establish an intrinsic or divinely sanctioned elevation of men over women must be critically interrogated within this tawhid-based framework. Moreover, Lampsey suggests, following in the footsteps of wadud (1992), that such assertions are potentially categorizable as manifestations of shirk - the gravest transgression in Islamic theology, involving the association of partners or intermediaries with the singular divine entity. In Lampsey's analysis, this tawhid-based hermeneutic thus provides a robust theological foundation for challenging androcentric interpretations of Islamic sources and patriarchal social structures. She proposes that it offers a conceptual framework for reimagining gender relations in Islamic thought, emphasising the direct, unmediated



relationship between each individual and the divine, and underscoring the theological imperative of gender equality as a reflection of divine unity and justice.

By synthesizing these elements, namely constructive reinterpretation, comparative engagement, and critical analysis of hegemonic feminisms, Lamptey's Muslima theology navigates a unique trajectory within the broader landscape of feminist theology and Islamic scholarship. It strives to remain faithful to Islamic principles while advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment, thereby contributing to the ongoing evolution of both fields. However, like Lamrabet and Shaikh, Lamptey does not systematically engage with philosophy of religion and process-relational theology to advance the cause of Islamic feminist theology.

The main premise of this article is that while the contributions of Muslim feminist scholars like Asma Lamrabet, Sa'diyya Shaikh, and Jerusha Lamptey as major representatives of contemporary Islamic feminist theology have significantly advanced Islamic feminist thought, their approaches can be further enriched by engaging with insights from process relational philosophy and theology in particular - a perspective that none of these scholars have yet explored.

In the subsequent sections of this article, I aim to address this gap by examining how process relational theology, with its emphasis on dynamic, interconnected relationships, and its rejection of rigid hierarchies, can offer new insights into Islamic feminist discourse. By introducing this philosophical and theological framework into the rich tapestry of Islamic feminist thought developed by scholars like Lamrabet, Shaikh, and Lamptey, this article seeks to open new avenues for dialogue and expand the philosophical and theological foundations of Islamic feminism / feminist theology.

## **Overview of Process Relational Theology**

Process relational theology, profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and the theology of Charles Hartshorne, stands in stark contrast to classical theistic views of God and the God-

world relationship. It rejects the notion of a static, immutable God who unilaterally determines the fate of creation from a position of absolute power (Hartshorne, 1984). Instead, it presents a God who is intimately involved in the universe's unfolding processes, a God who truly experiences, responds to, and is transformed by the relationships woven throughout creation.

Process relational theology highlights several key theological mistakes (Hartshorne, 1984) of classical theism that process theology seeks to rectify, particularly in how it characterises God's relationship to humanity. One such mistake pertains to the idea of Divine omnipotence in classical theism. In this respect process -relational theologians challenge the traditional concept of God as absolutely omnipotent. For them, this doctrine is logically incoherent and creates a framework where genuine freedom and love within creation become impossible. Instead, process theology proposes a God whose power is one of persuasion, not coercion, working with and through the world's own processes of becoming (Cobb & Griffith 1976; Epperly, 2011).

Process relational theologians further critique the classical understanding of God's eternity as an immutable, atemporal existence. Instead, they envision a God whose experience of time is more akin to the temporal unfolding of the universe, a God who is in process, not frozen in an eternal now. Consequently, God's knowledge is not a static foreknowledge of a pre-determined future but rather a dynamic and responsive understanding of the possibilities present within each moment of creation's becoming (Ibid.).

Finally, instead of a God who controls every detail of creation, process theology proposes a God who persuades, inspires, and empowers. God's love is not a force that dictates outcomes but rather a creative, responsive energy that nudges, invites, and calls forth the best possibilities within each moment of experience (Cobb & Griffith 1976; Epperly, 2011).

### ***Panentheism: The Foundation of an Intimate God-World Relationship***

The concept of panentheism forms the bedrock of process theology's understanding of the God-world relationship. This perspective distinguishes itself from classical theism's view of God as wholly other and transcendent, existing apart from creation. Panentheism literally means "all in God" and posits a far more intimate connection between God and the world, where God embraces the world in its entirety while simultaneously exceeding its boundaries (Sia, 1984). This intimate embrace is not a static or one-sided affair; it is a dynamic and evolving interplay that considers God as Experiencer and not as a distant observer. Process-relational theologians stress the active, experiential nature of God's relationship with the world, stating that God does not merely observe creation but genuinely *experiences* it. This experiential connection transforms how we, for example, understand prayer and religious experience, positioning them not as pleas for intervention from a distant deity but as participations in an ongoing, responsive dialogue. This emphasis on experience, in turn, underscores the reciprocal nature of the God-world relationship. Just as the world's becoming influences God, God, in turn, influences the world through persuasive love, guiding it toward greater complexity, beauty, and wholeness (Cobb & Griffin, 1976). This mutual influence of a continuous interplay where both God and creation are evolving, changing, and responding to one another.

