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Muslim Women on the Margin: On Whose Authority Does Islamic Knowledge Rest

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Abstract: This paper will examine Muslim women's engagement in Islamic scholarship by reviewing the foundational source of Islamic knowledge while referencing Somali female activists I interviewed in my 2017 published thesis. In particular, Somali women's active participation within the realm of Islamic scholarship in the diaspora will be reviewed, including how the contribution of religious knowledge has enhanced Somali women's faith and their active leadership in their communities. Moreover, I will analyze the orthodoxy limitation that has attempted to erase their scholarship.

Keywords: tawhid; discursive relationship; rereading of Quran; muhaddithat; the hermeneutics of tawhid; Quranic exegesis; tafsir; madrasa; gender justice; intersectional experiences; gender jihad; kha-lifah; tawhidic paradigm; consciousness-raising

1. Introduction

My awareness of the existence of Allah was at the age of five, while I was eavesdropping on a halaqah (a female gathering in my parents' home for knowledge exchange) led by my late great aunt, explaining Surah Al-Ikhlās, also known as the Declaration of God's Unity-al-Tawhid, the 112th chapter of the Quran. At my tender age, I did not comprehend there was a Creator that had neither a mother nor a father, who instead has created all of us, but it was the start of my conscious awareness of Islam and the concept of the monotheism of tawhid. The learning and teaching the Quran and hadith of the Prophet Mohamed (peace be upon him)¹ by Muslim women in the home or at the masjid has a long Islamic tradition that goes back to the Prophet's time. There is a well-established historical significance of Muslim women's Islamic authority in the informal arenas of the home and masjid, which will be illuminated in the following discussions. Since Prophet Mohamed (peace be upon him) brought the message of Islam to the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, women have played a significant role in the narration, collection and preservation of Islamic knowledge on the Quran and the science of hadith (Wadud 1999). However, the current misconception that assumes Muslim women teaching Islam and transmitting and producing Islamic knowledge is a new modern phenomenon speaks to both the impact of Western colonization and its orientalist misreading of Islamic tradition on the one hand and the male-centered misreading of the Quran that is often conflated with divine will on the other.

There is an oft-cited quote attributed to Virginia Woolf (1929) that has been rephrased as "Throughout most of history, Anonymous was a woman," which comes from her book, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). In a similar vein, the contribution of Muslim female scholarship in Islam is rendered anonymous for the masses, including by contemporary Muslim male muftis and scholars. Muslims are familiar with some of the female Muslim luminaries, mainly the companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), such as Umm Salama-Hind bint Abi Umayya, Aisha bint Abu-Bakr and of course his beloved first wife, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid (may Allah be pleased with them all). However, you will be hard pressed to find many Muslims who can name even one Muslim female scholar in the realm



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of Quranic teaching or the preservation of authenticated hadith. Many of us are familiar with Muhammad al-Bukhari and Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, who are famous for the collection of and authentication of hadith. However, few of us outside of learned circles could name the Muslim female *muḥaddithat* (such as Zaynab Bint Sulayma, Fatima Bint Muhammad, Sitt al-Wuzara' al-Tanukhiyyah and Zaynab bint Ahmad) who made it possible for the preservation and authentication of the science of hadith throughout the centuries (Farid 1980). These lapses in Islamic knowledge among Muslims have created a vacuum where patriarchal readings of the Quran became normalized, while contemporary Muslim female scholars, such as Dr. Amina Wadud's work and teachings, have been relegated to an emerging and corrupting Western phenomenon of heresy considered to be outside of the realm of Islamic orthodoxy. This in turn has seen an attempt to invalidate the crucial work being done by Wadud and many Muslim female scholars, to dismantle the masculinization of the Quran while conducting multiple critiques of the traditional understanding of knowledge production and preservation, which keeps Islam relevant for millions of Muslims.²

In contextualizing the traditional teaching of Islamic knowledge by Muslim women in the present time, I will discuss Somali female learned scholars who have taken on the mantle of what Dr. Wadud called Quranic Hermeneutics, as both the producer and disseminator of Islamic knowledge and a contestant to the essentialist and static engagement and understanding of Islam. What is distinctive about Somali women's engagement with Islamic knowledge in Canada is the fact that many of them have taken on the mantle of leading their communities in all aspects, including financial contributions to the community, the building of masjids and the formulation of Islamic structures and learning circles within the community. The Somali elders and activists I interviewed for my thesis demonstrated a solid commitment to challenging and responding to the systematic barriers experienced by their community by utilizing Islam as both spiritual healing and a tool for advocacy against all forms of oppression. The anti-Black racism and Islamophobia confronting Somali female activists within Canada mirror the broader immigration and settlement processes of the Somali community. From a historical perspective, the activism of Somali women and the transformation of their leadership in Canada began during the economic recession of the 1990s, which made the Somali community an easy scapegoat for the economic failures of neoliberal multiculturalism.

