

Islamic Feminism, the Liberal Foundation, and the Illiberal Edifice

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Introduction

The status of women in Islam has been a pressing concern for international politics since the colonial, and even pre-colonial, era, and through the present day (Said 1978; Massad 2015; Ahmed 1992). Moreover, Islamic feminism has developed a rich body of scholarship (Abu-Lughod 2013; Abu-Lughod 1999; Mahmood 2011; Hidayatullah 2014). In Western political thought, the status of women in liberalizing and democratizing societies – like those of Europe in the 1800s – was and remains also a matter of continual debate (Mill 1991; Rousseau 1979; Wollstonecraft 1796). This paper seeks to unpack what I take to be the “woman question” – what is the status of woman in society? – in Muslim political thought. It does so by examining the contextually specific case of a trio of thinkers’ writings on the place of women in society: John Stuart Mill, a post-Enlightenment liberal theorist; Qasim Amin, an Egyptian lawyer and a frequently-cited early Egyptian feminist; and Sayyid Qutb, a prominent Muslim political thinker noted for his so-called radical conception of society.¹ While I make no claims that these thinkers are representative of broader Muslim political thought, I argue that the approaches Amin and Qutb bring to understanding the status of women are influenced by the colonial encounter with both the material force of the British and the ideational force of Enlightenment political thought. These thinkers faced a need to articulate first, in the case of Amin, a coherent political project aimed at modernizing Egyptian society, and second, in the case of Qutb, a precise and comprehensive rejoinder to the idea of European superiority manifested in European thought and by Europhile Egyptians like Amin. In doing so, even someone as opposed to the European political project as Qutb argued with Europeans on their own terms. Thus, I claim, a kernel of

¹ In transliterating Arabic words, I have adopted the system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, with exceptions for proper names that have a common spelling, e.g. Muhammad Abduh, not Muḥammad ‘Abduh.

this same Enlightenment liberalism Qutb is otherwise opposed to finds itself at the core of his political thought.

This essay will bring two bodies of source material for Islamic feminism, colonial-era *salafi* philosophy and European Enlightenment political theory. This essay will bring these two sources, colonial-era Islamic thought and European Enlightenment political theory, together, highlighting the adoption of Enlightenment-era conceptions of the autonomous, equal individual in the early-twentieth-century discourse around Islamic feminism. To do so, I will place two works, *The Liberation of Woman (Tahrir al-mar'a)* and *The New Woman (Al-mar'ah al-jadida)*, by Qasim Amin (1863-1908) in conversation with Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, and read Amin's works against Qutb's *Social Justice in Islam*. This comparative reading will illuminate, I hope, the degree to which Qutb's austere philosophy is dependent on certain ideas that bear similarities to those of European Enlightenment liberalism. I suggest that there is a structural similarity to the ways in which the woman question appears in the political thought of Muslim and non-Muslim political thinkers across time and space. I cannot make the stronger claim that by reading Amin, who read Mill, Qutb framed his analysis of the woman question in similar fashion.

The relationship between Islamic philosophy and liberal political theory has only recently begun to be critically examined. By liberalism, I mean a political philosophy in which subjectivity consists in formally equal individuals before the law and in which the individual is privileged before the community.² Early commentary on the political philosophy of Islamic thinkers came out of the famous Arabist Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (1983), a collection of biographies and commentaries on some of the *nahda*-era ("Renaissance"-

² I am indebted to Danielle Hanley for this cogent framing.

or colonial-era) notable Muslim political theorists who grappled with the technological and military superiority of Europe in relation to the Muslim world. More recently, thinkers like Joseph Massad (2015) and Andrew March (March 2007; 2010; 2015) have tackled the project of comparative work linking European Enlightenment theory and Muslim political thought. This essay will attempt to show that Muslim political thought in the colonial and post-colonial eras argues with European conceptions of society on a relatively shared base. Thus, even a philosopher opposed to Western imperialism and colonial subjugation, Sayyid Qutb, takes as his basic units the (autonomous) individual and the nuclear family and his basic principle equality between persons. Massad, March and others, however, have generally not sought to link Islamic conceptions of male-female relations to liberal political thought.

Muslim theorists in particular are concerned with the relations between individuals inasmuch as they claim that Islam is a totalizing system that seeks to encompass all forms of human interaction. Thus, discussion of the proper relations of man and woman to one another and to society as a whole through the mediating unit of the family comes prior to and as a distinct foundation for a broader political theory. This holds for unabashed liberals like Qasim Amin, who claim that the tyranny men exercise over women through the family and through broader societal relations fundamentally affects and shapes political processes in a given polity and mars the fundamental equality of individuals, but it also holds for the stark philosophy of Qutb, who begins with discussion of the de-sexed and de-gendered, autonomous individual, moves to the sexed and gendered individual, and from there constructs a web of societal relations based on a male-female binary, presented as equality with differences according to capabilities. The basic political principle here, however, remains equality. In other words, though the gender structure that Qutb constructs on this base is different both from that of Qasim Amin and from

European Enlightenment thinkers, the foundation is nonetheless the same, and thus presents a structural similarity to Enlightenment discussions of the individual and the family in otherwise different structural and philosophic contexts.

