



## Intersectional Feminism in Islam: An Analysis of Leila Ahmed's Thoughts on Colonialism, Gender, and Religion

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### Abstract

The dominance of Western feminist discourse often positions Muslim women as symbols of cultural and religious backwardness, a construct reinforced by colonial narratives and still influencing contemporary representations of Muslim women. Although various studies have examined Islamic feminism, intersectional analyses of Leila Ahmed's thought, which integrally links colonialism, gender, and religion, are still limited. This study aims to specifically examine how Ahmed dismantles the instrumentalization of women's issues by colonial powers, distinguishes normative Islamic teachings from patriarchal practices, and formulates her contribution to the development of contemporary Islamic feminism. The method employed is a qualitative approach, utilizing a critical discourse analysis model by Norman Fairclough, which encompasses three main dimensions: text analysis, discourse practice, and social practice. The results of the study show three main findings: first, Ahmed uncovers colonial strategies that instrumentalize women's issues to strengthen political and cultural domination; second, Ahmed asserts that the oppression of Muslim women stems more from patriarchal social constructions than from Islamic teachings themselves; third, Ahmed offers a reinterpretation of tradition as a dynamic arena for women to build spiritual and intellectual authority. In conclusion, Ahmed's thinking presents a critical framework that enriches contemporary Islamic feminism by emphasizing the importance of an intersectional approach in reading the power relations between colonialism, gender, and

religion, while also opening up space for further research on women's interpretive practices in postcolonial contexts.

**Keywords:** Intersectional Feminism; Leila Ahmed; Colonialism; Gender; Women

### **Abstrak**

Dominasi wacana feminisme Barat kerap menempatkan perempuan Muslim sebagai simbol keterbelakangan budaya dan agama, sebuah konstruksi yang diperkuat oleh narasi kolonial dan masih memengaruhi representasi perempuan Muslim kontemporer. Meski berbagai studi telah mengkaji feminisme Islam, masih terbatas analisis interseksional terhadap pemikiran Leila Ahmed yang mengaitkan kolonialisme, gender, dan agama secara integral. Penelitian ini bertujuan menelaah secara spesifik bagaimana Ahmed membongkar instrumentalisasi isu perempuan oleh kekuatan kolonial, membedakan ajaran normatif Islam dari praktik patriarkal, serta merumuskan kontribusinya bagi pengembangan feminisme Islam kontemporer. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan analisis wacana kritis model Norman Fairclough yang mencakup tiga dimensi utama yakni analisis teks, praktik wacana, dan praktik sosial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan utama: pertama, Ahmed menyingkap strategi kolonial yang menginstrumentalisasi isu perempuan untuk mengukuhkan dominasi politik dan budaya; kedua, Ahmed menegaskan bahwa penindasan terhadap perempuan Muslim lebih bersumber dari konstruksi sosial patriarkal ketimbang ajaran Islam itu sendiri; ketiga, Ahmed menawarkan reinterpretasi tradisi sebagai arena dinamis bagi perempuan untuk membangun otoritas spiritual dan intelektual. Kesimpulannya, pemikiran Ahmed menghadirkan kerangka kritis yang memperkaya feminisme Islam kontemporer dengan menegaskan pentingnya pendekatan interseksional dalam membaca relasi kuasa antara kolonialisme, gender, dan agama, sekaligus membuka ruang penelitian lanjutan mengenai praktik interpretatif perempuan di konteks pascakolonial.

**Kata Kunci:** Feminisme Interseksional; Leila Ahmed; Kolonialisme; Gender; Perempuan

### **Introduction**

Intersectional feminism emerged as a response to the limitations of mainstream feminism, which primarily focuses on the experiences of middle-class, white, Western women (Sharma & Rawal, 2022). This singular perspective fails to capture the complexity of women's identities outside the West, who experience multiple layers of oppression resulting from the interplay of race, class, religion, and colonialism (Carastathis, 2014). In the context of the Islamic world, this failure is particularly evident because Western feminism often views Muslim women as victims of patriarchy who must be "liberated" by Western modernity (Johnson & Fairweather, 2017). This discourse is rooted in an Orientalist perspective that, since colonial times, has positioned Muslim women as symbols of backwardness. A Pew Research Center report (2023) shows that 68% of Western news coverage still negatively represents the *hijāb* and Islamic law, reinforcing the stereotype that Muslim women lack social agency.

