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## The Merits and Limits of a Gendered Epistemology: Muslim Women and the Politics of Knowledge Production

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## **The Merits and Limits of a Gendered Epistemology: Muslim Women and the Politics of Knowledge Production**

By Farhana Rahman<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

At their essence, feminist epistemologies argue that traditional male epistemologies have systematically removed the voice of women from knowledge production, effectively barring women from being “knowers”. How does the gendering of knowledge affect those with a particular perspective of viewing the world? This article explores the merits and limitations of a gendered epistemology by employing standpoint theory as a tool of analysis. Through the lens and context of the intersection of religion, gender, and Western academia, I trace the politics of knowledge production as it relates to Muslim women working within an Islamic paradigm. This article first explores gender as a category of analysis that came out of feminist epistemologies. It discusses the merits of allowing gender to be the primary and focal point of our knowledge, and consequently, how it has been employed within a particular Islamic paradigm. By drawing on the works of postcolonial theory, it then considers the limitations of such a process. The gendered epistemologies associated with Western secular thought – by placing gender as the primary category of analysis – have led to a uni-dimensional and monolithic understanding of what it means to be “gendered” for “Third World women”, particularly Muslim women. I interrogate this notion of a gendered epistemology as the only way of knowing by suggesting that a cross-cultural and intersectional “set of perspectives that place the category of gender within the category of other frameworks of ‘difference’” (Nye, 2003: 97) – in this case religion – pursues a more nuanced approach that is attune to a variety of epistemologies rather than a single unified gendered epistemology.

*Keywords:* Gendered Epistemology, Standpoint Theory, Postcolonial Feminism, Muslim Women

### **Introduction**

*My project is not to entertain readers with one more exotic tale or shock them with another astounding revelation about womanhood in a faraway place. All I wish to do is communicate another mode of being female. But this is more easily said than done.*

– Marnia Lazreg (1994a: 6)

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To be “another mode of being female” (Lazreg, 1994a: 6) gives caution to what defines our understanding of being a female, a woman, someone viewed as an “Other” (Frank, 2010: 1) within an already established framework of knowledge and understanding of the world. It prompts us to question our own subjectivities and modes of knowledge production that lie somewhere between different traditions and frameworks. The intersection of gender, religion, and secularism plays a profound role in our understanding of knowledge production and challenges the ways in which we traditionally see such approaches as distinct categories and, most importantly, where epistemology comes into the discussion.

Epistemology is defined as a theory of knowledge, the study of creation and basis of knowledge itself (Harding, 1987). It attempts to understand how we know what we know and how we decide what is valid knowledge. It poses the questions: “How is knowledge constructed?” “Does knowledge lead to truth?” “Who can be a knower?” – that is, who is privy to interpreting and developing knowledge? (Harding, 1987: 3) If this is the definition of “epistemology” what then can be said of a “gendered epistemology”? Gender represents a social concept that considers the difference of roles, norms, and meanings that societies prescribe on how men and women operate within a social process. It is important to note that too often, the category of gender is reduced to mean “women” rather than considering gender as an inclusive category of analysis. To be “gendered” however, is to suggest that the experiences of one gender take precedence over another in a specific situation. Thus, a gendered epistemology – the gendering of knowledge – gives reference to a particular gender as a knower from a gendered standpoint.

This article aims to explore the merits and limitations of a gendered epistemology by employing standpoint theory as a tool of analysis. It does this through the lens and context of the intersection of religion, gender, and Western academia. How does the gendering of knowledge affect those with a particular perspective of viewing the world? Through the lens of religion I trace the politics of knowledge production as it relates to Muslim women working within an Islamic paradigm. It also discusses how a “Western academic” hegemonic approach on gendered epistemology essentialises experiences of what it means to be a “woman”, as non-Western women’s identities are seen as monolithic (Gouws, 1996; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1988). This essay first explores gender as a category of analysis that came out of feminist epistemologies. It discusses the merits of allowing gender to be the primary and focal point of our knowledge, and consequently, how it has been employed within a particular Islamic paradigm. By drawing on the works of postcolonial theory, it then considers the limitations of such a process. The gendered epistemologies associated with Western secular thought – by placing gender as the primary category of analysis – have led to a uni-dimensional and monolithic understanding of what it means to be “gendered” for “Third World women”, particularly Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Alexander and Mohanty: 2001, 495; Frank 2010). I interrogate this notion of a gendered epistemology as the only way of knowing by suggesting that a cross-cultural and intersectional “set of perspectives that place the category of gender within the category of other frameworks of ‘difference’” – in this case religion – pursues a more nuanced approach that is attune to a variety of epistemologies rather than a single unified gendered epistemology (Nye, 2003: 97; Waller, 2005: 154; Zine 2004).

