

Asma Lamrabet's Theology: Navigating Islam, Gender Equality and Decolonial Thought

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Abstract

This chapter explores the thought of Asma Lamrabet (b. 1960), one of the most representative contemporary figures of the field of Islamic feminism, both in Morocco and globally. On the basis of numerous conversations and interviews carried out in Morocco with Asma Lamrabet between 2008 and 2018, as well as the study of documentary sources, the chapter firstly analyses four phases of the biographical, intellectual, and public trajectory of the author, and secondly her methods and the main contents of her work. Beyond the significance of the official religious function she served in her country for ten years, Lamrabet's discourse potential resides in the relevant role she has had and still could have in bridging modernist and traditionalist thinking of religion and society, by promoting gender equality within the Islamic paradigm in Morocco, in Muslim-majority countries, and among the Islamic diaspora.

Keywords

Islamic feminism – Asma Lamrabet – gender equality – Islamic reformism – decoloniality

1 Introduction

Asma Lamrabet (b. 1960) is one of the most representative contemporary figures of the field of Islamic feminism, both in Morocco and globally. This chapter first briefly introduces this perspective which aims to demonstrate the compatibility between gender equality and Islam, starting with the claim of women's access to Islamic knowledge production and religious authority, which are crucial tools for reinterpreting the sources of Islamic law, above all the Qur'an and the Sunna, as an alternative to the dominant patriarchal and androcentric readings. Next, and on the basis of numerous conversations and interviews carried out in Morocco with Asma Lamrabet between 2008 and

2018, as well as the study of documental sources, the chapter explores the biographical trajectory of the author, her methods, and the main contents of her work. Subsequently, various stages of the scholar's public path are presented to reveal the not-easy relation between intellectual and civil society's struggles for gender equality and the official Moroccan institutions involved in national Islamic knowledge production. The chapter argues that beyond the institutional religious function she held in her country for ten years, Lamrabet's discourse potential – also in the light of her participation in feminist transnational networks – resides in the relevant role she has had and still could have in bridging modernist and traditionalist thinking of religion and society, by promoting gender equality within the Islamic paradigm in Morocco, in Muslim-majority countries, and among the Islamic diaspora.

2 Islamic Feminism: A Multiple and Heterogenous Gender Critique

In her widely read article “Islamic feminism: What’s in a name?” (2002), Margot Badran describes the main aspects of “Islamic feminist” thought which places at the core of the reform of Muslim-majority societies new possibilities of identification with Islam; these possibilities are compatible with gender equality and the values of universal human rights. According to Badran, Islamic feminism “is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm.”¹ However, Asma Barlas, who is among the scholars who refuse the “feminist” definition, talks about “a gender equality and social justice discourse derived from the understanding of the Qur’anic message, which tries to realize rights and justice for all humans in the totality of their existence and in the public-private continuum.”² According to Valentine Moghadam, Islamic feminism is “a reform movement based on the Qur’an and promoted by Muslim women who challenge the patriarchal interpretation of Islam, offering alternative readings, on the basis of their linguistic and theological knowledge, in order to ameliorate women’s conditions.”³ In other words, Islamic feminism is an intellectual movement of Muslim scholars-activists,⁴

1 Margot Badran, “Islamic feminism: what’s in a name?”, *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 569 (17–23 January 2002). <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/>.

2 Asma Barlas, “On anti-anti foundationalism of Nasr Abu Zayd’s Rethinking of Qur’an”, paper presented to the Conference *Islamic new thinking*, Essen, 26–28 June 2011.

3 Valentine Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

4 Gisela Webb, ed., *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activist in North America* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

working to privilege the egalitarian ethics of the Islamic revelation (*risāla*) as an alternative to the literalist and misogynist interpretations that in their view have distorted and misapplied the Islamic message by generating “textual and sexual discrimination”⁵ against women, which is reflected in their subordination in laws and social behaviours. By distinguishing between the ethical dimension of Islam (*sharīʿa*) and the technical dimension of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), these scholars emphasize the distance between the norms which are valid in Muslim-majority countries from the values of solidarity and justice of the revelation, values that must be preserved and reclaimed.⁶ Islamic feminists act both in their own local contexts and in feminist transnational networks,⁷ by following different strategies and practices of action that reveal a multiple and heterogenous critique of this intellectual, theological, juridical, and social phenomenon.⁸ During the last decades, Muslim feminists have increasingly claimed women’s right to speak out in the religious spaces and discourses, demanding that women could have greater and more visible religious authority, a symbolic key to reform in Muslim-majority societies, where religious knowledge and authority are so crucial for the definition of norms and rights.