The phenomena of orientalism and colonialism play a central role in the construction of Muslim women's discourse. During the British colonial period in Egypt, the issue of women's emancipation was used as a political pretext to weaken local religious authority (Earls, 2017). Leila Ahmed notes that Lord Cromer, a British

colonial figure who opposed the *ḥijāb* in Egypt, actually denied women political rights in his own country (Ahmed, 1992). This contradiction reveals the manipulation of women's issues for hegemonic interests. A similar pattern continues in the modern era; a UN Women report (2022) shows that representations of Muslim women are still framed through an orientalist lens, highlighting the *ḥijāb*, polygamy, and sharia as symbols of oppression without considering complex socio-political realities. This phenomenon demonstrates that colonial discourse is not merely historical but continues to transform within a global discourse that marginalizes Muslim women's authority. Therefore, studying Leila Ahmed's thoughts is crucial for tracing the continuity of epistemic colonialism from the imperial era to contemporary discourse.

Criticism of the dominance of Western feminism has been voiced not only by Muslim academics but also by feminists of color who highlight structural biases within the global feminist movement (El Ouardi & Sandy, 2019). Universal feminism constructed from Western experiences often ignores the cultural, religious, and political contexts of non-Western societies, including Islam (Kumar, 2025). As a result, an epistemic gap emerges, where Western feminist narratives become the sole standard for judging women in the Islamic world. In this context, intersectional feminism, as formulated by Crenshaw (1989) and further developed by Leila Ahmed, provides an analytical framework that enables the simultaneous examination of the intersections of colonialism, religion, and gender. This approach is crucial because without an intersectional dimension, the study of Islamic feminism can easily become trapped in a reductive West versus Islam dichotomy.

Several previous studies have made important contributions, but leave significant theoretical gaps. Pandey (2024) asserts that colonialism shaped representations of Muslim women through Orientalism, which simplifies their identities. Hafizah (2024) highlights Ahmed's contribution to critiquing Western feminist methodology, but has not elaborated on the application of intersectionality to contemporary Muslim societies. El Nagah (2017) points out that Ahmed opened up space for the emergence of an Islamic feminism that integrates Islamic values and gender equality, but has not presented a practical strategy. Andrea (2021) considers Ahmed's thinking important in developing a framework for Islamic feminism; however, it remains weak in explaining the relationships between class, ethnicity, and geography as intersectional variables. Meanwhile, Jemia (2022) appreciates Ahmed's critique of epistemological colonialism but believes that theoretical strengthening is needed to connect intersectionality to religious studies. These five studies demonstrate that previous research has focused on Ahmed's critique of Western feminism and colonialism but has not integrated a comprehensive intersectional analysis of colonialism, gender, and religion. This gap serves as the basis for this research, which offers a new analytical framework for understanding Leila Ahmed's thinking.

The research problem is formulated as follows: How can Leila Ahmed's thoughts be understood within the framework of intersectional feminism? How do colonialism, gender, and religion interact in Ahmed's construction of Muslim women's discourse? And to what extent does an intersectional approach provide new insights into the study of Islamic feminism? The purpose of this research is to analyze Leila Ahmed's thoughts through an intersectional feminist perspective, outlining her critique of colonialism, her deconstruction of Western feminism, and the relevance of her approach for contemporary Muslim women. The basic argument of this research rests on the assumption that without an intersectional perspective, the study of Islamic feminism will be trapped in a conceptual dichotomy between the West and Islam that obscures the complexity of Muslim women's experiences. An intersectional approach enables a more comprehensive examination of the interplay between colonial power, social structures, and religious norms. By reading Leila Ahmed through this framework, this research is expected to enrich Islamic feminist theory with a critical dimension towards the colonial legacy, while also recognizing the authority and internal dynamics of the Islamic tradition.