Thus, this essay is an attempt to understand Islamic feminism through the prism of the liberal Enlightenment, by reading early Islamic feminist writings against those of their European contemporaries, and to understand later Muslim political thought through the same prism, by reading Islamic feminist writings against later broader political theories. Both Qasim Amin and his European interlocutors realized and grappled with the same fundamental paradox: the subjugation of women under a regime of ideas that claimed full equality between persons. Their responses differed in cultural context: Mill proposed letting women vote and be elected; Amin would stop short of political rights. These efforts to end the subjugation of women did not necessarily succeed in doing so, but they did introduce liberal conceptions of equality and reason that would also serve as the basis for later Muslim political thought, similarly engaged in struggle against a dominant, imperial Europe. The arguments that Qutb would later put forward have as their base a liberal, autonomous individual immediately enmeshed in a particular set of societal and political relations constructed around a male-female binary. In this regard, Qutb can be seen as arguing with political liberalism on political liberalism's terms, though building an illiberal edifice.

It may be worthwhile to briefly discuss the scholar, Joseph Massad, who has undertaken a work most similar to my own. Massad (2015), in *Islam in Liberalism*, develops an understanding of liberalism that has Islam at its core and as its fundamental referent. Liberalism, for Massad, produces and reproduces a multiplicity of Islams, in veins culinary, sexual, social, economic, sartorial, and others, that can be suitably juxtaposed to their Western opposites (2015: 4). He

explicitly does not “intend to explore how ‘Islam,’ whatever that is, constitutes itself, but emphatically how liberalism constitutes Islam in constituting itself” (2015:). What Massad does here is a similar project to what I propose in this essay in placing liberalism and Islam in conversation with each other. Yet in a key way, it is precisely the opposite of what this essay seeks to uncover: Massad situates Islam at the heart of liberalism, and defines liberalism as needing Islam to understand itself. I, on the other hand, seek to explore the underpinning of liberalism in the texts produced by Islamic thinkers. I am not arguing, and I do not seek to argue, that Islam “is” liberal, or indeed that “Islam” is any one thing; rather, I suggest that the liberal understandings enforced upon Muslim populations by the colonial encounter, the technological and ideational prowess of the Europeans, and later, Americans relative to Muslims, have resulted in structurally similar arguments and understandings of the bases of ideal political systems and communications of the same to fellow Muslim audiences. In other words, through the prism of gender relations, I develop a conception of liberalism *in Islam*, not Islam in liberalism.

From *Subjection to Liberation*: John Stuart Mill and Qasim Amin

Historical Context and Earlier Islamic Feminists

Qasim Amin published *The Liberation of Woman*³ in 1899, a time in which Egypt was undergoing a turbulent period of economic and political change. Already in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Egypt’s rulers had begun ambitious processes of social change. The modernizing policies of Muhammad Ali and his successors led to two important and related developments: the indebtedness of the Egyptian government to Europe and the subsequent

³ Amin’s translator, Samiha Sidhom Peterson, has translated the title, *Tahrir al-mar’a*, as *The Liberation of Women*. I have represented the title here as *The Liberation of Woman* both to be faithful to the actual Arabic, in which *mar’a* is the singular woman, and to reflect what I believe to be Amin’s intention, which was to describe the conditions that affected woman as a social category of practice in Egyptian society.

economic and political privileges gained by European countries, and the rise of an urban, educated bourgeoisie that benefited from the colonial administration and easier access to Europe, European goods and, importantly, European ideas (Ahmed 1992). The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the education of Egyptian and Ottoman colonial subjects (generally men) in European universities and the transplanting of European ideas and modes of governance to Ottoman lands. New forms of dialogue, such as that between Ernest Renan and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani on the subject of Islam, took place between Europeans and their colonized peers (Renan and Ragep 1883; al-Afghani 1883; Keddie 1983). Qasim Amin was one of these colonial-era intellectuals, exposed at an early age to European modes of education and later educated in Montpellier (Peterson 2000). Amin integrated the influences of many contemporary European thinkers, as well as those of his Muslim contemporaries, into his work.

Amin is frequently and inaccurately cited as the first or one of the first Islamic feminists. Leila Ahmed (1992) reminds us that what we would call feminist proposals had already been made in the early 1800s in Egypt; in the late 1830s, a director of a Cairene school for translators, Rifa‘āh Rafī‘ al-Taḥṭāwī, recommended that girls receive the same education as boys. Ahmed (1992: 133-134) notes that his proposals were the first “to appear in Arabic associating reforms in social mores affecting women with the social and technological reforms for national renewal.” In this way, a sort of feminist approach to social policy – equality of education – became linked to a Europeanizing project. Al-Taḥṭāwī would, in the 1870s, also write a state-sponsored textbook, titled *A Guide for Girls and Boys* (*Al-murshīd al-‘amīn lil-banāt w’al-banīn*), that, in much the same way John Stuart Mill argued regarding woman’s nature in *The Subjection of Women*, claimed women and men did not have any sort of essential difference other than their bodies, and that women’s intellectual capacity was the same as men’s. Muhammad Abduh, the

grand mufti of Egypt in the late 1800s, also argued for elevating the status of women and for reforms to marital practices, such as polygamy (Ahmed 1992). Abduh was also likely the first to make the important claim, echoed by Amin and by his later indirect interlocutor, Qutb, that Islamic rule gave significant rights to women far earlier than did Christian Europe.