The Somali story turned into the figure of the 'bogus refugee,' defrauding the welfare system through a combination of government policies, widespread fear and political discourse. Associating immigrants of color with criminology or social welfare is well founded in Canadian history (Kelley and Trebilcock 1998; Li 2008). Hence, identifying the 'dangerous' foreign immigrants as a 'peril to the public' was part of Canada's neoliberal economic agenda in the 1990s. Eventually, in a recession, the Canadian state mediating the economic and political inequality decided to pit the most vulnerable population (the Somali community) against the dominant white community. Therefore, both social welfare and immigration policy processes are governed through crime and punishment. It ultimately became about those deserving and undeserving of the law and the protection of Canada's multiculturalism. (Mohamed 2016)

The consequences of these economic policies are still reflected in the Somali community, which has experienced socio-political disfranchisement across the board. As one Somali female elder and learned scholar expressed at the time:

The unknown factor within the system, where we did not know how to navigate the health system, we did not know how to navigate the education system and we did not know how to navigate the police and justice system. So, all of these systems were something new to us, so instead of them helping us, they actually put even more barriers and more problems in front of us. (Ibid., p. 91)

2. Profile of Somali Women's Activism and Engagement

All of the eight Somali women interviewed for my published thesis are, in many ways, trailblazers, addressing critical issues within the community while simultaneously challenging racism and Islamophobia in Canada. One participant is in her late 20s; two are in their 30s; while the rest are in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Seven of the women I interviewed had master's degrees in various fields, primarily in public health and social services, while the others had degrees in business and the sciences. All but one had completed their undergraduate degree. The names given to the participants are pseudonyms to protect their privacy per the confidentiality agreement prior to interviewing them. In this paper, I will expand on the activism and scholarly engagement of three of the participants: Afgoye, Burco and Kismayo.

Afgoye is a sixty-four-year-old Somali woman who immigrated to Canada with her family after the collapse of the Somali government in the early 1990s. She is well respected in the Somali community in Toronto and has been a strong advocate for parents and youth in the past twenty-five years. When the Somali language was officially written in 1973, Afgoye was one of the first high school students to teach women in rural Somalia how to read and write. She also spoke about the knowledge she gained from these nomadic communities:

When Somali language was written and I was a teacher there, to teach the nomads how to write and read in Somali language, I found out the very interesting life of the nomads, the way they heal their diseases. The trees and the herbs they use, that's why I told my friends to have a diary where we write down what to do, if a snake bite you, we do what the nomads does. (Ibid., p. 37)

Burco is a Somali woman activist born and raised in Kenya. Her background is significant in my research because I wanted to include first-generation Somali female activists from diverse regional backgrounds to reflect the Somali community in Canada better. Burco has lived in Ontario for twenty-five years and did not come here as a refugee since she was not born in Somalia and held a different passport. According to Burco, her activism was accidental as she became further entrenched in Canadian society. She stated that her activism shaped her personality because, growing up, she never saw herself as an activist:

I did not choose to be an activist, I was pushed into it because I spoke English well and I articulated the issues better than many of my family members who perhaps did not speak the language. I did not think I could be an activist, because I was shy growing up, I was a reader, I was an introvert, however I was pushed into it (activism) and that dramatically changed, I guess, my character. (Ibid., p. 42)

Burco has been a visible presence in the Somali, Black and Muslim communities in Ontario in the past twenty years. She was one of the first Somali women to arrange sports and swimming sessions for 'Muslim girls only'; she was a strong advocate for Black youth experiencing racial profiling in public schools:

I have been instrumental in doing some amazing youth programs, integrating our Islamic culture, advocating for Muslim swimming programs for women and girls, we have done so well, and we demanded that some of the Mississauga lifeguards be trained, so that they understand our values and respect our privacy. (Ibid., p. 43)

Kismayo is a 34-year-old social media activist and a woman in her own lane because her work entails breaking down cultural taboos about sexual abuse affecting Somali girls and boys. She is also a social media influencer and a role model among many Somali and Black youth activists in Toronto. Kismayo came to Canada when she was six years old with her family as a refugee and her experience growing up in Toronto in the late 1990s was one of anti-Black racism and Islamophobia:

My Somali identity and I were othered all the time. Like spaces were violently white. I was the only Somali girl; I was the only Black girl on top of being a Somali. I was the only Muslim girl. I had an instance, where children, like white children particularly, would like to try to choke me with my hijab because they were trying to take it off me, and I refused to let them take it off me. (Ibid., p. 52)

Having such a traumatic childhood experience in Toronto shaped Kismayo's activism. Moreover, Kismayo's activism was born out of a need to affirm her sense of being while navigating the multiple challenges she faces as a Somali Black Muslim woman within the Somali community and in mainstream society:

I am an activist because I do not know what else to be. I do not know how else to navigate other than challenging stereotypes, gender expectations, sexism, racism and misogynoir in particular. Like I cannot imagine not challenging these things. (Ibid., p. 54)

Kismayo, Burco and Afgoye's activism is what Dr. Wadud termed 'gender justice,' where the concept of Islamic faith and the concept of justice are interconnected with Muslim women's lived realities through a historical and cultural lens. All of the women activists I interviewed found Islam a haven and a spiritual guide. According to all of them, their activism and that of other Somali women are rarely limited to one field or one type because they will always respond to the needs of their families and the current issues facing the Somali and Muslim communities. This conscious awareness of both their agency as Somali Muslim women and their spiritual duty to fight for justice is at the core of the Islamic ethical spirit, which strives to eliminate oppressive societal structures that deny one's human dignity. This shift from a cultural and religious perspective for Somali female activists and learned scholars in Canada will be expanded further in the following discussion.