Away from the definition of “feminist,” which is often linked to Western colonial reverberations, the expression “gender *jihād*” seems to be more adequate to explain Muslim women’s capacity to bring about a “cognitive subversion”⁹ inside Islam, aimed at offering an alternative to the male monopoly of the religious exegesis of the sacred texts and related jurisprudence. With this general objective, the protagonists of the “Islamic gender critique”¹⁰ pursue: 1) women’s right to have religious authority; 2) a narrative of cognitive subversion as an alternative to the patriarchal official discourses based on the hegemonic voices of the male *‘ulamāʾ*, and 3) a counter discourse to Western colonialism as well as white feminism, offering a “third way” between traditionalist conservatism and modernism *à l’occidentale*.¹¹

5 Barlas, “On anti-anti foundationalism”.

6 Ziba Mir-Hosseini et al., eds., *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law. Justice and Ethics in the Islamic Legal Process* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

7 Valentine Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

8 Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam. Creating Islamic feminism through Literature* (New York-London: Routledge, 2001).

9 Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

10 Rajaa Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

11 Lamrabet, interview, Rabat 2008.

Alongside the production of a theological discourse compatible with equality between human beings in general, and between men and women in particular, some feminist personalities challenge the consensus of the more traditional scholars with acts which are considered as provocative, such as leading a mixed group of believers during Friday prayer performed by Amina Wadud on several occasions in South Africa, North America, and the UK. The very taboo female *imāma* is increasingly performed by female religious authorities in Europe and among the Muslim diaspora.¹² Other women choose the path of dialogue and bargaining with religious power through a strategic compromise with local Islamic structures in order to promote progressive reform “from within.” And this is the case with Asma Lamrabet, at least up to a certain phase of her life trajectory.

3 “The personal is political”¹³

Asma Lamrabet was born in Rabat in 1960. Because of the political positions of her father, Ahmed, a militant of the socialist wing of the Independence Party (*Ḥizb al-Istiqlāl*) and close to the leader Mahdi Ben Barka, her family was forced into exile in Lebanon, France, Syria, and finally in Algeria, in Oran, where she lived from the age of two to fourteen. Very soon a motherless child, Asma said it was her father who passed on to her – with his references to figures like Che Guevara and Nehru – the importance of intellectual courage, integrity, and responsibility for one’s ideas. She also considers that attending a school of the Mission Française nuns in Oran taught her the Christian charitable spirit that she found in Islamic ethics as an adult.

With the permission to return to Morocco granted by King Hassan II in 1974 to political exiles, Asma was able to obtain a diploma and then a degree in Medicine and Biology in Rabat and, in 1982, she married an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1983 she gave birth to a child and in 1989 she obtained a Doctorate in Medicine. Then she followed her diplomat husband on various missions abroad: in Barcelona, where she attended a medical specialization course, and in South America (Bogota, Mexico City, and Santiago

12 Simonetta Calderini, *Women as Imams. Classical Islamic Sources and Modern Debates on Leading Prayer* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2020); Marion Holmes Katz, *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Janette Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

13 Lamrabet’s biography has been reconstructed thanks to interviews conducted in Morocco (2008–2018), which are reported in the References section.

de Chile), where she worked as a volunteer for various hospitals. During these years, also thanks to her contacts with Christian liberation theology and Marxist Christianity, she reflected on Islam from a philosophical point of view, and she became aware of the distance of Morocco and Muslim-majority countries from the values of Islamic ethics. She thus independently began to engage in the study of the Qur'an, its exegesis, and the main *hadith* collections, to discover a “*décalage* between *tafāsīr* and Qur'an.” In 2012, during the presentation of her book, *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran: quelle égalité?* (2012), in the same bookshop of Casablanca *Karāma* (in Arabic, “dignity”) in which Fatima Mernissi had also delivered some speeches during the 1980s, she explained why and how she started her research:

I came from a family that I can define as schizophrenic: a nationalist and socialist father, representative of the Moroccan left in the 1970s, progressive in the public sphere, but firm about conservative religious values in the private sphere. In my adolescence, Islam was not clear for me: my father was talking about freedom and justice at an ideological level, but in his daily life, in social practices, he was conservative. After my PhD in Hematology, it was my wish to know *by myself* what the Qur'an said. It was my wish to know *by myself* [she repeats] what Islam means. And I was feeling myself free to be able to conduct my research alone, without any association, group, or movement.¹⁴

Lamrabet defines this phase as the start of her *quête de connaissance* (“search for knowledge”). In 2002, she published *Musulmane tout simplement*, considered by the author as an “orthodox volume.”

Back to Morocco in 2003, where Lamrabet works as a biologist at the Rabat public hospital Ibn Sīnā, she found Moroccan society “sclerotised by a misogynistic *fiqh* which penalises women”: she considers the dominant Moroccan value system as “neither suited to the social evolution nor to the original Qur'anic message of equality between all individuals”.¹⁵ Then, while in *Musulmane tout simplement* she focused on women mentioned in the Qur'an such as Bilqīs, Mīryam, and Zulaykha, thanks to the study of the figure of the Prophet's wife Aisha, Lamrabet wrote the book *Aïcha, épouse du Prophète* (Aisha, Wife of the Prophet, 2004), dedicated to Aisha's public role in the first *umma*, and particularly in the transmission of Sunna. Lamrabet describes her as a “revolutionary woman.”

