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Feminism, Islam, and Psychoanalysis—A psychoanalytic case study

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Abstract

The ambiguity of the terms feminism and Islam does not allow for a fixed standpoint. The most emancipatory forms of feminism might be incompatible with Islam, whilst other forms of feminism such as the liberal reformist position can be combined with it. This article relates empirical material to the broader debate of the Muslim-feminist movement that might act as a nodal point for future challenges and developments as it questions widespread interpretations of the Qur'ān. The material gained via psychoanalytic interview was subjected to an analysis, situating the text within the tradition of Freudian psychoanalytic theory as well as within the tradition of the grand dame of German psychoanalytic feminism, Margarete Mitscherlich. The analysis of a case study of a queer person, furthermore, traces the way in which women make sense of Islamic tradition back to the time in which the Orient was open to same-sex practices. In this way the case study will enhance our understanding of how the three concepts, feminism, psychoanalysis, and Islamic tradition intersect with one another and how each of the traditions can learn from the others. Since there is an enormous gap in research concerning this intersection, this text aims to open up a space where a queer reading of psychoanalysis, a queer reading of the Qur'ān, and a psychoanalytic reading of Islamic tradition become possible.

KEYWORDS

case study, intersectionality, Islamic feminism, psychoanalysis, queer theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

This text was inspired, first, by my own psychoanalytic training at one of the traditional Berlin-based psychoanalytic institutes, the Institut für Psychotherapie, which was founded shortly after the Second World War in 1947 and at which students conduct case studies as part of their training. It was also inspired by a group of critical psychoanalysts, whose work is set in the tradition of the psychoanalysts to whom Otto Fenichel addressed his circular papers between 1915 and 1945. Lastly, it draws on the writings of the most radical, feminist psychoanalyst in post-war Germany, Margarete Mitscherlich. For this paper, three psychoanalytic interviews were conducted. The interviewees agreed that their statements could be mentioned anonymously in the text. Due to the very different subjective situations of the three women, the complexity of the topic chosen, and the lack of substantial research on the intersection of feminism, Islam, and psychoanalysis, however, I have decided to focus on a single case study—"Ava"—because I found her very unusual and very thought-provoking. I hope, via this case study, to make an Islamic feminist voice more available for critical analytic work in the English-speaking world. I will first introduce a categorisation of the diverse field of Islamic feminisms and then relate the original material to a broader theoretical context, concluding, in a final section, by addressing future challenges that this case study proposes.

2 | ISLAMIC FEMINISMS

It almost goes without saying that much of the debate regarding the terms "feminism" and "Islam" and the theoretical elaboration of what counts as Islamic feminism or Muslim feminism has taken place in academia, in intellectual and elite milieus since the 19th century (Ali, 2014, p. 21). And yet it is still a contested field of research, which has recently also been influenced by activists such as Najmabadi (2016) who wrote in her article "Is Another Language Possible?" that two young gay men in Iran "became an icon of what has become an international campaign for gay rights in Iran and a battle flag against the Iranian government's execution of homosexuals" (p. 169). As we will see from the case study of Ava—an Iranian immigrant who identifies as queer—gay and feminist voices have much in common. Before we turn to Ava, however, let us try to understand what is meant by the term "Islamic feminisms."

Zahra Ali, for instance, wrote in her book *Islamic Feminisms* that:

> *The Muslim feminist maintains that original Islam does not by any means promote patriarchy, rather the contrary—the equality of gender. With the help of social sciences, Muslim feminists call for a reading and rereading of the sources of Islam, to extract from there the principles of equality and justice and reject interpretations that were based on chauvinistic and patriarchal readings. (Ali, 2014, p. 22)*

This represents just one understanding of the relationship between feminism and Islam. There are, however, various ways in which Muslim women have developed strategies of resistance in their everyday life that also define the field of Islamic feminism. Fatima Mernissi describes in her book *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (1996) how women, mainly from the upper class, restore their hymen with an operation in order to enter into a heterosexual marriage as virgins—which can be regarded as one example of female resistance, while in *Women and Islam—An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1991) she retraces the history of the hijab back to a time where it was a symbol of protection against the sexual aggression of men who attacked female slaves. By means of the hijab, women could clearly indicate that they were neither slaves nor prostitutes.