### **Muslim Women and the Merits of Standpoint Theory**

Donna Haraway, in her essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988), suggests that the historical approach to an

androcentric/gynocentric binary must be removed where knowledge is divided between who is a “knower” and who is not. She questions our understanding of who claims to be a knower as she writes, “feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence of splitting subject and object” (1988: 583). It goes beyond a conception of the “God trick” that claims authority over all knowledge production (1988: 581). Haraway thus posits:

My crude characterization does not end up with an “objective world” or “nature,” but it certainly does insist on the world. This world must always be articulated, from people’s points of view, through “situated knowledge”... These knowledge are friendly to science, but do not provide any grounds for history-escaping inversions and amnesia about how articulations get made, about their political semiotics, if you will. I think the world is precisely what gets lost in doctrines of representation and scientific objectivity (1992: 313).

The use of “situated knowledge” was born out of a critique of psychologist Carol Gilligan’s epistemological project. In her book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1982) she argued against Lawrence Kohlberg’s exclusive use of boys as main participants in his project of understanding moral development and reasoning, as it neglected the experiences and moral development of girls. Gilligan thus provided a counter study to Kohlberg’s approach by claiming the “existence of a ‘different voice’ in moral reason”. Based on a purely one-sided approach to research that allowed the male voice to prevail, Gilligan challenged scientific “objectivity”. She stated that major scientific research failed to be objective and had with it a bias that played to favour the voice of one gender over another (1982: 170). She denounced the androcentric epistemological framework to which she was confined, which was a white, western, male-centered epistemology. This helped to illuminate an inherently gendered framework for understanding, which separated what it meant to be “male” and “female”. Her project heralded a new way of approaching knowledge and the emergence of a flourishing conception of feminist epistemologies.

Feminist epistemologies, as a response to an androcentric/gynocentric epistemological bias, placed “gender” as the focal point of epistemic analysis; they did not merely seek to give a renewed “woman’s voice”, but rather they carved out a new understanding of epistemology as a discipline. Linda Alcoff writes: “*Feminist epistemologies*, is meant to indicate that the term does not have a single referent...Feminist theorists have used the term variously to refer to women’s ‘ways of knowing,’ ‘women’s experience,’ or simply ‘women’s knowledge’” (1993: 1; emphasis in original). However, this is not to suggest that it is simply a way of “adding women” into a larger epistemological narrative; rather it is a renewed manner in which to see the world from a female gendered lens that puts gender as the primary category of analysis (Harding, 1987).

A gendered epistemology is further about power, about situating oneself within the political and physical spaces in which one can claim to be a knower, of upholding their gendered epistemology, and mostly for allowing us to understand one group’s claim of knowledge over another in order to arrive at an objective epistemic standpoint. Michel Foucault explores this concept of the role of power in knowledge by stating: “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (1977: 27). Knowledge was created to challenge power and in taking the production of power back, people are creating the power structures that govern their life bodies.

The idea of a gendered epistemology – by giving specific reference to a particular gender as a “knower” from a gendered standpoint – was developed to argue against traditional understandings of knowledge production. The merits lie in considering the way a gendered position influences modes of knowing. In *Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is “Strong Objectivity”?* (1993: 54), Sandra Harding contends that within the concept of feminist epistemologies is the idea that “knowledge claims are always socially situated”. Such claims conceptualise ways of knowing, and within the larger field of epistemology proper, gender as a category helps construct a gendered standpoint, through which the world can be viewed from a different perspective. The gendered identity of the knower plays a significant role in understanding how individuals claim knowledge in relation to other aspects of their lives.

It is within this framework that I demonstrate how gendered epistemology through the lens of standpoint theory could prove useful for Muslim women working within and under an Islamic paradigm.<sup>2</sup> As a group that has failed to be recognised as knowers by overarching and established ways of understanding, Muslim women argue that their standpoint as women within Islam is integral to understanding a gendered concept of Islam’s epistemology (Ishaque, 2013). This points towards a merit of standpoint epistemologies by providing women with a framework for the “dissemination and understanding of Islamic knowledge from a gendered standpoint” (Ishaque, 2013: 339). Uma Narayan thus suggests a general merit that feminist epistemologies bring to the prevailing discourse is that it:

...resembles the efforts of many oppressed groups to reclaim for themselves the value of their own experience. The writing of novels that focused on working-class life in England or the lives of black people in the United States shares a motivation similar to that of feminist epistemology - to depict an experience different from the norm and to assert the value of this difference (2004: 214).