## **Method**

This research uses a qualitative method with a critical discourse analysis approach modeled after Norman Fairclough, which encompasses three main dimensions: text analysis, discourse practice, and social practice. The primary data sources are Leila Ahmed's works, particularly *Women and Gender in Islam* and *A Quiet Revolution*. Secondary data sources include published academic articles and books relevant to the issues of Islamic feminism, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality, with selection criteria based on academic credibility and thematic relevance. Data collection techniques are carried out through a literature study that includes literature searches through academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, literature selection based on relevance and scientific authority, coding text content according to the themes of colonialism, gender, and religion, and cross-verification between sources to ensure interpretive validity. Data analysis is carried out in four stages: a critical reading of Ahmed's text by highlighting narrative constructions and key terminology, thematic coding based on intersectional categories such as gender, race, religion, and colonialism, contextualization of Ahmed's arguments within the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism and Islamic feminism, and discourse interpretation to identify power structures and forms of resistance manifested in the text.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Intersectional Feminism and Its Relevance in Islamic Studies**

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, explains that social identities such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation interact simultaneously to shape a person's life experiences

(Crenshaw, 1989). Social identities cannot be understood in isolation, as power structures place individuals in dominant or marginalized positions based on their identity configurations (Fiske et al., 2016). This framework rejects reductionist approaches that view women's oppression solely through a single category, such as gender, as the experiences of middle-class white women differ significantly from those of Muslim women living in postcolonial societies (D'Odorico, 2014). Intersectionality serves as an analytical tool to explore how various social dimensions intersect to create inequality, particularly for women at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination.

The basic principles of intersectional feminism emphasize that oppression is layered, simultaneous, and mutually constitutive. This approach is rooted in a commitment to social justice, aiming to dismantle systems of domination that operate through social, economic, political, and cultural structures (Alinia, 2015). Intersectionality rejects the universalization of women's experiences, as each woman is bound by a unique historical and social context (Sharma & Rawal, 2022). This approach demands an analysis that integrates structural dimensions with subjective experiences, allowing for a more comprehensive reading of inequality. An intersectional perspective opens space for methodologies that simultaneously consider race, class, religion, and colonialism in understanding women's conditions (Rosette et al., 2018).

Within the landscape of feminist theory, intersectionality stands in clear contrast to both liberal and radical feminism. Liberal feminism emphasizes equal rights through legal reform, education, and political engagement. This approach tends to be individualistic and often assumes that providing equal opportunities will lead to substantive equality (Dhuli, Dharmo, & Dharmo, 2023). Radical feminism, as advocated by figures such as Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone, sees patriarchy as a root of oppression that must be comprehensively restructured (Jensen, 2021). Both approaches make important contributions, but remain limited when confronted with the complexities of race, colonialism, and religion. Intersectionality complements and critiques by highlighting the interconnections between social categories that shape women's experiences in distinct ways. This approach examines not only gender relations but also how colonial systems, capitalism, and racism maintain social hierarchies (Mojab & Carpenter, 2019).

The intersectional framework becomes significant when applied to the study of Islam, which is characterized by cultural, historical, and political diversity. Muslim women face forms of oppression that are inextricably linked to patriarchal-biased religious interpretations, conservative social traditions, and the legacy of colonialism that influences modern social structures (Güner & Abbas, 2025). Bawa's (2019) research demonstrates how religious interpretations are used to normalize gender hierarchies, while colonial legacies reinforce discourses of "modernity" that marginalize women under the guise of morality and cultural representation. This

legacy is evident in legal policies, the education system, and state discourses that control women's bodies and roles. The intersectional framework helps unravel how these various layers of power work together to place Muslim women in a complex position between religion, culture, and coloniality (Pandey, 2024).

The geographic context reveals the diversity of Muslim women's experiences, underscoring the importance of intersectional analysis. Research on women in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and diaspora communities reveals varied experiences shaped by class differences, local traditions, and state policies (Jolof et al., 2022). In many cases, women in postcolonial countries face three forms of domination simultaneously: local patriarchy, colonial legacies, and modern, often centralized, state control (Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2024). An analysis that focuses solely on religion without considering other structural factors risks reducing the issue to a mere matter of tradition. An intersectional approach requires sensitivity to context, so that studies of Muslim women do not fall into the dichotomy of "traditional" versus "modern," but rather critically examine how colonial power and modernity produce gender identities (Babakhani, 2022).

Intersectional feminism offers analytical tools capable of reinterpreting power relations in Muslim societies by considering the intersections of religion, culture, and colonialism. This framework goes beyond the conceptual level but provides analytical strategies applicable to the study of texts, history, and discourse. This study uses this approach to examine Leila Ahmed's thinking on colonialism and gender, exploring how the categories of race, religion, and colonial power converge in the construction of Muslim women's identities. This approach allows for a more nuanced reading of the relationship between feminism, Islam, and coloniality without falling into conceptual simplification.