14 Lamrabet, interview, Rabat, 2012.

15 Lamrabet, interviews, Rabat 2008, 2012.

From 2004 to 2007, Lamrabet coordinated a Research Group on Women Issues and Intercultural Dialogue in Rabat. In 2008 she was appointed as President of the *Groupe internationale d'étude et réflexion sur les femmes dans l'Islam* (GIERFI) based in Barcelona. In 2008, a partnership was signed between GIERFI and the League of Ulama (*al-Rābiṭa al-Muḥammadiyya li-l-'Ulamā'*) of Rabat, headed by Ahmad Abbadi, a former director of a department in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

Lamrabet knew Abbadi when he, thanks to her network, was invited to present her book on Aisha. Their collaboration began then, despite several obstacles. Abbadi proposed to the League the translation into Arabic of her next book *Le Coran et les femmes: une lecture de libération* (2007), but this was blocked by the conservative 'ulamā' of the League mainly because of the author's progressive message and her lack of an official religious training and diploma. Despite this, during an interview, Abbadi asserted that "no one can say that Asma Lamrabet is not an 'ālima."¹⁶ In 2010, he appointed Lamrabet as Director of the Centre for Studies and Research on Women's Issues in Islam (CERFI, Centre d'études et recherches sur les questions féminines dans l'Islam – *Markaz al-dirāsāt wa-l-buḥūth ḥawla l-qaḍāyā l-nisā'iyya fī-l-islām*) of the League, which was created with a team of five researchers. According to Lamrabet, "getting to know Abbadi is the stage for the beginning of religious legitimization."¹⁷ This legitimization, combined with her capacity of bargaining with the institutional patriarchy¹⁸ in a continuous trajectory of self-negotiation for official religious authority, of stimulating a critical reasoning within her teamwork and of managing public communication, represent significant elements of her efforts in innovating the Moroccan Islamic institutional message "from within."

4 Lamrabet's Thought: Main Works, Method and Contents

Lamrabet describes her intellectual contribution as an "alternative third way to both the literalist and modernist approaches."¹⁹ In her first book *Musulmane toute simplement* (2002), a non-academic intellectual manifesto, she expresses the need to situate Muslim female identity as an alternative to the oppositional westernized vs. traditionalist dichotomy and invites Muslims to deconstruct

16 Abbadi, interview, Rabat, 2012.

17 Lamrabet, interview, Rabat, 2018.

18 Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

19 Lamrabet, interview, Rabat, 2008.

misogynistic readings of Islam in order to adapt its universalistic message to contemporary reality. To show the adequacy of her own approach to Islamic fundamentals, she cites some prominent figures of classical Islam, like Imam Mālik – and his expression “I am but a human being, I can be right as I can be wrong; examine my opinions carefully, if they seem to you to be in conformity with the Qur’an and the Sunna, accept them, otherwise reject them” – and Imam Al-Shāfi‘ī, who would modify his jurisprudence according to the city in which he resided, by affirming the adaptability of laws to the norms of different contexts, according to the motto “laws valid in one city are not necessarily valid in another one.”²⁰

In this early work, Lamrabet considers women capable of emancipating themselves through a renewed knowledge of the Islamic message, as an alternative to both rigorism and westernisation: “We need a specific modernity, in accordance with our ethics, our history and our aspirations. (...) I do not need to be Western to be free. I already am by claiming to be a Muslim.”²¹ Here she does not favour a hermeneutic method, but emphasises the intention to seek convergences between the discourse of universal human rights and Islam, combating both the fascination with the West and the “religious illiteracy typical of rigorist interpreters.”²² However, she presents some early deconstructions of the concept of male superiority, later expanded upon in subsequent works, and contextualises some of the most discriminatory Qur’anic provisions towards women, accusing the *fuqahā’* of transforming the economic responsibility of the family at the time of Revelation (the *qiwāma* verse 4:34) into absolute male superiority, which betrays the Qur’anic principle of complementarity (*takāmul*).

Lamrabet’s initial adherence to the principle of gender complementarity, defined as “a principle of equality inherent in the biological and psychological differences of men and women, based on dialogue, consultation, and mutual respect,”²³ soon gave way definitively to support for gender equality (*musawāh*), as emerges from her next works: *Le Coran et les femmes. Une lecture de libération* (The Qur’an and Women. A Liberation Reading, 2007), *Femmes, Islam, Occident: chemins vers l’universel* (Women, Islam, the West: paths to the universal, 2011) and *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran : quelle égalité ?* (Women and Men in the Qur’an: What Equality? 2012).