This, then, was the context in which Amin wrote: Egypt under colonial rule, with a large mass of peasants and lower-class individuals adversely affected by the policies taken under European tutelage, but also with a small, nationalist bourgeoisie that was divided in two factions. The first was that of Amin and his European-educated peers, who saw much to admire in Europe and sought to modernize Egypt by bringing European technology and modes of governance home. The second was a nationalist-traditionalist elite that resented European tutelage and sought to learn from the mythologized Islamic past, yet inescapably was bound up in a liberal-nationalist project that mimicked the European nation-state. Qasim Amin deserves credit not for being the first to make the claims he made around women's rights, but for making these claims repeatedly and taking them as fundamental to the future success of the political transformations that Egypt was undergoing concurrently.

Qasim Amin and His Critics

Amin's two works, *The Liberation of Woman* and *The New Woman*, in some ways copied earlier proposals by Egyptian elites to improve the status of women. They differed from these proposals in three principal ways: Amin proposed the abolition of the veil (at least the face-veil), the ending of the seclusion of women in the home and, most importantly, framed the status of women as the core problem facing Egyptian society and woman's subjection as the main impediment to successful Egyptian modernization. He also drew, particularly in *The Liberation of Woman*, on traditional Islamic sources for legitimacy; in this way Amin can be considered an

Islamic feminist even as much of his work criticizes social practices in Muslim societies. Amin, like Abduh and al-Afghani, saw in the early years of Islam practices to be emulated, but he, unlike Abduh and al-Afghani, also saw Europe as a model for Egyptian society, one to be gradually adopted, and, perhaps, improved upon.

In *The Liberation of Woman*,⁴ Amin lays out his proposals for woman's equality in four chapters representing four spheres of woman's subjection: education, the veil, the nation and the family. Amin's arguments are relatively straightforward: women deserve equal education (at least to the primary level), the veil is a pre-Islamic tradition that should be abolished, and women should no longer be secluded in the home. These points, made tentatively in *The Liberation of Woman*, are expanded on in *The New Woman*,⁵ in which Amin abandons his limit on woman's education to the primary level and intensifies his opposition to the veil and women's seclusion. In *The New Woman*, Amin also responds to his critics by defending his arguments not with Islamic sources but with the writings of European philosophers and American politicians. Amin utilizes several persuasive frames to make his case for women's equality. The first is a natural rights argument, in which he claims that all humans are entitled to certain societal benefits, including education. This, however, is not a sufficient argument for his case, in the same way that it was not for early European feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft. His second frame, which he uses frequently, is that women's education, inclusion in society and unveiling will be beneficial to men specifically. A corollary to this point is that women's subjection as it currently stands is *harmful* to men. His third frame is that of the nation, in which women represent a productive force to be mobilized by the country instead of a waste of resources; in his phrasing, woman could produce "as much as she consumes" (LW: 14). Amin also devotes considerable

⁴ Hereafter cited as LW.

space within these frames to deploying Islamic sources, namely the Qur'an and the *ḥadīth* (the verified sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), in the service of his project and in opposition to anticipated counterarguments.

It must be said that Amin has faced considerable criticism, not only from his contemporaries but from present-day Islamic feminists and historians of gender in the Muslim world, for his portrayal of Egyptian society, especially Egyptian women, and of European superiority. Leila Ahmed (1992: 162) in particular has been a ruthless critic of what she calls Amin's "rearticulation in the native voice of the colonial thesis of the inferiority of the native and Muslim and the superiority of the European." Analyzing Ahmed's argument requires a step back from Amin's work and to the perspective of the colonizer, in this case the British. Ahmed makes two claims with regard to this perspective. First, for Europeans, especially the British, aspects of metropolitan society, including Victorian sexual mores and gender roles, were taken as the pinnacle of civilization to that point (Ahmed 1992: 151). Second, Islam in particular was deemed "innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies" (1992: 152). Thus a colonialism founded on (Western) male dominance included a particular instrumentalization of the feminist project because of the visible aspects of male oppression that crystallized in the European gaze upon the veiled Muslim female. This erstwhile feminism in the colonies was, importantly, *not* echoed in the metropole: Ahmed perceptively notes that Lord Cromer, the British consul general in Egypt, actively opposed women's suffrage in Britain, founding the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage and serving, for a time, as its president (1992: 153).

⁵ Hereafter cited as NW.

This context, and Amin's closeness to the British administration (and Lord Cromer) leads Ahmed to claim that Amin's position and grounds for opposing the veil and seclusion were essentially identical to those of Cromer. Amin is said to reserve "his most virulent contempt...[for] Egyptian women" (1992: 157), to identify women as the source of "lewdness" in turn-of-the-century Muslim marriages and to ignore the tremendous power that husbands had over wives that led to women's analysis of their husbands' every move (1992: 158). She also claims that one particular section of Amin's book was likely written by Muhammad Abduh, and that this section both makes the most sense and is far more "feminist" than Amin's other writings.⁶ It is here that Ahmed's critique loses some steam, for while she is correct to note that Amin's portrayal of Egyptian women – mothers who have no sense of hygiene (LW: 27) or who rely on superstition (LW: 28), wives who rarely bathe (LW: 21) or are too unintelligent to understand their husbands (LW: 30) – echoes Orientalist stereotypes of the Muslim Other, she is wrong to surmise that Amin does not recognize the fundamental basis of this state of women: patriarchy. In this regard, it may be helpful to note that Ahmed never cites Amin's second work, *The New Woman*, in which he more explicitly notes the patriarchal roots of these observed effects. But we need not leave *The Liberation of Woman* to find evidence.