Having briefly outlined the basic features of process relational worldview and theology in the next section I explore the potential contributions of process relational theology to Islamic feminist thought and theology to uncover the nuanced ways in which this philosophical cum theological framework can illuminate new possibilities for understanding God, God-human relationship, reinterpreting religious tradition, and promoting gender justice within Islamic contexts.

## Process Relational Theology and Islamic Feminist Thought

In examining the intersection of process relational theology and Islamic feminist thought, this section critically engages with the re-evaluation of divine power and the patriarchal image of God and how process relational theology's emphasis on interconnectedness and relationality offers a powerful framework for challenging the rigid dichotomies that often underpin patriarchal interpretations of gender roles in mainstream Islam.

### *Deconstructing Divine Omnipotence and the Image of God as a Patriarch*

One of the most significant contributions of process relational theology to Islamic feminist thought lies in its re-evaluation of divine power and image of a God as all-powerful patriarch. The above-described process-relational theology's rejection of absolute omnipotence, a concept that is often used to justify hierarchical power structures, including those that perpetuate gender inequality is of paramount importance in this respect. Classical theism's emphasis on God's absolute, unilateral power can have far-reaching social and political implications. When God is conceived as the ultimate patriarch, an all-powerful, controlling, and demanding unquestioning obedience, it becomes easier to legitimize similar power dynamics in human societies. This is particularly relevant to Islamic feminist concerns, as patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts often draw upon such a model of God to justify male authority over women (Bauer, 2015; Duderija, 2014).

Hartshorne (1984), in his critique of classical theism, argues that equating divine perfection with absolute power is not only philosophically unsound but also morally problematic. He points out that such a conception can lead to a "despot's" model of God, where power becomes synonymous with coercion and control with bad outcomes for women. In this context the following words of Hartshorne are very instructive:

The feminists' complaint that they have been asked to worship a male deity seems pertinent and well founded. "Men are the masters" easily fits the tyrant conception of God, whose function is to command while the creatures merely obey (Hartshorne, 1984).

Similarly in the context of critiquing the classical theistic concept of God as male in Christianity Cobb and Griffin (1976) write as follows:

The liberation movement among women has made us painfully aware how deeply our images of deity have been sexually one-sided. Not only have we regarded all three 'persons' of the Trinity as male, but the tradition has reinforced these images with theological doctrines such as those noted above. God is totally active, controlling, and independent, and wholly lacking in receptiveness and responsiveness. Indeed, God seems to be the archetype of the dominant, inflexible, unemotional, completely independent (read 'strong') male. Process theology denies the existence of this God.

Process- relational theology offers a radically different perspective on divine power and God's image. Instead of absolute control, process relational theology emphasises persuasion, love, and mutuality as the hallmarks of God's relationship with creation. This understanding of divine power is not about imposing a preordained plan but rather about inviting, persuading, and empowering creation towards greater creativity, complexity, and beauty. It is a creative response love of God as an intimate companion (Epperly, 2011).

This shift in perspective has profound implications for how Islamic feminist theologians might approach questions of power and authority within Islamic tradition. By embracing a model of divine power rooted in persuasion rather than coercion, they can challenge interpretations that use God's omnipotence, especially the ingrained idea of God's sovereignty as a sole legislator for humanity (*hakimiya*) (Akbar & Saeed, 2022) that is used in classical theistic version of Islamic theology to justify gender hierarchy and inequality (Chaudhry, 2013).

Furthermore, process-relational theology's understanding of power can help us reinterpret several key Islamic concepts. For instance, the concept of *wilaya* interpreted as "male guardianship" in mainstream Islam but

encompassing broader notions of various forms of male authority can be re-envisioned through a process-relational theology lens. Instead of understanding *wilaya* as a hierarchical imposition of authority as patriarchal interpretations suggest (Mir- Hosseini et al., 2013; Sachedina, 2008), process relational theology invites us to consider it as a relationship of mutual responsibility, respect, and caretaking, grounded in a shared commitment to justice and flourishing. This aligns with the process understanding of God's relationship with creation which is one of guidance, support, and empowerment rather than domination and control.

Furthermore, the idea that God is dynamically engaged with the world necessitates an understanding of religious tradition as similarly dynamic, contextually driven and evolving. It suggests that as our understanding of the world and ourselves evolves, so too must our interpretations of religious texts. A dynamic God, in this sense, necessitates a dynamic tradition. Therefore, process-relational theology provides a robust theological framework to support such contextualised and always in process understandings of tradition that can dislodge strongly entrenched patriarchal interpretations of Islam that are justified on the basis of epistemological closure (Duderija, 2011).