3. A Historical Perspective: Somali Women's Religious Authority and Leadership

Somali society prior to the 1940s was mainly pastoral and patriarchal, whereby mostly men worked outside of the home, while women had domain over the household and rearing of their children (Bryden and Steiner 1998, p. 67). Since Somalis primarily adhere to tribal and clan allegiances, Somali men have always held dominance over all major political decisions, including marriages, conflict resolution, divorce, inheritance and judicial procedures (Bryden and Steiner 1998; Ingiriis 2015). Consequently, Somali women were excluded from any and all decisions in the public sphere. Despite these gendered cultural exclusionary practices, Somali women have actively resisted these toxic patriarchal practices and negotiated their own public spaces to be heard (Andrezejewski and Lewis 1964; Ingiriis 2015). One method through which Somali women have resisted political and cultural oppression is via poetry, which is called 'buraanbur' in Somali. Dr Lee V. Cassanelli stated the following about Somali poetry:

Not only a cherished form of artistic expression and popular entertainment, it is also a major vehicle for social commentary on events of interest to the community. (Cassanelli 1994)

Moreover, Somali women in the southern region had more authority in matters of religion; rural women often led their own movements (jameecooyin/community), whereby female sainthood was promoted (Mukhtar 1989; Kassim 1995; Reese 2008). For instance, a legendary poet, Dada Masiti, is the only documented woman saint in Somali history (Kassim 1995, p. 34). Another form of resistance Somali women employed to challenge the patriarchal structure in society and the erasure of their voices was by employing historical dissidents to counter men's dominant narrative about Somali history. Somali women wrote about heroic mythical female characters and lionized their roles in society, where according to Ingiriis:

They literally monumentalize themselves in using sheeka-xariirooyin (mythical tales), such as the stories of the mythical Queen Araweelo, a legendary phe-

nomenal woman who was thought to have once ruled northern Somalia and Dhegdheer ... and there were another 142 legendary autocratic women held to have oppressed Somali men under her rule? (Ingiriis 2015)

Somali women's contribution to the Islamic knowledge discourse in Canada is due to the shift in leadership that occurred within the community regarding the concepts of religious knowledge and authority, allowing the space to incorporate their voices and perspectives (Mohamed 2016). Traditionally, Islamic authority over the Quran and hadith have come from both informal and formal training and scholarship, including the support of the community of learned Muslim scholars. However, since decolonization, in most Muslim societies Islamic authority has been interlinked with state authority (from Saudi Arabia to Somalia), which has left a vacuum in the existing traditional institutions. This in turn has led to some Muslim scholars challenging the decentralized approach to learning Islam and gaining knowledge, whereby suddenly anyone can become a mufti, rendering fatwa on complex issues that have engaged Muslim scholars for centuries (Abou El Fadl 2001). While the traditional method of learning and verification via an interpretive community of scholars is critical to Islamic scholarship, it nevertheless has been weaponized to delegitimize Muslim women's religious authority and to criticize their lack of formal training. This in turn ignores the fact that acquiring Islamic knowledge and displaying authority over the Quran and the science of hadith were never dependent on classical training (Rajbee and Suleman 2007); rather, the homes of Muslim women and male scholars and masjids have historically been centers of learning circles, where traditionally Sunni and Shi'ite students of knowledge would attend. The educational evolution in Muslim communities was initially in oral form in informal circles in the masjid or even in public spaces, whether it occurred under the tent or under the tree, and seekers of knowledge would gather around a scholar to listen to lectures on specific topics and then disseminate this body of knowledge to others. Hence, if you have studied the science of hadith or tafsir—the interpretation of the Quran—you will not miss the numerous times a story or narration begins with “I heard from” or “I attended the lecture of so and so scholar”. In this methodology of the Islamic transmission of knowledge, a given teacher would only teach what she or he had directly learned and memorized from a previous scholar (Dodge 1962). Historically, there was no clear distinction between public and private spheres when it came to the ways in which Muslim women engage with Islamic knowledge and their male students. The desire and commitment to understand and learn the words of the Prophet and the meaning of the Quran initiated the birth of these particular educational methods at the masjid and in public spaces in the first hijrah. This method of Islamic teaching eventually developed into organized study circles in the homes of Muslim female and male scholars from the second century onwards (Rajbee and Suleman 2007).