Although I will be offering an analysis of a woman who does not feel as if she belongs to any intellectual milieu, the distinction that Ali (2014) introduced might still be pertinent here. She divided the Muslim-feminist movement into three positions: (1) traditional reformist, (2) radical reformist, and (3) the liberal reformist. The traditional reformist position is regarded as being the most widely spread: it emphasises that "men and women are spiritually equal, that, however, their biological peculiarities force them to adopt different roles and unequal but equivalent

rights and obligations" (Ali, 2014, pp. 27–29). It still regards the role of a woman as being that of daughter, mother, and wife within the context of family life. In the radical reformist position, the:

> *status of the woman is radically differently conceived, . . . it is no longer concerned with rights and obligations, neither with social roles nor the tasks of the sexes, rather with human beings, with subjects of the female and male sexes, that are fundamentally equal beyond cultural and social contexts (p. 28).*

Within this position, the sexist and patriarchal connotation of Islamic law is questioned. The liberal reformist position is the most widely adopted position amongst feminist Muslims. Its "proponents understand relations amongst the sexes as social constructs and the traditional Muslim conception as a patriarchal deformation of the fundamental gender equality" (p. 29).

3 | THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY—MOVING BETWEEN CULTURES AND BEYOND GENDER

In what follows, the case study of "Ava" will be discussed as a form of liberal reformist feminism. Ava was born in a small town in Germany as a child of Iranian immigrants. Both her parents were working-class, and Ava and her sister were also raised by her aunt whom she describes as being very supportive and understanding; Ava was able to tell her about her queer sexuality. She spent the early years of her childhood living in a prefabricated public housing estate with a lot of Muslim people in the neighbourhood. Later on, her family moved into the city and lived in a rather middle-class milieu. Ava's political understanding was informed by antifascist youth groups and by a left-wing youth organisation.

She was teased at school because she was overweight and was an outsider at that time. Nevertheless, she participated in political discussions in her school class and became a leader of her youth group.

When Ava was asked what has not yet been articulated about feminism and Islam, she replied:

> *That feminism and Islam is not a contradiction and that Islamic feminism is much older than Western feminism. The first wave had already taken place at the beginning of the 20th century and Kurdish and other feminist movements from the Middle East are even several hundred years old and this is just not visible. White feminists should simply be less arrogant and should not act as if they created feminism. (Ava, personal communication, May 16th, 2016)*

Badran (2014) wrote that "Islamic feminism transcends outdated binaries like secular and religious and East and West" (p. 44) but we can see from Ava's responses that she holds onto binaries and maintains a certain distance from Western feminism. It can be argued that Western feminism is seen by Ava as something that has become, and is still being imposed on them as, a discourse of cultural dominance. By claiming that Islamic feminism is far older than Western feminism, Ava is defending herself against this form of domination. Some Western feminists (see Abu-Lughod, 2013) even feel the need to "rescue" all Muslim women from the clutches of Islam and so we in the West might well need to listen more closely to what women in the Middle East want and desire. And yet it is Ava who argues against such a categorisation at all, especially when it comes to gender—which she regards as being socially constructed—as can be derived from this dialogue.

Ava: I do also think that politics are problematic that are based on identity. I would refer to myself not as a lesbian but rather as a queer, since this is also a term that is anti-identical [anti-identitär]. Identity simply gives room for gate-keeping.

Susanne: Identities are then also categories for you, in which people get classified and to which structures of power are related?

Ava: A friend of mine has expressed it like this: all these categories like desire or gender are socially constructed but can be experienced in real life [sind real erfahrbar]. There is actually an interaction between attributions and self-perceptions and I perceive on the basis of my experience and my socialisation that I

am just not a white German. Therefore, it is also important to speak openly about this and to develop resistance against a German identity.

