



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

The Muslim woman question in Bosnia and Herzegovina: between Islamic tradition and global modernity

Šerić, M.

Citation

Šerić, M. (2025, September 24). *The Muslim woman question in Bosnia and Herzegovina: between Islamic tradition and global modernity*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4261977>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4261977>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

PART II



The Bosnian Muslim Woman
Question within the Global
Contestations over Islamic Tradition
and Modernity

CHAPTER 4



4. Exploring the Multifaceted Roles of the Muslim Woman Question in Global Modernity

What became known as the “Muslim woman question” emerged as a global topic in the 19th century, capturing the attention of both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In the 19th century, dominant European narratives of discriminated Muslim women—which will be elaborated on further in subsequent sections—served to establish an inferior Other against which the European world could define itself as superior. This prompted Muslims to respond by conveying their own perspectives regarding their identity as well as their relationship with the West and with their own cultural and religious heritage. The Muslim woman question played a crucial role in (re)defining and conceptualizing the concepts of identity, progress, civilization, tradition, and modernity within both European and Muslim intellectual thought.

This topic played a multifaceted role within the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters. The Muslim woman question provided Bosnian Muslims with an opportunity to express their various views about their tradition, their place within the global Muslim community as well as within the context of European modernity and local socio-political context. Yet, the issue was also crucial to the definition of the “inner Other.” Different intellectual currents utilized this issue to justify their own perspectives on Islam and to criticize their opponents.

4.1. The Woman Question in Global Modernity

The controversial term the “woman question” was, as Karen Offen points out, an integral part of a global effort to “describe the complex totality of issues raised for women and for men by women’s subordinate status.”³²⁶ The term woman question was coined in Europe in the eighteenth century and became widespread in other parts of the world in the 19th century.³²⁷ Ayşe Polat argues that the it “encapsulated various intellectual, cultural and political disputations on the nature of women, their attributes, social status and roles, and less directly but no less significantly, about society, juxtaposed with perspectives on a remodelling of social institutions, particularly issues of family structure, economy and the

326 Offen, *The Woman Question in France*, 13.

327 Ayşe Polat, “The Late Ottoman Novel as Social Laboratory: Celal Nuri and the ‘Woman Question’” in *Ottoman Culture and the Project of Modernity: Reform and Translation in the Tanzimat Novel*, eds. Monica M Ringer and Etienne Charrière (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020), 147–148.

law.”³²⁸ During the eighteenth century the issues of woman’s nature, her place and role in society, and the relations between men and women became widely theorized and disputed in Europe. The 18th century discussions, as Naomi Andrews has shown, drew “on two older strands of argument: the “querelle des femmes” dating to the Renaissance, and debates over the relationship between the individual and society that marked the Enlightenment.”³²⁹ According to Melissa Hyde and Jennifer Milam, discussions on the woman question were a “central to the Enlightenment’s exploration of human society.”³³⁰

In the 19th and the early 20th century the woman’s question— encapsulating questions of female nature, education, the natural role in the family and society—emerged as a constitutive part of intellectual debates about modernity, tradition, progress, and identity around the world.³³¹ During the 19th century European intellectuals such as Charles Fourier and John Stuart Mill defined the status of women as the measure of civilization, as a standard to distinguish “civilized” states from barbaric societies.³³² This idea, blended with the modern notion that society progresses through stages of development, from savagery to civilization occupied the central place in the European representations of colonized women as passive victims of their inherently backward and savage traditions whose liberation justified colonial imposition of measures that were presented as an integral part of modern emancipatory processes.³³³ In all colonial contexts, women occupied the central place in “a civilizational narrative of progress that placed on Europe the responsibility to civilize non-Europeans.”³³⁴ Meyda Yeğenoğlu and İrvin Cemil Schick have shown that “representations of cultural and sexual difference are constitutive of each other”³³⁵ and that gender is at the centre of discourses of otherness.³³⁶ The depictions of foreign women as passive, alluring, or backward have been an integral part of the Western construction and representation of its own cultural superiority. Probably nowhere did the binary opposition between tradition and modernity, inherent in modern European discourses of the late nineteenth and early

328 Polat, “The Late Ottoman Novel as Social Laboratory,” 148.

329 Naomi Andrews, “The Woman Question: Liberal and Socialist Critiques of the Status of Women,” in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought* 1, eds. Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.), 255.

330 Melissa Lee Hyde and Jennifer Milam, “Introduction: Art, Cultural Politics and the Woman Question,” in *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, eds. Melissa Lee Hyde and Jennifer Milam (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 1.

