



“And We Created You in Pairs”: Islam and the Gender Discussion

FAATIMAH KNIGHT

Author Biography

Faatimah Knight holds a Bachelor of Arts in Islamic Law and Theology from Zaytuna College and a Master of Arts in Religious Studies from Chicago Theological Seminary. Her research interests include Islam and modernity, gender in the Islamic textual tradition, *usul al-fiqh*, metaphysics, and religion in public life. She is a research fellow at Yaqeen Institute and the community editor for *Renovatio*, the journal of Zaytuna College. She hosts a podcast on Islam, liberal arts, and culture called Creative Minority.

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Introduction

Gender informs who we are as individuals, as collectives, and as creators of civilization because it is real. The modern era, however, has uprooted much of our understanding of this defining aspect of selfhood. The new gender theories, pioneered by public intellectuals like Professor Judith Butler, have not so much replaced traditional configurations as simply disregarded them. In order to gain influence, these theorists misrepresent the meaning and implications of biological sex, take a reductionist approach to gender, and fail to consider the wide domain that “traditional” thinking about gender covers. They vulgarize science and overlook philosophical approaches to gender. This paper will argue that traditional thinking on gender—specifically Muslim thought—expanded far beyond a discussion of the body and its function, roles, dress, and demeanor, to map meaning on to the entirety of the cosmos.

We use the word *tradition* here to refer to a body of ideas that has been cultivated over an extensive period of time and is oft referred back to for the wisdom it continues to bestow. Professor Sachiko Murata argues in her landmark work, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, that gender was a characteristic feature in Muslim cosmological and Sufi thinking.¹ Religious cosmology details a way of explaining the origins, history, and future of the world, principally on religious terms; and the Sufi tradition that Murata utilizes, refers to Muslim intellectuals whose work focused on the higher ideals and spiritual depths of Islam. Likewise, Professor Abdal Hakim Murad argues in his essay “Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender,” that Islam offers an affirming narrative regarding gender which includes it as constitutive of what makes a human being spiritually whole and vibrantly connected to the universe.²

As much as Western culture debates gender and rights, it does not have a coherent message about gender. In fact, gender is one of the most fragmented concepts that we come across in current debates over ideas that shape our society. One of the reasons for this may be that many of those speaking about these issues are not

¹ Murata, Sachiko. *The Tao of Islam*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 15.

² Murad, Abdal Hakim. “Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender,” 1999.
<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/gender.htm>

speaking from a place of expertise. Biologists certainly have something to say about gender but they are limited to their area of expertise. Historians as well have much to offer us on gender but from within the confines of historical analysis. Likewise, philosophers, sociologists, religious scholars, and others have knowledge to contribute but it is from within their own disciplines that they can authoritatively speak. However, we observe that people find it profoundly difficult to stay within their knowledge base, and some go wildly outside of their expertise to make claims that support their analysis, instead of treading lightly into other arenas with intellectual humility, open to being informed by what exists *out there*.

The present paper, which puts forth an analysis of the role that the feminine and masculine play in Islamic metaphysics and cosmology, calls on the authority of the Muslim intellectual tradition to address the modern critique of gender. One of the modern critiques stresses the irrelevance of gender while itself being consumed by the concept, adamant about its own authority to restructure it, and wholly unconcerned with what is lost through this reimagination of gender. Judith Butler argues in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” that gender is a social construct, falsely correlated with biological sex, perpetuated generationally through the adoption of certain manners of dress and effectuations, ultimately serving the patriarchal end of reproduction. She writes, “Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”³ In Butler’s view, gender has no reality, no quiddity, and biological sex is “distinct from the process by which the body comes to bear cultural meanings.” Biological sex is a matter of fact she does not dispute but she associates it with the anatomy of the conspicuous practically to the exclusion of the inscription of gender in the literal cells of our bodies. If Butler denied biological sex, her work would be dismissed as absurd. She affirms it just enough to be believed as credible but falls far short of affirming its full scientific weight so as not to reveal the contradictions in her thinking. She makes reductionist claims about biological sex in order to make her central argument that it should not have

³ Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

any implications for how individuals express themselves alone and in relationship to one another.

Framing gender

The phrase ‘men and women’ tends to funnel into certain conversations like marriage, rights, equality, and history among a few others. But even the phrase ‘men and women’ is under scrutiny as being dangerously exclusionary. It has embedded within it certain implications that are increasingly under question. The phrase suggests, for one, a natural pairing: that men and women can and should be talked about together. It also suggests that ‘men and women’ represent two categories outside of which there are no other key players. In other words, men and women are the corresponding elements that make up a system of sorts. Some theorists, like Butler, would suggest this pairing is antiquated, that it assumes something about the world that no longer reflects ‘reality’ as ‘reality’ is commonly defined.