Susanne: What else have you experienced in real life?

Ava: Discrimination that I have had to experience personally such as when I was teased at school because of my name. And so it is not helpful when I just say, "Hey, we are all humans", since we are not treated equally.

When Ava speaks about identity as a form of gate-keeping, this is also due to her perception of being different and of not being perceived as belonging to a certain group. Especially on account of her perception of racism and nationalism and the bullying she experienced at school due to her name, she must feel directly devalued by people who refer to her as being non-German.

Generally speaking, classical psychoanalysis and queer theory have not come to a mutual understanding yet, since the Oedipus complex and the whole framework set up by Freud and his followers is so much based on gender identity. If we think of the early dyadic relation to the mother that is central to the conceptions of Melanie Klein or the concept of the "phallic woman" who has not yet given birth because she has not yet overcome penis envy, then we could argue that psychoanalysis must extend its framework to a more phenomenological understanding that merely describes how humans make sense of the world or, as the case may be, reframe its concepts taking into consideration the influences of queer theory.

Psychoanalytical understanding can then mean more than merely that Ava identifies with her father and is in a form of rivalry with him when it comes to competing for the love for her mother, given the negative Oedipus complex for homosexuals (Morgenthaler, 2011). Since Ava is not a woman who can be easily regarded as having many masculine habits, she is in some sort of way also identified with her mother. However, in order to be respectful to her wish not to be identified as lesbian, we do have to allow perhaps for another interpretation. It could be argued that the Oedipus complex means that a child is at a particular stage in their development when they are in love with one of their care-takers, which brings the child into rivalry with the other care-taker. The only way to overcome this conflict is to realise that both care-takers are in an intimate love relationship and that the child has to direct his or her love to another object. The traditional Oedipus conflict might not be conceived along gender differences that the child perceives but should rather be seen as being a particular kind of conflict in human relations.

A more traditional psychoanalytic interpretation would be that Ava's love for her mother remains necessarily unfulfilled and it is this relating that she describes in the following manner:

> *My mother is rather conservative, but liberal for Iran . . . We do not have the perfect relationship since we are just very different, and we do not share the same world view. She did, however, put a lot of effort into raising us and supported me in school and has motivated me since she knew that for us only education would help us to move up the social ladder. She has put in a lot of effort so that my sister and I could get our A levels and be ambitious and for that I am very grateful to her. . . . [A]t home it's not my father but rather my mother who has the say.*

Her mother is in several ways ambivalent since she embodies the more traditional cultural positioning (see Hall, 1994/2014). She wears no veil but lives rigorously in accordance with the Qur'ān and she is the love object at the same time in the context of a culture in which same-sex love is both prohibited and persecuted—a culture that is based on drive suppression for queer people. Ava identifies very much with her father who is a "rather soft, … very witty and shy" person, and she developed a character armouring that is rather soft and female (see Reich, 1933/2010). Moreover her identification with her father puts her in an inferior position due to her lack of a penis, since it is the father who can penetrate the mother (Freud, 1913/2000b, p. 325). It could be argued, however, that her interest in queer theory and her rejection of being identified as a woman is her way of overcoming penis envy and the suppression that she perceives. If there is indeed no difference between the sexes, then she can feel on

equal terms with her father when it comes to the love of her mother. It is her form of resistance to being identified as a woman in an inferior position that she is thus trying to overcome.

4 | IS A QUEER READING OF THE QUR'ĀN POSSIBLE?

