

Islam and Gender/Sex Nonconformity: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry

Instructor: Amir Aziz

Level: 3-credit undergraduate- or graduate-level seminar

Targeted enrollment size: 15-20 students, meets once a week in a 2-2.5 hour class session

Keywords: Islamic studies; Women's studies; Ethnic studies; History; Gender and sexuality

COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Is Islam naturally opposed to women’s rights and sexual diversity?” Such a question, blunt as it may be, goes right to the heart of popularized perceptions of Islam as innately adverse to forms of gender and sexual nonconformity that ‘deviate’ from the precepts of Qur’ānic text and Islamic orthodoxy. Rather than answering with a definitive ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ this course readily takes up the challenge in such a question by exploring how a range of Islamic texts and scholars have sought to understand issues of gender, sex, and sexuality across the domains of religious and social life.

Among the questions we will ask are: How have matters of gender, sex, and sexual identity been addressed in classical and contemporary Islamic texts and discourses? How have women’s subjectivity, agency, and sexuality in Islamic traditions been shaped by political, historical, and social conditions of the Islamic world and beyond? If gender and sex nonconformity has always been an integral part of Islamic cultures and Muslim societies, what does that look like and what are the theoretical, epistemic, and political possibilities that arise from such considerations?

The course is structured with two objectives in mind to respond to such inquiries. First, students will examine questions of gender, sex, and sexuality from an interdisciplinary approach, using methods from Islamic studies, anthropology, women’s studies, and queer studies, among other genres of inquiry. The goal is to introduce students to emergent and existing literature in Islamic Studies and other related disciplines and expose them to new theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding Islam and Muslim societies.

Second, students will explore how gender and sex nonconformity in Islam manifest through lived experience or are constructed via discourse and texts. Countering the premise that Islam is naturally hostile to women’s liberation and gender/sex nonconformity, the course will enable students to explore a rich archive of ethnography, music, art, literature, and film that demonstrates how gender and sexual progressivity have long existed within Islamic traditions and histories.

This seminar comprises 14 weeks of coursework, featuring a balance of lively lectures and open-forum, discussion-style sessions that encourage student participation and interaction.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this course, students will:

- Acquire a foundational understanding of how a range of Islamic texts and discourses address matters of gendered and sexed embodiment.

- Examine how women's issues are addressed in Qur'ānic, prophetic, and juridical traditions, and how Muslim women have sought to re-interpret and/or challenge dominant Islamic discourses on sex, gender, and sexuality.
- Understand how epistemologies and contemporary definitions of 'gender' and 'sexuality' may be rooted in specific Euro-centric and Western-centric configurations of gender and sexual rights and freedoms.
- Develop critical analytical thinking and writing skills to examine the complexities of women's issues, sex, gender, sexuality within historically-specific contexts in Islam.
- Nurture an appreciation of the manifold ways in which gender/sex nonconformity has historically manifested in Islamic cultures and Muslim societies, as well as its contemporary formations.
- Identifying new and existing approaches and methodologies that place Islamic Studies in robust conversation with other emergent fields of inquiry, such as Feminist Theory, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Critical Race/Ethnicity Studies, and Queer Theory.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

Students will be assessed based on a combination of weekly Class Preps, bi-weekly assignments, and a final exam. The Class Prep is due each week before class, while an online assignment that covers two weeks of material must be completed once every two weeks.

1. Class Prep and Class Participation: 45%

- Each week, students will prepare a "Class Prep" that they will upload online prior to class.
- Class Prep is at least 2 pages and consists of three parts: (a) a summary, (b) a glossary section of key concepts and definitions, and (c) a set of three questions that students have about the readings.
 - (a) The summary comprises 500-700 words, in which students will give a detailed description of each reading by providing its primary thesis, an explanation of the types of arguments and evidence present to support its claims, and a brief statement on the methodologies used to support its arguments.
 - (b) The glossary section involves a description of at least 2-3 new concepts, terms, and definitions, from across all the assigned readings, that pertain to the weekly theme.
 - (c) The final section comprises three questions that students may have when reading or that they may wish to clarify in class. This section will be used in discussion sessions, providing students the forum to ask their questions and/or expand upon arguments in the readings.

2. Bi-weekly Assignments: 30%

- Every two weeks, students will complete an online assignment—a short-essay quiz or a discussion forum post submitted online—that covers the current and previous weeks. The assignment will evaluate student ability to compare and contrast readings between different weeks.

3. Final exam: 25%

- A final take-home exam will be administered at the end of the semester during exams week. Out of 5 questions, students will respond to 2, with each response essay of at least 700-words long.