Amin holds that women's current state is the product of past victories by men over women and the path dependence that such victories have established. He writes: "[t]he superior physical and intellectual strength of men can be best explained by considering the past, when for many generations men have been involved in the world of work and the pursuit of intellectual activities. During those years, women have been deprived of all opportunity and forced into an

⁶ Joseph Massad (2015), who otherwise agrees with Ahmed's critique, notes that this allegation has little concrete evidence.

inferior position” (LW: 11).⁷ His discussion of the veil turns not on an emulation of Western women, who he claims are exposed too much (pointing, like many conservative contemporaries, to “immodest” clothing), but to Muslims going “to extremes in veiling our women...to such an extent that we turn women into objects or goods we own” (LW: 36). With regard to seclusion, Amin holds that women’s education is put to no use when combined with segregation from the rest of society and that knowledge-gaining is a *social* activity. Secluding women, for Amin, “is a form of execution” (LW: 60). With these instruments, informed by tradition and custom (against which Amin readily claims he is committing heresy [LW: 4]), “marriage will continue to be one of the many ways by which men can tyrannize women” (LW: 80). Amin thus constructs a particular view of women’s nature (which, it must be said, is still suited, for him, to being a wife and mother) that is shaped by the profound lack of power that women have in society. It may be true, then, that Amin’s perspective on women was shaped by his deep admiration for European society and that same society’s denigration of Muslim women, but in contrast to Europeans, Amin locates the causes of women’s degraded nature in tradition and custom, not Islam, and he explicitly recognizes the patriarchal roots of this nature.

Amin and European Thought

We can productively compare Amin with several European thinkers who formed part of the ideational corpus that the colonial project took as its base and that Amin admired and sought to implement in Egypt. These include, as may be already apparent, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others; for the sake of brevity, I will limit my comments here to Mill. I have selected Mill in particular because the nature of his work, from the

⁷ We can hear echoes here of Engels’s (2004: 67) “world-historic defeat of the female sex,” although Amin posits not just a world-historical defeat but an ever-increasing patriarchal subjection of women.

title (*The Subjection of Women*) to the arguments mobilized in favor of women's equality, bear strong similarity to Amin's writings.⁸ Comparing Mill, one of the preeminent philosophers of liberalism, and Amin also will highlight the deep entanglement of the European liberal project in Amin's political thought, and provide one entry point by which the liberal base is transplanted to the later thought of the Islamic radicals Qutb and Maududi. Amin was aware of both Mill's political activism (he mentions his drive for women's suffrage) and Mill's philosophical writing (he quotes from the introduction to *On Liberty*).

The Subjection of Women and *The Liberation of Woman* begin in remarkably similar fashion. Mill notes that he has held the opinion he will lay out for many years, that this opinion has grown stronger over the years and that he is compelled to lay it out, even though doing so is difficult. Amin similarly says that the

“truth I am presenting today has preoccupied me for a long time; I have considered it, examined it, and analyzed it. When it was eventually stripped of all confounding errors, it occupied an important place in my thinking, rivaled other ideas, overcame them, and finally reached the point where it became my dominant thought” (LW: 3).

Mill states his fundamental premise clearly:

“the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other— is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and...it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (SW: 471).

These principles also form the chief basis of Amin's diagnosis of Egyptian society, though while Mill starts from the reality of inequality enshrined in law and attempts to show, empirically and theoretically, women's equality to men, Amin begins from a reality of inequality against a backdrop of formal legal equality in Islam. Amin thus takes as his foil not Islam and Islamic law

⁸ Hereafter citations will refer to *The Subjection of Women* as SW in the text. I reference the edition edited by John Gray that also contains *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism* and *Considerations on Representative Government*.

but the traditions and customs that have, over the years, accumulated and subjected women, in the name of an Islam that he claims they do not represent. The principle violated here for both Mill and Amin, and a central theme of both of their texts, is that of equality, both of collectives (“men” and “women”) and of bounded, autonomous individuals.

Mill and Amin are also preoccupied with the nature of woman, and parsing out their differences here is somewhat difficult. On the one hand, Mill repeatedly insists that no one can know “the nature of the two sexes” (SW: 493) simply by examining present-day societal relations. Rather, “[w]hat is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others” (SW: 493). These comments are very similar to those Amin will make in *The Liberation of Woman* and, especially, *The New Woman*. Amin frequently sets up counterarguments based on contemporary assumptions about woman’s nature as foils for his actual arguments on women’s subjection or women’s equality. For instance, echoing Rousseau in *Emile*, he presents the argument that woman “reigns over man’s heart, subjecting him to her will and passions, manipulating him to gratify her wishes” (NW: 133). This classic point takes, for Amin, the moments of passionate love at early stages of a relationship to be the universal state of marriage. In his words, a woman “is on a pedestal as long as his [a man’s] passions revolve around her. When his passion subsides, however, and his emotions calm down, the woman drops from a pinnacle of honor to the depths of humiliation, and again wears the garb of slavery” (NW: 133). At other points, Amin’s foils suggest that education will destroy the chastity of women or further degrade their character. Amin responds by pointing to the way in which that character is socially constructed: woman’s mind is “inclined to deceit,” but this is a natural response to the slavery and ignorance into which women are placed. Education removes the ignorance and with it the inclination to

deceive; it “will perfect her mental ability and allow her to think, meditate, and reflect upon her actions” (LW: 31). Amin is surely too dismissive of women’s agency in combatting patriarchy at this time, but his point nevertheless runs clear throughout: woman’s nature in the present moment is the product of the actions of male domination.