In addition, the system of formal education, presently known as madrasa (a school, including an educational institution of higher learning), began at the end of the tenth century AD. The term madrasa was originally coined by Shi'ite Islamic knowledge producers and disseminators of its doctrine, for example the Bayhaqiyya School (al madrasa al-bayhaqiyya), the Sa'idiyya school and later in the eleventh century Abu Ishaq al-Isfara'ini. In response to these established formal Shi'ite schools, Sunni scholars began to develop similar institutions; for example, Al-Nizamiyya of Baghdad (1067 AD) (Makdisi 1970). This traditional model of acquiring Islamic knowledge is still practiced centuries later by Somali female learned scholars in Canada.

I demonstrated earlier the traditional method of acquiring Islamic knowledge for Muslim female learned scholars, who are entrusted with the teaching of Islam, which was through learning circles, observation and the testing of their aptitude. This Islamic tradition has continued among Somali women in Canada, who attend knowledge circles in private homes or at the masjid and document the lessons while going through examinations by the teacher on their understanding of the Quran and hadith. In fact, the four Somali female scholars sought by the community in the past twenty-five years for Islamic knowledge and teaching did not receive a formal university education to learn about Islam; rather, their

knowledge and authority in Islamic traditions was from directly learning from Muslim male and female scholars at the masjid or in their private homes, continuing fourteen hundred years of Islamic tradition in narrating and transmitting Islamic knowledge. I remember between the ages of 11 and 14 years old every weekend travelling to Jane and Finch, where my mother attended a Quranic learning circle while I waited for her at Yorkwoods Toronto Public Library. Eventually, my mother became one of the learned Somali female scholars who is both a *hafidha* (someone who memorized the entire Quran) and a teacher of Quranic tajweed (grammar), tafsir and muhadatha. This traditional method of studying, transmitting and preserving Islamic knowledge traces back to the time of the Prophet and continued after his death, where Muslim sahabah would write and preserve the Quran and hadith and teach it in public. One great example of this tradition of Islamic scholarship is Hujayma bint Ḥuyayy-Umm al-Darda al-Kubra (d. 700 H), a companion of the Prophet and prominent jurist and scholar of Islam in the 7th century, who was famous for lecturing men at the masjids and teaching them both the Quran and Sunnah. Umm al-Darda famously said:

I have tried to worship Allah in every way, but I have never found a better one than sitting and debating other scholars. (Rajbee and Suleman 2007)

From Baghdad to Mogadishu, Muslim women have stood among orthodox religions around the globe as leaders and knowledge producers in the realm of religious philosophy and teaching. In what is termed as the pre-modern era, in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, Muslim women were the authority in the science of hadith, where many famous male scholars, such as Ibn Hajar (d. 852 H) and Shams al-Din al-Sakhawi (d. 902 H), studied under numerous Muslim female instructors at the masjid or in their homes (Fadel 1997). Many of the Muslim female scholars taught and certified both men and women, often outside of any formal state authority or educational institution (such as a *madrassa* or *dar al-hadith*), because they did not want to be controlled by a given school of thought or political leaning (ibid.). To be considered a learned scholar with Islamic authority at the time, most Muslim scholars would seek Muslim instructors in their private domain and in the masjids, and this Islamic tradition of acquiring knowledge has lasted throughout the centuries all the way to the present day in North America. Three of the Somali female activists that I interviewed learned about Islam by attending similar knowledge circles, including my mother's circle and other Muslim female gatherings at the masjid. For instance, in Canada, Somali women's religious authority does not rest on a formal entity, but rather it is solely based on their surrender to Allah, including the Islamic knowledge acquired in learned circles led by Somali female elders. This has been termed by Dr. Wadud an active process of "engaged surrender" by learned Muslim women (Rouse 2004). This in turn allowed Somali women to take on the mantle of leadership in their community, in what Dr. Wadud has termed a *tawhidic paradigm* (Wadud 2006)—according to which the oneness and unity of Allah guarantees women's equality with men in the realm of Islamic authority, allowing them the moral agency to lead. According to Wadud, the belief in tawhid allows both women and men in Islam to have access to religious authority and leadership, which establishes a gender-inclusive framework that preserves and continues the historical tradition of knowledge production. Hence, such a knowledge paradigm allows for spiritual autonomy, whereby the authority of Somali female learned scholars' is rooted in their relationship with Allah rather than an exclusive reliance on a patriarchal reading of the Quran or community affirmation:

Every human being is a khalifa; being a khalifa is equivalent to fulfilling one's human destiny as a moral agent . . . in respect to society, (this) means working for justice. (ibid., pp. 30–34)

