Biology and ‘Created Nature’: Gender and the Body in Popular Islamic Literature from Modern Turkey and the West

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Abstract
A common theme in today’s popular Islamic literature is defending traditional gender roles against forces of change. When addressing audiences who are strongly influenced by Western modernity, such as in Turkey and some immigrant populations in the industrialized West, this literature often justifies its pronouncements by invoking the apparent authority of science, especially biology. Authors paint a sharp dichotomy between men and women in body, mind, behavior, and character, asserting that such differences are inherent and immutable. In assuming masculine biological superiority, such writings sometimes end up offering a quasi-Aristotelian notion of the body, echoing theories of anatomy and physiology dating back to the medical and biological treatises of ancient Greece. Casting women as universally predisposed, physically and psychologically, toward emotionality, weakness, domesticity, and motherhood, these authors define the nature of “the body” in such ways as to counter more liberal notions.

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Biology and “Created Nature”: Gender and the Body in Popular Islamic Literature from Modern Turkey and the West

Taner Edis and Amy Sue Bix

A common theme in today’s popular Islamic literature is defending traditional gender roles against forces of change. When addressing audiences who are strongly influenced by Western modernity, such as in Turkey and some immigrant populations in the industrialized West, this literature often justifies its pronouncements by invoking the apparent authority of science, especially biology. Authors paint a sharp dichotomy between men and women in body, mind, behavior, and character, asserting that such differences are inherent and immutable. In assuming masculine biological superiority, such writings sometimes end up offering a quasi-Aristotelian notion of the body, echoing theories of anatomy and physiology dating back to the medical and biological treatises of ancient Greece. Casting women as universally predisposed, physically and psychologically, toward emotionality, weakness, domesticity, and motherhood, these authors define the nature of “the body” in such ways as to counter more liberal notions.

To clarify, we are not arguing that those modern Islamic attitudes toward the body that we highlight represent a direct carry-over from the philosophy of ancient Greece. Scholars have long understood the vital role of Arab translators and compilers after about the ninth century in maintaining Greek philosophical writings, transferring Aristotle’s theories of biology and Hippocrates and Galen’s medical thought into forms that attained lasting influence among Christian theologians, medieval anatomists, and Enlightenment philosophers in Western Europe.1 But pathways of intellectual transmission are complicated, and it would be vastly simplistic to expect that today’s popular Islamic biology recapitulates centuries-old thought, unchanged. A sampling of Islamic literature from Turkey and from Western immigrant Muslim sources indeed provides striking echoes of Aristotelian-style biology, in concepts of the body and gender differences. Yet it makes more sense to interpret this phenomenon within the context of modern Islamic thought itself. Specifically, these theories of gender roles are mediated through the vital religious notion of fitra, a specific “created nature.” Through being identified with fitra, prescribed gender roles gain not only the weight of tradition, but the mandate of divine order.

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Jurisprudence represents a central aspect of orthodox Islam, and Muslim efforts to understand sacred texts very often take mundane matters of everyday life as their point of departure. Practical questions and the need to validate answers with the authority of the Quran or hadith drive much of Muslim literature, whether in the historical development of orthodoxy or among Islamist students in university campuses today.2

In a changing cultural and economic landscape, particularly where religiously conservative communities are in contact with secular Western environments, today’s practical questions often involve gender and appropriate female roles in the private and public realms. In Turkey and among Muslim immigrant communities, advice manuals, religious newspaper columns, and web sites devoted to counsel from religious scholars proliferate, almost all proclaiming the virtues of a traditionally Islamic ideal for women. They typically maintain that the sexes have separate spheres; though women can take on public positions, their complementary, no less honorable place in life is primarily home and family. And following the age-old pattern, the advice they present displays proof texts for validation.

The proof is relatively easy to find—the same multitude of passages from scripture and tradition that Western critics are wont to bring up as evidence that orthodox Islam does not value women as much as men. Devout Muslims, naturally, usually hold that traditional Islam values women more than do secular, decadent points of view. What is most important, however, is that there is little need for such defensive polemic within securely traditional or fundamentalist communities: citing the authoritative texts and their accepted interpretation settles the debate. So a large part of today’s Islamic literature on gender makes little attempt to provide any rationale beyond the standard proof-texts. Even the more sophisticated writers work within the classical Islamic tradition honed through layers of commentaries upon commentaries. This is the style of the ulama, and it is often adopted also by Islamists even though they have developed non-traditional structures of religious education and legitimation. The writers take it for granted that an idealized orthodox Muslim culture in the classical mold is their God’s will. They consider that clarifying the divine commandments is all that is necessary to justify a traditional role for women.

The availability of more Westernized options for life, however, means that many Muslim popular writers feel a pressing need to explain and defend their prescriptions. In Turkey, from which we draw most of our examples, the constituencies for Islamic revival movements are typically part of modern urban life, whether they are recent internal immigrants populating the slums of large cities, or business interests with provincial roots who have been able to economically assert themselves in a globalized marketplace.3 While strongly committed to an Islamic identity, such modernizing groups demand more from their faith-affirming literature than a laundry list of traditional proof-texts.4 Hence, arguments explicitly drawing on biological conceptions of female nature tend to become visible in cases where writers are addressing readers who have a modern education and may often hold professional jobs. This audience is familiar with and works within a cultural world other than that of classical Islam — a world in which secular legitimation often comes through invoking
“science.” Turkey especially harbors one of the most Westernized elites among Muslim countries, but has also witnessed a strong and successful re-Islamization movement in the 1990s. Islamist movements have become the most dynamic new force in contemporary Turkish politics, mobilizing many women in their ranks. Due to the role of women in Islamist movements, and because Islamist movements in Turkey “can only be understood . . . in terms of their problematic relation to Western modernity, a relation that takes shape and acquires sense only through women’s bodies and women’s voices,” questions about the nature of women remain in the forefront of public debates.

