



Negotiating muslim feminist identities in secular Europe: A critical review of Vanja Mosbach's voices of muslim feminists

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ABSTRACT

Background: This paper presents a critical review of the dissertation *Voices of Muslim Feminists Navigating Tradition, Authority and the Debate about Islam* by Vanja Mosbach, defended at Uppsala University in 2022. The dissertation examines how Muslim women in Sweden and the Øresund region, who identify as Muslim feminists, negotiate religious identity, religious authority, and their commitment to gender equality within the context of European secularism. **Methods:** This review applies a critical academic assessment focusing on methodological validity, the coherence of the theoretical framework, and the adequacy of empirical representation in Mosbach's work. Through a reflective qualitative approach and an analysis grounded in the theory of religious individualization, Mosbach constructs a complex understanding of Muslim feminism as a form of agency that transcends traditional-modern or Islam-secular dichotomies. **Findings:** The analysis highlights the dissertation's contributions to the study of Islamic feminism and the sociology of religion, while identifying key strengths and potential weaknesses in its methodological and theoretical approaches. It also situates Mosbach's work within a broader intellectual landscape, particularly in relation to the discourse on Muslim feminism in the Global South, to assess the relevance and transferability of its findings to other contexts, including Indonesia. **Conclusion:** Overall, the dissertation demonstrates that Muslim women's religious agency and feminist expressions in Europe can only be fully understood through an inclusive, interdisciplinary approach that bridges lived experience, social theory, and Islamic epistemology. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The paper offers an original contribution by linking Mosbach's analysis to Global South perspectives, thereby expanding the discussion on the adaptability and applicability of Muslim feminist frameworks beyond European contexts.

KEYWORDS: muslim feminism; religious authority; religious individualization; sociology of religion; women's agency.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, issues concerning Islam, gender, and women's active roles have increasingly gained prominence across interdisciplinary studies, ranging from the sociology of religion to anthropology and gender studies (Rampton & Van De Putte, 2024). Muslim women around the world are now situated within complex dynamics as they struggle with deeply rooted patriarchal norms embedded within their religious traditions while simultaneously facing labeling from secular societies that often perceive Islam as inherently opposed to gender equality (Khan, 2022; Koburtay et al., 2023; Yousaf et al., 2025). This dual dilemma has given rise to identity spaces that can no longer be interpreted

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through binary categories such as traditional versus modern or Islam versus the West (Mahmood, 2005; Moad, 2015).

Within this context, terms such as Muslim feminism or Islamic feminism are not merely academic trends but reflect Muslim women's tangible struggles to reconcile their faith with their aspirations for gender justice (Bardhan, 2025; Itani & Green, 2025). They construct intellectual frameworks that are deeply personal and reflective to articulate their positions amidst tensions between sacred texts, religious authority, and egalitarian values. These efforts reveal a new and flexible form of agency that may be critical, conciliatory, or deconstructive toward long established boundaries (Badran, 2015).

Against this backdrop, Vanja Mosbach's dissertation, *Voices of Muslim Feminists*, stands as a significant contribution. Her work amplifies the voices of Muslim women in Scandinavia who self identify as feminist and Muslim while reflecting on how these identities are constructed, negotiated, and reinterpreted in everyday life. Drawing on the theory of religious individualization, Mosbach argues that contemporary religiosity is no longer strictly tied to institutional authority but is becoming increasingly personal, autonomous, and rooted in authentic spiritual experiences.

Despite its contributions, the dissertation is not free from critique. Questions remain regarding participant representation and the robustness of its theoretical approach. Therefore, this paper critically revisits Mosbach's work by evaluating its methodology, data validity, and its significance for the global discourse on Muslim feminism, particularly within Global South contexts such as Indonesia. Beyond evaluation, it also offers a reflective space for understanding the challenges Muslim women face in seeking forms of religiosity and gender equality that hold personal meaning, while fostering dialogue between Europe and the broader Muslim world in the pursuit of inclusive and transformative thought.

2. Methods

This paper is prepared using a qualitative approach based on textual study and content analysis of Vanja Mosbach's dissertation, *Voices of Muslim Feminists* navigating tradition, authority and the debate about Islam (Mosbach, 2022). This approach is chosen because it allows the reviewer to explore in depth the structure of ideas, theoretical framework, methodological strategies, and narrative construction employed by the dissertation's author in building her arguments. The primary focus is not only on thematic content but also on the logical consistency between the research questions, methods, and data interpretation presented in the work under review (Nunan, 1992).

The review is conducted by applying the principles of critical reading, which involve active and analytical engagement to assess three main aspects: how the arguments are constructed and developed, how empirical data are utilized to support theoretical propositions, and to what extent this dissertation contributes to the scholarly discourse on Islamic feminism and the sociology of religion (Pollack, 2008). This process also considers the relationship between theory and data, as well as how the researcher's positionality influences the perspectives and research approach used in the dissertation (Mosbach, 2022).

The methodology of this review is descriptive analytical and argumentative, taking into account the social and intellectual context in which the dissertation was written. A conceptual comparison is also carried out with relevant literature from key figures in the study of Islamic feminism, such as Saba Mahmood and Margot Badran, and with scholarship on religious individualization, such as the works of Detlef Pollack, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead, to evaluate the position and contribution of Mosbach's ideas within a broader intellectual framework (Heelas et al., 2021). The evaluation also includes a review of ethical considerations, data collection strategies, and the transparency of the analytical process described in Mosbach's methodology chapter (Mosbach, 2022).

By applying this approach, the paper aims to deliver a critical and well reasoned evaluation of Mosbach's dissertation, avoiding both uncritical praise and ahistorical critique. The reviewer's perspective as a reader from the Global South is also employed as

a reflective lens to assess the extent to which the arguments constructed within the Scandinavian context can be translated or compared to the dynamics of Muslim feminism in Muslim majority societies such as Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1.1 Chapter: Introduction and research orientation

The phenomenon of Muslim feminism in Sweden and the Øresund region, which includes the Skåne area in southern Sweden and the eastern part of Denmark, shows new dynamics in the social, religious, and gender landscape. Muslim women have begun to appear publicly with dual identities, as Muslim and as feminist (Asif, 2023; Babakhani, 2024; Keddie et al., 2021). This is evident from the increasing number of voices advocating gender equality from an Islamic perspective, whether through social media, public forums, or the establishment of religious institutions such as the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, which is led by women (Mosbach, 2022). Their presence challenges two dominant narratives, namely the secular feminist narrative that often positions Islam as its opposite and the conservative religious narrative that limits the roles of women. In this context, Muslim feminism emerges not only as an ideological identity but also as a form of resistance against stereotypes and as a negotiation strategy within the secular and plural public space of Europe.