The conflict of being positioned in two cultures, German and Iranian, led to Ava entering the field of Cultural Studies as a means of gaining more insight into the differences that she perceives. Ava describes the situation for gays in Iran as follows:

Ava: In Iran, it is not the case that there are queer movements, that there are initiatives that organise meetings, rather a lot happens underground and also in left-wing movements. All of this is not so obvious because it is not visible for outsiders. Rather it takes place underground. However, there are gay cruising parks in Tehran and left-wing cafes where a lot of people hang out, but this does not constitute a queer community, rather circles of friends, since the former is just dangerous. Being homosexual is still persecuted by the state. It just happens there without being named. And, of course, I wish for the system to collapse. At the same time, the one-sided view in the Middle East is an import from the West—dating back to colonial times. Before that time, Islam was very queer and was labelled by the West as immoral and promiscuous. After that, all these conservative reforms took place.

Susanne: Do you think that the devaluing of certain groups when it comes to living out their sexuality is derived from the Qur'ān?

Ava: The way I see it, the Qur'ān can also be read in a very queer and feminist way.

When Ava speaks of a discourse in the Middle East that was far more open to same-sex practices before colonialism, this is what we also find in Fozooni (2014), who argued that there was a "non-classificatory discourse of sexual conduct for 19th century Iranians" (p. 90). Same-sex practices were simply regarded as being one kind of practice amongst others and something that "men also did before they were settled into heterosexual procreative sex with wives" (Najmabadi, 2005, cited in Fozooni, 2014, p. 90). Ava reminds us that there used to be a very different tradition in the Middle East, one that might be regarded as being very open, one that has been greatly neglected by current society. In the 19th century, "the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe" (Said, 1978/2003, p. 190). The double-bind situation that queer Iranians find themselves in with regard to a whole set of ideas of morality might be rooted in "manufactured amnesia" (Fozooni, 2014, p. 91). The suppression of sexual freedom, which is connected to an oblivion of Iranian heritage, developed through prohibitions by Western discourse. A discourse can hardly be solved through an intellectual debate and any attempt to challenge the current situation must necessarily fail since this oblivion owes its strength to its own compulsive character and its unconscious counterpart. Due to prohibition, people develop all kinds of substitute objects (*Ersatzobjekte*) and substitute activities (*Ersatzhandlungen*) and all movements against the prohibition lead to even greater prohibitions and to a withdrawal from sexual freedom. Through rigid forms of inhibition, an even greater need for discharge is developed (see Freud, 1917/2000a). It therefore comes as no surprise that a lot of immigrants develop an even greater need to practise their religion and begin returning to more traditional ways of practising it. They feel even more secure in their religious group since the world that surrounds them is, in most cases, hostile to them.

Perhaps it could be argued that, through colonialism, a rather oral function of religion in Iranian society was replaced by a more anal one and, furthermore, that the foundational story of Islam, that of Hagar, was suppressed. Given that a lot of Muslims emphasise the positive attributes of their religion, and religion adopts a more nurturing position through caring, providing a structure and creating warmth and a sense of belonging—which are all attributes many people perceive as lacking in a capitalist society—then it might well be possible to agree with Benslama's insight, although not widely acknowledged, that both maternity and the figure of Hagar form the foundation of identity of the Islamic community.

> *Hagar appears with the beginning of monotheism (more specifically, with the writings of its beginning), within the heart of the patriarchal family, whose irreparable rupture she caused. The subversive impact of the figure of Hagar in the concept of origin has remained unnoticed throughout the lengthy tradition of monotheistic commentary and philosophical and psychoanalytic interpretation of religion. (Benslama, 2009, p. 78)*

For Benslama, the story of Hagar is the foundational story of the Islamic tradition since there is some sort of "prohibition of paternity of Islam" and a prohibition of its representation (see Benslama, 2009, p. 215).