20 Asma Lamrabet, *Musulmane tout simplement* (Paris: Tawhid, 2002), 28.

21 Lamrabet, *Musulmane*, 90–91, 121–122, 184.

22 Lamrabet, *Musulmane*, 197.

23 Lamrabet, *Musulmane*, 64.

Particularly in the latter, Lamrabet's hermeneutics inspired by the *ijtihad* method is consolidated on five dimensions of interpretation of the Islamic sources. The first theological and spiritual dimension is the concept of *tawhīd*, the oneness and unicity of God, which represents in her thought a double human liberation: the first consists of the liberation from every form of moral or material alienation for the believer who devotes her/himself to the straight path indicated by Allah; the second implies social justice because God is the unique superior entity, while all the human beings created by God are on the same level. Moreover, the attribute of God as "just" prevents the acceptance of any form of injustice, and the doctrine of divine incomparability does not allow God to be associated with either the male gender in language or the father figure, as is the case in the other two monotheisms. The second dimension is related to knowledge, indicated in the appeal of the Qur'anic verse "Read" (*Iqra'*, Qur'an 96:1). The third dimension is that of remembrance (*al-dhikr*), since Islam presents itself as a synthesis of the other two historically preceding monotheisms. The fourth dimension is the rationalist invitation to the believer to exert reasoning (*al-'aql*). The fifth is the socio-political one, based on the concept of justice (*al-'adl*), which rehabilitates the role of women in society.

More specifically, Lamrabet's Qur'anic reading is inspired by three hermeneutical levels: 1) the holistic reading of the Qur'an (*al-qirā'a al-shumūliyya*) enables the restoration of the issue of women's rights within the universal spiritual message of equality for all human beings; 2) the teleological reading (*al-qirā'a al-maqāṣidiyya*) aims to shed light on the purposes of the Qur'an (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*); 3) the contextual reading, based on the effort (*ijtihad*) of the interpreter, as a fundamental tool, enables the consistency of the spiritual message within its context and in relation to the challenges of its changing times.

Furthermore, on the basis of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's hermeneutics and in agreement with other reformist theologians, Lamrabet distinguishes three types of Qur'anic verses: 1) universal, 2) conjunctural and 3) specific. First, among the universal verses there are those addressed to men and women without distinction. These are centred on values of justice and equality, which constitute the foundation of behavioural ethics inspired by spiritual piety (*taqwā*). Second, conjunctural verses concern some practices historically placed, like the ones related to war, slavery, corporal punishment, and concubinage. Third, specific verses, circumstantiated to particular situations of Muhammad's era, have purposes that must be understood beyond a literalist interpretation, which is anachronistic today, like the verses on polygamy, inheritance, testimony in the case of a fixed-term financial debt (Qur'an 2:282) or the power of male correction over his wife, deduced in a "scandalously discriminatory

manner”²⁴ by the more rigorist exegetes from the verse (4:34). Lamrabet argues that these last verses should instead be interpreted in the light of “Qur’anic pedagogy,” i.e. the pedagogical spirit of the Sacred Text aimed at bringing about a gradual transformation of the discriminations existing in the early Islamic society, which Revelation did not fully correct.²⁵ One example concerns polygamy, which the Qur’an reduces to four wives compared to the limitlessness of the pre-Islamic period, inserting the moral and material obligation of equal treatment of wives by the polygamist. The rationale for polygamy is related to the high number of widows and orphans following the battles of the early Islamic period. Nevertheless, the more traditionalist interpreters, in addition to undervaluing the need to provide for the care and maintenance of these more-disadvantaged individuals, have interpreted the verse (4: 3) as a unilateral male right, thus underestimating the Qur’anic call for monogamy, which is based on the Qur’anic observation that male equity towards multiple wives is difficult.²⁶

In *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran: quelle égalité?* (2012), Lamrabet presents a holistic approach to reading the Qur’an based on its overall transversal values, historical contextualisation, and prophetic tradition. The result is a more mature Qur’anic exegesis than her earlier works aimed at demonstrating that the recipient of Revelation is the human being (*al-insān*) without any distinction of gender. In this sense, she calls her approach “theology of *insān*” or “epistemology of *tawhīd*,” proving the Qur’anic conformity of gender equality according to ten arguments, also inspired by the work of other intellectuals of Islamic feminism (such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir Hosseini). These issues are explored further in her later work *Islam et femmes: Les questions qui fâchent* (Islam and Women: The Troublesome Questions, 2017).

- 1) The first argument in favour of gender equality is related to the creation of human beings, where there is a clear Qur’anic declaration of equality in the first verse of the fourth Sura, as God “created you from a single soul” (where “from a single soul” in Arabic is “*min nafsin wāḥidatin*”). Islamic creation is an alternative to the derivative creation of woman from the male’s rib as is described in the other two monotheisms.
- 2) The second refers to the responsibility of human beings (*al-khilāfa*) on the earth which belongs to both men and women (Qur’an, 2:30). Moreover,

24 Asma Lamrabet, *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran: quelle égalité?* (Paris: Al-Bouraq, 2012), 32.

25 Lamrabet, *Femmes et hommes*, 36.

26 Lamrabet, *Femmes et hommes*, 34–35.

the words referring to the divine viceregent on earth are *ādam* (Qur'an, 11:31) and *al-insān* (Qur'an, 33:72), which are not only male terms.