### **Leila Ahmed's Analysis of Colonialism and Gender Discourse**

European colonialism in the Islamic world operated not only through political and economic domination but also through the ideological formation of knowledge (Kebaïli & Lépinard, 2025). Leila Ahmed, in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), asserts that colonialism functioned as an epistemic project that sought to reconfigure the social and cultural identities of Muslim societies through control over gender discourse. Colonialism created a narrative of the "oppressed Eastern woman" as a moral legitimation for Western intervention (Cariño & González, 2022). In Ahmed's analysis, this is a form of knowledge production that operates through the mechanism of discourse formation, as described by Foucault (1980), in which colonial power regulates the way colonized societies perceive themselves and their identities. This ideological construction positions women as the primary locus of colonial subject formation, while also illustrating how power relations operate at the symbolic and cultural levels.

The concept of colonial feminism is a key point in Ahmed's critique of British colonialism in Egypt. She shows how colonial figures such as Lord Cromer claimed



the colonial project was a mission to rescue Muslim women from patriarchal practices, particularly the *hijāb* and social segregation (Ahmed, 1992). This rhetoric was used to assert Western moral superiority while delegitimizing Islamic culture. However, Cromer himself rejected the women's movement in Britain, demonstrating the contradiction between claims of emancipation and colonial patriarchal practices (Ahmed, 1992). For Ahmed, colonial feminism is not simply a form of moral hypocrisy, but an ideological mechanism that created the epistemic category of the "oppressed Muslim woman" (Ahmed, 1992). Within a postcolonial framework, this practice constitutes a civilizing mission and a form of mimicry, in which Western values are imposed in the name of modernity (Sauerbronn, Ayres, da Silva, & Lourenço, 2024). Ahmed's criticism aligns with the views of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Reina Lewis (1996), who reject the universalism of Western feminism because it ignores the historical and cultural contexts of non-Western women.

The representation of Muslim women was a central component of this colonial strategy. Ahmed reveals how the *hijāb* became a symbol of backwardness and a tool for distinguishing between the East, considered static, and the West, claimed to be rational and advanced. The female body became a semiotic arena that marked cultural differences and reinforced the image of Islamic inferiority (Ahmed, 1992). Using Edward Said's Orientalist concept of representation, Ahmed interprets this phenomenon as a form of colonialism that stifled women's agency and excluded their authentic experiences. Cultural symbols such as the *hijāb* were treated as signs of slavery, rather than conscious choices rooted in spirituality and identity (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Ahmed, 1992). As a result, global discourse on Muslim women was distorted by stereotypes that denied diversity and presented them as a homogenous entity lacking autonomy (Vidūnaitė, 2023).

Colonial feminism also served as an epistemological instrument shaping Western understandings of Islam. Ahmed demonstrates that the binary narrative between the "modern West" and "repressive Islam" erases the long history of Muslim women's participation in education, commerce, and politics. She asserts that women like Khadījah bint Khuwaylid and 'Āisha bint Abū Bakr played crucial roles in early Islamic society, long before colonialism imposed a single interpretation of women's underdevelopment (Ahmed, 1992). Ahmed's claim challenges the colonial narrative that equates Islam with women's oppression and asserts that women's subordination stems not from Islamic teachings, but from intertwined colonial and patriarchal power structures (Babakhani, 2022).

Ahmed's analysis situates colonialism as a meeting point between political power and the production of knowledge. Adopting a postcolonial theoretical approach, she demonstrates that women's issues are used to create a hegemonic narrative that justifies conquest (Ahmed, 1992). This process operates through the practice of othering, as proposed by Spivak, namely the systematic differentiation

that positions Eastern societies as “other” (Spivak, 1988). Muslim women are the primary locus of this othering practice because their symbols, such as the veil, spatial segregation, and domestic traditions, are interpreted as signs of inferiority (Rumaney & Sriram, 2023). Within the framework of intersectionality, Ahmed sees the oppression of Muslim women as formed through the intersections of race, religion, class, and gender (Ahmed, 1992). This critique demonstrates that colonialism not only dominates economically but also regulates systems of meaning that subjugate colonial subjects epistemically.