At its essence, feminist epistemologies argue that traditional male epistemologies have systematically removed the voice of women from knowledge production, effectively barring women from being knowers. By Narayan’s stance on what a gendered epistemology can provide to those employing it, women in an Islamic paradigm are able to “depict an experience” that is different from what is usually established in male-dominated epistemologies (Ishaque, 2013). Within Islamic discourses, a burgeoning wave of women are using their gendered standpoints to argue that male-centered epistemological readings of Islamic texts prevent women from redefining Islamic knowledge through a gendered lens, thereby trapping knowledge within a patriarchal cage. Knowledge was seen to be limited to the male sphere and as something that could only be understood by androcentric readings by male authorities. This approach came at a time when a new form of feminism had risen – what scholars such as Margot Badran (2005) have called “Islamic feminism”. This was a feminism created by Muslim women to negotiate their identities within an Islamic framework, and fight for women’s empowerment using the religious text – the Qur’an. To this end, Badran writes, “Islamic feminism is expressed in a single or paramount religiously grounded discourse taking the Qur’an as its central text” (2005: 6). The rise of Islamic

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<sup>2</sup> I want to clarify that the notion of “Muslim women” I employ in this essay is not to essentialise and generalise the experiences of all Muslim women into a single mould, as Muslim women who align themselves with Islam inhabit various sectarian, ideological, and analytical understandings of the faith. Rather, I use this as a way to qualify the identity of women who not only subscribe to the faith but who actively see themselves as “practicing” it (in whichever form they do so).

feminism came at a time when Muslim women grew increasingly weary of patriarchal readings of Islam, thus:

...women shaped their own discourse *as women* from their own perspective and experience. By the start of the 1990s, it was becoming increasingly apparent that women were re/visioning a new feminism through their fresh readings of the Qur'an (Badran, 2005: 9).

It is important to note here that those employing a gendered epistemology do not believe that Islam itself gives men an epistemic privilege; rather this privilege is read in and through patriarchal readings of Islamic texts (the Qur'an and *Hadith* – sayings and teachings of Prophet Muhammad) by male-centered epistemology (Barlas, 2002). In *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, Miriam Cooke states that women “do not challenge the sacrality of the Qur'an, but they do examine the temporality of its interpretations” (2001: 62). The gendered epistemology is thus employed to challenge the male-dominated status quo.

Cooke (2001) upholds gendered epistemology in precisely these terms – an epistemology as opposed to a mere ideology. By employing their social standpoint and internal subjecthood women are “claiming Islam” by recasting their voices within a traditionally male-dominated sphere that, according to them, has erased the voices and experiences of women in public and discursive spaces of knowledge and knowledge-making within Islam:

Situating themselves as Islamic feminists, some are beginning to challenge conventional histories and canonical texts that either omit mention of women or stigmatize their prominence as aberration (Cooke, 2001: 62).

In this lies a clear merit in employing a gendered epistemology within this framework. Women challenge male epistemic privilege by situating their knowledge within the space they occupy in Islam as women – as agents of equal rationale able to be knowers and use their own thought processes to come to conclusions regarding Islam and Islamic texts. They attempt to “unread patriarchy” from the texts and take claim of the unprecedented importance given to women through Islam that has been written out of much of historical and political understanding (Barlas, 2002; Cooke, 2001). Further, by employing their gendered standpoint, gendered epistemology “can be used to uncover implicit androcentric assumptions in past research” (Jones, 2002: 78). Adis Duderija (2010: 1) thus states, “these works primarily focused on exposing, explaining, contesting and dislodging the male epistemic privilege in the formation and interpretation of religious sciences and tradition”.

Women are thus attempting to eliminate biases and the unbalanced gender dynamics of epistemology in Islam. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2004) suggests that there is a need for a paradigm shift; with the emergence of women who use their gendered standpoint to lay claim to knowledge, they could easily expose the inequalities in search of new questions and new answers. A gendered epistemology can have important consequences by ushering in a more “egalitarian spirit of Islam and the feminist quest for justice and a just world” (Mir-Hosseini, 2004: 4). The male-centered representation, as they believe only “depicts the world with relation to male or masculine interests, emotions, attitudes or values” (Anderson, 2012: 54).