- 3) The third refers to moral integrity or piety (*al-taqwā*), as the only criterion of evaluation of human beings by God beyond gender differences.
- 4) The fourth concerns the recipients of Revelation: the Qur'anic plural male nouns refer to both women and men, according to the Arabic language, e.g. *yā ayyuhā l-nās* ("O believers, O people"). The Qur'an's appeal to all believers could also have been encouraged by the request of one of the Prophet's wives, Umm Salama, to see the right of women to receive the Qur'anic message on an equal basis with men.²⁷
- 5) The fifth argument refers to marriage, which must be based on Qur'anic ethics, thus it must be conceived as a mutual union inspired by love, harmony, and respect between husband and wife: marriage is not a contract to buy a woman and her reproductive capacity, as its aim is mutual welfare (*ma'rūf*), as emerges from the Qur'anic verse (2:187) "they are a garment for you, and you are garment for them" (*hunna libāsun lakum wa-antum libāsun lahunna*).
- 6) The sixth argument refers to political and familial responsibility (*wilāya*) which is valid for both men and women. Lamrabet considers that this concept is already part of the Moroccan Family Code where, starting from its reform in 2004, the family is under the responsibility of both husband and wife, and women are not obliged to obey the husband, as was the case before 2004.
- 7) The seventh concept refers to the right of all believers, including women, to be responsible for leadership in the public sphere (*al-qiwāma al-āmma*), according to the Qur'anic principles of equity and justice.
- 8) The eighth concept concerns the anachronism of inequality in the inheritance law, related to the rationale of *qiwāma* in the family sphere. *Qiwāma* was originally linked to the male obligation to support women and the family, to which an unequal inheritance would correspond, in accordance with the early Islamic period's social structure. But this rule is discriminatory today, since more and more women work and contribute to the family budget or are breadwinners themselves: they are therefore all the more entitled to a fair inheritance.
- 9) The ninth argument is a critique of the classical interpretations which consider the juridical testimony of two women as equivalent to the testimony of one man. According to Lamrabet, this only concerns some

27 This event is related in some *tafāsīr* of the verse (33: 35) by Ibn Kathīr, al-Ṭabarī and Ibn 'Āshūr. Lamrabet, *Femmes et hommes*, 59–67.

financial contracts during the first Islamic period, as the Qur'anic verse (2:282) suggests. Today, however, there is no reason for this discrimination because of women's professional capacity also in this sector.

- 10) The tenth concept concerns marital divorce, envisaged in the Qur'an as the fruit of a shared choice and conjugal co-responsibility (4:35 and 4:130). For Lamrabet, there is no doubt that women have the right to ask for divorce, as also envisaged by the new Moroccan *Mudawwana* of 2004. In addition to these ten arguments in favour of gender equality, Lamrabet has her position on other topics concerning sexual and reproductive rights. On the prohibition of marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man, because of lineage preservation requirements, Lamrabet argues that if the verse (2:221) – "Do not marry unbelieving women, until they believe" – prohibits marrying non-Muslims, this rule should concern all believers or none, and not only women. Moreover, women's obligation of legal retreat (*'idda*) should be abolished or, as Amina Wadud also argues, extended to men as well if understood as a period of reflection for the reunion of the couple.²⁸ As to the right for non-therapeutic abortion, Lamrabet considers it as a personal choice to be legalised and not to be criminally prohibited as it is in Morocco. As for homosexual relations, she respects them while defining them as counter-nature insofar as they are non-reproductive, but she is against their criminalisation in the Penal Code, as well as the criminalisation of sexual relations not regulated by marriage.²⁹ These concepts in favour of gender equality are elaborated according to her hermeneutic method:

Firstly, on reading the Qur'an, then on some classical and contemporary *tafāsīr* and then on the most important *ḥadīth*. I first collect all the Qur'anic verses on the topic I intend to explore, then the main *tafāsīr* on the subject, and then some reliable *ḥadīth* that are not in opposition to the Qur'an, since, as Abu Shuqqa says, the *ḥadīth* must not contradict the Qur'an, but only explain it. So, I make a choice: for Qur'anic exegesis, I choose one Qur'anic commentary from each classical school: there is the historical compilation school of al-Ṭabarī, then there is Ibn Kathīr, then there are the traditionalists like al-Qurṭubī and then there is the rationalist school of al-Zamakhsharī. I choose one commentary for each approach then I compare different interpretations of a verse. I then delve into more recent authors, focusing mainly on the exegesis of the *Nahḍa* theorists Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida and Ibn 'Ashur. To fully

²⁸ Lamrabet, interview, Rabat 2012.