Muslim women in Europe often become objects in public debate, frequently represented as symbols of backwardness, subordination, or conservatism (Piela, 2021). Both Western media and internal religious discourse often fail to provide space for Muslim women to represent themselves. This study departs from an awareness that many Muslim women have taken control of the narrative about themselves, both through individual and collective actions. They do not only want to speak as “women” or as “Muslims,” but as Muslim women who are able to reinterpret tradition, build new authority, and voice their agency autonomously (Mosbach, 2022).

This research aims to explore how Muslim women who openly identify themselves as feminists understand their identities and how they respond to and negotiate the relationship between Islam, feminism, and religious authority in the context of European society. This study examines how the participants interpret Muslim feminism, how they define themselves as Muslim feminists and relate their experiences to global Islamic feminist discourse, and how their expressions of religiosity align with the theory of religious individualization as presented in Mosbach’s dissertation (Mosbach, 2022).

3.1.2 Chapter: Research design framework

This study employs a qualitative research paradigm with a social constructionist orientation. This means that meaning is not regarded as fixed or objective but is socially constructed through interaction, discourse, and experience. Such an approach allows the researcher to explore the participants’ experiences in constructing meaning about Muslim feminism and their relationship with Islam (Mosbach, 2022). Social constructionism also opens space for the researcher to recognize their own involvement in the knowledge production process (Burr, 2024; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Saleem et al., 2021). Therefore, this dissertation does not only present findings but also reflects on the researcher’s position, values, and assumptions as an integral part of the research process.

Rather than being bound to a single methodological school, this study applies a pragmatic approach by adapting its methods to the context, objectives, and ethical considerations (Bayuno et al., 2025; Gillespie et al., 2024; Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Its central focus lies on “what works” in uncovering complex and multidimensional realities (Mosbach, 2022). This flexibility enables the researcher to respond effectively to field dynamics, particularly when engaging with sensitive issues such as religion, gender, and minority identity.

Data were collected through in depth interviews with eight Muslim women who explicitly declared themselves as feminists. The participants were purposively selected based on three criteria: first, identifying themselves as “Muslim feminists”; second, being publicly active; and third, holding a personal understanding of Islam as a living belief system embedded in their daily lives (Mosbach, 2022). The interviews were conducted in a participatory, open, and flexible manner, allowing the participants’ narratives and experiences to emerge organically without being constrained by overly rigid questioning frameworks.

The researcher acknowledges that the issues addressed in this study are highly personal, political, and potentially vulnerable to manipulation or misuse. Therefore, all participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the purpose and process of the research, as well as their right to withdraw participation at any time. In addition, the author explicitly reflects on her own position and role, not only as an academic researcher but also as a subject who brings her own values, assumptions, and emotions into the research process. This reflexivity is regarded as an essential component in maintaining scientific integrity and transparency (Mosbach, 2022).

3.1.3 Chapter: Theoretical and conceptual framework

In this chapter, Mosbach critically reflects on the categories “Muslim” and “religion,” which are often used universally and essentially in Western scholarship (Moosa, 2022). She highlights how Muslim identity is frequently treated as a fixed entity associated with adherence to a singular normative system (Mosbach, 2022). She writes,

“Any attempt to theorize Muslim religiosity needs to address in what ways analytical categories are intertwined with categories of practices, not only for ethical reasons but for broader methodological reasons.” Mosbach emphasizes that the category “Muslim” in the sociology of religion is not neutral, as it is often framed by Western narratives that position religion as “the Other.” (Mosbach, 2022)

She proposes a “purpose-bound definition of religion,” meaning a definition of religion that depends on the context of study rather than theological norms or Euro-American assumptions. Mosbach uses the theory of religious individualization as the main framework to analyze the forms of religiosity among the participants. This theory, rooted in Western sociology of religion, argues that modernization does not eliminate religion but instead transforms it into something more personal, subjective, and autonomous from traditional authority (Mosbach, 2022). However, Mosbach approaches this theory critically by pointing out that the concept is not uniform but rather highly heterogeneous and susceptible to secular bias. She states,

“Religious individualization is not as conceptually and theoretically homogeneous, rather, the concept is theoretically under-exposed and heterogeneous.” (Mosbach, 2022)

Some of the key concepts from this theory used by Mosbach include the privatization of religion, autonomy and authenticity, detraditionalization, and the selectivity and internalization of authority. Nevertheless, she argues that the religiosity of Muslim women in her study is not entirely detached from traditional authority, as several participants continue to refer to classical schools of thought and interpretations. She remarks,

“While religion might on the one hand be seen as a private affair, how it is lived and conceptualized is in many ways determined by discourses and realities outside of this realm.” (Mosbach, 2022)

Mosbach also examines the long history of Islamic feminism, tracing it from the *islah* projects within Islamic modernism to contemporary feminist *ijtihad* and exegesis. She notes

that Muslim feminists do not only demand gender equality but also claim authority over sacred texts (Mosbach, 2022). She writes,

"The intention is to lift up a methodological framework with which to connect and compare the participants' hermeneutics and rhetorical strategies." (Mosbach, 2022)

The methodological approaches in Muslim feminism discussed include progressive *ijtihad* to reread Qur'anic and hadith texts, contextual interpretations, particularly regarding verses on polygamy, inheritance, and leadership, as well as the rejection of patriarchal interpretations and the empowerment of women's public roles. Mosbach also observes that not all participants are directly connected to the academic discourse of Islamic feminism, represented by scholars such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Leila Ahmed, but their intuitions resonate with the movement's broader principles. She concludes,

"The participants' diverging manifestations of religiosity are better described in terms of a relationship with the foundational religious texts, shaped in interplay with power, authority, and time." (Mosbach, 2022)

3.1.4 Chapter: Analysis and findings

This chapter focuses on the desire of Muslim women to reclaim the narrative about themselves within secular European societies. They reject being reduced to symbols of oppression or objects in debates about Islam and women. The participants emphasize the importance of "authentic representation," expressing their wish not to be seen as victims but as moral agents capable of interpreting their own faith (Mosbach, 2022). Mosbach writes,

"They want to be recognized as Muslim women who live their religiosity in a way that is deeply personal and moral, but not subject to the dominant liberal feminist or anti-Muslim discourses." (Mosbach, 2022)

These acts of self-representation include how they speak in the media, use the hijab as a symbol of active identity, and reject the "Muslim versus feminist" dichotomy imposed by public discourse. This chapter also analyzes how participants negotiate Islamic values in private spheres, particularly concerning marriage, domestic violence, divorce, polygamy, inheritance rights, and sexual orientation (Mosbach, 2022).