Sandra Harding (1987) describes how both the researcher and research subject need to be socially located. Women engaged in a renewed gendered epistemology of Islam argue against male

hegemony in terms of production and establishment of official Islamic knowledge that have dictated the discourses surrounding Muslim women. Thus, some Muslim women are reclaiming their voices and their position against a largely male-centered episteme where knowledge is tied to the patriarchal voice:

As for me, I belong to no sanctioned interpretative community, nor am I a male, or even a recognized scholar of Islam... However, as a Muslim woman, I have a great deal at stake in combating repressive readings of the Qur'an and also in affirming that Islam not based in the idea of male epistemic privilege, or in a formally ordained interpretive community (Barlas, 2002: 209).

This merit points to the redefining of an established epistemology of knowledge production in Islam, which helps contribute to a discourse that asks what is missing and how the texts might be read differently if “researchers inquire into the subjective experience of groups often overlooked in traditional analysis, and, in the process, uncover a multiplicity of subjective truths” (Jones, 2002: 79). This gendered epistemology analyses issues of unequal distribution of power and promotes women’s agency and negotiation in culture and history. What becomes apparent is that it is an important epistemological project not only as a way of redressing wrongs that may have come about through interpretations that fail to account for the larger picture, but also as a way of expanding and deepening our understandings of what Islam reveals to Muslims. In sum, this gendered epistemology that asks the question of “who can be a knower” and within what gendered standpoint has allowed Muslim women working within an Islamic framework to adopt a gendered epistemology that works to reclaim their voices against male epistemic privilege. What can be argued then, is that a gendered epistemology within an Islamic paradigm can provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of how Islamic knowledge can be employed in our contemporary world. It can further allow for a critical understanding of what it means to be “gendered” within such a paradigm.

### **“Third World Muslim Women” and the Limits of Knowledge Production**

At this juncture it is necessary to problematise the notion of a gendered epistemology by considering the gaze of the “Other”. While there are indeed merits of a gendered epistemology, particularly in how some Muslim women are able to employ such a theory to further goals of Islamic knowledge production by embracing internal subjecthood, it serves to bring out the larger limitations of when gendered epistemology uses standpoint theory as a tool. This gendered epistemology works within a secular feminist framework that views the Other as a largely monolithic category. A homogenous category of “Third World woman” is juxtaposed against the patriarchal Muslim man and the supposed “oppressive” religion of Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Frank, 2010). It has given an ethnocentric notion to conceptual frameworks and engages in a violent politics of representation – in this case, of representing the Other as oppressed while focusing on their gender as the primary category of analysis through a Western lens, which can be seen as a clear limitation of gendered epistemology. It is what Marguerite Waller (2005: 155) states to be the “crucial exclusion” within the U.S. academy where “white academic feminist theory” has upheld the idea of which subjects are “knowers” and which are not.

In the same vein, considering the long history of racial tensions in the United States and discontent with the often essentialising nature of the original “white academic” approaches to

feminist standpoint theory, the experiences of African American women shaped Black feminist theory and praxis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Black feminist academics sought to emphasise the plurality and diversity of women's experiences at the intersections of various social structures including race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Building on the works of Alice Walker, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins constructed the concept of "Outsider Within" by way of a Black feminist epistemology. This framework was derived from the personal experience of Black women who often have to straddle two social worlds – the perspective of the dominant group on the one hand (academics), and the oppressed group on the other (black women), affording them a type of epistemic "double consciousness". It is thus as bell hooks described of her dual social positioning:

Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention of the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and centre. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole (1996: 156).

Alongside postcolonial feminists, black feminists thus envisioned feminist theories that take into account a plurality of women's intersectional experiences and the element of power relations. Chandra T. Mohanty discusses the power relations eschewed in how "Third World women" are constructed and theorised as "imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations" (*in* Gouws, 1996: 71) through the use of standpoint theory as a gendered epistemology. Women are treated as a homogenous ideal based on a blanket assumption of the sameness of their oppression (Mohanty, 1991). Thus, knowledge is constructed and has produced a homogenous and monolithic understanding of "women" resulting in a geographical Other. However, Third World women rejected the notion of this type of "global sisterhood":

The criticism on an epistemological level is aimed at the creation of global hegemony of Western scholarship by producing (ethnocentric) universal knowledge, which negates cross-cultural differences. Women as an analytical category are treated as an already constituted group. It is in essence a critique of epistemological foundationalism, which reflects the authority and standpoints of those who have the power to control knowledge production and dictates to but also silences those who are not scientists (Gouws, 1996: 72).