331 Lucy Delap, “The ‘Woman Question’ and the Origins of Feminism,” in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, eds. Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 319–320.

332 Jonathan Beecher, “Women’s Rights and Women’s Liberation in Charles Fourier’s Early Writings,” in *Utopian Moments: Reading Utopian Texts*, eds. Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés and J. C. Davis (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.) 92–98; Towns, “The Status of Women,” 681–706.

333 Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Suzanne L Simon, “Feminist Orientalism and Development,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Sustainable Development*, ed. Wendy Harcourt (London: Zed Books, 1994), 27–28.

334 Sher Ali K. Tareen, “Struggles for Independence: Colonial and Postcolonial Orders,” in *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, eds. Armando Salvatore, Roberto Tottoli, and Babak Rahimi (Hoboken, NJ : Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 525.

335 Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.

336 İrvin Cemil Schick, *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alteritist Discourse* (London; New York: Verso, 1999).

twentieth centuries, come to the fore as in the constructions of the native Muslim woman. The subject of Muslim woman was the cornerstone of the Western narratives about Islam, tradition, and modernity.³³⁷ Edward Said has shown that feminization of the Oriental Other as a means legitimizing the colonial power of Europe was the integral part of the Western discourses.³³⁸

According to recent research, Orientalist representations of Muslim women had several common characteristics: the notion of Muslim woman as oppressed, essentialist understanding according to which everything in Muslim societies, including the Muslim woman's status, was determined by Islam, the assumed total dichotomy between tradition identified with Muslim societies and modernity identified with the West.³³⁹ Scholars, artists, missionaries, and travellers from Europe portrayed Muslim women as exotic, sexualized, secluded, powerless slaves who were oppressed by their static, unchanging, and backward religious tradition.³⁴⁰ Indeed, in the Orientalist worldview, the Orient itself was imagined "as feminine, erotic, exotic, and savage, allowing the West to accede to a position of superiority as Christian, civilized, and moral."³⁴¹ This implicitly meant that only in the Western of Westernized culture women were able to achieve freedom. Keddie notes that European narratives about Muslim women were a specific mix of prejudices against Islam, scientific racism, and convictions about the possibility of progress only by following and adopting European institutions and values.³⁴² Carl Ernst points out that, besides the scientific language of racial categories and the alleged evolutionary superiority of Europeans, European language of the emancipation of women was the key element in the ideology of colonial ascendancy.³⁴³

While the Orientalists discourses of the 19th and early 20th century presented the European women as the standard against which to measure civilizational progress, recent research points at the discrepancy between the ideal of women's emancipation in Europe, and the reality of European women's lives and positions. Uma Narayan argues that the West saw and presented itself as completely committed to values like liberty and equality, while simultaneously resisting granting political and civil rights even to large numbers of Western

337 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 150–155.

338 For more on the feminization of the Orient see: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 6.

339 Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in the Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5–9; Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman from Termagant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 1–9, 177; Al-Saji, "Muslim Women and Rhetoric of Freedom," 65–87.

340 Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, 6–9; Hana Sobotkova, "The Image of Balkan Muslims in Czech and French Journals around 1900," in *Developing EU-Turkey dialogue: a CLIOHWorld Reader*, eds. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Hatice Sofu (Pisa: Edizioni Plus – Pisa University Press, 2010), 57–69.

341 Reina Lewis, "'Only Women Should Go to Turkey': Henriette Browne and Women's Orientalism," *Third Text* 7, no. 22 (1993): 54.

342 Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*, 63.

343 Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 144. For similar interpretations of modern European narratives about women see: Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 153–155; Al-Saji, "Muslim Women and Rhetoric of Freedom," 65–87.

subjects, including women.³⁴⁴ Studies taking a critical stance towards modern European discourses on women in Muslim societies interpret the European focus and obsession, as they claim, with women's issues primarily as an attempt to undermine Islam and the cultures of Muslim peoples. To show that the main motivation behind the European goal of liberating Muslim women was not genuine concern for women emancipation, these studies have pointed out that some of the most vocal advocates of the liberation of Muslim women, such as Lord Cromer and Lord Curzon, strongly opposed women's liberation movements in their own countries.³⁴⁵ Anne Towns has demonstrated that during the 19th century, excluding women from the political sphere in Europe was viewed as a sign of a more civilized society. Her work calls for the re-evaluation of the prevailing belief that women's empowerment is inherently tied to Western modernity, as 19th century political and intellectual elites regarded societies where women held political power as backward.³⁴⁶