Several important findings emerge in Mosbach's dissertation. Some participants critique the practice of polygamy as irrelevant in contemporary contexts, emphasizing contextual readings of Qur'anic verses (Mosbach, 2022). Issues of domestic violence are addressed through ethical rather than purely jurisprudential interpretations. Inheritance and gender relations are understood as spaces of interpretation rather than as static dogma. Some even challenge heteronormative understandings of Islam. Mosbach states,

"They describe a search for moral integrity within Islam and a continuous struggle with the boundaries between what they find acceptable and unacceptable." (Mosbach, 2022)

The chapter examines in greater depth how the Muslim women participating in this study experience and respond to gender inequalities in religious public spaces. These inequalities manifest in three primary forms: segregation within mosques, limitations on women's roles in leading worship, and the politicized symbolism of the hijab. Rather than only voicing complaints, these women actively seek ways to reshape their roles within male-dominated religious structures (Katz et al., 1973; Mosbach, 2022). One of the most striking issues concerns mosque design. Many participants feel uncomfortable being placed behind curtains or in separate rooms, rendering them nearly unheard and unseen. This is not merely about spatial arrangements but symbolizes the exclusion of women from shared

spiritual spaces. Some even describe feeling as if they were “not truly invited to participate in communal prayer.”

Conversely, there are participants who have contrasting experiences. One woman is involved in the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen, Europe’s first women-led mosque. For this participant, the mosque no longer represents a space of restriction but becomes a site of empowerment and new authority. In such a place, women can lead prayers, deliver sermons, and engage in equal discussions. For them, this is not merely about claiming rights but about creating a new understanding of religiosity that is more just (Mosbach, 2022). Meanwhile, the hijab emerges as a symbol with layered meanings. Some participants wear it not due to social pressure or traditional obligation but as a declaration of identity and autonomy. For them, the hijab represents spiritual strength, a way to assert presence, faith, and voice, even within societies that sometimes view it with suspicion.

Mosbach highlights that these women are not merely adapting to their surroundings but also actively creating new spaces, both physical and symbolic. They do not only demand a place but also challenge the fixed meanings and authorities that have long been accepted. This chapter presents a detailed portrayal of how Muslim women construct and negotiate their relationships with religious authority. Mosbach avoids portraying the participants as monolithic and instead illustrates that the spectrum of approaches to Islamic authority is broad and dynamic. Some participants still refer to traditional scholars or schools of thought, particularly when seeking certainty or spiritual affirmation. For them, religious authority is not entirely rejected but serves as a selective moral reference. They acknowledge the existence of Islamic scholarly structures while filtering them through the lens of their lives as Muslim women in Europe.

Other participants, however, choose a more personal path by relying on individual *ijtihad*. For these women, directly reading sacred texts, reflecting on their meanings, and making decisions based on conscience and lived experiences become a form of authentic faith. They do not position themselves as religious authorities but believe that spiritual authority can be cultivated internally, as long as it is carried out with moral and spiritual responsibility. Mosbach notes that the participants’ relationships with religious authority are not a matter of outright acceptance or rejection but a continuous process of navigation shaped by biography, education, community, and even past traumas (Mosbach, 2022). This process shows that religious authority no longer exists as a singular and absolute structure but as a network of meanings renegotiated by women based on spiritual needs, social conditions, and gender awareness. She underscores a shift in sources of authority, moving from external figures such as scholars, traditions, and institutions toward internal sources like reason, personal experience, and moral conscience. This, she argues, exemplifies the practice of religious individualization in a complex form that is not necessarily liberal or secular (Mosbach, 2022). Mosbach also observes that participants approach Qur’anic interpretation in diverse ways, with some favoring literal readings, others adopting symbolic approaches, and some deliberately avoiding verses they find problematic.

3.1.5 Chapter: Theoretical discussion and conclusion

Mosbach concludes that the participants cannot be easily classified within either secular feminist frameworks or traditional Islamic categories. Instead, they combine values of equality and faith in new ways, creating fluid categories of identity and religious authority (Mosbach, 2022). She states,

“Rather than fitting neatly into either a secular feminist or a traditional Muslim category, the women in this study reconfigure both.” (Mosbach, 2022)

This reconfiguration demonstrates that Muslim feminist subjectivities are not simply derivative of Western feminist ideals or bound by orthodox Islamic prescriptions, but rather, they form new expressions of religiosity that challenge both structures simultaneously.

Mosbach also situates the voices of her participants in relation to global Islamic feminism. She compares their perspectives to academic feminist thinkers such as Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi, noting that while not all participants directly engage with these scholars' writings, they express similar intuitions, particularly in their reinterpretations of sacred texts, critiques of patriarchy, and symbolic struggles in public religious spaces (Mosbach, 2022). She observes,

"Their narratives reflect a reflexive engagement with Islamic sources that resonates with Islamic feminism, even when they do not explicitly refer to it." (Mosbach, 2022)

This suggests that their feminist expressions emerge organically from their contexts while echoing broader transnational discourses. One of Mosbach's most significant theoretical contributions is her revision of the concept of religious individualization. She challenges dominant interpretations of this theory, which often frame religious individualization as purely liberal, atomized, and detached from traditional religious structures. In the case of Muslim women, Mosbach argues that religious individualization can occur communally, within social spaces that support collective expressions of faith, such as activist networks and alternative religious spaces like women-led mosques (Mosbach, 2022). She emphasizes that in these experiences, individualization does not always lead to a break from sacred texts or Islamic traditions. On the contrary, participants often revisit Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and Islamic normative values as moral and spiritual foundations for negotiating their dual identities as Muslims and feminists (Mosbach, 2022).