Having spiritual agency has been fundamental to Somali female activists and learned scholars' journeys as leaders in their communities. The Somali women who have exercised religious authority within the knowledge circles or took on the mantle of leading the community through activism and advocacy for equity and justice do not fit into the traditional

module of leadership of being educated in formal madrasa, or are not certified by a mufti. The trust and responsibilities bestowed upon them is both spiritual and political because they do not see contradictions between their faith in Islam and their moral consciousness to fight against anti-Black racism, Islamophobia and all other forms of oppressive experiences. This *consciousness-raising* is what Burco discussed during my interview, whereby her Muslim identity is intertwined with her blackness and Somaliness, guiding her Islamic knowledge and relationship with Allah. This is significant because the experiences of the Somali community in Toronto, and Somali women in particular, lies at the intersection of universalism and particularism, a discourse first introduced by Edward E. Curtis (Curtis 2002). In other words, how can Islam speak to the social and political needs of Black Muslims, shaped by a history of enslavement, colonization and displacement, in contemporary times? This question also draws attention to the disconnection that often exists between Black Muslim communities (including Black immigrants) and non-Black Muslim immigrant communities, since the latter are inclined to view Islam from an ahistorical, reductionist perspective. Consequently, this disconnect reduces the complexity of Black Muslims' lived experiences and of their relationship with Islam into a simplified, essentialist category to appease the non-Muslim gaze, and this ultimately serves anti-Muslims, neo-colonial political interests. Black Muslim scholars from Dr. Wadud to Dr. Karim (2009) have written about the need for learned reformers to be conscientious of the potential of any form of reductionism in the quest for Islamic knowledge, as it risks maintaining the hegemony of the neo-orientalist thought that often dominates the politics of Islam in western academia (Wadud 1999); rather, in accordance with Black Muslim scholars, the Somali learned educators and activists seek to expand on the existing Islamic scholarship and intellectual legacy that have continued over the past fourteen hundred years.

4. Navigating between Complex and Contradictory Meaning of Islamic Authority

An example of Black Muslim women negotiating alternative spaces in their communities is that of the Somali women who financially contributed to the two well-known masjids in the Toronto community: Khalid bin Waleed and the Abu Huraira Center. It was Somali women (like two of the participants I interviewed for my research) who financed the purchase of the land, contributed to the design of the building and authored the programs run at the masjids. In fact, in Abu Huraira, Somali female learned scholars co-established the founding board and created an inclusive space, where all Muslims, and Black Muslims in particular, can feel supported. Both of these masjids exist because of the anti-Black racism the Somali community experienced in other masjids in the Greater Toronto Area. One of the founders of Abu Huraira's Center, whom I interviewed, spoke about the fact that even though the masjid adheres to Islamic orthodoxy when it comes to traditional imams and khudbah, the operation and maintenance of the masjid incorporates the leadership of both Somali women and men. Moreover, the male leadership always seeks her council and that of other Somali women when a conflict arises, including the allocation of funds and the support of community members. The gendered and cultural normative practices within the Somali community is a complicated one, because there is no clear line when it comes to Islamic authority or leadership, even though patriarchally inclined cultural practices often prevail in the practice of Islam. The tradition of consultation (shura) in Islam is still practiced among Somali learned scholars in Toronto, whereby Somali male imams and Islamic leaders will seek the counsel of Somali female scholars. Ironically, Somali women who co-manage both masajids organize many of the lectures and conferences held in the masjid are rarely found on the speakers' list. This contradictory paradigm, whereby Somali women's financial, intellectual and physical labor is fundamental to the community and the operation of its sacred worship spaces, is what Dr. Wadud theorized as the presumption that the male voice and knowledge are the standard-bearers in Muslim communities. Consequently, such paradigms restrict Muslim female scholarship from full consideration in the construction of all ethical, spiritual and socio-political spheres in Islamic knowledge production.

How could the Islamic intellectual ethos develop without giving clear and resounding attention to the female voice, both as a part of the text and in response to it? Perhaps it was the absence of this resounding attention historically that resulted not only in negating the significance of this voice but also deeming it to be awrah, or taboo. (Wadud *ibid.*, pp. 11–12)

One of the Somali female activists that I interviewed pointed out this contradictory practice of Islam, which fosters a fragmented authority and leadership within the Muslim community. Discussing her work against sexual violence within the community, Kismayo stated that the interpretation of the Quran and Islamic tradition should be understood within the context of Muslim women's lived experiences, in order to find and establish meaningful spiritual engagement for women living in the present day:

I am part of a generation of young Somali women who are refusing to let gender stereotypes prevent us from speaking out. There is injustice in the community, like yes there is injustice on a global scale, but if my home is broken, how can I help another? I want to normalize a lot of taboo topics, like sexual violence because I am a survivor, mental health because I have a lot of mental illness, and also I advocate for those Somalis that no one wants to acknowledge, like those in the queer community, who are dismissed and invalidated, which is horrific. (Mohamed 2016)

In her book 'Quran and Women,' Amina Wadud notes how the perception of women in Islamic scholarly work shapes the traditional interpretations of the Qur'an, which ultimately influence Muslim women's overall positionality in Islam and in their own community. Wadud calls for the full inclusion of Muslim women's active presence when it comes to Qur'anic hermeneutics, which can and should be inclusive of their experiences and voices. She argues that this will yield a greater degree of gender justice to Islamic thought and contribute toward the achievement of equity and justice in Islamic practices. In particular, Wadud points out that there has been no substantial consideration accorded by traditional and reactionary Muslim scholarship to the issues that contemporary Muslim women face socially, morally, politically and economically in relation to the Qur'an and its major concepts. Thus, she calls for a 'reading' of the Qur'an by centering women's experiences and without essentialist stereotypes, which have dominated most of the Muslim male interpretations (Wadud *ibid.*, pp. 3–20). This very much aligns with the work that Somali female activists are engaged in within their community. For instance, Kismayo believes in and advocates for fostering a space that is free of misogyny, anti-Black racism and Islamophobia. She emphasizes the importance of intersectionality when speaking about the lived experiences of Somali female activists and Muslim scholars alike:

Not only do Black lives matter for us, but our womanhood matters to us. Therefore, does us being Muslims matter? Some of us do not have the luxury to separate ourselves and just call ourselves Muslims. That is why intersectionality is so important. (*ibid.*, p. 55)

Kimberlè Crenshaw, a Black feminist scholar, coined the term intersectionality, a theory where race, gender, class and other social divisions intersect to construct systems of oppression (Crenshaw 1989), which was later deconstructed from transnational feminist political thought by Patricia Hill Collins (Collins 2002). The Somali Canadian female activists I interviewed engage Islam as a liberating tool, while navigating multiple spaces as Black Muslim women. Depending on the spaces they occupy, they are constantly negotiating between their multiple identities, which has shaped their experiences in Canada. Having your Blackness questioned, your Somaliness criminalized and Muslim identity othered has made it difficult for the participants of the study to have a unified sense of self. In their case, colorism strips away the diversity within Blackness, while anti-Black racism permeates Muslim spaces. This in turn leads to a constant othering of Somali women in both Black and Muslim spaces. For example, one of the participants said:

For me it wasn't even, you know, the white Canada; it was the other section of racialized communities subjecting their racism onto me. (ibid., p. 20)

Some Muslims claim that Islam transcends identity politics, unifying all Muslims under the banner of one nation. This popular paradigm excludes Black Muslims' history with Islam, their sufferings through the Arab and Atlantic slave trade and the rise of different sectarian Muslim traditions and present day anti-Black racism within Muslim immigrant communities by simply subsuming them under the models settled on in the Muslim world. This is what Sherman A. Jackson (2005) described as a "presumption ultimately sustained by a deeply entrenched racial myopia or agnosticism through which immigrant and overseas Muslims tend to view the history of Islam in North America." (Mohamed 2017) The paradigm in which Muslim women, and Black women in particular, operate as one, where Islam and its practitioners interact with contrasting discourses and ideologies, is shaped by history and has consequences for the community. Thus, Black Muslim women, including Somali women, do not live in a vacuum; rather, they must negotiate within various relationships that may reproduce oppressive and discriminatory practices due to the intersectionality of race, gender, class and social location, both outside and inside of the Muslim communities. Somali women's scholarly engagement with Islamic knowledge is rooted in unpacking racial and gender privileges that often challenges their faith. Thus, employing an Islamic framework as a method of alleviating du'm (oppression or injustice) and promoting equity is an act of worship for them. As Allah said: "And your Lord is not at all unjust to (His) servants." (Surah Fussilat 46). This in turn fosters inclusive spiritual spaces that Somali women can occupy without leaving their community.

Somali women are constantly responding to various forms of oppressive practices by narrating, disrupting and engaging with discourses of power. This in turn leads them to imagine an alternative framing of Islamic practices and a reinterpretation of traditional teachings, instead of being limited by existing dogmatic notions of what it means to be a Muslim woman. This engagement with Islam is 'gender jihad,' a notion introduced by Imam A. Rashid Omar from South Africa. Expanding this concept of gender jihad, Wadud calls for gender inclusiveness in the Muslim world while simultaneously dismantling the 'un-divine' hegemony of male privilege in Islamic teachings and dogmatic practices (Wadud 2006). Wadud is following in the historical footsteps of Muslim female scholars, such that critical inquiry and informed dialogue with the Quran and hadith both examine and challenge the differentiating levels of power within Islamic methodologies, which are due to cultural and social factors, are reproduced through societal upbringing and have little to do with Allah and Prophetic tradition. This is to say that attributing oppressive practices to the Quran or hadith would only further affirm the status quo, while also discouraging Muslim women from actively engaging with their Islamic faith and tradition. The legal scholar Azizah al-Hibri stated it eloquently: "So long as Muslim women are led to believe that their oppression was divinely decreed, they will hesitate to change the status quo, as oppressive as it may be." (Al-Hibri 2000).

5. Theology of Care among Somali Female Activists

Somali female activists in my research touched on what Wadud has termed a *theology of care*, where they strive to cultivate a woman-centered space in the masjid and in their community to eliminate gender segregation. This theology of care among Somali female activists and learned scholars is rooted in the ethics of rahma or compassion, whereby empathetic leadership is central to addressing the trauma of migration, settlement, anti-Blackness and Islamophobia. Thus, Somali women's engagement with their faith and their experiences within the Muslim community and Canadian society reflect not just the literal text of Islam, but rather the legacy of enslavement, colonization and migration, including their social location. Accordingly, to understand the complexity of Somali women and their scholarly relationship with Islam, one must ground themselves in the history of anti-Black racism and the evolution of Islam in Black communities (including continental Africans). Black women's scholarship in Islam, such as Wadud and the Somali female activists I

interviewed, places a greater emphasis on how Black Muslim women negotiate alternative spaces in the community through the re-reading of the Quran from an anti-patriarchal lens. The centering of gender justice and re-interpretation of the Quran and hadith, while interrogating the status quo around Islamic authority, are forms of theological care for Somali female activists. Ultimately, by practicing a theology of care, Somali female learned scholars and activists are embracing their faith while rejecting patriarchal cultural practices that have the potential to reproduce their own oppression (Rouse 2004).