²⁹ Ibid.

understand the nuances of Qur'anic Arabic, I use the *Encyclopaedia of the Arabic Language*, which explains the various meanings of the most difficult terms. I also read up on jurisprudence, especially with Abu Shuqqa's text *Tahrīr al-mar'a fī-ʿaṣr al-risāla* (*Encyclopédie de la femme en Islam*), which compares the versions of the four legal schools on every topic related to women. In the end, I arrive at my personal interpretation, based on assessments of the reality in which I live. I too have the right to interpret the Qur'an!³⁰

Lamrabet states that she has developed such a method without following the teachings of any school of religious training and that she is inspired by *ijtihād* as an alternative to the imitative method of *taqlīd*:

The closing of the door of *ijtihād* was inadequate, because it made the adaptation of Islam to social evolution more difficult. Islam has an evolutionary nature and *ijtihād* serves to adapt it to the reality; the *taqlīd* [the imitation of the precedent interpretations] is blind.³¹

5 A Reformist and Decolonial *Gender Jihad*

Lamrabet is very active nationally and internationally. At the national level, she has come into collaborative contact with secular intellectuals and activists, and she is a reference for many pro-gender equality Muslims. A central figure in her intellectual and human path was the well-known Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, who always supported Lamrabet and considered her as her intellectual heir by attending a number of public initiatives together or inviting her to speak in her own place at conferences on the topic of women and Islam. Mernissi also involved Lamrabet in the initiative *Majlis al-ḥiwār* (Council for dialogue) which involves some Moroccan secular and religious intellectuals and activists with the aim of building bridges between different societal projects and political perspectives.

At the international level, Lamrabet's work and network are extensive: she increasingly receives invitations to international meetings and conferences around the globe and she is part of some transnational networks such as

³⁰ Idem. Lamrabet is referring here to the work of Abd al-Halim Abu Shuqqa, *De la femme en Islam* (1–11) (Paris: Al-Qalam, 2007), which first appeared in Arabic in multiple volumes in the 1990s as *Tahrīr al-mar'a fī-ʿaṣr al-risāla*.

³¹ Ibid.

Musawah, which is composed by Muslim scholars, females and males, engaged in the struggle for gender equality in Muslim-majority countries as well as in the diaspora.

Since she contends that Muslim women's rights have been instrumentalised both by Western discourses and by rigorous Islamic discourses, in the name of deconstructing both these approaches, she defines her own perspective as "reformist and decolonial":

To be reformist means to claim equal rights for men and women starting from the reference of human rights and within a critique of the Islamic reference. The adjective decolonial, on the other hand, refers to the need to base one's approach on one's own cultural context by criticising the hegemony of Western discourses imposed in the relationship of domination between the North and the global South.³²

In this regard, she has been, for instance, responsible for the teaching module on Islamic feminism at the summer school *Critical Muslim Studies: Decolonial Struggles, Theology of Liberation and Islamic Revival*, organized annually in Granada, in collaboration with the University of California, Berkeley. She is also the responsible for Gender studies within the Euroarabe Foundation in Granada. In 2014, in Cairo, Lamrabet was awarded the prize *Femme arabe pour la Sociologie* by *Munazzamat al-mar'a al-'arabiyya* (Arab Women Organization). In 2017, she was awarded the prize Prix Grand Atlas by the French Embassy in Morocco for her book *Islam et Femmes: Les questions qui fâchent*. Such international recognition, coupled with the (partial) religious legitimation, the support of Mernissi, and an array of voices from the world of both secular and religious intellectuals and activists, have contributed to making Lamrabet's voice increasingly known and influent in the public debate in Morocco.

6 The Debate on Equality in Inheritance Law (2018): A Turning Point

Asma Lamrabet has always navigated wisely in the Moroccan public debate. Here, the so-called red lines, "God, Land, King," which make the motto of the anthem of the country, are in many cases self-censuring to intellectuals and journalists. Lamrabet adopted a communication strategy that I would define as made "in waves": she won the trust of Muslim and secular audiences, to whom

³² Lamrabet, interview, Rabat 2013.

she spoke cautiously over time, not participating in the debate in a provocative or aggressive manner, thus making important statements counter to the hegemonic discourse in a balanced manner, and then allowing the debate time to fulfil itself on the issues she raised while avoiding unnecessary polemics.

While the magazine *TelQuel* described her in 2013, erroneously, as an Islamist intellectual, in one of the interviews I had with her, she described herself as a “secular Muslim,” a believer who advocates the creation of a rule of law in which state institutions are independent of religion and guarantee individual rights and freedoms of all citizens without any distinction of gender, ethnicity or religion.³³

In March 2012 when interviewed by the magazine *Femmes du Maroc* about the possible first political gesture she would take if she were to become Minister of Islamic Affairs, she stated that she would abolish the Ministry itself, because, in her view, there should be no religious ministry in a state that wants to call itself “under the rule of law.”³⁴ On the other hand, in her view, citizens should be left with full freedom of conscience, as provided for in the Qur’an (“No constraint is there in religion”, Qur’an 2:256). In the 2013 *TelQuel* interview, she went on to say that mosques could be mixed, in accordance with what happened in Muhammad’s times.³⁵ Despite these relevant declarations, it is her declaration in favour of gender equality in inheritance law that ended her trajectory as a public religious authority.