> *Allah is, in principle, neither a father nor the god of fathers, and this includes the prophet, who is irrevocably an orphan, whom the Qur'an forbids in turn from being the father of a community. . . . The god of Islam is not an originary father, he is the impossible: transpaternal. In the beginning there was the being-there, thrust into the womb of Hagar. (Benslama, 2009, p. 87)*

If we have a closer look at the story, then we can find in Hagar the symbol for the oral function of the Islamic religion: Hagar, a slave in the household of Abraham, gave birth to his son Ismael, since his wife had unsuccessfully tried to become pregnant. Later, Abraham had a second son; this time by his wife, and named him Isaac. Since Ismael was not meant to be the son who would receive an inheritance, he and Hagar were sent away and they began their wanderings in the desert (see Genesis, 1, Moses 21). However, it is the house of Abraham, which is to become the place where praying takes place, which Abraham should do towards a "peaceful city" and at which he should "nurture with fruits those that believe in Allah and the judgement day" (Qur'an, Sura 2, 127). It is precisely this nurturing function adopted by Hagar that forms the beginnings of a religion in such a way that the "distance between god and father can remain in the impossible" (Žizek, 2015, p. 42).

If we go back to Ava, who was raised moving between two cultural positions, the Western and the Oriental, then we find that religion is for her a form of cultural identity, a positive reference point and that it represents some sort of motherly love—the way typical motherly love functions for others.

Ava: It [religion] is more of a cultural identity. I don't pray five times a day but I pray from time to time and on Iranian holidays. I do drink alcohol but for a long time I did not for political reasons and because I thought that nicotine and alcohol tame a revolutionary mind into accepting more bad circumstances. It makes a lot of sense to say a sober mind is a brighter mind. I also do not eat pork and I am vegan. For me, religion means also showing motherly love for others and standing up for others and not just watching things happen. This is practice for me.

For Ava, it is religion that fulfils her desires in several ways: the longing for a community that she identifies with since she perceives herself as being non-German, the longing for motherly love for others, the desire for a holding object (*Halt gebendes Objekt*, see Winnicott, 1965/2006) and a lifestyle that allows for a bright mind. Ava speaks in this short passage about a rather oral form of satisfaction that she does not seek via alcohol, for example, or by eating meat. She has rather found a way of life that is far more sustainable. In her desires, there is always something utopian that is present: a society that is respectful towards others, where people support each other, that is sensitive towards its environment and its resources—a society that is, in many respects, very different from a capitalist one. It is a society permeated by a sense of the collective, by caring as well as by ecological and social sensitive nurturing.

In many ways, the East represents a good breast for Ava and, in some sort of way, the West a bad breast with its loneliness, individualism, and lack of human relationships (see also Homayounpour, 2012, p. 62). This is a particular culmination point that is at the heart of the feminist debate on Islam. One could argue that she could easily take the best from these two breasts and happily get away with this. However, the situation is actually more complex. The trauma of the colonial clash of two cultures has not led to a symbolic mediation between the two. It is rather the case that one culture has developed a stronger super-ego (see Žizek, 2015). The more the West seems to advance its capitalist system, the more rigid the super-ego of the Middle East seems to become. It seems as if the West is constantly castrating Muslims. Muslim men are in constant fear of being castrated and Muslim women are also in fear since they cherish the hope that their penis might grow again. The stronger the Iranian government wants

to become, for instance, with its attempt to develop nuclear weapons—which symbolises the biggest penis and which the Iranian government has now given up on—the more the West displays that it has better technology and more advanced intelligence techniques to sabotage these attempts. No matter what the East does, its whole power is dedicated to competing with the West, even when the West shows its ugliest side.

5 | IS AN INTERSECTIONAL MOVEMENT POSSIBLE?

A feminist movement that is also sensitive to freedom of religion and a freedom not to be religious must necessarily critique the very grounds on which a foot race between the East and the West has been taking place. Particularly during the last decades, women have adopted due to their suppression a value system that is different from that of men: "Women direct their aggression against themselves, which not only leads to self-sacrifice but also to chronic feelings of guilt and envy amongst themselves" (Mitscherlich, 1990, p. 64). As Mitscherlich further argued, men easily find scapegoats that allow them to "live out their aggression and their contempt while maintaining an idealisation of their 'holy fatherland,' their family and their own ego" (p. 64). Since women have developed more of a conscience than men due to anxiety over their love object and are more focused on the maintenance of love amongst related persons, they can better empathise with others. This accounts also for why Ava proposes to forge intersectional alliances as a way out of perceived inequalities, as a way of resistance and as her own form of struggle.