The idea that the social position of women reflects a state's level of civilization was not limited only to the Western world. It was translated, adopted, and reconfigured by predominantly male intellectuals from non-Western countries who discussed it in their encounters with the West, and in their local intellectual spheres to rethink their traditions and the future of their societies that were to be modern civilized societies.³⁴⁷ Debates on women's place in society and on gender relations more broadly became, as Fabio Giomi puts it, "a global phenomenon par excellence," through which the place of men and women in modernity was discussed.³⁴⁸

4.2. Muslim Discourses on the Woman Question in Global Perspective

In the latter half of the 19th century, Muslim women's rights, their status, and roles within both the family and society became an integral part of diverse state modernization efforts in various Muslim regions. Likewise, these issues became a focal point within the developing Muslim public sphere. During the first half of the 20th century a wide range of actors,

344 Uma Narayan, "Contesting cultures. Westernization, Respect for Cultures, and Third World Feminists," in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*, ed. Uma Narayan (New York: Routledge, 1997), 15.

345 See for example: Omnia Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-Century Egypt," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 126–170; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 153.

346 Towns, "The Status of Women" 681–706.

347 For more on the link between civilization and the "the woman question" across different regions see, Kim Yung-Hee, "In Quest of Modern Womanhood: Sinyōja, A Feminist Journal in Colonial Korea," *Korean Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 44–78; Carrie Khou, "Trajectories of change: Modernity / the woman question / new woman fiction, progressive America (1890–1920) and Meiji Japan (1868–1912)" (PhD diss., Universität Mannheim, 2015); Sanjay Seth, "Nationalism, Modernity, and the 'Woman Question' in India and China" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (2013): 273–297; Ringer, "Rethinking Religion, 49–57.

348 Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 67.

including secular-oriented political elites, religious scholars, Muslim intellectuals, and early Muslim feminists played an important role in transforming the Muslim woman question into a crucial forum for discussing a broad range of religious, cultural, and political issues.³⁴⁹

Scholarly research since the 1990s has focused on and enhanced our understanding of the critical role that debates about Muslim women's rights have played in the context of state modernization efforts, anticolonial struggles, and conversation regarding national progress and the effects of Westernization within the Muslim world.³⁵⁰ This scholarship has underscored the nuanced and central nature of Muslim women's issues in these debates.

However, here I focus on another, but not less important, aspect of the Muslim woman question, that is its place and role in global Islamic discourse about the place of Islam in modernity. The late 19th and the first half of 20th century witnessed significant interest among Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars who used the woman question to discuss the possibilities, legitimacy and scope of internal religious reform. They positioned debates concerning the rights and status of Muslim women as a fundamental part of the global Muslim introspective engagements with Islamic tradition. Women, or perhaps more pointedly the definitions of the proper Islamic roles and duties of Muslim women, were the ground on which wider struggles over Islamic norms and values and the authority to define Islamic norms and values took place.

The centrality of this issue in the process of (re)thinking Islam within global Islamic thought was linked to Western critiques of the treatment of women in Muslim societies, a dimension that has been widely acknowledged in literature, as I will discuss below. Nonetheless, as we will see, the Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars who discussed this issue within an Islamic framework went beyond mere reactions to Western critiques, developing their own views on true Muslim womanhood deeply intertwined with their understandings of authentic Islam.

4.2.1. Western Criticism of Muslim Women's Status and Muslim Discursive Engagements

Muslims have, in different socio-historical circumstances, developed different models of the ideal Muslim woman and gender relations, in complex interaction between general principles of Islam and predominant paradigms on women in different cultural

349 Elizabeth Frierson, "Women's Rights: Male Advocacy" in *Encyclopaedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, ed. Joseph Suad, vol. 2, *Family, Law and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 779–782.

350 Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation the Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt (1805/1923)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Renata Pepicelli, "Rethinking Gender in Arab Nationalism: Women and the Politics of Modernity in the Making of Nation-States. Cases from Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria," *Oriente moderno* 97, no. 1 (2017): 201–219.

environments. What sets apart modern, 19th century and early 20th century Islamic discourses from pre-modern discourses, is the fact that the status of Muslim women was an important part of “the comparative cultural evaluation and a domain in which the gaze of the colonial European Other played an important role.”³⁵¹

The global domination of the West was an important factor determining the development and content of the Muslim discourses on women. Studies focused on the specific socio-historical context in which this issue emerged and was discussed among Muslims generally share the idea that European narratives about Muslim societies had an important role in the emergence of this issue and on development of complex ideas of Muslim authors about the woman question. European criticisms, as well as the fear of total European cultural domination, provided an initial impetus for a critical reflection on the status of women in Muslim societies and Islamic teachings on women by Muslim authors.