A few intellectuals argue that science can occupy a sphere separate from that of religion. However, many Muslim thinkers in Turkey, especially those sympathetic to political Islam, insist that a religious vision should permeate science as well as political aspects of life. Since mastery of science and technology is identified as a main reason for the military and economic dominance of Western colonial powers, appropriating and Islamizing science remains a concern of Muslim intellectuals, which trickles down to popular writings. Thus, for example, some Turkish Muslims in recent years have developed an extensive and influential anti-evolutionary literature. They seek to claim the authority of science, particularly when appealing to a more secular audience. In fact, popular writers from all over the Muslim world regularly seek to appropriate science for religious purposes. In doing so, they very often draw on physics as well as biology to provide arguments. In addition, many who call for Islamizing science have especially concentrated on the social sciences. Such ideas, however, appeal mainly to those intellectuals who desire an all-encompassing Islamic vision. The biology of gender and the body has much greater popular resonance, since the role of women always represents a major point of contention in the conflict between advocates of secular modernization and development through a revitalized Islamic identity.

**Fitra and Female Nature**

As a venerable concept in Muslim theology, @tras is regularly invoked in numerous contexts. For example, popular Muslim writers often say that the created nature of humans is such that we are all born submitters to the One God and hence Muslim; it is only social indoctrination which turns many of us into adherents of other religions or none. Many Western converts to Islam therefore describe themselves as “reverts,” perceiving themselves as having reverted to the natural state of humankind. In more mystical and metaphysical currents of Islam, @tra often refers to a somewhat Platonic ideal, a primordial humanity associated with mystical notions of human perfection. With all its variations, however, the central thrust of the @tra concept is that the created nature of humans is inscribed with especially Muslim ideals.

So when popular Muslim writers in Turkey need to provide reasons for female subordination, they naturally draw on tradition and invoke @tra. This does not often require much elaboration, as the audience for religious-themed literature is generally already familiar with such major themes in their common religious culture. Writers with a background in a tariqa, a religious order, might invoke their particular...
metaphysical tradition—for example, explaining why only men are able to be prophets of God by saying “To summarize, man represents God; woman represents nature.”

Perceptions of science need not play any role in such explanations. However, when the intended audience inhabits a cultural world not entirely steeped in Islam, secular legitimation requires calling on “science.” In such cases, fitra easily comes to mean created nature as revealed by biology as well as religion.

Most often, this notion of fitra lurks in the background, as a common theme in a shared religious culture. But when discussing gender roles, the concept is readily available. For example, consider verse 4:34 from the Qur’an, in Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation: “[Husbands] are the protectors and maintainers of their [wives] because Allah has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means.” In explaining such statements about superior male strength and defending a subordinate role for women as needing protection and support, expositors typically draw on the notion that nature itself, being divinely ordered, reflects the moral guidance made explicit in religion. So Ali, in a footnote, elaborates on his translation by saying: “A man’s chivalry to the opposite sex is natural and God-given . . . [A] woman is the weaker vessel, that tenderness may . . . be likened to mercy, the protecting kindness which the strong should give to the weak.” Though the concept of female nature in such a statement is not explicitly biological, it can easily be developed to invoke “science” as a rationale for traditional gender roles. However, the concept of female nature here is not derived from modern biology; it calls to mind the Aristotelian principle that nature made women inherently weaker than men, not only physically, but in multiple dimensions.

Female Nature from Ancient Greece to Modern Times

Among ancient Greek scholars, the dominant understanding of nature suggested that four elements, earth, air, fire and water, composed the entire world. Inside the body, corresponding to those elements, four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) governed health or illness, character, and temperament. The essential man was associated with the hot-dry portion of the spectrum, linked to the masculinized power of the sun, while the natural woman was defined as his opposite, cold and wet, related to the moon. The power of heat was thought to condition development, and Aristotle in particular believed that by definition, females had less vital heat than men. Aristotle asserted that this deficiency accounted for women’s relative physical and mental weakness, while men’s greater vital heat conveyed upon them the intellectual power of reason and justice, the temperamental virtues of courage and moral fortitude, and sheer physical size and strength. Thus, Aristotle set up male and female as opposites, with the male as active and rational, and the female as passive and emotional. For Aristotle, these extremes were not equally worthy; he depicted the male as the normal and therefore true and ideal form, with woman as a departure from type. Aristotle’s Generation of Animals and his History of Animals propounded elaborate interlocking rationales to illustrate women’s biological inferiority; he even rationalized the early maturity of girls and the higher rate of birth defects among boy babies as proving female inadequacy.
Aristotelian biology also rationalized an awareness of essential hierarchies; just as the natural order placed humans above animals, Greeks over barbarians and masters over slaves, so the world mandated the rule of rationality over emotion, and thus man over woman. Aristotle declared, “The rule of the soul over the body is natural, [which makes] the male by nature superior and the female inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled. The courage of man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.” These biologically-based views rationalized a conviction that men must keep wives and daughters under control, preventing their tendencies of weakness, unreasonableness and instability from damaging society. In ancient Greece, of course, women, slaves, and “barbarians” did not enjoy the same rights of citizenship and political participation as did elite males.15