Rarely do we talk about ‘men and women’ as an idea even though for much of history, in cultures far and varied, the realm of ideas was a natural place for this topic to live. We have stalled in talking about these as spiritual ideas with explanatory power and instead prefer the brass tacks—those things that present themselves as urgent because they are obvious. One reason we have ceased talking about the idea of gender is that we have lost a sense of just how broad it is. As a society, we have become so narrowly focused on the biology and lived experiences of men and women, as Butler’s assessment demonstrates, that our scope of conversation is limited to whatever seems to engage directly with those dimensions. Pervasive is the notion that, in order to protect ourselves from limiting ideas about gender, we must marginalize discussions that suggest difference or make gender too prominent an issue. Religion is viewed as a culprit in perpetuating gender distinctions to an oppressive extent. Yet, religious cosmology seeks to explain the dynamic structure of the universe by utilizing a large number of symbols, of which gender is a key component. Yet it rejects the idea that the symbolized could be equated with the symbol. The former is always far greater in importance and scope than the latter, although the latter is more tangible.

Arguably, thinkers like Butler have been able to take their conclusions as far as they have because of how patently flimsy some of our expressions of gender are. The more people insist that girls must wear pink and only boys can play with toy trucks as matters of principle, the more arguments like Butler’s seem credible. Claims like those are far removed from the concerns of Muslim cosmologists. Likewise, the more American culture exploits notions of the perfect male and female body, the more Butler’s idea that gender rests on the social performance of gender gains ground. Butler’s critiques about the ways in which we “perform” gender, particularly in the public domain, are not without basis. Modern American dress is perhaps more gendered than any generation prior for the ways in which it crudely overemphasizes the distinct aspects of the male and female form. It is reasonable that someone surrounded by this display questions whether this style of dress is not socially constructed toward a sexual end that has usurped the will of the individual although they do not perceive it as such—Butler calls these individuals “actors”⁴—they are parroting the script they’ve been given.

Again, it is worth noting that Muslim thinkers cared little for some of the same excesses that Butler finds fault with. The cosmologists who postulate the ways in which gender can be employed to understand the forces that shape our world are wholly unconcerned with many of those social “acts” as Butler calls them, which seem to defy any higher purpose, like overtly sexualized dress. Islam, of course, deemphasizes and desexualizes the body in any public setting and therefore disincentivizes profiteering over the body, women’s bodies in particular. The Muslim cosmologist engages with a Qur’anic principle, that Allah “created everything in pairs in order that you reflect” (Qur’an 51:49) so he or she must concede to the obvious pairing of men and women. Yet, because the verse calls on us to reflect, we are compelled to dig deeper than superficial differences. Furthermore, the language of pairs is distinct from the language of binaries, the former brings into focus difference as well as sameness whereas the latter emphasizes only difference. Biology advances the idea that men and women are bimodal, not binary, that while we exist in two categories this does not deny variance within each of those categories, as well as the overlapping of categories.

⁴ Ibid., 520.

As biologist Dr. Heather Heying puts it, members of a gender category “are simultaneously of a type, and distinct within that type.”⁵

Finding purpose through stories

Stories and symbols are the guardians of a culture’s values and sources of meaning. The narratives we tell or hear about ourselves and the world we operate within form structural support for our individual and collective lives. Any psychologist who listens to his client’s discourse will be able to identify the story the latter tells about himself, grasping through it the world he has confined himself to and determining if there isn’t some alternative narrative—whether more true or more helpful—that can enable the client to live in a different, life-affirming paradigm. Similarly, our beliefs about gender inform our understanding of what it means to be human and, thus, are profoundly important and of fundamental concern for believers.

The story of the creation of Adam and Eve, in the numerous ways that it is told and retold in the Qur’an, illustrates just how important it is for humans to recognize that we have an origin and therefore a story to reflect upon in order to determine our essence and our purpose. Sachiko Murata, writing on the motivation of Muslim cosmologists states that, “...most cosmologists have been concerned with demonstrating the analogies among all levels of existence in order to show that human beings play a unique role in the universe as God’s representatives or vicegerents (*khalifa*). This, in turn, demands human responsibility.”⁶ Without the story of Adam, we would not know that we have been charged with the responsibility of *khilafa*, but it is also not readily apparent why we are capable of carrying out this task. If we cannot access the ‘why,’ then acting in proper accordance with the station of *khilafa* will escape us.

Cosmologists have charged themselves with the task of demonstrating analogies because the Qur’an relays many of its core messages through analogical language.⁷ Of concern to us in this discussion are the analogies God uses to help human

⁵ Heying, Heather. Should We “Stop Equating ‘Science’ With Truth”? *Quillette*, August 11, 2017. <https://quillette.com/2017/08/11/stop-equating-science-truth/>

⁶ Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 15.