According to Gail Minault, the initial motivation behind the Muslim authors’ concern for women was a defence of Islam and Muslim cultures against European critics.³⁵² Leila Ahmed, using example of modern discourse on the woman question in Egypt, argues that the woman question was inextricably tied to broader issues such as cultural status of Muslims and the relationship between Islamic tradition and the West.³⁵³

The Western critiques that targeted the traditional roles of women in Muslim societies, portraying them as indicative of Islam’s resistance to progress and modernization had multiple effects on Islamic thought. They were generally perceived within the Muslim world as part of a broader Western agenda against Islam and consequently, in Muslim public discussions, the woman question emerged as closely related to the issue of Westernization and its consequences for Islam and Muslim identity. These criticisms shifted discussions about Muslim women’s rights, social roles, bodies, and attire to the forefront of broader debates concerning the cultural and religious authenticity, the civilizational status, and Westernization.³⁵⁴

The interrelation between Muslim cultural practices, Islam, and Muslim woman status present in Western discourses on Muslim women not only have drawn increased attention to issues concerning Muslim women within the global Muslim intellectual community but

351 Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 22.

352 Gail Minault, “Sayyid Mumtaz ‘Ali and *Tahzib un-Niswan*: Women’s Rights in Islam and Women’s Journalism in Urdu,” in *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, ed. Kenneth W. Jones (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 196.

353 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 127–143.

354 Judith Tucker, “Gender and Islamic History,” in *Islamic & European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, ed. Michael Adas (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 62; Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse—Unveiled Bodies,” 487–518.

also played an important role in positioning women and familial structures as the central arena for both cultural resistance and reform. Western narratives on Muslim woman question stirred a more in-depth conversations concerning the tension between conserving traditional practices and implementing progressive reforms among Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars. Within these discussions, some emphasized the importance of preserving established women's roles and family structures as vital to maintaining Muslim cultural and religious identity, while others contended that these roles and structures, as cultural practices and not religious commands, required critical reassessment to ensure progress of Muslim societies.³⁵⁵

4.2.2. The Woman Question in Muslim Debates about Islamic Tradition

The woman question in intra-Muslim conversations from late 19th century transcended mere discussions about women's roles and rights, becoming deeply intertwined with issues regarding authenticity and the (re)interpretation of Islam in the context of modernity.³⁵⁶ At the heart of this issue was not only the position of women, or interests of men, but the future of Islam.³⁵⁷ During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, discussions surrounding women were central to internal Muslim debates about creating a moral and progressive society founded on Islamic principles and values. These discussions symbolized the broader effort to preserve Islamic values and authenticity in the modern world.³⁵⁸

In a time of deep crisis caused by European domination, different circles focused on the woman question to express their understandings of the causes of the crisis of the Muslim world, true Islamic values and their visions of the identity and future of the Muslim community. Muslim women were turned into a symbol of everything valuable that needed to be preserved as authentically Islamic, but at the same time a symbol of degeneration of the true Islamic message and everything that needed to be reformed so that Muslims could return to true Islam and walk the path of progress.³⁵⁹

The debates on this issue clearly show that Muslim understandings of what constitutes true Islamic values and who has the right to define them were far from static or uniform. On the contrary: these debates reflect the deep polarization in modern Islamic thought when it

355 Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, "Polemics on Modesty and Segregation of Women in Contemporary Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19, no. 1 (1987): 23.

356 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Introduction," in *Women, Islam, and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 7; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 127–168.

357 Hoffman-Ladd, "Polemics on Modesty and Segregation of Women in Contemporary Egypt," 23.

358 Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

359 Gail Minault, "Women, Legal Reform and Muslim Identity," in *Islam, Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond*, ed. Germany Mushirul Hasan (New Delhi: Manohar 1998), 139–158. See also: Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*; Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

comes to attitudes towards one's own tradition and its place in modernity.³⁶⁰ As Dona Lee Bowen suggests, the question of gender roles and gender relations in intra-Muslim debates has been a symbol of the validity of different visions of Islam and the true Islamic social and moral order.³⁶¹

The Muslim public debates of the late 19th and early 20th century clearly illustrate the inherent tension in Islamic thought between the demands for preserving inherited traditions and interpretations and calls for their critical re-examination. These tensions are closely tied to divergent conceptions of authenticity and authority.