The influential Greek physician Galen seconded Aristotle’s contention that females’ relative coldness left them less perfect than males. Writings associated with the Hippocratic school of medicine emphasized that menstrual problems could cause women to hallucinate and become suicidal or insane. Some authors suggested that the uterus could become dislocated from its natural spot and move around in the body like an animal, causing mental weakness or physical illness in women.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, commitment to Greco-Roman intellectual currents declined in the West. Yet during the same period, Arab conquests and the growth of empire facilitated contact with cultures previously exposed to a strong Hellenizing influence, such as Syria and Egypt. Starting in the ninth century, Arab and Persian scholars proceeded to import key pieces of Greek literature into their own languages, including works on natural history and mathematics, alchemy and astrology/astronomy, and philosophy. Thanks in part to the perceived practical value of medicine, texts on health and the body attracted attention, particularly works linked to Galen. Galenic medicine had predominated throughout the eastern Hellenistic regions for at least five centuries, and Islamic scholars proceeded not only to translate almost all of Galen’s books and related compendia into Arabic, but also to quote Galen in their own analyses and write commentaries about him. While Islamic practitioners assessed ancient Greek texts through the lens of their own experiences and advanced substantial original knowledge in fields such as ophthalmology, the Galenic viewpoint remained dominant for centuries. The eleventh-century medical writings of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), for instance, blended his own perspective with Arabic and Persian observations and with Hellenistic authority, particularly Aristotelian natural philosophy and Galen’s works. Some historians of medicine have pointed out that in particular, the principle of the four humours in nature and the body “was never replaced by any other theory in traditional Islam,” at least in the context of scientific medicine (as differentiated from folk or “prophetic” medicine). Key pieces of Islamic medical writing, such as the thirteenth-century work of Ali ibn al-Abbas al-Majusi, repeated the Aristotelian and Galenic conviction that females were always colder and wetter than males.16

Back in the West, the opportunities for learning available in monastic cultures and universities (similarly self-isolated from women) gradually revitalized interest in classical writings. Medieval scholars re-translated texts in natural philosophy
and medicine, including those carried over through Arabic sources. Theologians of the twelfth century and later aimed to unite Christian principles with Aristotelian philosophy. Combining classical principles and some strains of medieval religious thought with misogynistic superstitions, most secular and religious scholars in early modern Europe agreed that woman’s nature was inherently less advanced. Within the context of male celibacy, many theologians denounced women as a contaminating threat, since their physical form, mental traits, and personal character embodied instability, foolishness, and untrustworthiness.17

In their analysis of male and female bodies, male and female nature, European philosophers worked to reconcile theological principles with the theories of natural philosophy carried over from ancient Greece. Thomas Aquinas accepted Aristotle and Galen’s view of women as having less vital heat than men and therefore being inherently defective creatures. He argued that women had been created to handle the demands of reproduction, thereby freeing men to concentrate on higher intellectual and spiritual purposes. Since men were essentially more rational, women must naturally remain subject to their enlightened governance to maintain order in society.

Throughout the medieval era and the Renaissance, natural philosophers generally concurred with the notion of females as a colder, weaker, and imperfect version of the male ideal. Women were regarded as closer to nature and thereby lower in the natural order, men as closer to a share of the divine spirit. Scholars disagreed about details, particularly regarding the nature of reproduction. Aristotle had credited male semen with generating the intellect, creating the soul and contributing the active principle to offspring; he indicated that females filled the less exalted role of supplying raw material and the location of pregnancy. Hippocrates and Galen had diverged from Aristotle in suggesting that women as well as men contributed seed to conception, but they portrayed female seed as weaker and less pure. Over subsequent centuries, anatomists Ricardi Anglici and William Harvey among others, along with the philosopher Descartes, maintained that men supplied babies with reason or soul, while the female’s share of this function was inherently less vital and more passive. Throughout Europe’s Scientific Revolution, even after the introduction of new tools such as the microscope, debates between the preformation and epigenesis theories of embryology remained centered around ideas of female inferiority.

Into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even as biologists embraced new ideas such as evolution, theories of female inferiority persisted. Like Aristotle, Darwin referred to examples from the animal world in stressing sexual polarities, radically contrasting male bravery and action to female intuition and gentleness. Noting an absence of women among the ranks of outstanding scientists, artists and scholars, Darwin cited his conviction that women were by nature lower on the evolutionary ladder, less able than men to attain greatness or original genius in any intellectual or creative endeavor. Anatomists chose models and constructed illustrations that exaggerated male-female differences as contrasting extremes of strength and form. Anatomists such as Alexander Monro and Samuel Soemmerring described women’s bones as incomplete, less robust and inherently destined for procreation.
Anthropologist James McGrigor Allan and evolutionist Edward Drinker Cope, like many fellow scientists, did not credit women with the mature biological complexity of adult men, but placed them at an arrested stage of development. Paul Topinard and many others argued that women’s skeleton, bodily proportions, and skull dimensions resembled infantile or youthlike traits. These nineteenth-century scientists elaborated theories of biological recapitulation to portray women as undeveloped men, trapped at a more primitive physical and mental level. Menstruation linked women to the bodily processes of lower animals, argued James McGrigor Allen, destroying any chance for their overly-emotional minds to match men in intellectual power or productive activity. Craniologists reinforced such convictions; the influential Paul Broca assumed that women’s relatively smaller brain size explained why women fell below men in intelligence by a meaningful amount. Psychologist George Romanes credited women with greater affections, sensitivity and perception, but damned them with the inability to keep those inherently intense and primitive emotions under control, leading to childlike irrationality, impulsiveness, moodiness, or hysteria. In terms of body, character and mind, men were primarily defined according to their perceived strengths, whereas women were defined according to what they lacked. Men were paraded as the fully developed norm, while women were denigrated as the incomplete deviation, which was, however, an imperfection acknowledged as necessary and perhaps even desirable for the species to perpetuate itself. 