Mosbach further notes that these forms of individualization are not secular in nature but carry transformative spiritual dimensions. For some participants, deeply personal engagement with faith becomes the impetus for advocating gender justice, opening new interpretive horizons, and cultivating more authentic relationships with God beyond structural constraints traditionally deemed normative (Mosbach, 2022). This finding suggests that individualization, as experienced by these women, does not equate to secularization or relativism but embodies a hybrid mode of religiosity that intertwines personal agency with spiritual integrity.

In addressing the relationship between tradition and modernity, Mosbach avoids presenting them as a binary opposition. She demonstrates that the participants negotiate religious authority situationally, with some continuing to recognize the importance of classical scholars and texts, while others construct authority based on personal experience and moral reasoning (Mosbach, 2022). She summarizes this observation by stating,

"The study reveals a dynamic form of Muslim religiosity that constantly negotiates between tradition, community, and the self." (Mosbach, 2022)

This negotiation illustrates that neither traditionalism nor modernism alone can adequately capture the participants' lived religious practices. Mosbach closes her dissertation by emphasizing, "These voices are not just 'cases' to be studied, but agents of religious knowledge production" (Mosbach, 2022). She asserts that the voices of these Muslim feminist women are not merely personal testimonies but represent a new form of religious knowledge. This knowledge emerges not from authoritative institutions or formal Islamic scholarship but from lived experiences, personal reflections, and active negotiations of Islamic values within the context of minority life in Europe. Moreover, Mosbach interprets these expressions of Muslim feminism as a form of symbolic resistance against three dominant forces: structural racism that marginalizes Muslim identities in Western societies, internal patriarchy within Muslim communities that restricts women's agency, and exclusive secularism that sidelines religious expressions from public life (Mosbach, 2022). She concludes that the religious and feminist expressions of her participants cannot be fully understood through conventional categories such as "moderate," "progressive," or "traditionalist." These categories fail to capture the spiritual, political, and cultural

complexities that shape the identities and practices of the Muslim women at the center of her study (Mosbach, 2022).

3.2 Critical review

3.2.1 Theoretical

Vanja Mosbach’s dissertation *Voices of Muslim Feminists* positions theory as the primary foundation for understanding the phenomenon of Muslim feminism in the Øresund region of Sweden and Denmark. Broadly, Mosbach combines social theory on religion with feminist thought, with particular emphasis on the concept of religious individualization and feminist hermeneutical approaches within Islam (Mosbach, 2022). From a critical review perspective, however, there are several important observations regarding the theoretical framework she employs, particularly in terms of its coherence, contextual relevance, and analytical strength (Adam, 2024). One primary concern is the dominance of the religious individualization perspective. Mosbach asserts,

“The participants’ religiosity is shaped through personal agency, negotiated authority, and selective adherence to Islamic traditions.” (Mosbach, 2022)

Her reliance on religious individualization as a lens warrants reconsideration, particularly in light of Talal Asad’s critique of Western approaches to the sociology of religion. Asad argues that many modern sociological theories of religion, including frameworks aligned with religious individualization, implicitly assume that religion must be private, subjective, and detached from public institutions (Seidel, 2005). Talal Asad has criticized sociological approaches that presuppose religion must be privatized and individualized, which is not always applicable to Islam (Tezcan, 2019). This assumption, Asad contends, stems from the historical and theological development of Christianity, especially Protestant traditions in the West, which has then been universalized as a normative model for understanding religion (Asad, 2019).

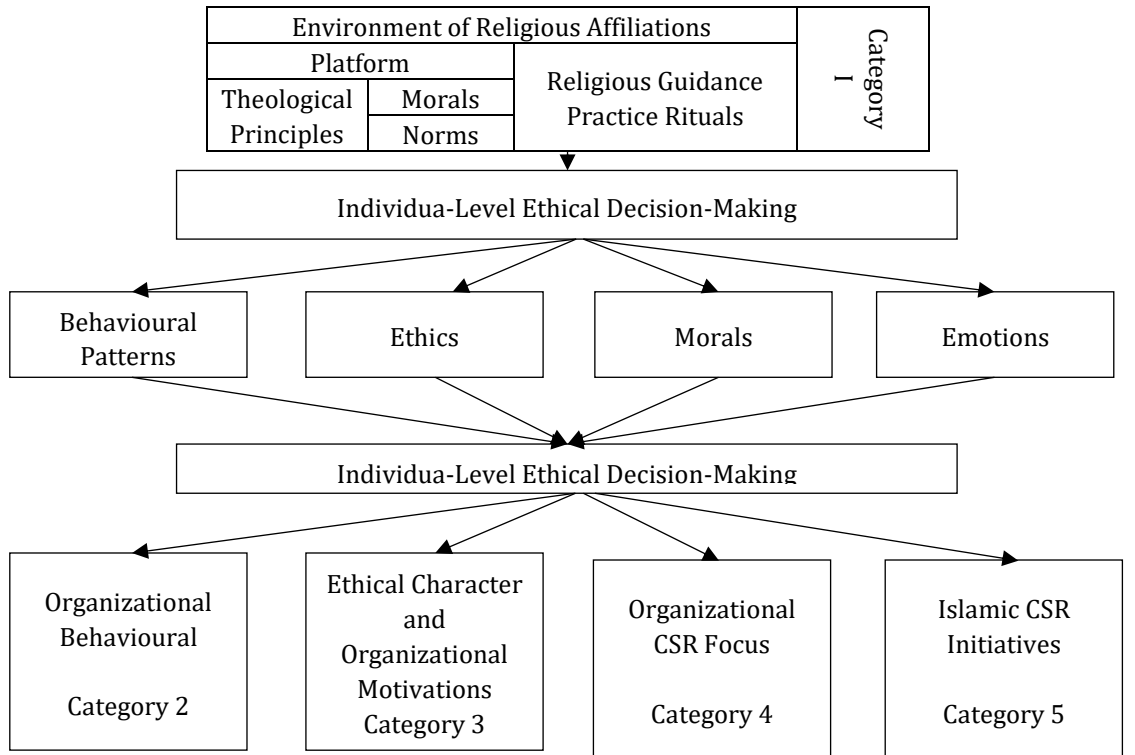


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the influence of religious affiliations on individual-level ethical decision-making and organizational outcomes

In the context of Islam, such assumptions are not always relevant. Islam is not only a personal spiritual experience but also a comprehensive way of life encompassing social, political, legal, and epistemological structures (Koleva, 2021). Religion is not merely believed but also enacted collectively, shaped through practices, and maintained by communities. Thus, approaches that reduce Islam to a matter of personal spiritual choice risk neglecting the complex normative and institutional dimensions embedded in Islamic tradition (Koleva, 2021). In light of these critiques, Mosbach's reliance on the concept of religious individualization raises a critical question regarding whether her analytical framework fully captures the complexity of Muslim women's religiosity or instead positions their experiences within a Western paradigm that, as Asad contends, is inadequate for interpreting non-Western religious traditions. This methodological tension underscores the broader challenge of employing Eurocentric theories in Islamic contexts without rigorous adaptation, particularly when examining how Muslim women negotiate their faith and feminist identities within both public and private spheres in Europe.