Gender equality in inheritance law has been particularly at the centre of Moroccan public debate when in 2015 the National Committee for Human Rights (*al-Majlis al-waṭanī li-ḥuqūq al-insān*, known as CNDH from its French acronym), called for an end to inequalities in inheritance law in application of the principle of equality between men and women recognised in the Constitution adopted after the popular protest led by the 20th of February Movement in 2011.³⁶

33 Lamrabet, interview, Rabat 2012.

34 Asma Lamrabet interviewed by Fedwa Misk, *Femmes du Maroc*, Dossier 8–14/3/2013, Casablanca, 2013.

35 Asma Lamrabet interviewed by Jules Crètois, *Tel Quel* 561, 8–14/3/2013, pp. 4–5, 2013.

36 Sara Borrillo, “Le mouvement du 20 Février et la réforme constitutionnelle au Maroc: un compromis démocratique suffisant? Une lecture de genre,” in Fatima Sadiqi, ed., *Femmes et nouveaux media dans la région méditerranéenne*, v/18 (Fondation Hanns Seidel: Rabat, 2012), 303–324; “Women’s Movements and the Recognition of Gender Equality in the Constitution-Making Process in Morocco and Tunisia (2011–2014),” in Helen Irving and Ruth Rubio Marin, eds., *Women as Constitution Makers: Case Studies from the New Democratic Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 31–80.

The debate on the issue started after the publication of the CNDH Report on the 20th of October 2015 entitled *Etat de l'égalité et de la parité au Maroc. Préserver et rendre effectifs les finalités et objectifs constitutionnels* [State of equality and parity in Morocco. Preserving and making effective the constitutional aims and objectives], calling for the adaptation of all Moroccan laws to Article 19 of the 2011 Constitution, which provides for the protection of equality between men and women, albeit in continuity with the country's constants (*al-thawābit*). Moreover, the text denounces the delays of the APALD, (the Authority for parity and the fight against all forms of discrimination, according to its French acronym),³⁷ provided by Article 19 – delays in the equal nomination of access to public institutional roles, in women's full access to education and work, reproductive health (clandestine abortions), and equal pay. The Report also calls to end gender stereotypes and violence, as well as phenomena that are still in practice in especially rural and disadvantaged areas, such as child marriage and marriage before the age of 18. In the section of the Report dealing with the transposition of non-discrimination and equality into the national legal system, a paragraph is precisely devoted to denouncing the inequality of inheritance law and the increase in economic vulnerability that the status quo of inheritance redistribution contributes to. This paragraph also refers to the unequal distribution of collective land inheritance suffered by women belonging to ancient tribes (this issue questions the legislation passed during the French protectorate and which has recently seen a major mobilisation of women excluded from the distribution of collective lands).³⁸ Moreover, the Report denounces the feminisation of poverty, in particular the economic marginality for single mothers, women heads of households, widows, orphans, and the system of obedience in exchange for maintenance which characterises male-female relations in the Moroccan family.

The publication of the Report provoked a strong resistance from the more conservative voices of society and particularly of the class of the ulama of the Higher Council of Ulama, who in 2008 (on 17th December) published an ad hoc communiqué against the removal of the reservations placed by the Moroccan legal system on the transposition of the provisions of the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women), stating that the provisions on inheritance law would never be subject to the removal

37 *Autorité pour la Parité et la Lutte contre les Discriminations envers les femmes* (APALD).

38 Yasmine Berriane and Fadma Ait-Mous, "Droit à la terre et lutte pour l'égalité au Maroc: Le mouvement des soulaliyates", in Hassan Rachik (dir.), *Contester le droit. Communautés, familles et héritage au Maroc* (Casablanca: La Croisée des Chemins, 2016), 87–173; Soraya El-Kahlaoui, *Landless Moroccans* (Documentary Movie: Morocco, 50').

of reservations, because the Qur'an is clear on the matter. On the other side, the modernist civil society animated the public debate with an Avaaz petition and with several collective research projects and books.³⁹ Some of the most relevant books were:

- 1) *Min ajli naqāsh mujtama'ī ḥawl manzūma al-mawārīth* (For a public debate on the inheritance system), by the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc – ADFM), published in Arabic and French in 2015;
- 2) *Women's Inheritance: A Multidisciplinary Perspective on Inheritance in Morocco*, published in 2017, edited by Siham Benchekroun;
- 3) *Les hommes défendent l'égalité en héritage* (Men stand up for equality in inheritance), published in 2017 in French and Arabic, edited by Hakima Labbar.

Lamrabet contributed to *Women's Inheritance* edited by Benchekroun with a chapter on the theological debate on inheritance law and on 17th March 2018, during a book presentation at the International University of Rabat, she declared herself in favour of gender equality in the inheritance law. Although she made it clear that her statements were personal and did not represent the institutional opinion of the Ulama League centre (CERFI) she was heading then, this element was overlooked by the press, and the news soon reached a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Ulama League that was taking place in Marrakech. Thanks to anonymous sources, we know that when contacted by an assistant to the League secretary, she said that the article failed to emphasize that the statements were made as personal opinions and not on behalf of the institution, and said, however, that she took responsibility for her own declarations; and that if this called into question her leadership at the research centre, she would resign so as not to harm the institution. One day later, Lamrabet received communication about the acceptance of her resignation; the scholar Farida Zoumourru was appointed as Director of the CERFI by being defined by the League of Ulama's press release as a guarantor of the country's constants.