4.2.3. The Muslim Woman Question in Discourses on Islamic Reform

Within Muslim debates on the woman question, the reformist intellectual movement occupies a special position due to its influence on intra-Muslim reflections and discussions on this topic since late 19th century. Reformists discourse raised the issue of Muslim women's status as a critical domain for the re-examination of Islamic tradition. Their advocacy of reforming traditional practices and institutions regarding women as part of renewing the authentic Islamic message was instrumental in providing a conceptual framework within which discussions on this topic evolved among Muslims throughout the world. The establishment of a strong connection between the Muslim woman question and the search for the true meaning of Islam has significantly shaped discussions among Muslims about women since the late 19th century. Since that time, discussions among Muslims regarding the status of Muslim women have notably incorporated efforts to reinterpret Islamic texts and history, aiming to develop an authentic Islamic perspective on womanhood.

The status of Muslim women was a topic through which different reformist authors expressed their views about the discrepancy between Islamic ideals and Muslim realities – between true Islam and its historical realization. Throughout the Muslim world it was an integral part of the discourses of Muslim scholars and reformers such as Egyptian scholar Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905), Crimean Tatar reformist İsmail Gasprinski (1851–1914), Indian Muslim jurist and writer Sayyid Amīr 'Alī (1849–1928), Egyptian Muslim intellectual Qāsim Amīn (1863–1908), Indian Muslim scholar Mumtāz 'Alī (1860–1935), and one of the first female Ottoman novelists and an advocate of women's rights Fatma Aliye (1862–1936) who advocated a wide range of reforms of institutions and customs related to women. Their calls for reforms were generally situated within rhetoric about the need for the return to true Islamic norms and values, which they saw as the only true path to progress

360 Mansoor Moaddel, "Religion and Women: Islamic Modernism versus Fundamentalism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 1. (1998): 108–130.

361 Dona Lee Bowen, "Islamic Law and the Position of Women," in *Islam and Social Policy*, ed. Stephen P. Heyneman (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 112.

and prosperity in the modern age. The most common topics in reformist discourses were female education, veiling, polygamy, divorce, and the nature of marriage.³⁶²

The modern idea according to which women are the crucial element for the prosperity or regression of society was definitely one of the central motifs of reformists' discussion on woman question.³⁶³ In these discourses women generally epitomized the backwardness of the Muslim world. Generally, the low education of women and their exclusion from the society was presented to be the main culprit for a series of social problems and deviations, from poverty to prostitution, as well as deviation from the true spirit of Islam. Reformists' call for reforms of a wide range of customs and institutions related to women followed from their preoccupation with regeneration of truly Islamic values. The changes in the customs related to female education, female dress, marriage and reforms of laws, especially those governing polygamy and divorce, were presented as significantly important to the progress of the Muslim world.³⁶⁴ Contrary to the European discourses that held Islam responsible for the low status of women in Muslim societies, the reformist call for the reform of inherited norms and customs related to women was situated in the larger framework of the criticism of *taqlid* and advocacy for reinterpretation of Islamic foundations (*ijtihad*).³⁶⁵

In the pursuit of modernity, Muslim reformists generally stressed the vital importance of upholding the authentic principles of Islam. Modernity and progress were considered closely related to a pure and uncorrupted form of Islam.³⁶⁶ Their criticism of inherited practices and institutions related to women was focused on correcting distorted interpretations of Islam. In accordance with their separation between true Islam and its historical realisation reformist authors argued that Islam itself had granted women their rights but that they were not able to make use of these rights due to the corruption of the real Islamic message.³⁶⁷ Amīr 'Alī, in his work *The Spirit of Islam*, argued that the Qur'ān recognized women as full human beings and that it was not Islam that lowered status of women in Muslim societies, but the Muslims' departure from the true Qur'ānic message and adherence to false customs.³⁶⁸ Ismail Gasprinski, who held that the equality of women and men was a fundamental Qur'ānic principle, used the same kind of argument. According to Gasprinski and other reformists, many practices associated with Muslim women, such as face veiling and seclusion, that were generally considered by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as essential and unchangeable parts of Islamic doctrine, were in fact cultural traditions that had been assimilated into Islam. Reformist claimed that these practices, having been assimilated from external cultures over time, were not inherent to Islam. Consequently,

362 Kurzman, "Introduction," 23.

363 Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, "Polemics on Modesty and Segregation of Women in Contemporary Egypt," 25–26.

364 Minault, "Women, Legal Reform and Muslim Identity," 139–158.

365 Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-Century Egypt," 128.