Female Nature in Popular Islamic Writings Today

Today, popular writers who want to comment on female created nature hark back to a long and established tradition. Significantly, notions of women being by nature weaker and better suited to the home is rooted both in Islamic thought and in Western natural philosophy, transformed into science. It is very easy to present such notions as science, even today.

Popular writers do not, of course, self-consciously borrow from any live Hellenistic medical tradition. It would be best to describe such ideas as being available to popular writers, whether due to their being embedded in the classical education of the ulama, in folk-biological notions that are widely believed among uneducated segments of society, or in other sources that make these ideas common background knowledge. For example, throughout the Middle East, a “monogenetic” theory of procreation has been very commonly held, where the male is considered to make the truly creative live-giving contribution, thus are more closely identified with God, while females merely give birth. Middle Eastern peasants do not normally receive an Aristotelian education.

Returning to today’s Turkish literature, Professor Bekir Topaloglu, in a very popular Turkish book on women in Islam, further explaining man’s superiority in strength:

In the Quranic verses the reasons for male dominance are given as twofold: 1) Men are created as stronger, more resistant to hardship than women. He has more prudence, foresight, and forbearance. Therefore he has a privileged position.
in prophethood, leadership of a state, war, and in the larger share of inheritance.

2) Due to the mehr [marriage gift] and due to providing for the family, men are burdened with financial responsibilities. So the dominance of man arises from his responsibilities.\(^\text{20}\)

This quotation elides man’s physical strength with an advantage in mental power and rationality, as Aristotelian biology had done. In asserting that men are more rational than women and that women are less capable of controlling their passions, Aristotle wrote, “The woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more apt to scold, more prone to despondency, more deceptive.”

In Turkey today, some writers elaborate further on the biological dimensions of fitra, bringing in scientific sounding claims. Topaloglu echoes nineteenth-century conceptions of women when he writes:

In connection with physiology, there will of course be important differences in the area of psychology. In men, you cannot find the delicate emotions of women, or the behavior which adjusts to the ever changing needs of children. The created nature of man is such that he can withstand the ravages of the natural world, and the numberless difficulties of life. . . . The woman has some special properties due to her physiology. Heat, pulse, and breath is higher in women. Muscle power is stronger in men. This situation places woman in a position intermediate between children and men.\(^\text{21}\)

Topaloglu’s description of women as being less like full adults than men has little in common with current biology and psychology. Instead, this statement parallels assumptions about women’s nature that were popular more than one hundred years ago among Western scientists. Nineteenth-century anatomists such as Edinburgh’s John Barclay and Germany’s E.W. Posner saw a resemblance between the skeletons of women and children, leading them to place female development midway between children’s incompleteness and men’s maturity. One European anatomist explained that in women, “the finer bone structure, the less sharply developed facial features, the childish round face all clearly show this similarity [to children’s bodies]. The nerves and blood vessels of women are also as delicate and fine as children and the skin layer of rich fat is childish.”\(^\text{22}\) This principle of biological recapitulation located women at an arrested stage of development, more primitive than men and closer to a child’s physical and mental state. Again, this comparison of writings is not intended to suggest a direct line of intellectual descent from European anatomists of the 1800s to Topaloglu. Rather, it suggests that these different perspectives, separated by time and culture, display a harmonious comfort with similar assumptions about female bodies and the biology of gender differences.

One of the most interesting examples of popular Islamic commentary elaborating in greater detail on the biology of gender differences comes from Süleyman Ates, a leading Turkish theologian who has also served as head of the powerful national Religious Services Department. In response to a series of publications presenting
secularist criticisms of Islam, he wrote a number of books in the 1990s defending the faith and justifying the traditional place of women. Given his audience, Ates had to do more than produce proof-texts or rely on a notion of *fitra* that needed no elaboration. In doing so, he drew on a philosophical conception of nature which incorporates echoes of ideas going back to the Greek philosophers. Even today, the background of a classically educated Islamic scholar incorporates centuries-old philosophical traditions, including Muslim developments of Hellenistic ideas about human nature. Justifying the verse “And women shall have rights against them, according to what is equitable, but men have a degree (of advantage) over them,”23 Ates argues:

The verse expresses the superiority of the male sex to the female sex. It does not mean that individually every man is superior to every woman. There are many women who are superior to many men in knowledge, capability in work, and strength of body. But it is true that as a whole, the male sex has been created superior to the female. Even the sperm which carries the male sign is different from the female. The male-bearing sperm is more active, carrying light on its head, the female sperm is less active. The egg stays stationary, the sperm seeks her out, and endures a long and dangerous struggle in the process.24