Yet Mill, at the end of the second chapter of *The Subjection of Women*, does take a step back from this position on woman’s nature. Mill still appears to believe that most women will choose to get married, and that this choice will now be made not out of coercion, but freely, and not with the reign of coverture, but with female retention of property rights. Nonetheless, when a woman marries,

“it may in general be understood that she makes choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a family, as the first call upon her exertions, during as many years of her life as may be required for the purpose; and that she renounces, not all other objects and occupations, but all which are not consistent with the requirements of this (SW: 523).

Both Mill and Amin presume the same sexual division of labor to continue and see it as the “most suitable division of labour between the two persons” (SW: 522). In *The New Woman*, Amin writes that “we wish every women [*sic*] to be a wife, and that every wife be a mother,” although he goes on to acknowledge that the present, unequal reality is quite different (NW: 155). In *The Liberation of Women*, Amin claims that once women understand their rights, “marriage will become the natural means for fulfilling the dreams of both men and women” (LW: 80). His foundation for this is drawn from Muslim legal codes and the Qur’an: Amin believes that women and men have the right (ordained by Islamic texts and thus by God) to see each other before marrying; he claims a “liberal Islamic legal system grants...[a woman] the same right to ensure the possibility of fulfilled hopes” (LW: 79). This “liberal Islamic legal system,” phrased quite differently, will be a useful point of departure for finding the liberal foundation beneath the illiberal edifice constructed by Qutb. Mill and Amin, then, both note that

the present state of woman's existence tells us nothing about woman's nature, but that the way society is currently constructed means that the sexual division of labor, where women run the house and bring up the children (NW: 165), is the best-suited system for family life.

Both Mill and Amin take as their aim the persuasion of men both that the existing societal structure, patriarchy, is wrong *and* that there exist solutions to this problem. Mill proposes several: education, female representation, female suffrage, female entrance (if necessary) into the workforce, the reconstruction of the marriage contract. Amin's prescriptions are education, unveiling, inclusion, and a return to the basic principles and laws of Islam. Notably absent from Mill's proposals is a return to some sort of just law; absent from Amin's is any discussion of political rights. These contrasts are worthy of note. Mill does not seek to fall back on religious arguments to make his case. When he comes to marriage, the Christian Church receives his disdain for requiring "a formal 'yes' from the woman at the marriage ceremony; but there was nothing to show that the consent was other than compulsory," and the end of the enforcement of the laws of petty treason he claims, sarcastically, that "civilization and Christianity have restored to the women her just rights" (SW: 502-503). Mill sees Christianity and Christian laws as, at best, immaterial to the debate on women's rights or, at worst, as an impediment to change driven by secular reason (SW: 521).

Amin, on the other hand, reconstructs a history of the early years of Islam whereby Islam granted to women more rights than Christianity ever had, and calls for a return to these principles.

The Islamic legal system, the Shari'a, stipulated the equality of women and men before any other legal system. Islam declared women's freedom and emancipation, and granted women all human rights during a time when women occupied the lowest status in all societies. According to Islamic law, women are considered to possess the same legal capabilities in all civil cases pertaining to buying, donating, trusteeship, and disposal of goods, unhindered by requirements of permission from either their father or their

husband. These advantages have not yet been attained by some contemporary Western women, yet they demonstrate that respect for women and for their equality with men were basic to the principles of the *liberal Shari'a* (LW: 7, emphasis mine).

Amin's lack of discussion of political rights, especially when they form such an important part of Mill's argument, is also notable. On the one hand, the absence of political rights – voting and representation – is surprising, not only because Amin would seem to be sympathetic to women's political participation but also because Amin favorably quotes several governors of Wyoming, public officials from other states and census data on women's participation in the American workforce (NW: 122-124). He also references the history of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom and the advocacy of Mill, Gladstone and Disraeli (NW: 125). He suggests that the Islamic legal system “has even gone so far in the equality between men and women as to permit women when necessary to be guardians over men, and to occupy the position of mufti or qadi [judge], a position that entails the administering of justice” (NW: 118). Amin also repeatedly denigrates autocratic rule.⁹ Why, then, does Amin “set aside the question of political rights and privileges” (NW: 149)? The answer lies in his earlier conception of women's nature and in his view of progress in Europe. Women's nature is socially constructed and conditioned by patriarchy, a rule by which women's functional role has been “narrowed...to one of child-bearing” (LW: 71). The past foreclosure of women's rights to knowledge and to the development of intellect in Egypt means that women are presently unfit to vote. Amin constructs a history of Europe whereby women gain education *and only then* are able to vote, and he is interested in implementing at least the first part of that path in Egypt.

Both Mill and Amin, then, develop a remarkably similar argument diagnosing societal conditions that generate the subjection of women. Women's nature is seen as socially constructed by the external influences of patriarchal society; women's subjection produces

negative effects on women foremost, but on husbands and children a close second; woman has natural rights that place her equal to man in intellect and in capacities. Their solutions, education, the granting of rights, inclusion in society, are also similar and represent a liberal approach to the development of equality. Amin's philosophical move is to begin with the reality of gender inequality, establish the formal equality of individuals, discuss the equality of sexed and gendered individuals, and reconstruct societal relations in a way that treats these groups as equal, but equal in a differentiated sexual division of labor. These presumptions of rights and equality in difference will be echoed by Qutb half a century later.