COURSE SCHEDULE

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

WEEK 1 - Re-thinking Gender and Women's Rights in Islam

Lecture: "Women in Islam, Past to Present: Histories and Debates"

Readings:

- Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Rise of Islam," in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*
- Fatima Mernissi, "The Hijab, the Veil," "The Prophet and Space," "The Prophet and Women," and "The Hijab Descends on Medina," in *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*

WEEK 2 - Women's and Feminist Interpretations of Sacred Texts in Islam

- Lecture: "Gender and Women in Prophetic, Qur'anic, and Legal Traditions in Islam"
- Kecia Ali, "Marriage, Money, and Sex" and "Lesser Evils: Divorce in Islamic Ethics," in *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*
- Aysha Hidayatullah, "Historical Emergence of Feminist Qur'anic Interpretation," in *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*

EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

WEEK 3 - Re-thinking Epistemologies of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

Lecture: "Knowledge Matters: Unpacking Categories of Sex, Gender, Sexuality"

Readings:

- Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Beyond the Americas: Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Analysis?"
- Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender"
- Evan B. Towle and Lynn Marie Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of the 'Third Gender' Concept"

WEEK 4 - Ethics of Gendered Piety and the Female Subject

- Lecture: "Women's Piety, Agency, and Subjectivity in Islam: Debates and Critiques"
- Saba Mahmood, "The Subject of Freedom" and "Agency, Gender, and Embodiment," in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*
- Kecia Ali, "'If you have touched women': Female Bodies and Male Agency in the Qur'an" in *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*

SEX/GENDER TRANSGRESSIONS

WEEK 5 - Sex/Gender Transgressions

Lecture: “Islam, Queer Femininities, and Sex/Gender Transgressions”

Readings:

- Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Allah, Hidden Treasures, and the Divine Feminine”
- Afsaneh Najmabadi, “The Eclipse of the (Fe)Male Sun” and “Women’s Veil and Unveil,” in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*
- Evelyn Blackwood, “Gender Transgression in Colonial and Postcolonial Indonesia”

WEEK 6 - Homosexuality and Queer Desires

- Lecture: “Homosexuality and Queer Desires in the Islamic World”

- Khaled El-Rouayheb, “Pederasts and Pathics,” in *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*
- Samar Habib, “The History and Representation of Female Homosexuality in the Middle Ages,” in *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*

INTERSEX AND GENDER/SEX NON-CONFORMING BODIES

WEEK 7 - Intersexuality and Islam

Lecture: “Intersexuality in Islam: A Historical and Theological Perspective”

Readings:

- Saqer Almarri, “‘You Have Made Her a Man among Men’: Translating *Khunthā* Anatomy in Fatimid Jurisprudence”
- Paula Sanders, “Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law”

WEEK 8 - Trans Bodies and Queer Divinities

Lecture: “Gender Crossings: Transgender and Transsexual Bodies in Islamic Texts”

Readings:

- Afsaneh Najmabadi, “‘Before’ Transsexuality,” in *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*
- Asli Zengin, “The Afterlife of Gender: Sovereignty, Intimacy and Muslim Funerals of Transgender People in Turkey”

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

WEEK 9 - Feminist Materialism

Lecture: “Islamic and Feminist Critiques of Imperialism, Power, Patriarchy”

Readings:

- Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women (Still) Need Saving?” and “The Social Life of Muslim Women’s Rights,” in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*
- Asma Barlas, “The Qur’an, Sex/Gender, and Sexuality,” in *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*

- Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*

WEEK 10 - Feminist Anthropology

- Lecture: “Feminist and Anthropological Approaches to Islamic Studies”
- Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival”
- Lara Deeb, “Pious and/as/is Modern,” in *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon*
- Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando, “Rediscovering the “Everyday” Muslim: Notes on an Anthropological Divide”

CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

WEEK 11 - Islam, Blackness, and Gender

Lecture: “Islam, Blackness, and Genderqueer Dandies”

Readings:

- Su’ad Abdul-Khabeer, “The Loop of Muslim Cool: Black Islam, Hip Hop, and Knowledge of Self,” in *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*
- Sylvia Chan-Malik, “Being Muslim Women,” in *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*

WEEK 12 - Contemporary Islamic Identities: Technology, Media, Fashion

- Lecture: “Gender/Sex Non-Conformity and Contemporary Islamic Identities”
- Fatima El-Tayeb, “Time Travelers and Queer Heterotopias: Narratives from the Muslim Underground”
- Reina Lewis, “Hijabi Shop Workers in Britain: Muslim Style Knowledge as Fashion Capital?,” in *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures*

RE-THINKING ISLAMIC STUDIES

WEEK 13 - Women’s Studies and Islamic Studies

Lecture: “Theoretical and Sociological Approaches to Women’s Studies and Islamic Studies”

Readings:

- Zakia Salime, “Embedded Counterpublics: Women and Islamic Revival in Morocco”
- Aysha Hidayatullah, “Confronting Feminist Edges,” in *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an*

WEEK 14 - Gender/Sexuality Studies and Islamic Studies

- Lecture: “Approaches to Gender/Sexuality Studies and Islamic Studies”
- Kecia Ali, “Toward an Islamic Ethics of Sex,” in *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*
- Amanullah de Sonny, “The Failed Search for a Single Qur’ānic Masculinity” and “Ṣūfism’s Beloved Subversions,” in *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*