366 Amzi-Erdogdular, "Alternative Muslim Modernities," 928.

367 Mazheruddin Siddiqi, "Islamic Modernism," *Islamic Studies* 12, no. 3 (1973): 189.

368 Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, 222–267.

they argued that reforming or even abandoning these practices was not only permissible but also essential for a true adherence to Islamic principles.³⁶⁹

This strategy had two main objectives: firstly, to refute the Western assertion that Islam was the source of women's oppression in Muslim societies; and secondly, to validate their push for change in the eyes of those Muslims who viewed traditional gender roles as divinely ordained. By making a clear distinction between cultural customs and the fundamental teachings of Islam, reformists managed to argue that their proposals for reform were not only compatible with Islamic values but also a revitalization of its authentic principles. In this way, they were able to defend themselves against claims that their efforts were part of the Westernization process.

Fatma Aliye, for instance, argued that Islam had already granted women equal rights to men, but customs and traditions had revoked them. A lack of understanding about Islam and about Muslim women's positions during the Golden Age of Islam led to the inferior status of women in Ottoman society, according to her. The path to true emancipation for Muslim women was not based on accepting Western feminism, which she opposed, but on fighting ignorance.³⁷⁰ Islam, progress and knowledge were closely related, with Islam serving as a catalyst for progress while knowledge was necessary for a true understanding of Islam.

Argumentation of modern reformists included two important elements, still found in various discussions about women and Islam. First reformists introduced distinctions between the Qur'ān and the later Muslim interpretations of its texts and traditions. From a reformist perspective the Qur'ān was a liberator of women, a text whose principal message is equality between men and women, while later interpretations were understood to be responsible for the abandonment of this original, egalitarian message.³⁷¹ Second, the abandonment of this egalitarian voice was primarily understood as the result of foreign influences on Islam. Specifically, it was seen that Muslim interpreters of the Qur'ān were impacted by foreign cultural norms, leading them to interpret the Qur'ān in that light. We frequently come across these arguments, also in recent studies on women and Islam, especially among the

369 Alan W. Fisher, "A Model Leader for Asia, Ismail Gaspirali" in *The Tatars of Crimea: Return to the Homeland*, ed. Edward A. Allworth (New York: Duke University Press, 1998), 39; Siddiqi, "Islamic Modernism," 189.

370 Barbara Dell'Abate Çelebi, "Fatma Aliye: At the Intersection of Secular and Islamic Feminism," *Women's Studies* 51, no. 7 (2022): 812.

371 On the division between tradition as oppressor and the Qur'ān as liberator of women see: Naguib Shuruq, "Horizons and Limitations of Muslim Feminist Hermeneutics: Reflections on the Menstruation Verse," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, ed. Pamela Sue Anderson (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 45. To explore how modern Islamic feminism portrays the Qur'ān as a source of liberation and tradition as a source of oppression, refer to the following key works: Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.); Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1999).

circle of progressive authors who claim the right to independent, rational interpretations of Islamic sources in order to restore the authentic Islamic message and to renew the true, egalitarian model of relationships between men and women.³⁷²

The reformist emphasis on distinguishing between pure and traditional Islam is an aspect of what Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori have termed the “objectification” of religion to describe a conscious questioning of religion’s traditions.³⁷³ It is the process through which Islam became an object that can be reflected upon, defined, and justified as something relevant and important in the modern world. In order to answer their primary concern—how a Muslim can remain authentic and modern at the same time—Muslim reformists engaged in a critical evaluation of their own tradition and European modernity. In the context of Islamic discussions on tradition and modernization, the conscious (re)definition of true Muslim womanhood played a significant role. Separating what is authentically Islamic from what is a product of non-Islamic influences and practices, between the essence of Islam and cultural practices, was an integral part of reformists’ conceptualizations of the modern Muslim woman, one that is both authentically Muslim and modern at the same time.

The reformist conceptualizations of the true Muslim womanhood through the critique of historical Islam and local customs faced strong opposition from conservative factions within Muslim societies. Conservatives viewed traditional practices, institutions, and values as integral to Islamic doctrine and distinctive markers of Muslim cultural identity.³⁷⁴ As in Western narratives, conservative discourse imbued Muslim traditional practices related to women with a sacrosanct significance and questioned the reformists’ calls for women’s emancipation based on reinterpretation of Islamic teachings. Since conservative discourses, much like Western ones, generally linked the emancipation of Muslim women with secularization and Westernization, it is not surprising that reformists’ efforts were largely viewed, criticized and dismissed by conservatives as an attempt to introduce Western trends and ideals into Muslim societies under the guise of Islam.³⁷⁵ Moreover, the proposed reforms, based on direct and critical engagement with the Qur’ān, challenged conservative interpretations of Islamic intellectual and religious heritage, as well as established notions of authority and authenticity. Conservatives maintained that the interpretations and practices developed throughout Islamic history were essential elements of Islamic doctrine and rejected the idea that the Qur’ān could or should be interpreted independently from its historical and scholarly heritage.