6. Centering Muslim Women Leadership in the Masjid

I vividly remember an incident that happened during my undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto, while attending Jummah prayer in one of the rooms at the Hart House. While we were getting ready to pray when a white woman came in and started screaming at the men leading the Salah. You might dismiss this incident as another racist person trying to insert themselves in a space to which they were not invited. However, if you were to attend these Jummah prayers, you would know how the men would just dump their jackets and bags on the dividing table between them and us and how we rarely had enough space behind them. In fact, I would have been surprised to see a Muslim woman giving khutbah on any of the days I attended Jummah with friends, in order to have a spiritual break from the hustle of endless academic pressure and campus activism. This one room at my university campus represents many rooms, masjids and spaces all over Canada and the globe, where it is normal to disregard Muslim women's presence in whatever space we identify as a place of worship, even though it may be argued that the men leading us to prayers or providing Islamic knowledge during Khutbah sometimes have less Islamic scholarly authority when compared to some of my fellow sisters who were attending the Jummah prayer.

Negotiating masjid spaces is a persistent struggle for Muslim women in the East and the West, where they are constantly resisting eviction from the houses of Allah. Masjids are not just a place of worship for Muslims, but also a community space and a knowledge center in accordance with the Prophet's tradition. Therefore, when these spaces of worship are privatized and gendered, it excludes Muslim female leadership and delegitimizes their Islamic authority. This in turn undermines the tradition of the Prophet (PBUH) and that of his companions, and those Muslim scholars who followed their example. For example, there are Muslim male scholars who hesitate to support the opinion that Muslim women can lead other women in prayers, contrary to what Islamic evidence indicates. Among Sunni Muslims, who comprise the majority of Muslims, this particular resistance is due to the views of two Sunni school of thoughts: Hanbali and Hanafi. Apparently, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal did not recommend it and Hanafi scholars regarded it as undesirable. In these various narrations and claims formulated through modern Muslim modes of Islamic teaching and the dissemination of information, what gets broken is the methodology of knowledge verification and the importance of holding multiple forms of critique and analysis. Here, it is pertinent to emphasize that the long-standing tradition among both Sunni and Shi'ite schools of thought (called Madhabs) is that expressed scholarly opinions or fatwa (Islamic legal opinion) are neither absolute nor obligatory. Indeed, the tradition of Islamic teachings and knowledge productions have always differentiated between scholarly interpretation and critique and the explicit Quranic rules made by either Allah or affirmed by the Prophet (PBUH). Thus, it has been narrated that Muhammad Ibn Al-Husain reported from Ibrahim An-Nakh'i that Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) used to lead women in prayer during the month of Ramadan, standing among them in the same row (Al-Azimabadi 1995).

Amina Wadud is widely known in contemporary times as the first Muslim women to lead prayers in a mixed congregation, as a leading voice in challenging patriarchal readings of the Quran and in striving for the interpretation of the Quran as anti-racist and anti-misogynist by considering Islam as a revolutionary paradigm for humanity. An unverified hadith that is popular among some scholars and attributed to the Prophet (PBUH) addressed Muslims in a speech, stating, "A woman may not lead a man in prayer."

Another version of the hadith reported by Ibn Abi Shaybah, from Abu Bakr, quoted Ali ibn Abi Talib when he said: “Women should not lead prayers.” Most Muslim scholars who have mastered the science of hadith authentication consider these particular chains of hadith weak. Some scholars have even called such hadith to be an outright fiction.³ On the other hand, there is historical evidence that the tradition of Muslim women leading both men and women in prayer is not a new-age phenomenon, but rather that it happened even at the time of the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) according to an authentic hadith, in which one of the female companions led women and men in prayers.⁴ Another Muslim scholar who has rendered a legal opinion on Muslim women leading mixed congregations is Taqī ad-Dīn ‘Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Numayrī al-Ḥarrānī (simply known as Ibn Taymiyyah). He is among a minority of Sunni Muslim scholars who have rejected the claims of other Muslim male scholars, such as Abū Muḥammad ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Sa‘īd ibn Ḥazm, stating that there is consensus among scholars on the prohibition of women leading men in prayers altogether. Ibn Taymiyyah stated:

A learned woman leading unlettered men in the night prayers of Ramadan is permissible according to the famous opinion from Ahmad. As for all other congregational prayers, there are two different opinions that Ahmad gave.⁵