⁷ Ibid., 23.

beings understand Him as well as themselves. Vicegerency, as described in the Qur'an, bestows human beings with God-like responsibilities in the relationship we have to the rest of creation. For one, human beings have the unique capacity to think and act freely with limitations that are barely perceptible. Therefore, we are able to wield a certain amount of control over the rest of creation. We are called to care for creation, but our abilities can just as easily be used to cause harm if our outlook and priorities are disordered. Animal, plant, and mineral life are not practically defined in moral language because their actions are confined by their natures which are limited and fixed. Murata points out that “Evil appears when people break the balance.... Evil has no other entry into the world since only human beings have the freedom to choose it.”⁸

This brings us to the second characteristic of humans that annexes us to God in our relationship to creation: we are endowed with a richness and complexity of nature and capacities that are unlike any other creature. Murata writes that human beings “manifest the whole,”⁹ meaning that we are a little cosmos, manifesting all the attributes of the ‘big’ cosmos within ourselves. This assessment by the cosmologists is based on a number of traditional statements, among them, “We will show them our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth” (Qur'an 41:53)¹⁰ and the *hadith*: “Allah created Adam in His image.”¹¹ These correspondences to The Divine are of particular interest to cosmologists because they are illustrative of what is demanded by human vicegerency and why such an honor and responsibility has been placed upon us. The Qur'an employs the term signs (*ayat*) hundreds of times and we, the audience, are asked to see the signs and then see beyond them to the truth that they are alluding to. Notes Murata, “...the Koran tells us that we must perceive things not so much for what they are in themselves but for what they tell us of something beyond themselves.”¹² The multitude of signs ultimately delivers us to a unified notion of wholeness, *tawhid*. In this way, all of life is imbued with meaning.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰ Alternate translation: “He is the Truth.”

¹¹ Narrated by Abu Hurayrah in both Bukhari and Muslim.

¹² Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 24.

Just as we derive knowledge of our purpose from the Qur'an's discussion of our origin story, so, too, do we learn about gender and its significance. Within the origin story, Adam stands both as the archetypal human and the archetypal man. This is because gender is only understood (by humans) when both male and female are present. Before Hawa's creation, Adam is more properly described as human than as a human male because maleness is not comprehended without femaleness as its complement. Much of our knowledge base as people is impossible without recourse to opposites. There is the old adage that a fish neither knows that it is wet nor that it lives in water because it has no concept of dryness. When we read our origin story, we see a derivation from oneness, as exemplified in Adam before Hawa, then duality, Adam with Hawa, then multiplicity, ourselves as the progeny of Adam and Hawa. While nearly all animals exist in pairs, none, as far as we know, was created from its own self like Adam and Hawa were created from the same *nafs* (soul). And while all other creatures live in accordance with their natures, none of them is conscious of their origin. The first verse of Surah Nisa illustrates human derivation from oneness, through to duality and then multiplicity: “O mankind, have *taqwa* of Allah who created you from one soul and created from it its mate, and spread from it countless men and women...” (Qur'an 4:1). Surah Hujurat reinforces this movement from singularity to multiplicity with the added benefit of encouraging us to reflect on proverbially climbing the ladder from multiplicity back to singularity: “O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Qur'an 49:13).

Gender further informs our position as stewards. As we know, God is not gendered; but, as Abdal Hakim Murad points out, “the phenomenal God is manifested in not one but two genders.”¹³ When Murad says “phenomenal God,” he is referring to our perception of God which is dependent upon that which God chooses to manifest of Himself to us. This is different from “the noumenal God” which refers to God's ipseity, or who He is in Himself, independent of human sense perception. An example of “phenomenal God” is ‘The Names of God’ which

¹³ Murad, “Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender.”

have inspired an entire doctrine that designates them as archetypes for all duality in creation.¹⁴ As Murad points out, they are divided into Names of Majesty and Names of Beauty; the former are associated closely with the masculine pole and the latter with the feminine pole. It would belie the point of this essay to think of these in strict opposing categories. God, who possesses ultimate Unity, does not suffer internal conflict or contradiction. Rather, God’s effects on creation can be seen through the lens of His many names which appear to fall gracefully into two categories, archetypically masculine and archetypically feminine. Yet each of those categories contains dozens of Names, displaying variance from within as well as methodical overlap. God’s wrath, for example, is categorically distinct from His Mercy, but Prophet Ibrahim warns of a “punishment from the All-Merciful” (Qur’an 19:45), a seemingly oxymoronic statement that must be true given the authority of the person uttering it. Thus, the dynamism we see in creation—its nuance and interconnectedness—is a manifestation of God’s creative power which we come to experience from His Names, those of Majesty and Beauty. God “created everything in pairs” (Qur’an 51:49), and thereby we are affirmed in our genders and connected to all of creation as well as to the dynamic pairing of God’s Names through our genders. Notes Murad, “The doctrine of the Names as archetypes for all bipolarities in creation ruled out any possibly consequent idea that humanity’s retrieval of theomorphism must entail a shedding of gender in favour of androgyny. On the contrary, the retrieval of theomorphism is the retrieval of gender, fully understood.”¹⁵ Theomorphism, or being created in likeness to God, should not be confused with the Christian conception of the term which includes ‘God made flesh.’ Rather, for the Muslim, we mean that humans are granted qualities that are a small sample of the omnipotent God. It also hinges on the understanding that in order for us to be our highest version of ourselves, we ought to adopt God-like qualities of care and concern for others, goodwill, forethought, and forgiveness among others.