Moreover, the Islamic concept of *fitra*, often translated as "human nature," can also be fruitfully reinterpreted through a process-relational theology lens. Classical interpretations of *fitra* often emphasise a fixed, essentialist understanding of human nature used to reinforce rigid gender roles underpinned by patriarchy (Ayubi, 2019; Sachedina, 2008). Process-relational theology, with its emphasis on becoming and potentiality, offers a powerful counter-narrative to this view since it considers human beings as "co-creators with God" and human nature as not fixed but rather characterised by an inherent capacity for growth, transformation, and participation in the ongoing creative process alongside God. This potentially resonates with the Quranic emphasis on human beings as God's vicegerents (*khalifas*) on Earth, entrusted with the responsibility of shaping a just and flourishing world. By understanding *fitra* through a process-relational theology lens, Islamic feminist scholars can articulate a more dynamic and liberating understanding of human potential, one that

transcends restrictive gender binaries and affirms the inherent capacity for dignity, growth and change within all individuals. The above outlined interpretations of wilaya, khilafa and *fitra* resonate with those advocated by Lamrabet (2018) and provide further theological and philosophical arguments in support of Islamic feminist theology.

### ***From Dichotomies to Interdependence***

Process relational theology's emphasis on interconnectedness and relationality offers an additional powerful framework for challenging the rigid dichotomies that often underpin patriarchal interpretations of gender roles in mainstream Islam. By recognizing the inherent value and significance of all aspects of existence including those often deemed "feminine" process thought paves the way for a more holistic and egalitarian understanding of human nature and gender relations.

Classical theism, particularly in its interpretations of creation narratives, frequently relies on binary oppositions—male/female, spirit/matter, reason/emotion to establish a hierarchical order. This hierarchical and patriarchal understanding, has contributed to the marginalisation of women within religious discourse, justifying their exclusion from leadership roles and limiting their full participation in religious life (Alak et al., 2020).

Process-relational theology disrupts this binary thinking by positing relationality as the fundamental nature of reality. This means that all aspects of existence, including those typically categorised as "masculine" or "feminine," are seen as interconnected and mutually enriching. Moreover, process-relational philosophy considers human experience as a high-level exemplification of reality in general (Mesle, 2008). One implication of this is that the same principles of relationality and interdependence that govern the cosmos (including God) also govern human relationships. This approach does not negate distinctions including those of femininity and masculinity but rather re-evaluates their value. Instead of privileging one side of a binary over the other as in the case of patriarchy, process-relational philosophy/theology emphasises the dynamic interplay of diverse qualities as essential to wholeness

(Hartshorne, 1984; Sia, 1984). Just as a musical masterpiece derives its beauty from the harmonious combination of different notes, so too does the richness of human experience emerge from the interplay of various qualities and perspectives, including those traditionally associated with both masculinity and femininity.

Moreover, process -relational theology's panentheistic understanding of God's relationship with the world further challenges hierarchical and therefore patriarchal understandings of reality associated with classical theism including its Islamic version. By affirming God's intimate involvement with creation, panentheism disrupts the devaluation of the material world often present in classical theism. This has significant implications for how we understand the body, sexuality, and those aspects of human experience often coded as "feminine" and relegated to the realm of the material and therefore "inferior" as per mainstream Islamic thought (Alak et al., 2020). This in turn, allows for a more holistic understanding of human nature that honours the deep interconnectedness of the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of (human) being. This view is not only aligned with Muslima theology as espoused by Lamprey (2018) but also deeply resonates with Shaikh's (2012) call for a vision of human nature in Islam that is "holistic, non-hierarchical, and egalitarian" and her non gendered religious anthropology. Process-relational theology, therefore, offers a theological vocabulary (and broader philosophical worldview) to further develop this vision, suggesting that the divine image is reflected in the full spectrum of human experience, encompassing both traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" qualities.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, through its reconceptualisation of God, emphasis on change and becoming in a panentheistic view of the cosmos, and celebration of relationality, process relational theology offers a powerful toolkit for further development of Islamic feminist thought and theology. It provides a philosophical and theological framework for:



***Critiquing Patriarchal Interpretations:***

By challenging classical theistic notions of omnipotence, immutability, and dualistic thinking, process thought provides a theological basis for critiquing interpretations of Islamic texts that have been used to justify gender hierarchy and inequality.

***Re-interpreting Religious Tradition:***

Process relational theology's emphasis on dynamism and the evolving nature of both God and creation encourages a more contextual and liberating approach to interpreting Islamic texts and tradition.

***Developing Inclusive Theological Visions:***

By emphasising interconnectedness, mutual influence, and the inherent value of all forms of experience process relational theology allows for the development of more inclusive theological visions that honour the full spectrum of human experience, regardless of gender.

Through these contributions, I am confident and excited about the prospect of process relational theology serving as an additional catalyst for Islamic feminist theology, offering tools to critique, reinterpret, and re-envision the patriarchal foundations of mainstream Islamic theology. By embracing a model of God that is relational and dynamic, Islamic feminists can fulfil their mission and values of adhering to a version of an Islamic faith that truly uplifts and empowers all individuals, irrespective of gender. The integration of process relational theology into Islamic feminist discourse, therefore offers (an additional) transformative pathway toward understanding divinity and human relationships that is not tinged by patriarchy. As Islamic feminists engage with these ideas, they will contribute to a revitalisation of the Islamic faith that champions dignity, justice, and the flourishing of all individuals within the Islamic tradition. Thus, the future of Islamic thought may very well depend on this deepening this dialogue, leading to a richer, more inclusive understanding of faith that honours the complexities of human as well as the divine experience.

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