Ana Frank (2010) notes that the sweeping assumption of "sameness" and "sisterhood" suggests how the U.S. academy theorised "Third World women" through an "Orientalized feminist epistemology" – it placed "gender" at the focus of their conception creating a normative knowledge of the Other. By defining this "normative knowledge" it placed anything and everything outside of this framework automatically as the Other (Frank, 2010). The production of a gendered epistemology can thus be seen deeply entrenched within the historical project of colonial encounters. This type of gendered epistemology is "dependent upon power relations and primarily concerned with a contextual understanding of the dominant versus subordinate group" (Frank, 2010: 3). These power relations in knowledge have led to a hegemonic tendency of Western

epistemological thought (grounded in colonial thought) that have had a long built-in discourse of knowledge, which has lasted in the West (Frank, 2010; Mohanty, 1991). With regards to how knowledge and power are intricately interwoven, and how the production of knowledge is in essence the production of society, Foucault states that:

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations (1977: 27).

This forces us to scrutinise how for example, the knowledge of the "Third World oppressed Muslim woman" came to be. Rey Chow (1991: 93) writes that, "Vis-à-vis the non-Western woman, the white woman occupies the position, with the white man, as investigator with 'the freedom to speak'". This indeed points towards the epistemic privileging of the Western woman that claims to speak with authority over all Third World women. Black feminist intellectual Audre Lorde (1984) presents a critique of a universalised understanding of woman against this notion of a common "sisterhood" bound together by gender and apparently common oppressions. She argues that when working towards the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchal cages, Western feminist epistemologies ignore their "built-in privilege of whiteness" (Lorde, 1984).

It further calls into question the knowledge – and thus, production of knowledge – appropriated by colonial discourses that do not consider the categories of "difference" – such as religion – in the case of Muslim women. This epistemic privileging of the struggle against inequalities based solely on gender fails to consider other categories of being. It is due to the secular approach of the West which views Western discourses as the only "acceptable" epistemologies (Frank, 2010). Thus, religious discourse and understanding is not an "accepted" use of epistemology, which Western gendered theorists say results in "false-consciousness" of the Muslim women – the Other – who employs herself within an Islamic framework (Zine, 2004). In essence, it creates an "Orientalized feminist epistemology" (Frank, 2010: 4) when looking at the position of Muslim women, which as Uma Narayan (2004: 214) states, becomes a "predominantly Anglo-American project of feminist epistemology" reinstating a north versus south, subject versus object dichotomy.

Inherent in this Orientalising of "Muslim women", through standpoint theory as gendered epistemology, is the perceived notion that Western epistemologies are incompatible with religious discourses and gendered epistemologies born out of a religious framework. Marguerite Waller succinctly notes how Western academic discourse fail to take into consideration discourses which are "different" such as religion:

... 'belief systems' have not been taken seriously in the U.S. academy, where knowledge is defined as secular, despite the deep roots of science in monasticism and religious orthodoxy. Even, or especially, Marxist-inspired thinkers can find themselves entangled in an exclusionary "historical materialism," as can feminists who equate religious understanding with patriarchy or locate the possibility of female agency exclusively within secular worldviews. Within the contexts of the

arguments I have been making here, the discounting of religious understandings begins to emerge as lethal, as a self-destructive blindness to the workings of “patriarchy” in Western secular discourses (2005: 164).

By Orientalising the “Muslim woman” as a homogenous Other that is viewed as oppressed within their religion due to their gender because of patriarchal tendencies of religion, Western epistemological discourses fail to take into account the importance of this same religion they attempt to “deprivilege” as fundamental to the women they homogenise. The normative knowledge stemming out of Western secular feminist epistemologies that deprivileges the role of religion – in particular Islam – takes away the subjecthood of the group it marginalizes as the Other (Zine, 2004). While feminist epistemologies allow for an insertion of discourses on race and class, Jasmin Zine notes that religion is still a fundamentally unaccepted category of analysis and as an unacceptable form of knowledge, as Islam is seen not to be compatible with secular Western epistemologies:

...[r]eligion is [still] characteristically cast only in fundamentalist terms, despite the fact that fundamentalism accounts for only a minority of the varied orientations toward faith that exist. The idea that women can use religion as a site of resistance and as an epistemological terrain upon which to construct alternative visions of womanhood has not been validated in most antiracist feminist discourses (2004: 171).