Ates is responding to a modern challenge to his faith, and so he appeals to scientific-sounding facts. The picture of a passive egg and aggressive sperm conveys a powerful simplicity that, not coincidentally, reflects social ideals in which boys have frequently been raised to be competitive and self-assertive, while girls have been instructed to be demure. Today’s reproductive science has long since moved toward a far more complex picture of conception, in which the egg plays an active role, rather than idly waiting for a sperm to win the race and undertake fertilization.25

Ates’s assertion that sperm themselves come in separate forms, with male-bearing sperm more active than female-bearing sperm, also recalls a centuries-old debate about reproductive biology. The classical physician Hippocrates argued that seed came in two types, that male seed produced characteristics of strength, courage, and a “brilliant” soul, while female seed produced traits of grace and delicacy. As one Hippocratic text declared, “the male creature being stronger than the female must of course originate from a stronger sperm.” The influential Greek physician Galen suggested that the weaker, less perfect female seed was produced from watery, uncleansed blood on the left side of the body, while stronger male seed came from the pure right side. Ates’s modern Turkish writing effectively reasserts the fundamental notion of female biological inferiority, based on essential differences between male-generating and female-generating sperm.26

Ates’s argument contains other quasi-Aristotelian interpretations portraying male and female as complete opposites in terms of bodily and psychological traits. He continues:

Generally in nature, all male animals are more complete, more superior compared to their females. For example, the cock compared to the hen, the ram to the ewe, the
male lion to the lioness, is more beautiful and stronger. Facial hair on men is also considered a perfection relative to women. And so inability to grow facial hair is considered a flaw in men. Man, being more enduring at work, and superior in prudence and willpower, has been given the duty of protecting woman.27

Ates’s statement that “all male animals are more complete” clearly echoes Aristotle’s conviction that males of virtually all species were more perfect than females, allegedly being larger, more long-lived, and physically more powerful. With regard to humans, Aristotle defined the male as the norm, the ideal pattern of full development and wrote, “The female is, as it were, a mutilated male.” His philosophy of biological processes started from a premise that the amount of an animal’s body heat governed how far it would develop. With the corollary assumption that females had less “vital heat” than males, Aristotle defined women as less developed, incomplete versions of the male ideal. Writing that “the female is less perfect than the male,” Galen extended this approach to explain the visible differences between the two sexes. He maintained that females and males had exactly the same genital components, but that a woman’s lack of vital heat had halted development before her genitals could make the final step of emerging outside the body. Like these ancient philosophers and physicians, Ates speaks of male perfection relative to female deficiency. For evidence, he cites the inherent virtue of beards, rendering the unfortunate man unable to display facial hair feminine and therefore flawed. European scholars of the Middle Ages linked male beard growth to their vital heat; nineteenth-century biologists similarly spotlighted beard growth as a male advantage, using more modern language. Cope, W.K. Brooks and others expressed this faith in male superiority as an evolutionary concept, citing facial and bodily hair as markers of males’ more advanced stage of development in contrast to women.

Equally significant, Ates’s argument extending male superiority across species is a virtual paraphrase of Aristotle, who wrote, “In all cases, excepting the bear and leopard, the female is less spirited than the male . . . Even when the cuttlefish is struck with the trident the male stands by to help the female; but when the male is struck, the female runs away.”

The fact that some prominent modern Islamic apologists cling to outdated notions of male and female biology is in itself revealing. Even more tangible repercussions come when they apply this idea politically, to counter Western influences. In his modern Turkish commentary, Ates further argues:

It must not be forgotten that there are virtues in which women are superior to men. In bringing children up, mercy and tenderness, and sensitivity, women are superior to men. The sentence ‘God has made some people superior to others’ signifies this as well. God, due to his wisdom, has created man with superior bodily strength in order that he should govern the family, work and provide for all, and protect his society from enemies. He has granted woman the opportunity of motherhood so she can nurse her children, bring them up properly, and fill the family with peace and tranquility through her affection.28
In short, his prescription for an ideal society is based on the theory that women’s biology makes them uniquely suited to domesticity. In defining the sexes as bodily opposites, Ates divides them along sharp gender lines. Similarly, Abdal Hakim Murad, a Muslim intellectual based in Britain, says “The Quran and our entire theological tradition are rooted in the awareness that the two sexes are part of the inherent polarity of the cosmos.” He proceeds to invoke fitra, writing:

Islam’s awareness that when human nature (fitra) is cultivated rather than suppressed, men and women will incline to different spheres of activity is of course one which provokes howls of protest from liberals: for them it is a classic case of blasphemy. But even in the primitive biological and utilitarian terms which are the liberals’ reference, the case for absolute identity of vocation is highly problematic. However heavily society may brainwash women into seeking absolute parity, it cannot ignore the reality that they have babies, and have a tendency to enjoy looking after them. The screaming fanatics who “out” bishops and demand a lowering of the “gay” age of consent are among the most bitter enemies of the fitra, that primordial norm which, for all the diversity of the human race, has consistently expressed itself in marriage as the natural context for the nurturing of the new generation. That which is against the fitra is by definition destructive: it is against humanity and against God.29

In this formulation, feminism and gay rights, naturally, violate nature’s law and therefore counteract the moral intent of the creator. Mahmoud Abu Saud explains how this works in light of our created nature made evident by biology, concluding:

Thus, the “lib’s” claim for identical treatment of males and females in every domain denies the biological constitution of the human mind and body and nullifies masculinity and femininity. Homosexuality, which at present is assuming some prominence in industrialized Western societies, is the product of lopsided thinking and is bound to fail. It is a revolt against the law of creation and will not be allowed to prevail, whatever price humanity may pay for it.30

These preceding quotations all represent opinions expressed by male authors. However, today’s revival movements, particularly those inclined toward political Islam, allow more scope for female public participation than had traditionally been the norm in premodern Turkey. Though men’s voices continue to predominate in Muslim popular writing, some women also provide religious advice, usually concentrating on questions related to women and family. With few exceptions, female authors writing for popular audiences defend the standard subordinate role for women, emphasizing familial and caregiving activities.

In particular, Hülya Demir, who made a study of Islamic women’s magazines in Turkey, found that the notion of fitra featured prominently in discussions of women’s role.31 Demir observed that when debating women’s position in society, politically and publicly activist Islamist women were forced to engage the traditional vision
of created nature. In practice, it proved extremely difficult for them to challenge assumptions of women’s weakness with any success.

Significantly, many Turkish feminists, like their counterparts in the west, have tried on occasion to turn assumptions of gender roles to their advantage. In the women’s movement in Britain and America during the early 1900s, suffragists often asserted that women deserved the vote since they were committed to protecting children and creating a healthy family environment. They further argued that by nature, women were more moral than men, and that the female vote could energize a reformist political movement to clean up cities and purify government. Similary, Demir describes how Turkish activists have invoked fitra as making women naturally self-sacrificing and community-minded. In that fashion, they hoped to justify female political involvement, asserting that society would benefit by allowing women a broader public role. But in practice, such arguments have had little impact. Sources that devout urban Muslims are likely to consult more frequently continue to assume the inviolability of a divinely created order mandating traditional gender roles.

The importance of fitra in what is promoted as the Islamic social vision becomes clearer when we observe how created nature comes into play in even seemingly trivial matters. For example, when asked about cosmetic surgery, religious scholars will typically answer that it is not permitted if it is a matter of frivolously interfering with God’s creation, but permissible if it corrects a defect and thereby brings someone closer to the ideal state of the fitra. Created nature embodies a moral ideal and so deviations from this ideal are morally tainted. Within this context, Islamic thinkers are also able to accommodate the imperfections of human nature. Unbridled male sexuality, for example, is supposed to be a created weakness, but it can be turned into a strength when it finds its proper place in a strong Muslim family. Similarly, conservative Muslims often view women as sexually uncontrollable and needing to be tamed.

Anachronistic biological views are not too difficult to find in today’s popular Muslim literature in Turkey and the West. But it is important not to read too much into this. Though in some cases today’s popular writers do seem to rely on very outdated notions about biology, current Muslim commentators do not appear to be consciously reviving a more culturally authentic natural philosophical tradition. Their writings do not strive for the kind of intellectual structure which more serious Muslim thinkers might pursue. Instead, popular writers throw together scientific-sounding material from a variety of sources, often without attribution or just citing other popular literature. Therefore tracing a history of borrowing or intellectual influence is a very difficult task; if there is a common theme, it is how popular Muslim writing treats “science” as a laundry list of “facts” to selectively use with no regard for the theories they are embedded in, or indeed much concern for general coherence. Much of gender-related popular literature should be seen as a kind of pop-psychological writing; as when Mehmet Dikmen declares, “Woman has no egoism. In other words she lacks spine. Because of this she is dependent on man; she needs a fixed point. Otherwise she just sways with the prevailing wind. She has to be directed toward a certain goal.”
Some writers are, indeed, more aware of up-to-date ways of suggesting anatomy is destiny. Abdal Hakim Murad, for example, engages in a kind of pop-sociobiological reasoning familiar to Western readers in order to commend Muslim polygyny:

A further controversy in the Shari‘a’s nurturing of gender roles centres around the institution of plural marriage. This clearly is a primordial institution whose biological rationale is unanswerable: as Dawkins and others have observed, it is in the genetic interest of males to have a maximal number of females; while the reverse is never the case. Stephen Pinker notes somewhat obviously in his book *How the Mind Works*: ‘The reproductive success of males depends on how many females they mate with, but the reproductive success of females does not depend on how many males they mate with.’ Islam’s naturalism, its insistence on the fitra and our authentic belongingness to the natural order, has ensured the conservation of this creational norm within the moral context of the Shari‘a.35

Similar references to disputes over women’s biology familiar from the Western scientific world also appear in other popular writings, such as the role of hormones in aggressiveness or the sex-typing of the brain. However, this is generally window-dressing, added on top of the usual gender-related themes centered on a morally significant created nature. Sociobiology or its descendant, evolutionary psychology, appears superficially if at all, since popular Muslim writers usually operate in a creationist framework. Islam is probably the world religion which has most successfully resisted Darwinian influences.

“Created Nature” and Islamic Creationism

The importance of a biological understanding of fitra in popular Muslim literature is also apparent in writings against Darwinian evolution. Prominent Turkish creationists promote a vision of morality and gender manifested in the natural roles creatures have in a harmonious, divinely created world. Creationist views of biology are thus mutually supportive with the popular literature on gender and fitra.