Mosbach employs the theory of religious individualization as the primary analytical lens to interpret the religious experiences of Muslim women. This concept refers to the process through which individuals increasingly assume authority in religious matters, no longer submitting entirely to institutions or authoritative traditions. The framework offers notable strengths, such as its ability to explain how Muslim women in Europe, living as minorities within secular societies, establish flexible relationships with their faith. It also captures the diversity of religious expressions that are neither uniform nor entirely bound by traditional authority. However, significant weaknesses emerge in its application, as Mosbach does not provide a structured framework for operationalizing the concept or clarify which indicators could measure religious individualization. Furthermore, the concept derives from European Christian experiences and is not sufficiently contextualized within Islamic epistemological traditions, nor is it compared to concepts such as *ijtihad*, *ijtima'*, or contextual interpretation that are deeply embedded in Islamic thought (Mosbach, 2022).

Mosbach also employs the category of Muslim feminism rather than Islamic feminism, a terminological choice that carries conceptual implications. On one hand, the term could be understood as feminism practiced by Muslim women without necessarily being grounded in Islamic epistemology. However, its use is not explicitly defined in the dissertation, resulting in conceptual ambiguity. This choice produces a key weakness, as there is no clear distinction between the social experience of Muslim feminist women and the textual or scholarly project of Islamic feminism. Mosbach also fails to clarify what distinguishes a Muslim feminist from a feminist who happens to be Muslim. Moreover, foundational ideas of Islamic feminism, as developed by scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Kecia Ali, are only briefly mentioned rather than meaningfully integrated into the theoretical framework (Mosbach, 2022).

Another limitation lies in the weak integration of theory and data throughout the dissertation. Although Mosbach presents rich interview data, there is a visible gap between her conceptual frameworks and empirical findings. For instance, the notion of negotiating authority is not theoretically articulated, leaving it unclear whether such negotiations represent resistance, transformation, or a reconfiguration of authority. The participants' self-representation as Muslim women is treated merely as discourse, without engaging theoretical perspectives on representation such as Stuart Hall's theories or concepts of subject positioning within postcolonial studies. Furthermore, Mosbach relies heavily on participants' narratives without sufficiently examining how these experiences can be processed into epistemic knowledge rather than remaining purely subjective testimonies. This creates a risk of bias by assuming that feelings and experiences inherently possess scholarly value without undergoing conceptual categorization or rigorous analytical articulation (Mosbach, 2022).

As a reviewer, considering the theoretical dimensions of Vanja Mosbach's dissertation, it can be concluded that while the study is solid as a social examination of Muslim women's experiences, it remains theoretically underdeveloped. Theory does not operate as a sharp

and disciplined framework but rather as a blurred lens loosely applied to participants' narratives. This reflects Mosbach's avoidance of taking a firm epistemological stance, perhaps to avoid appearing overly normative, yet at the cost of conceptual clarity. Academic scholarship, however, demands the courage to articulate a position and discipline the concepts employed so that readers can trace the logical and methodological coherence of the argument. While the dissertation succeeds in centering the voices of Muslim women, it falls short in constructing a strong and consistent theoretical foundation. The application of religious individualization requires reconceptualization or replacement with approaches more compatible with Islamic epistemology. For deeper engagement with Islamic feminism, methodologies of Qur'anic exegesis, Islamic legal theory, and theories of religious authority must receive greater emphasis so that the work transcends ethnographic description and makes a substantive theoretical contribution to studies of Islamic feminism and the epistemology of religion (Mosbach, 2022).

3.2.2 Methodology

The dissertation *Voices of Muslim Feminists* employs a reflective qualitative approach, relying on in-depth interviews with eight Muslim women living in the Øresund region (Sweden–Denmark). The researcher positions herself as a feminist scholar who does not claim ideological neutrality but seeks to build empathetic and ethical relationships with participants. This methodology offers notable strengths, particularly its relational, ethical, and reflective dimensions. Mosbach explicitly acknowledges her subjectivity, adopting a feminist situated epistemology that emphasizes trust, care, and dialogic engagement, allowing participants to safely share their narratives. This approach aligns with principles of reflexive ethnography, as described by Ellis and Bochner (2000), where the researcher's experiences, positionality, and emotions are incorporated into the scholarly narrative. Mosbach is commendable for candidly reflecting on her own background as a white, non-Muslim woman working within a European academic institution (Mosbach, 2022).

However, the study's methodology also exhibits key weaknesses, the most apparent being the very limited number of participants, with only eight individuals. While this size is acceptable for qualitative research prioritizing depth over breadth, Mosbach attempts to draw theoretical conclusions and even describes participants as “producers of new forms of religious knowledge” (Mosbach, 2022). Such claims require a more diverse and representative sample in terms of age, ethnicity, education, Islamic orientations, and social status. Most participants come from educated, activist backgrounds, leaving conservative, traditional, or socially marginalized Muslim women largely absent from the study. Additionally, the exclusion of male voices narrows the gender perspective. Although the focus is on women, the dissertation examines negotiations over religious authority and gender equality, yet it fails to include men who might either support Islamic feminism or represent the authority structures being critiqued. This omission risks reinforcing a reductive dichotomy where men are solely cast as authority figures and women as agents of change, despite the more nuanced realities of gender dynamics in Muslim contexts (Wadud, 2006).

Another methodological concern is the lack of clarity regarding participant selection criteria, particularly the operational definition of “Muslim feminist.” While Mosbach states that participants self-identify as Muslim feminists or are active in gender equality advocacy, she does not specify whether this identification is based on organizational affiliation, gender-related stances, theological interpretations, or purely subjective self-identification. This ambiguity undermines the conceptual validity of the study, particularly when Mosbach seeks to connect participants' narratives to global Islamic feminist discourse. Hammersley & Atkinson (2019) caution that participant selection in qualitative research must align with analytic conceptualization to ensure valid and responsible interpretation. Without clear criteria, the study risks conflating diverse experiences under a vague label (Mosbach, 2022).