While modern theorists hold that true freedom rest in throwing off the shackles of masculine and feminine in favor of androgyny, Murad argues that living to our full humanity does not necessitate a rejection of gender in favor of androgyny. God is

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

not androgynous, so the idea of the theorist that in order to have the ultimate freedom that we attribute to God we must be androgynous is a misconception. Their understanding of theology is deeply flawed. What Murad shows is that God has created these differences as a means to reflect upon Him; they are not obstacles, rather, they are means. Our genders, like our bodies, are vehicles meant to aid us in achieving our ultimate purpose of *ibadah* (worship) and *khilafa* (stewardship).

Modernity sees the ways in which we are not identical and reads meaninglessness into that. One common way this plays out can be seen in the persistence by some of feigning blindness to aspects of another’s identity. This shows, in my estimation, an inability to not be reductionist while perceiving someone’s identity. In other words, if I can’t look at you and let go of the stereotypes and preconceived notions I have about your identity, I’d rather pretend to not see our differences and claim some moral ground. Some modernists assume traditions like Islam crafted comprehensive theories because the latter refused to acknowledge variance but the opposite is true. What Islam resurrects in the modern day that is useful for us as people negotiating perspectives and influenced by thought trends is a reaffirmation of embodiment, a resurgence of feminine symbolism, and an invitation to see the form and perceive beyond it. These are important retrievals in our time.

Conclusion

Ironically, Judith Butler’s paper “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” works from a feminist framework to achieve a feminist end. It erases gender, femaleness included and commonly understood, in pursuit of a feminist aim. Ultimately, Butler’s argument is that we achieve a fuller expression of humanity when we liberate ourselves from gender. So women must give up their gender identity if they want to be treated as fully human and live in an equitable world. Butler seems to be asking that women once again sacrifice themselves, which is odd given that she and other feminist theorists argue that sacrifice is one of those norms that patriarchal society forces upon women. And what is the benefit of asking the beleaguered group (women) to do away with gender when the empowered group (men) receives no benefit in doing

the same? It seems at best uncertain how women will benefit from such a radical change when the world around them inevitably stays the same. Not to mention the herculean task of ripping gender from one’s very self. It seems Butler thinks we can remake ourselves in the image of our choosing but this is an atheistic way of viewing the world because it makes us out to be gods in full control. But this is not possible. Religion tells us we are like God and yet the gulf between who and what we are and who and what God is *is* immeasurable. The greatest crime a steward could make is refusing to acknowledge that he is a placeholder for the king, not the king himself. Muslim cosmologists would argue that gender is inextricable from humanity and in truth enriches our selfhood. For the believer on the path to God, learning to express the positive aspects of one’s gender is a help rather than a hindrance. And learning to observe the pairings of the world grants us a deeper vision, not a skewed one.

The scope of this topic is far greater than the constraints of this paper, which by no means exhausts what can be said on the broader meaning and implications of gender. To conclude, let us revisit the headlines of what this essay does cover. We situate this discussion within the persuasive modern theory of gender which posits that gender is a social construct without any reality other than the norms we pass down generationally. While there is truth to the claim that some ways of acting and dressing vary across cultures, this hardly stands as a refutation of gender in its totality. Gender is biologically and culturally determined, as well as spiritually significant. Thus, it is inadequate to point to some superficial cultural and social standards of gender in order to tear down gender’s entire edifice. Reductionist claims about gender misrepresent the issue by setting up a straw man that is easy enough to tear down. However, gender has meant much more as an ontological and cosmological phenomenon in the imagination of Muslim thinkers than the petty gender differences used as targets by theorists. Muslim thinkers in the sapiential and Sufi traditions have utilized and championed gender as an analogy for the world more broadly. They take seriously God’s teaching in the Qur’an that He created all things in pairs and use that as a lens to clarify what otherwise would have remained nebulous. By lifting up this teaching, they affirm and celebrate human fullness with regard for, instead of disregard of, the body.