Islamic creationism is, like its Christian and Jewish counterparts, largely a response to the challenges evolutionary ideas pose for traditional religious doctrines. A related motivation to oppose evolution, however, is to reaffirm a created nature infused with traditional Islamic morality. Not every challenge to Muslim ways of perceiving the world calls forth a high-profile response. Evolution is a particular target not just because it undermines the sense of an obviously designed universe promoted by many popular Muslim writers in places such as Turkey, but also because it casts doubt on the whole notion of a fixed created nature, threatening the traditional moral order.36 So Islamic creationism helps recast the ancient idea of fitra in a modern pseudo-biological language.

Islamic creationists in Turkey have, interestingly, adapted the anti-evolutionary views of their Protestant colleagues, repeating many of the arguments of both American young-earthers37 and “intelligent design” proponents while downplaying...
Islamically non-essential ideas such as flood geology. Moreover, in Muslim countries, anti-evolutionary views are part of the intellectual mainstream. Well-known advocates of Islamizing science, such as Osman Bakar or Seyyed Hossein Nasr, typically denounce Darwinian evolution. Popular creationist authors in Turkey can win praise from divinity professors in prestigious institutions, and creationism in education has periodically found support from conservative governments.

However, a high-profile popular opposition to evolution has emerged only recently, with a large quantity of material—books, articles, magazines, videos, websites—put out under the pseudonym of “Harun Yahya.” Similar to creationism in the United States, Yahya’s version of Muslim creationism appeals to an upwardly mobile population who respect science and technology and so have to resolve conflicts with modern science by promoting an alternative rather than by denying its value. Yahya’s books are widely available, in multiple languages, accessible in bookstores in London as readily as Istanbul. His influence has been such that even a mass market introductory book such as The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Islam refers to Yahya as a “top” Muslim scientist with a worthwhile critique of evolution.

Both more sophisticated Muslim anti-evolutionary writings and the popular polemics of Yahya naturally concentrate on attacking evolution. Hence detailed discussions of fitra and gender-related issues are not a primary concern in this literature. However, Yahya tries to explain why opposing evolution is so vital for Islam. According to Yahya, evolution is at the root of almost all evil in modern life: communism, unbridled capitalism, fascism, even the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September. So it is no surprise that he should think evolution has a negative influence on gender-related social concerns. He particularly worries about homosexuality: in his opus Avrim Aldatmacasi (The Evolution Deceit), he looks for ideological reasons behind mainstream science’s acceptance of evolution:

We can add [to racists, fascists, socialists etc.] those homosexual ideologues who try to explain their sexual deviation by “a genetic variation produced by the process of evolution.” These “scientific” vanguards of the homosexual movement claim that homosexuality arose in a certain stage of the process of sexual evolution and contributed to the progress of this process. In doing so, they seek to legitimize their perversion.

Yahya is concerned with the boundaries of created nature; since nature embodies a moral order, violating natural boundaries in matters of gender is also a moral perversion. By reaffirming creation in the face of the fluidity and variation inherent in modern biological understandings of life, Yahya is defending social boundaries inscribed into nature.

Yahya’s influence, though considerable, is limited to the popular media. However, more substantial attempts to Islamize knowledge and revitalize Muslim culture draw on similar ideas about created nature. As the International Institute of Islamic Thought puts it:
All things in creation serve a purpose and all purposes are interrelated, as a means and an end to one another. This makes the world one telic system, vibrant and alive, full of meaning. The birds in the sky, the stars in the heavens, the depths of the ocean, the plants and the elements—all constitute integral parts of the system. No part of it is inert or evil, since every being has a function and a role in the life of the whole. Together, they make an organic body whose members and organs are interrelated.\footnote{All things in creation serve a purpose and all purposes are interrelated, as a means and an end to one another. This makes the world one telic system, vibrant and alive, full of meaning. The birds in the sky, the stars in the heavens, the depths of the ocean, the plants and the elements—all constitute integral parts of the system. No part of it is inert or evil, since every being has a function and a role in the life of the whole. Together, they make an organic body whose members and organs are interrelated.}

When nature is fundamentally understood in terms of divine purposes, it becomes easy to consider anything that appears to violate the boundaries of nature as a moral danger. Such an approach to biology is ever ready to be deployed to oppose fluidity in gender identity and gender roles.

**How Widespread is Modern Fitra Rhetoric?**

*Fitra*, with some biological embellishments, appears to be a significant concept in some of today’s popular Muslim literature concerning gender roles. However, it can be hard to gauge precisely how important it is. After all, ‘Islam’ encompasses cultural and religious variations among a billion people. Though many Muslims in changing social circumstances might respond to arguments invoking created nature and justifying traditional social roles in scientiﬁc-sounding terms, whereas others might not. Responses may also be local: while Turks go in for the semblance of biology, perhaps other nationalities may prefer their traditions without a dose of alleged science. Our examples in this paper are drawn from the popular literature in Turkish and English. Can we generalize based on this sample?