The long-term impact of colonial feminism is a crisis of representation and identity negotiation for Muslim women (Ali, 2019). Ahmed points out that postcolonial women must contend with two pressures: colonial stereotypes that position them as victims and the need to reclaim agency within the discourse of modernity (Ahmed, 2011). This phenomenon can be explained through Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the ambivalence of colonial discourse, which describe how colonial subjects lived in a space between resistance and adaptation (Bhabha, 1994). Ahmed reads the experiences of Muslim women as a form of hybridity that negotiates Islamic values and modernity without losing spiritual autonomy. Their identities are not solely shaped by rejection of colonialism, but also by creative efforts to build new spaces for existence that are not subject to the West-East dichotomy (Ahmed, 2011).

Ahmed's critique of Western feminist universalism asserts that women's liberation is inextricably linked to a critique of colonial hegemony and patriarchal epistemology. She rejects the singular narrative of secular feminism, which treats Western experience as a universal standard and instead offers a framework of Islamic feminism rooted in spiritual values and social justice. In this context, Ahmed's contribution goes beyond a historical critique of colonialism; she constructs an epistemology of Islamic feminism that affirms the plurality of women's experiences. Her thinking aligns with that of Margot Badran (2009) and Saba Mahmood (2005), who emphasize the agency of Muslim women as active subjects in shaping the relationship between religion and emancipation. This perspective opens up new horizons in intersectional feminism, where the intersection of faith, identity, and resistance to global hegemony forms the basis for a re-examination of women's positions in Islam and the modern world.

### **Gender, Religion, and Tradition in Leila Ahmed's Perspective**

According to Leila Ahmed, gender construction in Islamic tradition is the result of a dialectic between religious texts, social context, and historical interpretations that shape masculine power structures. Islam, for Ahmed, is not the source of patriarchy itself, but its sacred texts have been read through a male social lens that has dominated scholarly authority throughout history (Ahmed, 1992). This condition creates an interpretive bias that legitimizes the patriarchal social system and excludes women's perspectives as epistemological subjects. This bias does not



arise from the normative teachings of Islam, but from interpretations that operate within the ideological structure of patriarchal society (Ahmed, 1992). Within this framework, Ahmed emphasizes the need to reread Islamic tradition through a historical-critical approach to reveal how interpretation becomes a means of reproducing power relations (Ahmed, 1992). This view aligns with Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, who both believe that women's subordination stems from androcentric exegesis, not from the text of the Quran itself (Barlas, 2012; Wadud, 1999).

Religious traditions are often used to legitimize rigid gender role differences, creating social hierarchies that oppress women in both public and spiritual spaces (Harahap, Is, & Julaiha P, 2025). Ahmed believes that religious practices considered established do not always stem from pure Islamic teachings but are instead the result of cultural constructions legitimized theologically. A notable example is the interpretation of women's absolute obedience to men, which she argues is a form of internalization of patriarchal values in normative theology (Ahmed, 1992). Within the framework of postcolonial feminism, she highlights how Western colonialism reinforced this dichotomy by claiming the "liberation of Muslim women" while stigmatizing Islam as a source of oppression (Ahmed, 1992). Her critique functions as an epistemic shift, shifting the center of interpretive authority from male dominance to women's experiences as an alternative knowledge space in understanding the text (Budgeon, 2021).

Ahmed's critique of patriarchal bias is rooted in the belief that the Quran embodies egalitarian principles that guarantee spiritual equality between men and women. She points out that differences in the interpretation of verses such as Surah 4:34 and Surah 33:35 stems not from the text itself, but from social constructions that position men as the primary interpreters (Ahmed, 1992). In this regard, Ahmed not only exposes bias but also proposes a reinterpretation that reaffirms Islam's message of justice. Her approach differs from Amina Wadud's use of linguistic analysis, as Ahmed emphasizes historical and contextual hermeneutics rooted in the experiences of Muslim women throughout history (Ahmed, 1992; Wadud, 1999). This reinterpretation aims to dismantle the epistemic structures that obscure Islam's theological potential as a religion that honors humanity without gender discrimination (Hafizah, 2024).

Ahmed's hermeneutic framework emphasizes women's experiences as a primary source of knowledge in the study of religion. She employs recovery, re-reading, and reclaiming strategies in reading texts. Recovery is achieved by exploring women's voices that have been erased from the history of interpretation; re-reading by contextually reinterpreting the text based on the values of justice and mercy; and reclaiming by returning spiritual authority to women as interpretive subjects (Ahmed, 1992). Through this strategy, Ahmed's hermeneutics is not only intellectual but also theological and transformational (Hafizah, 2024). A reading of

*Women and Gender in Islam* demonstrates her systematic effort to construct a hermeneutic of gender liberation that functions to dismantle masculine authority in classical Islamic discourse. This approach presents a new epistemology that affirms that women's experiences are a legitimate part of Islamic interpretation that is spiritually and socially just.