Formal Equality, Practical Inequality: Sayyid Qutb

Sayyid Qutb: Historical Context

Sayyid Qutb is one of the most important Islamic political philosophers of the twentieth century. His conception of a future Islamic society, what Andrew March has termed a "realistic utopia" (March 2010), has proved influential within Muslim political and theological discourse. Qutb was born in Asyut, Egypt, in 1906, only a few years after Qasim Amin published *The New Woman*, at a time in which Shari'a courts were increasingly relegated to matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance (Calvert 2011: 32). He was drawn to a form of Egyptian nationalism that opposed the acceptance of Western norms and values, writing a virulent critique of Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* in 1938. Taha Hussein, like Qasim Amin, had been educated abroad and advocated the inclusion of Egypt in a "Mediterranean space" in which Egypt had historically participated and could participate once again (Hussein 1975). Many of Hussein's suggested reforms lay in education, and on these, Qutb disagreed little. But the underlying premise of Egypt as part of a space that included non-Muslim

⁹ Though he seems to have little problem with the autocratic rule of the British over Egypt.

Europe was one Qutb would argue strongly against (Calvert 2011: 94-96). Qutb eventually became employed by the Ministry of Education and visited the United States from 1948 to 1950. Upon his return to Egypt, he supported the coup of the Free Officers in 1952 that removed King Farouk from power, only to eventually be imprisoned and tortured by Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime, and killed by the state in 1966. Qutb's writings grow steadily more radical in emphasis throughout his life, especially in his understanding of divisions between Islam and the rest of the world, but they do not stray from the principles he was to articulate in his earlier works. These include "Islamic renewal and authenticity, the purification from religion of arbitrary practices...a direct encounter with the texts and practices of the revelatory period, the rationalization of Islamic legal and political thought for application within the political-institutional conditions of modernity, [and] the relevance of Islam for action and material life" (March 2010: 191).

Qutb is noteworthy for his wide influence in the Muslim world and for his innovative political philosophy. His proposal of the entrance of Islam into politics through formation of a vanguard of "true believers" to lead the Muslim community into a realistic utopia (as Qutb would propose most clearly in his 1964 tract *Milestones along the Path*) represented a new approach to deal with the challenges facing Muslim populations in modernity and in combat with colonial rule. Yet even as he argued against the rule of the "West," Qutb borrowed from Western ideas and incorporated them into their thought. As Vali Nasr put it about Qutb's contemporary Abul A'la Maududi, Maududi's thought "was defined in large measure in terms of imagining a new Muslim community that was distinct from both [traditional identity and secular nationalism]. To do this, it borrowed from the West, even as it challenged it, and used its tools to achieve its purpose" (1996: 5). The same could be said for Qutb's writings. To establish a distinctly *liberal* base on the part of these philosophers, I will examine his intellectual production

on the status of women in Islam in conversation with Qasim Amin's two earlier tracts. I will limit my remarks to Qutb's (2000) *Social Justice in Islam*.¹⁰

Qutb and the Liberal Foundation

Placing liberalism at the base of Qutb's political thought is a daunting task. Andrew March (2010: 190) notes that in Qutb's writings "there is no move to replace the traditional corpus of *shari'a* rulings with a more generic, ecumenical morality derived from reason or intuition." Instead, theological shifts are "contained" at the "foundational (or even rhetorical) level." Thus, one cannot claim an overarching liberalism to Qutbist interpretations of Islam or Islam in politics, and I will not attempt to do so here. Rather, I want to argue that the foundational (or rhetorical) elements March notes in discussing Qutb's compatibility with "natural law" theory are actually key to understanding his political theory writ large, and that he adopts liberalism both as a paradigmatic device and as a fundamental grounding for his political system. In other words, liberal conceptions of individuals pervade the fundamental pretenses of Qutb's text. Yet even as Qutb engages with liberalism and adopts it as his starting point, he quickly builds an illiberal edifice atop his liberal foundation.

Sex and gender form a useful way to engage Qutb on the subject of liberalism. This is because the introduction of gender relations is precisely the moment in which his political system becomes illiberal in its effects.¹¹ I will argue below that Qutb develops his political theory in (at least) three broad stages. The first is the positing of formally equal, bounded, autonomous individuals as the basic unit and principle of the political system. In this stage, these formally

¹⁰ Hereafter I will refer to this text as SJI for in-text citations.

¹¹ It is important to note that no liberal thinker fully succeeds in developing a political theory with deracinated and degendered individuals. Uday Mehta (1999) and others have convincingly argued that liberalism's deep anthropology – in which such characteristics become essential parts of the liberal individual – is necessary for liberal theory to function.

equal, bounded, autonomous individuals are, importantly, *de-sexed* and *de-gendered*. The second stage is the introduction of the only form of inequality he allows: inequality based in sex and gender.¹² In other words, into the principle of formally equal and autonomous individuals Qutb develops a *sexed* and *gendered* individual with corresponding rights, responsibilities, roles and obligations flowing from sex and gender. This stage posits not the formal equality we would expect from liberalism, but an equality-in-difference approach that both claims male-female equality and explains inequalities produced by male-female gender roles. The third step is the enmeshment of these sexed and gendered individuals into a web of social relations in which they make up a Muslim collectivity. This collectivity is not differentiated by race, ethnicity or (ideally) class but is differentiated by sex and gender because of their prior introduction. Thus, the web of social relations into which individuals enter is an illiberal one, even though its beginnings were liberal. The moment in which sex and gender are attached to individuals is the exact same moment in which liberalism recedes from his political theory.