The widespread understanding in Western scholarship of this type of gendered epistemology is criticised by postcolonial theorists as attempting to create a global hegemony of Western scholarship that used the “Third World Woman” as a site of interrogation – as an “oppressed” woman in need of liberation under the power of patriarchal influence and Islam. By critiquing the standpoint of those who have the power to control, Anna Yeatman challenges the gendered epistemologies that have produced an essentialised “we” by:

...disrupting the we-ness of the community of knowers and locating all knowledge-claims within the politics of contested domination, the epistemological force of the politics of difference is to refuse any vantage point for knowledge outside or beyond this field of contested domination (1994: 192).

### **The Bridge Between Competing Standpoints?**

Like Jasmin Zine (2004), this article argues for a new “discursive space” that allows for further “engagement” between two seemingly distinct epistemologies – religion on the one hand, and gendered identity on the other. Postcolonial theorists are critical of the way “gender emerged as a primary category of analysis and the social, demographic, and class composition of those who actually theorized gender in the U.S. academy” (Zine, 2004: 167). Zine’s (2004: 182) conceptualisation of a “critical faith-based anti-racist epistemology” bridges these supposedly competing standpoints together to allow for engagement. In discussing the importance of this epistemology, Zine writes thus:

Attempting to construct a new genealogy for Muslim women’s feminism and

praxis based on a faith-centered epistemological framework requires centering faith-based knowledge construction as a lens through which a particular reading of the world can be constructed and framed. This involves the political and discursive goal of creating a space where faith-centered voices can enter critical academic and political debates and dialogues as valid sites of knowledge and contestation. The emphasis on criticality within this perspective relates to the way women can identify, counter, and resist racism, classism, and sexism from a spiritually centered space that is at the same time attentive to the way that extremist or fundamentalist religious dogmas can become complicit in these constructions and the structural relations and circumstances that sustain them (2004: 181).

In secular Western academia, since Islam is seen as inherently oppressive to Muslim women, and further as Islamic epistemology is not viewed as a legitimate epistemology by Western normative discourses, Zine's approach suggests a call for a renewed epistemology that does not allow gender to be the sole focus of epistemologies of the world, but that also facilitates interactions with other categories of knowledge – such as religion. By considering the role of religion in defining “faith-centered” Muslim women's standpoint, a critical faith-based antiracist epistemology would allow for secular Western academia to acknowledge the centrality of faith in framing worldviews and “accept this as a valid way of negotiating an understanding of notions of community, selfhood, gender, identity, and feminist engagement and praxis” (Zine, 2004: 182). This epistemological framework would thus move religion from the margins to the center of discursive focus, intersecting with the concept of gender, and is what Zine sees as a need for engagement to set gender as a category within other frameworks of “difference” like religion – in this case Islam (Waller, 2005).

## Conclusion

By considering the merits and limitations of gendered epistemology that uses standpoint theory as a tool of analysis, through the lens and context of the intersection between Islam, gender, and Western academia, what can be seen is the need for a more nuanced engagement to see us through a variety of epistemologies away from a single and unified notion of simply a gendered epistemology. As Muslim women work to claim knowledge by employing gendered epistemology within an Islamic paradigm, they must be equally aware of the larger political implications of mapping such an epistemology within a Western secular hegemony that still views religion in a negative light. While standpoint theory has been particularly useful for some women to internally create subjecthood within an Islamic paradigm, at the same time it externally assumes a certain Western view of the “Other” thereby taking away the subjecthood of this marginalised group. This calls for engagement between different ways of knowing, and of critiquing the notion of a simple “gendered epistemology” by considering a cross-cultural engagement between different sets of perspectives. This “difference” allow us to understand what is locally meaningful as opposed to what we assume to be meaningful (Waller, 2005). As noted above, gendered epistemology through the tool of standpoint theory has the potential to provide a space for women of faith to lay claim to knowledge within an Islamic paradigm. Yet too often a larger secular understanding of gendered identity that sees the Muslim woman as inherently oppressed shadows this attempt at an epistemology. Perhaps Zine's (2004) “critical faith-based anti-racist epistemology” may be a way

to bridge the gap and reconcile these competing standpoints to allow for inclusion and understanding.

But until this new “discursive space” can be created, where more nuanced engagement between epistemologies can take place, expressing “another mode of being female” – as Lazreg (1994a) suggests – will continue to be difficult.

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