7. Conclusions

By historicizing the scholarship of Somali and Muslim women in this paper, I intended to ground us in the foundational methodologies of narrating, analyzing, transmitting and verifying both primary sources of Islam: the Quran and hadith. Muslim scholars are the secondary sources of knowledge production, which contextualizes Islam and its practitioners within an ever-evolving, interactive and living history. Engaging both primary and secondary sources of knowledge allows us to utilize these complicated and sometimes contradictory discursive teachings (which also teach deeply rich and divine knowledge) to map out the trajectory of Islamic consciousness, while simultaneously grounding us in an understanding of the traditions that connect Muslims around the globe. Islam is not fixed by a particular nationality or gender identity, but rather its believers are informed and locate themselves within the multiple sites they occupy; thus, Somali female activists and their engagement with their faith reflect not only the literal text of Islam, but also the legacy of enslavement, colonization and migration, including their social location.

For many Muslims, the condition of the Muslim world and that of Muslim female scholarship have been as a crisis of faith for several centuries now. This is why celebrity-like figures from Mufti Menk to Shaikh Omer Suleiman exist, because there is a thirst for the bygone era of Islamic scholarship that could nourish one’s intellectual growth, while affirming the liberating paradigm of Islamic spirituality. I remember when Mufti Menk’s YouTube video of responding to a man about domestic violence became viral, simply because he affirmed the inherent right of Muslim women in Islam.⁶ Basic fundamental human rights within the Quran are apparently a revolutionary discovery. In addition, I argue, this is because the direct engagement of Islamic scholarship by the masses is in decline. The rich exchange of Islamic knowledge that brought so many Muslim men to learn from Muslim women is almost nonexistent in contemporary times. In fact, it is deemed heresy or un-Islamic in some mainstream Muslim societies if Muslim women are invited to speak at the masjid, let alone lead a mixed congregation. For almost all of the Islamic lectures and gatherings in North America, most are organized with complete gender segregation, relegating Muslim women’s scholarship to the margins of mainstream recognition. Muslim male ‘scholars’ rarely engage in a scholarly dialogue with Muslim women; rather, they often lecture them, relegating their presence to so-called ‘women’s issues.’ I stopped attending all of the well-known Muslim conferences held in North America, mainly because it is rarely about acquiring knowledge and more about discursive practices that affirm conventional Islamic frameworks, if not promoting sectarianism. Today, the majority of the dominant voices acknowledged by Muslim scholarship or placed as authoritative on Islam seem to have sidelined the critical voices of Muslim women and the

fundamental role they have played in shaping Islamic theological and an understanding of fiqh.

Despite the religious and cultural challenges faced by contemporary Muslim female scholars, Somali women continue to engage in the theoretical framework of Islamic knowledge while redefining the spaces they occupy in their communities. In my conversations with Somali women, they all touched on the advantages and disadvantages of being activists and advocates within and outside of the community. Most expected a collective organized effort and direct engagement with Islam to have a long-term impact, while pushing against cultural boundaries and naming harmful elements within the Somali community were seen as spiritual duties. This paper demonstrate that Muslim women's community engagement and scholarship have always served as the legal and intellectual foundation of the Muslim communities. It is fundamental to those engaged in the production of Islamic knowledge to not just simply acknowledge these historical and current figures, but to also re-read and re-narrate Islam without the patriarchal lens and imposed cultural interpretation of the Quran and hadith that has corrupted Muslims' understanding of their faith. Somali women's religious scholarship in Islamic sciences is deeply entrenched in the traditional modalities of evolving narratives that disseminate Islamic concepts that reflect their lived experiences. Ultimately, what motivates Somali female activists and scholars alike is the strong faith that they hold in Islam and the yaqeen (certainty) they carry that dismantling dogmatic concepts and deconstructing oppressive interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah are forms of piety and necessary exercises to preserve Islamic scholarship. For instance, Somali female educators and activists, along with other Muslim authors and scholars, such as Dr. Wudud and Dr. al-Hibri, have continued to theorize a disruptive epistemology that expands our understanding of Islamic jurisprudence, while interrogating systems of power that have been entrenched in Islamic traditions masquerading as divine teachings of Allah.

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- ¹ The use of salutations when the Prophet Mohammed's name invoked is a common practice orally and in writing by Muslims. Salutations are also extended to family members of the Prophet as well as notable companions.
- ² Adis Duderija; Haddad, Gibril Fouad Haddad; Sheik Yousef al-Qaradaw; Yasmin Mogahed.
- ³ Ibn Majah' Sunan, volume 2–183 and 1–343.
- ⁴ Abu Dawud al-Sijistani, "[Sunan Abu Dawud \(2008\)](#)," 1/442 591.
- ⁵ [Ibn Hazm \(1998\)](#), "[Maratib Al-Ijma](#)"; Ibn Taymiya, "[Naqd Al-Maratib](#)," 290.
- ⁶ Mufti Youtube Channel. "DON'T ABUSE YOUR SPOUSE—MUFTI MEN," Taken from the lecture on the death of Ayesha Arif Khan.

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