After this event, Lamrabet started to receive threats on social media by conservatives, while she was receiving messages of solidarity from the secular voices of this public debate.

She continued to work but away from the spotlight, and about a year after (on 20th October 2019) she posted on her Facebook profile an article

39 *Femmes du Maroc*, "100 personnalités s'engagent contre la règle successorale du Ta'sib", 21/3/2018, <https://femmesdumaroc.com/archives/petition-100-personnalites-marocaines-sengagent-contre-la-regle-successorale-du-tasib>.

entitled “Voile ou hijab des femmes musulmanes entre l’idéologie coloniale et l’idéologie islamique traditionaliste: une vision décoloniale,”⁴⁰ which was presented in 2013 during the Granada summer school on Critical Muslim studies. After receiving much criticism, she posted a relevant declaration:

The point here is to reaffirm that it is legitimate for Muslim women today to question concepts such as modernity and emancipation, and their respective instrumentalisation by a hegemonic ideological discourse that is said to be universal and today has frankly racist overtones ... And it is legitimate for these same women to also question the unique, consensual, and patriarchal interpretation of the sacred texts by a male scholarly elite that has decided what should be the NORM for these same women!!! Freedom of choice ... that is all that matters ... the rest is pure totalitarian logic: that of political instrumentalization on the one hand and religious instrumentalization on the other: Let’s free ourselves once and for all from these puerile and distressing debates and discourses ...⁴¹

One hour later, after receiving other criticism, she published a photo of herself without the hijab and with this declaration:

To be “liberated” is not to be liberated in dress or outward appearance ... to be liberated is to be free from all alienation, from all hegemonic ideologies ... and as a believer my only alienation is my love for the Creator of this World who created us FREE and WITH DIGNITY ...

7 Conclusions

The research carried out so far allows us to distinguish four phases of Lamrabet’s intellectual journey: 1) knowledge-seeking, 2) religious accreditation and official legitimization, 3) her institutional role within an established religious institution, and 4) a free and public intellectual in total freedom of thought. The personal, intellectual and public path of Asma Lamrabet, visible

⁴⁰ “Voile ou hijab des femmes musulmanes entre l’idéologie coloniale et l’idéologie islamique traditionaliste: une vision décoloniale”, 20 October 2019; accessed the same day: <http://www.asma-lamrabet.com/articles/voile-ou-hijab-des-femmes-musulmanes-entre-l-ideologie-coloniale-et-l-ideologie-islamique-traditionaliste-une-vision-decoloni/?fbclid=IwARoieqE-DTe3gEWFZ2bPOFPnn7dObPKhoT-tkKzVolYiQl-9p3pKdajPi9o>.

⁴¹ Capital letters are original. Translation from French is mine.

through her articulated thought and her prolific publishing activity, testifies that she is one of the most authoritative personalities in the field of contemporary Islamic feminist thought in Morocco and globally. Although without an official religious title, Lamrabet has managed to acquire religious authority in a self-negotiated trajectory by building a solid body of knowledge capable of deconstructing certain stereotypes and strongholds of Islamic discriminatory readings against women. Her discourse crosses national borders, increasingly proving to be a reference for Muslim women and reformist Muslims in Muslim-majority countries as well as in the diaspora. Moreover, Lamrabet does not uncritically adhere to the white feminist emancipation model and does not question her own faith either. She proves to be an authoritative voice aimed at stimulating a critical consciousness as an alternative to pure imitation of the classical Islamic tradition regarding gender issues. She constantly collaborates with colleagues from other nationalities and religions.

Lamrabet represented a unique case in the institutions of official Moroccan Islam, where freely expressing one's opinions away from the official line is not an easy task. Her resignation from the CERFI of the League of Ulama in Rabat demonstrates a difficulty in the opening of religious institutions to components of society committed to the struggle for the protection of women according to the principle of gender equality. Lamrabet manages to be a bridge between secular and religious components of society and the setback in her institutional journey represents the resistance to dialogue and collaboration between different societal projects. If her institutional path has come to a halt, despite her work on knowledge production, education and interreligious dialogue within and beyond Muslim-majority societies continues and does not seem to be deterred by obstacles. In fact, she continues to be very active, by giving lectures and conferences and by being a prolific essayist as evidenced by many translations of her books into different languages and by her latest books: recently she has devoted her research to the mystical figure of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya,⁴² and, in collaboration with two other Muslim women scholars, she has published a direct Qur'anic exegesis alternative to masculine hegemonic interpretations.⁴³ Moreover, she is a member of a collective for fundamental freedoms which has been founded in Morocco in 2022 aimed to promote fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of faith and

42 Lamrabet, Asma, *Rabīyya al-Adawīyya. Mystique et liberté* (Paris: Al-Bouraq, 2022).

43 Lamrabet Asma, Tabbara Nayla, Monturiol Jaratullah, *30 Jours avec le Coran* (Paris: Al-Bouraq, 2023).

belief and gender equality in inheritance.⁴⁴ New possibilities of engagement seem always on her horizon.

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