From Ahmed's perspective, religion is a dialectical space with transformative potential. He rejects the view that religion is the source of gender injustice, instead emphasizing that it provides a moral basis for the principle of equality (Ahmed, 1992). The relationship between religion, tradition, and gender is dynamic: religion offers egalitarian values, and tradition conveys cultural interpretations that can strengthen or weaken those values. In contrast, gender becomes a field of interpretive negotiation between the two. Within this framework, Ahmed's critique goes beyond simply opposing patriarchy to construct a hermeneutic-theological dialectic that opens space for women's spiritual reinterpretation. He uses verses such as Surah 4:34 and Surah 33:35 to affirm the fundamental equality of humankind before God. For Ahmed, internal critique of patriarchy in the Islamic world is a form of reflective faith that renews spirituality without abandoning Islamic identity. This position showcases Ahmed's significant contribution as a bridge between Western feminism and Islamic theology, grounded in the value of universal justice.

### **Leila Ahmed's Contribution to Intersectional Feminism in Islam**

Leila Ahmed's contribution to intersectional feminism in Islam occupies a central position in the development of global feminist discourse. She rejects approaches that generalize Muslim women as sole victims of patriarchy or colonialism and emphasizes that the intersection of history, culture, and social structures shapes women's experiences. In her work, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), Ahmed dismantles colonial constructs that use women's issues as a tool for political legitimacy, such as the project of "colonial feminism" in 19th-century Egypt spearheaded by Western figures (Ahmed, 2015). This analysis demonstrates a direct application of Crenshaw's (1989) principles of intersectionality to the Islamic context, showing that Muslim women's experiences cannot be separated from the influence of colonialism and religious authority. This perspective establishes a new epistemological framework that does not simply adapt Western theories but rather reconstructs Muslim women's experiences as a theoretical basis for intersectional feminism rooted in Islam.

Ahmed's methodological approach synthesizes historical analysis and discourse criticism, opening new interpretive spaces in the study of Islam and gender. She reads Islamic history through the lens of women's experiences, highlighting how religious texts interact with the social contexts that shape religious practices (Ahmed, 1992). This approach aligns with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist hermeneutical framework, which emphasizes rereading tradition through

women's experiences (Fiorenza, 1983). Still, Ahmed goes further by linking it to the colonial and political history of Islam. She formulates an epistemological strategy for revising Islamic history without negating the normative values of religion, integrating text and context through counter-discursive strategies that challenge patriarchal domination (Ahmed, 1992). In this context, Ahmed's thinking shares a methodological affinity with Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, who both emphasize the importance of contextual, gender-justice-based interpretations of the Quran (Barlas, 2012; Wadud, 1999).

Ahmed's theoretical contribution is evident in her critique of Orientalism, which portrays Muslim women as passive and powerless. She asserts that Muslim women possess the agency to negotiate their social and religious positions within structures of domination (Ahmed, 1992). This view resonates with Saba Mahmood's theory of agency in *Politics of Piety* (2005), which explains that secular criteria cannot measure women's actions within a religious framework, but rather through piety and faith. Ahmed expands on this concept by asserting that Muslim women's agency lies not necessarily in explicit resistance to religious norms, but in their ability to autonomously interpret and practice Islamic teachings within a complex social system (Ahmed, 1992). This approach demonstrates that intersectionality in Islam is not simply about the intersection of identities, but about how dimensions of faith, history, and culture interplay in shaping women's experiences.

Criticism of Ahmed has primarily come from traditionalists, who consider her approach too grounded in Western epistemology and potentially obscuring Islamic authenticity (Vahedi, 2016). This challenge illustrates the epistemological tension between Islamic feminism, which seeks to integrate modern critical methods, and literal interpretations that emphasize the authority of texts. Referring to Gayatri Spivak's (1988) subaltern theory, Muslim women are often trapped between Western representations and internal traditional controls. Ahmed attempts to break through this silence by reconstructing history, presenting women as active subjects within Islamic civilization (Ahmed, 1992). Her strategy demonstrates that her critique of patriarchy is not a form of secularization, but an attempt to rewrite the narrative of Islam from a female perspective. However, the reception of this idea remains mixed, particularly in societies with strong interpretive authority, demonstrating the need for a more open epistemological dialogue between tradition and modern criticism (Hafizah, 2024).