372 Emile Sahliyah, *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.), 198.

373 Dale F. Eickelman, and James P. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 37–45.

374 Nadia Hijab, *Womanpower: The Arab Debate on Women at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 38.

375 Moaddel, “Religion and Women: Islamic Modernism versus Fundamentalism,” 120; Hoffman Ladd, “Polemics on the Modesty and Segregation of Women,” 23.

Although conservative discourse has often been viewed as inherently opposing modernity, Adeeb Khalid's study of Muslim debates in Central Asia has plausibly shown that conservative discourse went beyond simple opposition to modernity or a disregard for social transformations confronting Muslims since the 19th century. Rather, according to him, conservatives' public defences of traditional practices represented a form of an active engagement with modern developments.³⁷⁶ This also appears to be the case with the Bosnian debates on the Muslim woman question. They were part of Muslim global conversations about the woman question marked by the intermingling of central Islamic concepts, such as *ijtihād* and of *taqlīd* with the seminal ideas of European modernity, such as progress, civilization and emancipation. The issue of the Muslim woman status served as a forum through which Bosnian Muslim intellectuals publicly articulated their various, often contradictory, notions of the diverse religious, social and cultural issues.

4.3. The Construction of the Ideal Muslim Woman in Bosnian Muslim Public Discourses

Nowadays, the term "woman question" is criticized in feminist scholarship as a reductionist and essentialist term. On the one hand, it posits women primarily as a subject of male dominated discourses, while on the other hand it runs the risk of essentializing women without recognizing the differences among women like race, class, regional origins, and other.³⁷⁷ However, as previously shown, non-Muslim, as well as Muslim discourse in the 19th and early 20th century maintained such reductionist representation of Muslim women. These representations have certainly contributed to the rise of a specific construct which until this day has been present in different discussions on Islam, which Miriam Cooke calls *Muslimwoman* to denote a specific "religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity."³⁷⁸

In the early 20th century, the static category of Muslim woman, emerged as a central trope in Bosnian Muslim public sphere. Starting in the early 20th century, when the magazine *Behar* began reporting about the emancipation of Muslim women from other Muslim regions, to the 1950, the Bosnian Muslim public sphere was dominated by debates about the Muslim woman status, the types of education appropriate for Muslim women, and the practice of veiling. As an essentialized entity, the Muslim woman was positioned in these

376 Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 11.

377 Offen, *The Woman Question in France*, 12–16; Taslim Madhani, "Constructions of Muslim Identity: Women and the Education Reform Movement in Colonial India" (MA diss., Institute of Islamic Studies McGill University Montreal, 2005), 6–7.

378 Miriam Cooke, "Deploying the Muslimwoman," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no 1 (2008): 91–99.

discussions as an embodiment of authenticity, as well as a measure of the progress of the Muslim community.

Before proceeding to the content of the Bosnian debates, I first want to introduce several general principles and assumptions that are useful for the contextualization and analysis of these debates.

Building on the concept of woman as a cultural symbol, a concept developed within the contexts of women's and gender studies, I view Bosnian Muslim discussions regarding the woman's question as deliberate efforts aimed at constructing the ideal Muslim woman, as a bearer of culture, a symbol of a unique Bosnian Muslim identity, and a representation of true Islamic values and the authentic Islamic path to progress.³⁷⁹ To understand the close relationship between the woman question and religious-cultural authenticity and progress in these discussions, it is necessary to acknowledge that women have historically been assigned complex and conflicting roles. The women have not only been considered responsible for transmitting the religious and cultural values of their group, but they have also served as symbolic figures illustrating the modernity of the community and demonstrating the moral standards of their families and communities.³⁸⁰

The concern for women-related issues during periods of significant social transformations has been a common theme in many religious and cultural traditions. The concept of the ideal woman, an evolving and changeable construct, has historically been at the forefront of communal reflections during times of profound socio-cultural, political and economic shifts perceived as threats to the moral integrity and identity of the community.³⁸¹ Thus, it is not surprising that Bosnian Muslims focused on issues related to Muslim women during the first half of the 20th century, a time of both global and local transformations. Global dynamics, such as Western dominance, modernization initiatives in wider Muslim world, and the global spread of the ideas of Islamic reformism, in combination with profound political and socio-cultural transformations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, heightened attention of Bosnian intellectuals and religious scholars to issues related to women.