Qutb begins by placing himself in dialogue with Western political thought. He initially discusses the political thought of (European) bourgeois secularists who believe “religion concerns only a man and his God” – an argument also found in Egypt at the time of his writing – and with Marxists and communists in Europe, frequently highlighting Marx’s framing of religion as the opiate of the masses (SJI: 21). Qutb goes on to situate himself in conversation with the entire European intellectual tradition. Qutb’s moves here are important for several reasons. First, we gain an understanding of who he believes his interlocutors are: not (at least not directly) the earlier Islamic philosophers Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd (although Qutb does briefly dismiss these

¹² Qutb and Maududi conflate sex and gender in their writings, so it is difficult to speak of a *sexed* individual without also speaking of a *gendered* individual. In their conceptualization, biology determines social roles and social roles explain biology.

thinkers as aping Aristotle), but rather the giants of European political thought. In doing so, he places both himself and his political theory on the same level as European political thought. Second, we see his conversation with present-day movements (like bourgeois secularism and communism) as reflective of the turbulent political events Egypt was undergoing at the time of his writing. Third, he expects his audience to have an understanding of the intellectual movements he discusses, at least enough for them to comprehend discussion of capitalism, communism and other social and political theories. This tells us something about the intellectual climate of the locale in which he writes, and it is important to note that his audience *already* seems to have at least a passing familiarity with liberalism.

In stage one of my proposed liberal foundation-illiberal edifice theory, Qutb posits formal equality of individuals without regard to gender. Early on, Qutb says “Islam does, of course, acknowledge a fundamental equality of all men and a fundamental justice among all” (SJI: 48). It is worth stopping here to consider the use of “men” here, for if Qutb had used the word *rijāl* in the original Arabic he would have been referring to specifically men in sex and gender.¹³ Qutb does not, however; the Arabic reads “Islam has, of course, determined a fundamental equality of opportunity [*mabdan takāfu’ al-furṣ*] and a fundamental justice among all”—there are no gendered terms anywhere to be found (Qutb 2000: 29). This is remarkable for two reasons. First, Arabic is a highly gendered language: all words have either a masculine or feminine case and take masculine or feminine adjectives. Qutb’s phrasing here avoids using any sort of pronouns that give away a sense of gendered equality. Second, the translator, in striving perhaps for an easier translation, allows one to believe Qutb may be talking about men when he really is speaking of individual, de-sexed and de-gendered humans. This same error repeats itself in the

¹³ Man in Arabic is *rajul*, men is *rijāl*; woman in Arabic is *mar’a*, women is *nisā’*.

text, and we may take, until Qutb turns directly to gender, Qutb's "men" in *SJI* to mean "humans." This fundamental human equality, then, is founded on freedom of conscience, freedom from servility, from poverty (except poverty ordained by God) and from fights over wealth or status (*SJI*: 68). Human equality is even superior to "human desires and bodily appetites" (*SJI*: 68), in which we hear in Qutb echoes of Rousseau. Qutb directly compares his equality to that "established by human laws during and after the French Revolution" but boasts that Islam accomplished that equality more than a thousand years earlier (*SJI*: 69).

In stage two, this potentially liberal framework is interrupted by the introduction of sex and gender into the individual. It is important to note that for Qutb, Islam "has an intense passion for equality; it demands that it be universal and complete, not limited to one race or one nation, to one house or one city" (*SJI*: 79). In phrasing equality in this way, Qutb has foreclosed other potential axes of inequality from affecting how he phrases his theory. Sex and gender, on the other hand, receive special treatment. It is worth quoting Qutb's phrasing in full:

"Islam has guaranteed to women a complete equality with men with regard to their sex; it has permitted no discrimination except in some incidental matters connected with physical capacity, with customary procedure, or with responsibility, in all of which the human status of the two sexes is not in question. Wherever the physical endowments, the customs, and the responsibilities are identical, the sexes are equal, and wherever there is some difference in these respects, the discrimination follows that difference" (*SJI*: 73).

Here, we see the possibility of discrimination or inequality on the basis of sex and gender, which are ordained both by nature and by God. Qutb is careful to lay out areas of equality first: in religion, men and women are equal (that is, in matters of marriage, divorce, and in having a soul); in matters of money and property rights, men and women are equal. Yet inequalities persist and are ordained by God. For instance, women receive half the inheritance that men do. Women can also give testimony in court, but two female witnesses are required to give the same weight to testimony as one male. This is because "by the nature of her family duties the growth of the

woman's spirit is toward emotions and sentiments, just as in man it is towards contemplation and thought...[s]o when she is forgetful or when she is carried away by her feelings, the other will be there to remind her" (SJI: 74). Qasim Amin (and his European Enlightenment male feminist contemporaries more broadly) would likely agree with him on this score; Amin recognizes the degree to which societal and external influences shape behavior, and he might suppose that the woman, the natural wife and mother, would tend toward emotion even in his reconstruction of equality. Amin also views women as having the right to give testimony in court, although he requires this testimony to be given unveiled (LW: 38). Qutb furthermore claims the right for men to be overseers over women for several reasons. First, men will never be pregnant, and therefore will never have a regular biological impediment to their societal obligations. Second, women must care for a family, and the "emotions and sentiments" that result from this require care from a more detached and thoughtful individual: the man. Third, men have financial responsibility both in earnings and in administration, although women are allowed to administer their own property. Fourth, men are physically stronger than women. Qutb explicitly states that men's guardianship over women is "by reason of physical nature and custom" (SJI: 74).