Ahmed's application of intersectional feminism faces structural obstacles in the context of contemporary Muslim societies, which still place religious identity as the dominant category. Intersectionality, as emphasized by Collins (2000) and Hopkins (2017), requires recognition of the diversity of identities and the interconnected nature of power relations. In reality, many Muslim societies prioritize religious identity while neglecting other dimensions such as class, ethnicity, and social location (Subchi, Zulkifli, & Latifa, 2022). Ahmed has highlighted

this issue through her analysis of Egyptian women facing simultaneous colonial and local patriarchal oppression, but its implementation in various global contexts remains limited (Jemia, 2022). Her approach is only effective at the academic level. At the same time, its practical application as a social advocacy tool requires broader structural support and cultural reform to simultaneously acknowledge various forms of oppression (Hafizah, 2024).

In the context of globalization and human rights discourse, Ahmed offers a critical position on the universalization of Western feminism. She rejects the notion that women's liberation must adhere to homogeneous standards defined by the West, instead emphasizing the importance of local plurality in shaping the ethics of Islamic feminism (Ahmed, 1992). Her ideas align with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) critique of the construction of "Third World women" as a single, homogeneous category that overlooks social and cultural complexities. Ahmed's views pave the way for the development of a transnational feminism that is more sensitive to the diversity of Muslim women's experiences in various regions, including Southeast Asia and Africa, where religious practices and gender relations exhibit patterns different from those in the Middle Eastern context (Charles et al., 2022). Ahmed accepts the universality of the value of justice. Still, he emphasizes the need for a cross-cultural approach that recognizes particularity as the basis for the global ethics of Islamic feminism (Ahmed, 1992).

Overall, Leila Ahmed's thinking demonstrates a methodological and theoretical synthesis that enriches Islamic feminism by positioning intersectionality as the primary framework for reading Muslim women's experiences. She constructs a new paradigm that connects postcolonial critique, feminist hermeneutics, and agency theory in Islam. Challenges to her approach actually demonstrate its epistemological vitality, as it opens up a dialogue between tradition, modernity, and global discourse. Ahmed's position can be understood as a bridge between Islamic epistemology and contemporary feminist theory, seeking to construct a new understanding of gender justice that does not abandon its roots in religion. Her perspective emphasizes the importance of recognizing Muslim women's agency, avoiding the reduction of their identity to a single aspect, and expanding the theoretical space for Islamic intersectional feminism as an intellectual movement that is plural, contextual, and relevant to global society.

## Conclusion

Intersectional feminism in Islam, as analyzed through the thinking of Leila Ahmed, asserts that colonialism not only subjugated territory but also shaped a gender discourse that positioned Muslim women as symbols of backwardness and tools of legitimacy for Western intervention. Ahmed demonstrates that intersectionality—the link between religion, race, class, and colonial power—opens up space for a critical reading of Muslim women's experiences historically and theologically. Theoretically, the integration of postcolonial perspectives and Islamic

feminism renews the approach to gender studies in Islam by emphasizing the importance of contextual reading of texts and traditions. Practically, this thinking encourages the reconstruction of a discourse on equality based on Islamic values that can be implemented in education, religious policy, and social advocacy. The limitation of this study lies in its sole focus on Ahmed without comparison with other Islamic feminist thinkers, thus failing to encompass the epistemological diversity of Islamic feminism. Future research should examine Ahmed's thinking comparatively with figures such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Fatima Mernissi to broaden the understanding of intersectionality in the context of contemporary Muslim social practices.

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### **Author Contribution Statement**

AS contributed to the formulation of the research design, development of the conceptual framework, overall coordination of the writing, and correspondence with the publisher. SA contributed to data collection, primary literature review, and preparation of the introduction. LI contributed to data analysis, the deepening of theoretical aspects, and the writing of the discussion section. NA contributed to the development of the research methodology, data validation, and refinement of the manuscript structure. AM contributed to academic editing, ensuring the consistency of arguments and finalizing the manuscript. All authors read, reviewed, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, either financial or non-financial, that could potentially influence the research process, writing, or publication of this manuscript.

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