

# Islamic Feminism and Its Role in Cinema

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## Background

*“Muslim women form a highly diverse and complex group and assumptions about them are often ill-conceived, mis-informed and grossly mis-represented. This is often reflected in images of them, particularly in the West, as oppressed, powerless and victimised. The voices of Muslim women, striving to keep their religious identity in Western contexts, are seriously under-represented within academic research.”*<sup>1</sup>

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in Islamic culture as a fundamentalist and sensationalist phenomenon. Media coverage and Western scholarship often views Muslim women as an oppressed mute victim and ‘asserts or implies that Islam itself oppresses women’.<sup>2</sup> Islamic Feminism and Its Role in Cinema is a study derived to counter react the portrayal of Muslim women by the media.

## Objectives

The main aim is to advocate the Muslim woman’s gender role, in an attempt to break the shackles of the suppressed Muslim woman stereotype, thereby advocating a feminist agenda. Gender is often used as an academic method of analysis to challenge the established views of culture, society, politics and literary production<sup>3</sup>. A conflict in theory is the confusion and controversy around the label ‘Islamic feminism’ with different strands, types, waves and tropes being suggested by various scholars that the current research is trying to identify.

## Methods

The proposed research practice will use the film medium as a tool to recover a loquacious account of a Muslim woman of merit and importance. The purpose of the study is to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of film practice as a research method. Part of the objectives for practice as research is to investigate the creative-academic issues raised by practice as research, especially where film practice is concerned, in representing practical-creative research within academic contexts.<sup>4</sup> The research uses cultural studies interdisciplinary methods, working across various subject areas including anthropology, feminist political theory, screen studies and Middle Eastern studies. A critical and self-reflexive approach is applied to the study rather than a grounded subjective approach, which is normally associated with feminist studies.<sup>5</sup> The film medium will be used to evaluate theory and research methods. The study and the data-gathering process is guided by the following questions:

- What is Islamic feminism?
- What it means to be an Islamic feminist?
- To what extent could Muslim women filmmakers be described as Islamic feminists?
- How would you describe filmmakers as Islamic?
- Could there be such a thing as an Islamic feminist cinema practice?
- What can be learnt from film techniques and strategies?
- How does theory inform the film practice?

## Results

The distinct feature that makes this work original is that the research employs filmmaking practice as a qualitative data-gathering method, analysing and experimenting with the film medium. The film medium is used to evaluate the effectiveness of practice-based research as an academic method.



*“Yas”, 2008. A still image taken from an experimental project by Sabina Shah. A series of photographs accompanied with a sound-recorded interview.*



*“Untitled”, 2009. An experimental still image focussing on the representation of the Muslim woman by Sabina Shah.*

## Conclusion

Islamic feminists and Muslim women activists have sought to determine the cause of discrimination against women by examining the effects on Muslim women of patriarchy, kinship and norms within Muslim and non-Muslim societies.<sup>6</sup> Overall trends in the published material focus on colonialism, Orientalism and the media as the cause of discrimination against the Muslim woman’s identity. An extensive study of the research literature has failed to identify how Muslim women filmmakers represent Muslim women and whether they support an Islamic feminist agenda.

Mobilised aesthetics are used as part of a recovery project of gutsy and powerful Muslim women. The research intends to create an awareness of the achievements of Muslim women, breaking conventional stereotypes by applying the film medium. By manipulating mixed media and film techniques to form a collage of imagery, cine dialects will attempt to expatiate the empowered Muslim woman. The current thesis will generate and produce a short animated film, to exercise the dynamics of experimental film practice, articulating a social and political reality.

## References

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