The role of custom in Qutb's theory is paradoxical. On the one hand, Qutb is invested in a project that will return Islam to the golden years of the Prophet's political system. This leads him to strip away many of the practices that had built up over the years and modified "true" Islamic principles. In this regard, we can favorably compare him with Qasim Amin, who lays the blame for women's inequality in society not on Islam but on the accumulation of customs over time. For instance, Amin notes that on the subject of inheritance, the women of southern Egypt lacked inheritance rights guaranteed to them under Islam. The government eventually established a system of courts that guaranteed these rights, but the provincial governors stated that "the courts

would give women inheritance rights that would be contrary to the customs of the region” (NW: 150). Custom is, for Amin, what degrades the ultimate authority of Islamic principles. Yet Qutb, even as he strips away some customs, retains others, like men’s oversight over women. Custom is sometimes accorded a privileged role in the maintenance of gender inequalities, including in establishing and continuing the sexual division of labor.

Women, in Qutb’s Islam, are also allowed to work and to earn money, something Qutb’s contemporary Abul A’la Maududi was to forbid in favor of seclusion in the home (Maududi 1991: 124). Here, Qutb develops a history of women’s work in the West to compare with the right of women to work under Islam. For Qutb, the entrance of women into the workforce created a surplus of labor that allowed capitalists to pay them lower wages. This led to women viewing equality solely through an economic, then a political, sphere: women demand equality of wages, then equality of votes, then equality of representation. It is not clear what Qutb thinks of women voting or serving in public office, or what those offices might look like. What is clear is that women’s bodies and men’s sexual desires are not to be exploited under Islam for material gain; this is one of the principles that Qutb holds makes Islam a humane system where the West sees only economic interest.

Like Qasim Amin, Qutb finds education an area where men and women are equal. He states that Islam “grants to women...the right of intellectual achievement; more—it makes it obligatory for them” (SJI: 76). Beyond this statement and quoting a saying of the Prophet, Qutb is silent on what form women’s education will take. By the time Qutb entered university in Egypt, women had already received college diplomas from Egyptian universities. Qutb thus would have been familiar with women’s education not just at the primary and secondary levels, but all the way to post-secondary education. He does not claim that women need specific

education in cooking, cleaning and sewing, like Amin does (LW: 12), nor does he claim, like his contemporary Maududi, that women only should have education that prepares her to be a good wife and mother (Maududi 1991: 155). In granting women the right to work outside the home, Qutb appears to recognize the necessity of education in a variety of fields—provided that the maintenance of the home and the family is not interrupted by women’s work. Qutb, thus, might be friendly to Amin’s statement that “women comprise at least half the total population of the world. Perpetuating their ignorance denies a country the benefits of the abilities of half its population, with obvious negative consequences” (LW: 13). Yet, where Amin suggests that women’s education should be directed toward teaching and medicine (NW: 158-159), Qutb might allow for a more expansive view of women’s knowledge-gaining.

Qutb’s final word on women and men in Islam represents both his turn to the third stage, enmeshment in a web of social relations, and is reminiscent of Qasim Amin’s phrasing of Islamic feminism. He writes:

“Islam looks at life from many sides and envisages for individuals duties that differ one from the other, but that are all mutually connected and ordered; within this scheme are envisaged the respective duties of men and women, and it lays on each of them the charge of fulfilling a duty primarily towards the growth and advancement of life as a whole; and it ordains for each of them his guaranteed privileges in order to ensure this universal and humane aim” (SJI: 78).

This conception of equality through differentiated roles is one that echoes from early twentieth-century Islamic feminism through to radical Islamic philosophical texts. These differentiated roles, not the equality of autonomous individuals posited earlier, form the basis for the Islamic polity that Qutb goes on to construct.

Conclusion

The “woman question” in Islam has been addressed by a number of thinkers in the colonial and post-colonial era. In this essay, I established Islamic feminism as borrowing from

the liberal tradition of the European Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment. I did so by reading the works of Qasim Amin, one of the first Islamic feminists in Egypt to make the case for women's inequality as the fundamental problem facing Egyptian society, in conversation with John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, a work that made similar claims in the context of England thirty years prior. This reading of Amin identifies what he takes from the European intellectual tradition and what he adds and subtracts to adapt feminism to the context of turn-of-the-century Egypt. Yet I have also sought to claim a place for liberalism in the intellectual production of later Muslim thinkers, focusing in particular on Sayyid Qutb. In constructing a process by which Qutb's thought develops a liberal foundation on which to build an illiberal edifice, I identified the role sex and gender play in moving Qutb away from liberalism and towards an equality-in-difference approach that assigns rights and duties to women and men. Reading Amin against Qutb shows the way rereading the Islamic past with an eye toward return to a "golden" first few years produces similar views on women and gender, and identifies the ways in which Qutb's philosophy is dependent on the work of earlier scholars even as he develops an innovative political system. This essay, then, has contributed to a number of different fields: the study of sex and gender, the history of political thought, the study of liberalism, the study of so-called "radical Islam." In situating liberalism as the basis for even thinkers like Qutb, I hope to have highlighted the manner in which subjects in colonial dominions both took from and argued against the dominant intellectual milieu and ideology of Western politics.

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