In discussing these issues, Bosnian Muslims did not merely express concern for the rights of women, but primarily for the survival of Islam and their distinctive identity. My reading of the previously described selected periodicals as well as other publications from the first half of the 20th century that will be analysed in greater detail in the following two chapters

379 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); Bronwyn Winter, "Women as Cultural Markers/Bearers," *Wiley Online Library* (John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2016), accessed November 2022, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss695>

380 Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, 39–46.

381 Joseph Martos, "The Evolving Ideal of the Family in the Catholic Tradition," in *The Ideal in the World's Religions: Essays on the Person, Family, Society, and Environment*, eds. Robert Carter and Sheldon Isenserg (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1997), 240.

indicates that Bosnian Muslim discussions regarding the Muslim woman issue were less concerned with the well-being of Muslim women than with preserving the relevance of Islam in modernity and preserving the identity of Bosnian Muslims. Bosnian Muslim representations of women provide little information concerning the actual position of Muslim women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nevertheless, they provide an excellent insight into how Bosnian Muslim men interpreted their own cultural and religious tradition and the place of Islam in modern society. As well they provide an insight into how Muslim intellectual and religious elite perceived the place of Bosnian Muslims within the local socio-cultural context, marked by constant socio-cultural, legal and political transformations, as well as an insight into their diverse views on global developments; both in the Muslim world and the West.

Similar to discussions in various Muslim regions, the discussions about Muslim woman question in Bosnia played a key role in the process of the internal Muslim self-critical engagements with the various aspects of the Islamic tradition in which issues of authenticity, authority and modernity played the key role.

These discussions present a variety of perspectives regarding the Islamic tradition, along with diverse interpretations regarding the legitimacy of speaking on behalf of Muslim women. The issues of (re)interpretations of the Islamic textual sources and Muslim history, the universal validity of Islamic legal and exegetical heritage were debated and pondered upon in discussion about the authentic Islamic view on women.

Moreover, these discussions as elsewhere largely concentrated on, what Adeeb Khalid calls, the struggle over the possession and redefinition of *cultural capital*.³⁸² Not only did Bosnian Muslims use the Muslim woman question to redefine the position of women in the family and society, but they also used it to redefine the very competencies necessary to define Islamic values in the first place. Both secular intellectuals and religious scholars have used the Muslim woman question to assert their exclusive authority over what constitutes a true Islamic practice and what constitutes a deviation from it. In this regard, this issue played an important role in drawing internal boundaries within the Muslim community.

These discussions also provided Bosnian Muslims with an opportunity to debate their diverse views regarding local modernization narratives and processes, as well as their complex positions regarding the seminal ideas of European modernity. Contrary to the essentialist views prevalent in modern European scholarship, which strongly associate modernity with the West and automatically align Islam with tradition, the Bosnian Muslim

382 Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*, 5–6.

discussions about women present a more complex picture.³⁸³ These public discussions challenge the simplistic categorization of Muslim authors in general as “either as strategically employing traditional concepts and ideas in order to serve as transparent guises for what are ‘really’ imported Western notions, or as compulsively, and sometimes aggressively, parroting ancient traditions in an act of intellectual resistance.”³⁸⁴ Within the discussions on the woman question, Bosnian Muslim intellectuals and religious experts have through a dynamic process of adopting, adapting, redefining and synthesizing elements of Islamic religious tradition, modern ideas from the wider Muslim world and central concepts of European modernity developed their own, often divergent viewpoints on the relationship between Islam and European modernity, and expressed various visions of true Islamic modernity and progress. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the issue of the Muslim progress and the recognition of women’s important role in the advancement of the Muslim community dominated the public sphere. Nevertheless, Muslim authors differed considerably in their understanding of the meaning of progress and the specific role of Muslim women. Whether the path to progress lay in reforming the traditional practices and institutions, or in preserving traditional ways of life, was a question that divided Muslim authors. The different responses to this question reflect varied perspectives on their own religious and cultural heritage, as well as on modern Europe.

The following chapters of Bosnian Muslim discussions on Muslim women education and veiling were used to express diversity of views about the relationship between the West and Islam, tradition and modernity; but also, in discursive constructions of true Islam and specific Islamic modernities.

383 For further information on essentialist perspectives that portray Muslims as inherently incapable of being modern, see Reinhard Schulze, “Is there an Islamic modernity?” in *The Islamic World and the West: An Introduction to Political Cultures and International Relations*, eds. Mohammed Arkoun and Udo Steinbach (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 25–28.

384 Elisabeth Kendall, and Ahmad Khan, “Introduction,” in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, eds. Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 3.