Although Mosbach's reflective, empathetic approach effectively amplifies the voices of her participants, her methodology suffers from selective bias, favoring narratives that align

with her research aims. By excluding voices from men, conservative or traditional women, and socioeconomically marginalized groups, the dissertation presents a partial view of Muslim feminism that largely reflects a middle-class, privileged demographic. Most participants are well-educated activists connected to secular, progressive public spaces such as academia, NGOs, or community leadership. Consequently, the experiences of working-class women, migrant laborers, housewives with limited educational access, and those in social isolation are nearly invisible in the study, despite being among the most materially and spiritually marginalized in diaspora contexts. As Fraser (1995) reminds us, feminist scholarship must integrate cultural and structural dimensions to avoid producing an elitist “representational feminism” that overlooks material inequalities (Fraser, 1995).

Finally, while Mosbach highlights women’s narratives with empathy, her analysis overlooks the discursive construction of gender in Islam as a historically, spiritually, and epistemically relational process involving both men and women. By presenting only female voices, the dissertation inadvertently perpetuates a binary framework where male authority and female resistance stand in opposition, without exploring possibilities for collaboration, mutual epistemic exchange, or shared interpretive spaces in Islamic hermeneutics. This omission not only limits the depth of the study’s gender analysis but also weakens its potential contribution to broader discourses on Islamic feminism and epistemology (Mosbach, 2022).

3.2.3 Evaluation of key concepts

Religious individualization is the primary theoretical framework employed by Mosbach, derived from contemporary sociology of religion, particularly the works of Thomas Luckmann, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, and Detlef Pollack. Mosbach argues that this concept is relevant because it reflects how Muslim women in Europe interpret and practice their faith autonomously, often outside traditional structures of authority. However, she also acknowledges that the term itself remains under-exposed and heterogeneous even within sociological literature, lacking a consistent definition or uniform application. Her reading of individualization is notably critical, emphasizing that it is not inherently liberal or secular but may take collective, spiritual, and contextual forms as well.

Despite this, Mosbach does not develop a consistent working definition throughout her analysis. At times, individualization appears as a break from institutional authority, while at other points it functions as a dynamic relational process, which creates conceptual ambiguity. Moreover, she does not clarify how individualization is measured, traced, or classified within participants’ narratives, which complicates the validation of theory against empirical data. The concept would be stronger if Mosbach had formulated concrete indicators such as degrees of interpretive autonomy, the extent of distancing from institutions, and the influence of community, so that individualization could be applied methodologically rather than serving merely as a normative lens.

Mosbach also outlines the historical and methodological trajectories of Islamic feminism, ranging from modernist projects developed by scholars such as Fatima Mernissi to contextual interpretations of the Qur’an by figures such as Amina Wadud. She observes that while many participants have not engaged directly with these academic texts, their interpretive intuitions often resonate with Islamic feminist discourse. However, Mosbach does not clearly distinguish between Islamic feminism, which is rooted in theological and scholarly epistemology, and Muslim feminism, which emerges primarily from social and personal praxis. This conflation creates ambiguity as to whether Mosbach is analyzing Islamic feminism as a formal intellectual tradition or simply documenting forms of feminism practiced by self-identified Muslim women.

Without clear conceptual delineation, it remains uncertain where the participants are situated along this spectrum. A more precise distinction between feminism grounded in Islamic epistemology and that rooted in Muslim women’s lived experiences would prevent overgeneralization and ensure that not every act of agency or interpretive engagement by Muslim women is automatically categorized as feminist. Two other concepts that emerge

repeatedly in Mosbach's dissertation are self-representation and religious authority. Representation is presented as the effort of Muslim women to assert control over narratives about themselves, whether in public discourse, the media, or religious spaces. Religious authority is portrayed as a dynamic relationship between individuals and institutional structures of religion, one that can be negotiated, renegotiated, or even rejected outright.

Nevertheless, Mosbach does not offer a sufficiently rigorous theoretical framework for analyzing self-representation, as her usage of the concept seems intuitive rather than grounded in established theoretical perspectives such as those of Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, or postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak. Her discussion of religious authority is similarly limited, as it remains unclear whether participants are merely substituting one form of authority for another that aligns with their values, or if they are actively creating new epistemic and discursive structures of authority. A more robust engagement with concepts such as counter-public religious authority, as developed by scholars like Ebrahim Moosa and Saba Mahmood, could have deepened her analysis by distinguishing between selective adherence and genuine discursive innovation.

3.2.4 Epistemological dialogue: Evaluating the framework of knowledge

The dissertation *Voices of Muslim Feminists* by Vanja Mosbach explicitly positions itself within the spectrum of social constructionist epistemology and Western secular feminism. Within this framework, the experiences of participants become the primary source for constructing knowledge about Islam and gender. Religiosity is not approached as something grounded in sacred texts or theological traditions but as a dynamic construction shaped through social relations, historical contexts, and identity positions. Mosbach states,

"I approach religious identity as something shaped in interplay with time, location, personal biography and the particularities of contemporary discourses." (Mosbach, 2022)

By taking this stance, Mosbach appears to reject transcendent epistemologies found within Islamic scholarly traditions such as *usul fiqh*, *tafsir*, and *kalam*, opting instead for an experience-based, contextual epistemology. However, this approach generates serious concerns when examined from the perspectives of Islamic epistemology and Islamic feminism itself.

The first issue lies in the reduction of religion into purely individual or performative experience. Mosbach's framework risks diminishing Islam to a subjective or ethnographic construct, disregarding the fact that in Islamic epistemology, religious knowledge does not stem solely from individual interpretation but is grounded in established methodological structures, including *ijtihad*, chains of scholarly transmission (*sanad*), consensus among scholars (*ijma'*), and intertextual engagement with the Qur'an and Sunnah. In this sense, Mosbach demonstrates a limited understanding of Islam as a complex and autonomous knowledge system, choosing instead to treat it primarily as a cultural artifact interpreted through Western lenses. This results in a fundamental epistemological gap, where Islam is not acknowledged as a robust intellectual tradition but is instead reduced to ethnographic experience. Such critiques echo the arguments of Talal Asad and Wael B. Hallaq, who emphasize the necessity of recognizing Islamic epistemology as an autonomous and sophisticated system. As Wael Hallaq critiques in *The Impossible State* (2012), Western approaches to Islam often disregard its internal epistemological frameworks, imposing liberal-secular paradigms as universal norms.