Ava: If I have experienced suppression with a white woman, but if she is being racist in a movement or homophobic then it is simply not possible to fight actively with her. When a movement is not intersectional, then it is simply not possible to forge an alliance.

The concept of intersectionality that was initiated by Black and other feminists "to deconstruct the categories of both 'women' and 'Blacks'" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 193) that Ava adopts demonstrates that she is well beyond even most feminists in Germany. She proposes a "theory, method, perspective, approach or a heuristic device" that is based on a "standpoint epistemology" (Kallenberg, Müller, & Meyer, 2013, p. 18). According to this approach, different social divisions such as class, ethnicity, and gender have something in common: the way in which different cultural discourses operate is mainly based on naturalising narratives (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is, however, difficult to describe the attributes of each of the categories since this would tune in to these naturalising narratives. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that there are perceived differences; for instance, being a coloured feminist represents another form of oppression than that encountered by a white feminist. Everyday racism is something that Ava experienced in her early childhood at school when kids would bully her because of her Persian name. One could even argue, according to intersectional theory, that Ava is subject to fourfold oppression: based not only on gender, race, and class but also on religion.

6 | DO WE HAVE TO CONSIDER CLASS?

When Ava was asked if there exists a social class for her, she replied:

Ava: Yes, sure, it is a social construct that does not simply exist as such, but which was brought about by humans. But I do think it is important to speak about this, because people speak very reluctantly about it and, in order to achieve redistribution, one has to speak about it. However, class is not only money, social capital comes into it as well and a person's educational background. In Germany, for example, class is not spoken about so much; people talk rather about educated citizens [Bildungsbürger] and the working class.

Susanne: What is social capital?

Ava: Do I listen, for example, to classical music or Madonna and do I have an idea of culture and which culture do I engage with: higher culture? Or did I do ballet in my childhood or did my parents listen to classical music or did I play the piano, or did I listen to hip-hop and did my parents listen to Iranian music and did

> we go to concerts and to the theatre? Or how many people do I know that study or work at the university, how many people was I raised with that write books?

What Ava realised throughout her childhood is that through education she became interested in culture that was, in some sort of way, different from the cultural background of her parents. It also reveals her feelings of belonging to Iranian culture via listening to music that her parents liked and, at the same time, to music that was favoured by her peer group—such as hip-hop. Pierre Bourdieu wrote in his 1982 book *Distinctions* that the same education can lead to very different forms of culture and that inherited capital is what people gain from their parents and acquired capital is what is conveyed through institutions. Although education can level the small differences between the classes, Ava's sense of belonging to Iranian culture is still prevalent and this inherited capital has accompanied Ava throughout her life. At the same time, she argues that people with greater social capital than her have a different form of access to culture. It reminds us again of Bourdieu, whose study in the '70s revealed that musical taste is quite different between the classes, particularly when it comes to classical music which he regards as being the taste of the upper class (Bourdieu, 1982).

Nevertheless, Bourdieu's theory of social capital is, in a certain sense, fairly limited. It seems as if economic thought is being applied to the social domain and that free time is being valued in economic terms as a higher or lower form of social capital depending on what form it assumes. What poor and marginalised people need to do is to get organised in a political sense. They need to become informed about ways of doing so and become educated about their current situation and its implications. No matter what kind of value their free time activities might have and whether they listen to Stravinsky or Madonna, a clarification of their objective situation would be the best step forward.