The second concern relates to Mosbach's use of the term Muslim feminism, which lacks a clear epistemological foundation. It remains ambiguous whether this refers to a feminism grounded in Islamic sources and methodologies or simply a Western feminist framework adapted by Muslim women. Mosbach notes that while some participants are disconnected from academic Islamic feminist literature, their "intuitions resonate" with such discourse. This conflation is problematic because it equates subjective experience with epistemological

positioning. Islamic feminism, as advanced by scholars such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Kecia Ali, is not merely intuitive but is built upon systematic, critical engagement with sacred texts and interpretive methodologies. Amina Wadud underscores that Islamic feminism involves a reinterpretation of the Qur'an rooted in *tawhid* and ethical justice rather than simply the social expressions of Muslim women. As Wadud argues,

"Any attempt to rethink gender in Islam must first reconsider the underlying epistemological assumptions and interpretive methods applied to the Qur'an." (Wadud, 2006)

By failing to distinguish between text-based Islamic feminism and experience-based Muslim feminism, Mosbach creates a blurred and difficult-to-assess analytical category, weakening the clarity of her theoretical framework (Fidhayanti et al., 2024). A third problem concerns the dynamics of epistemic power, particularly the dominance of Western academic discourse over Islamic intellectual traditions. Mosbach draws heavily on sociological theories from Western scholars such as Luckmann, Hervieu-L  ger, and Pollack without critically interrogating these frameworks from a postcolonial perspective. Talal Asad has long critiqued how Western academia frames non-Western religions hegemonically, often assuming that religion should conform to Protestant models characterized by individualism, privacy, and rationalism. By reproducing this approach, Mosbach neglects to engage with alternative frameworks of knowledge arising from within Islam itself, resulting in an analysis that, while ethnographically rich, perpetuates the asymmetries of epistemic power between the West and Islamic traditions.

3.2.5 Conclusion of the epistemological dialogue

Mosbach's dissertation opens a space for new narratives of Muslim women in Europe, yet it fails to construct an epistemological dialogue that balances the experiences of Muslim women with the intellectual frameworks of Islamic scholarship. What emerges instead is a dynamic in which these experiences are absorbed into Western social theories without being critically examined or deconstructed from within. From the perspective of Islamic epistemology, this approach appears overly lenient, as it does not provide analytical tools rooted in Islamic sources and methodologies and tends to assume that the liberation of Muslim women can only be realized by detaching themselves from traditional authorities. In conclusion, this dissertation is best understood as an ethnographic study of Muslim feminism viewed through a Western analytical lens rather than as a substantive contribution to the epistemology of Islamic feminism. Such a critique is essential to ensure that scholarship on Islamic feminism remains anchored in rigorous intellectual traditions rather than reduced to culturally situated interpretations detached from their epistemic foundations.

3.2.6 Reviewer's reflection

Reading *Voices of Muslim Feminists* by Vanja Mosbach offers not only an engagement with an academic work but also an opportunity to reflect on how the voices of Muslim women are constructed, presented, and, at times, inadvertently shaped by specific theoretical frameworks. From the standpoint of a Muslim academic situated in a Muslim-majority Southeast Asian context, the narratives presented in Mosbach's dissertation evoke both resonance and distance. On one hand, the study's effort to provide Muslim women with a platform to articulate their own perspectives—particularly within Scandinavian public spheres that are predominantly secular and often skeptical of religion—constitutes an important scholarly contribution. On the other hand, the analysis reveals an unaddressed epistemological gap, as the dissertation relies on the theory of religious individualization to interpret participants' spirituality, despite this theory's roots in a European Christian milieu characterized by individualism and secularism. For many Muslim women who remain

connected to texts, communities, and religious traditions, the tension between interpretive autonomy and the continued search for moral authority remains insufficiently explored within Mosbach's framework. Additionally, the study's methodological limitations—such as its focus on only eight women and the exclusion of Muslim men who also contribute to broader Islamic feminist discourses—raise further questions. Gender justice, after all, extends beyond women's experiences, and Islamic epistemology necessitates collective, cross-gender participation in the production of religious knowledge.

These reflections contribute to a broader awareness that Muslim feminism is not merely a social practice but an epistemological project that raises fundamental questions concerning who is authorized to interpret, which analytical tools are employed, and for whom such narratives are constructed. Such considerations underscore the importance of advancing a framework for Islamic feminist epistemology. While Mosbach's contribution is acknowledged for its academic courage, questions remain regarding whether her approach effectively creates space for an Islamic epistemology that is not only spiritual, but also methodological and conceptual in nature. This recognition further highlights the need for Muslim scholars to maintain a critical stance toward external theoretical discourses while simultaneously cultivating an academic language grounded in lived experience, scholarly tradition, and faith.

3.2.7 Suggestions and recommendations

The dissertation *Voices of Muslim Feminists* by Vanja Mosbach offers a valuable contribution by amplifying the voices of Muslim women in Europe, a group often marginalized in both mainstream feminist discourse and within the structures of traditional Islamic authority. However, to deliver a more robust and inclusive scholarly impact, the dissertation leaves several areas that warrant refinement.

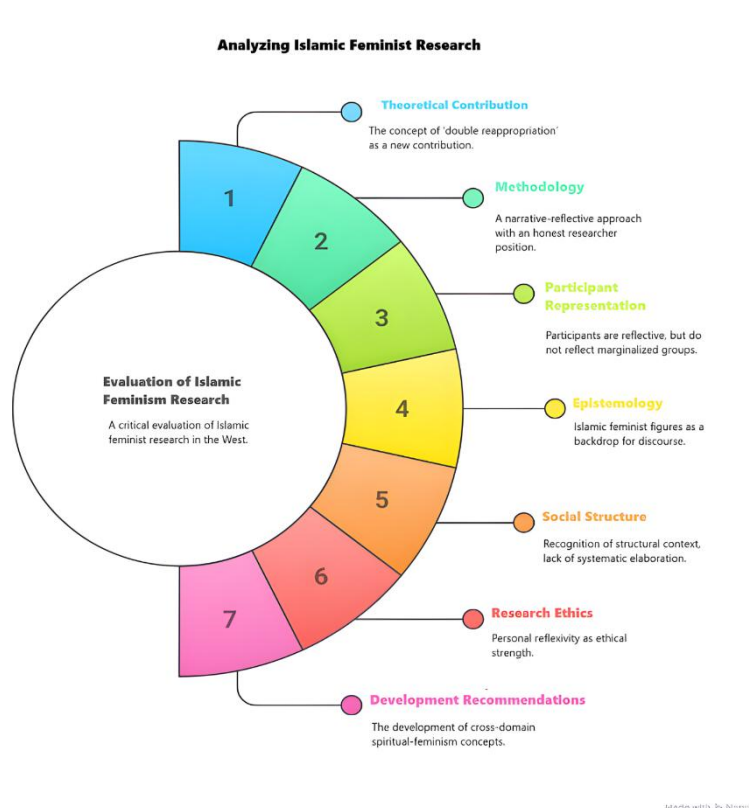


Fig. 2. Analyzing islamic feminist research

First, from a theoretical perspective, it would benefit from clearer working definitions of its key concepts, including religious individualization, Muslim feminism, and religious authority. Without precise and operational categories, these terms risk being applied

loosely, weakening the analytical framework. Additionally, Mosbach would do well to incorporate Islamic epistemological frameworks as a foundation for dialogue rather than relying solely on Western social theories as the primary analytical tools. Second, methodologically, while her reflective feminist approach is commendably ethical, it is hampered by a lack of data triangulation and by unclear strategies for thematic analysis. Relying solely on interview data without supplementary participant observations or document analysis renders the participants' narratives somewhat detached from their wider contexts. Furthermore, Mosbach does not provide sufficient detail regarding how the data were processed, from transcription to thematic categorization.

Third, the representation of participants requires closer scrutiny, as most come from middle-class, highly educated, and publicly active backgrounds. This creates a class bias that risks obscuring the realities of Muslim women from migrant worker groups, conservative communities, or those with limited access to feminist discourse. Given Mosbach's background in the sociology of religion, greater sensitivity to social structures and class disparities would be expected. Fourth, from a gender perspective, restricting the participants exclusively to women invites further critique, as the dissertation omits the voices of Muslim men who could serve as allies, critics, or even pioneers within Islamic feminist movements. Since gender justice in Islam should be framed as a collective struggle, the absence of male voices narrows the scope of the analysis and limits its understanding of gender negotiations in full complexity.

Tabel. 1 Critical evaluation of Mosbach's dissertation

Aspect	Strength	Weakness	Strengthening Recommendation
Theoretical	Using the concepts of religious individualization and Muslim feminism	No clear operational definition; dominance of Western perspectives	Define conceptual boundaries; present Islamic epistemology as an alternative lens
Methodology	Reflective, ethical, and participatory; using a feminist approach	Only interview-based; minimal triangulation; analysis strategy not elaborated	Use data triangulation; explain the thematic analysis process transparently.
Participant Representation	Focus on Muslim women as active agents	Limited to middle-class women; socially and culturally homogeneous	Expand participant diversity: lower class, migrants, conservatives
Gender Criticism	Challenging patriarchy in religious public spaces	Not involving men as part of the gender discourse	Include progressive Muslim men as partners in discussions on Islamic feminism.
Epistemology	Placing women's experiences as a source of knowledge	Not building dialogue with Islamic epistemology	Involve Islamic sources (tafsir, ushul fiqh, maqashid) as a basis for criticizing patriarchy.
Socio-Political Context	Highlighting the reality of Muslim women in the diaspora in Scandinavia	Minimal scrutiny of state policy, media, and systemic discrimination	Add structural context so that the narrative does not float

Lastly, in terms of socio-political context, the dissertation does not adequately examine how state policies, racial dynamics, or public discourses about Islam in Europe influence the participants' religious experiences and interpretations. Without engaging these broader contexts, the personal narratives presented risk appearing unanchored and lack the strength to be understood as forms of structural resistance. Thus, the dissertation would benefit from conceptual, methodological, and representational strengthening so that it may serve not only as a compelling account of women's experiences but also as a rigorous, epistemologically grounded, and contextually aware scholarly reference.

4. Conclusions

Vanja Mosbach's dissertation *Voices of Muslim Feminists* makes a significant contribution to expanding our understanding of the dynamics of religious agency among Muslim women in Europe by employing a qualitative-narrative approach that amplifies feminist Muslim voices often marginalized in secular public discourse. The study illustrates how spirituality, identity, and struggles for gender equality are reflectively and personally negotiated by participants within socio-political contexts that frequently sideline them, while the use of the concept of religious individualization strengthens the narrative that religion is no longer monopolized by formal authorities but serves as a space for critical and conscious interpretation. This work stands out for its courage in providing a platform for Muslim women who are reshaping their identities in relation to Islam, feminism, and secular societies, a perspective often overlooked by mainstream academia. However, the dissertation leaves room for critique, as its theoretical framework is heavily dominated by Western perspectives, particularly the sociology of religion, with only implicit engagement with Islamic epistemology, and its participant selection tends toward homogeneity, creating class and ideological biases. While the dissertation remains an important contribution to Muslim feminist studies, it requires broader perspectives to serve as a more inclusive and epistemologically grounded reference in Islamic and gender scholarship.

Moreover, the dissertation underscores that the study of Muslim feminism cannot rest solely on presenting women's personal experiences but must be anchored in strong, inclusive, and interdisciplinary scholarship. There must be deliberate efforts to bridge the gaps between lived experiences, social theory, and Islamic epistemology so that Muslim feminism emerges not as a purely cultural discourse but as a critical, contextual, and impactful intellectual project for advancing gender justice within global Muslim societies.

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Author Contribution

The author designed and conducted the critical review of Vanja Mosbach's dissertation *Voices of Muslim Feminists: Navigating Tradition, Authority and the Debate about Islam*, using a qualitative text-based and content analysis method. She conducted an in-depth engagement with the dissertation's epistemological and theoretical frameworks, compared its core arguments with prominent Islamic feminist thinkers, and composed the full manuscript. The paper was revised following academic feedback from Prof. Dr. H.M. Atho Mudzhar, MSPD, who provided supervision, theoretical insight, and approval for the final version of the paper.

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