Although Ava speaks of class being very important in social discourse, she suggests that there is merely a need for a redistribution of wealth, neglecting the fact that redistribution is still based on a society in which wage labour is the prevailing economic principle. Her stance towards social class seems to be a socialist or social democrat one, according to which wealth should just be "better" distributed—taken from the rich and given to the poor. From this viewpoint, it is just a question of the state regulating wealth distribution in favour of the working class, while not, however, abolishing the social division of classes. In many respects, Ava is aware of her class, acknowledging her mother for being supportive in her climbing the social ladder. On the other hand, she is reproducing an acceptance of the social positioning of herself as being working class. The fact that she had access to higher education and culture might have led her to the assumption that social relations between people are relations of objects in capitalism (Marx, 1867/1980). That she has not, however, come to this conclusion, in spite of her personal history, is something worth noting.

Ava was socialised within a left-wing youth group and bringing together her views on religion and the struggle for better conditions is quite a challenge. When she was asked whether she perceives Islamophobia in the left, she said:

> *There are people who say that religion is in principle shit and then there are people who say that there is a different dynamic if they criticize the Catholic Church or if they talk badly about Islam as white Germans. And then there is, of course, amongst anti-German Germans a very concrete anti-Muslim racism, for which automatically everything Islamic is also anti-Semitic. Then it is not even subtle and not hidden. A lot of white feminists are also against the veil or against circumcision.*

It is difficult not only for Ava, but also for the left, to find a position beyond the discursive opposition of Islam and secular Christianity and to question current political practices (Schade, 2015). Let me now add to this and provide you with some concluding remarks on this case study and the relation between religion and the left.

7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I have stated above, this case study was discussed from the standpoint of liberal reformist feminism, whose "proponents understand relations amongst the sexes as social constructs and the traditional Muslim conception as a

patriarchal deformation of fundamental gender equality" (Ali, 2014, pp. 27–29). Ava emphasises the fact that the Qur'ān can be read in a very feminist and queer manner and furthermore, for her, "in Islam there is feminism and justice." Although I have tried to refer to the more oral function of Islam as occupying a nurturing position by giving people a sense of belonging and a feeling of warmth and caring for each other, all attributes that are lacking in capitalism, this position is rather ambiguous, since Ava, as a queer person, feels directly the patriarchal deformation of the religion in her home country where there is no public sphere for queer people. She adopts a position that, in many ways, negates her cultural background by rejecting the heterosexual norm but also negates mainstream political positions by being rather left-wing. Her view on Islam might be considered as being very idealistic, when she argues, for instance, that the Qur'ān can be read in a queer way. This also brings her into opposition with some Muslim feminists such as Hidayatullah (2014), who argued that she is "unconvinced that there is a clear textual support for treating mutuality between the sexes as an overarching value of the Qur'an" (p. 120). Nevertheless, Ava has opened up a debate about how people from different cultural backgrounds can contend while being united. While her views on social capital theory and intersectional theory take up current debates in academia, they do at the same time reveal some limitations. This is particularly the case for intersectionalist theorists. Just recently Eve Mitchell developed a Marxist critique of intersectionalist theorists. She wrote,

> *Intersectionality theorists argue that the experience of being an oppressed person places individuals in a uniquely privileged position for struggle. In other words, if you've experienced the multiple, identity-based oppressions, you are the vanguard of the struggle against it. (Mitchell, 2013, para. 23)*

Although it is clearly relevant to acknowledge different forms of oppression, since it does indeed make a difference whether one is a person of colour or is white, these different forms of oppression are also to be analysed within their specific context. Nevertheless, it is important to situate these relations of power within the greater context of the economic principles of capitalism as well. In this way, being excluded from any form of political vanguardism would be prevented and there would exist even better chances for an intersectional movement to take form and to succeed.

When Ava says, "for me to be a good Muslim means to fight against social injustice and, therefore, Islam is good for me", we have to bear in mind the fact that the debate in the left movement also involves looking at the way in which bourgeois ideology is reproduced by Muslims as well as looking out for emancipatory attempts that display an underlying common struggle. This would also mean standing side by side with Muslims if they experience racism in Germany—such as we find in the case of Ava—or sexism, and also working together with them, based on an adequate critique of the political economy that surrounds us, in order to be able to forge alliances that transcend apparent differences such as skin colour, culture, gender, and religion.

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