Generalization is, of course, risky; however, there are some indications that a science “avored” way of using concepts has widespread currency. One reason to think so comes from observing the speed at which such ideas spread through Muslim communities today. Harun Yahya’s brand of creationism, for example, has become a multinational phenomenon within only a few years.\footnote{Harun Yahya’s brand of creationism, for example, has become a multinational phenomenon within only a few years.} Creationism existed previously, but in a less organized, more local form—commonalities between creationist writers were due to a broadly shared conservative Islamic culture and the fact that there are a limited number of commonsensical ways to object to evolution. Nowadays, a modiﬁed Protestant-style creationism is becoming an increasingly recognizable feature in the popular Muslim apologetic literature.\footnote{Nowadays, a modiﬁed Protestant-style creationism is becoming an increasingly recognizable feature in the popular Muslim apologetic literature.}

Similarly, the popular literature about gender roles shows a large degree of similarity throughout the Muslim world, not just because of shared texts-as-proof to appeal to, but also because of the rapid communication allowed by modern technologies. Writers from different countries often repeat the same phrases; for example, Ates says, “In the body, the heart is as valuable as the head. If the man is in the head’s position, the woman is in the heart’s. One of these being more useful, or having been created superior, does not reduce the value of the other.”\footnote{Abu Saud employs exactly the same metaphor:} Abu Saud employs exactly the same metaphor:

This fundamental basis, if well understood and observed, makes the loyalty of both spouses to their family which is supposed to serve God in piety as the main
purpose of marriage. It implies that they act as if they were one person with many organs. The head of the human is not better than the heart, and the hand is not better than the foot. If the man is charged with the duty of leadership and maintenance, he is not better than the woman who is assigned the duty of keeping the household, even if the first duty is more difficult and perhaps more significant.50

These examples, and the work of creationists such as Harun Yahya, suggest that many of the innovations popularizing creationism and *fitra* as a more explicitly biological concept comes from Turkey—the most Westernized of Muslim countries—and from technologically-literate immigrant Muslim communities in the industrialized West. If so, this is no accident. The kind of popular writing discussed in this paper is best seen as a response to modernization; it arises in an environment where “science” is respected and carries cognitive authority. Similar social needs felt by modernizing communities can be met by similar responses, particularly when these responses can be rapidly communicated globally. For example, throughout the Muslim world, a very widespread form of apologetic literature is concerned with finding “scientific miracles” in the Quran: verses which are interpreted to announce some modern scientific theory fourteen centuries ahead of time. Among these perhaps the most famous is physician Keith Moore’s tortured analysis of the “embryology” in verses from Suras 22, 23, 32 and 39 of the Quran.51 While Moore’s article is obscure to almost all scientists, web sites and popular publications from all over the Muslim world now cite this as a Western scientific authentication of the Islamic revelation. Harun Yahya is now an international figure, not just a local source of worry for Turkish scientists and educators. And gender roles, for many modern Muslims, have now become a natural reflection of a created nature obviously revealed by science.

This is not to say that there is no dissent among Muslims. For many, science is still socially irrelevant. And within intellectual circles, many deplore both the low intellectual quality and the unreflective moral traditionalism exhibited in popular writings.

For example, Zahra Seif-Amirhosseini, a Muslim feminist, follows many reformers in finding fault with the way classical Islam came to interpret their sacred sources, and identifies the influence of the Hellenic philosophical tradition as a particular problem:

The biological differences, “inadequacies”, of female biology is used to negate her spirituality and relationship to her Creator. It is highly probable that the rationale of male/female differences, if not the rights themselves, are heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, particularly the works of Aristotle and Plato, which have been present in the curriculum of our religious schools from the early formative years.52

Seif-Amirhosseini then tries to recover a sense of non-hierarchical polarity between the sexes, one that values the female perspective as much as the male.

However, it is unclear what, in practice, such critiques accomplish. More liberal interpretations like that of Seif-Amirhosseini’s have little popular effect, though they appear as examples to showcase in Western arguments that Islam does not necessarily
oppress women. These interpretations draw academic interest, especially among scholars attracted by the liberatory rhetoric of Islamic feminism. And it is certainly arguable that if more feminist notions of the body are to take hold in Muslim lands, this will happen through an explicitly Islamic form of feminism. Nevertheless, the popular literature about women and the family that devout urban Muslims prefer to consult remain unaffected by more academic debates. Such material tends to keep restating the traditional concept of fitra, often dressed up in new “scientific” clothes.

As Serpil Üstü puts it, classical Islam was always inclined to see social roles in created nature; “within the ideology of Islam, ... the sexual division of labor becomes a fundamental principle, a divine and eternal natural law determined by God when creating the sexes.” Today, this tendency has altered very little; it has only been updated with some biological-sounding references suitable for an audience influenced by western definitions of modernity. The principles of fitra, as applied to popular literature about gender roles, result in a vision of the body as a sharp contrast of gendered opposites, established by natural order, with a quasi-Aristotelian biological assumption of male superiority.

ENDNOTES


3 Nuriay Mert, Islam ve Demokrasi: Bir Kurt Masalı (Istanbul, Turkey: İz Yayıncılık, 1998). All translations from Turkish sources are by Taner Edis.

4 For example, the “Nurcu” movement, which is based in Turkey but has enjoyed influence throughout the Muslim world. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, ed., Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).


Ibid, p. 1012.


Tuana, 1993; Schiebinger, 1989; Cadden, 1993.


Topaloglu, p. 77.


Ali, Quran 2: 228.


Tuana, 1993.


Ibid.


Fatima Mernissi, Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Mernissi highlights the emphasis on women’s childbearing capacity in traditional Islamic sexual identity; males are judged to represent humanity while females stand “not only outside of humanity but a threat to it as well.” (p. 45)


Murad, “The Fall of the Family,” (no date).


Young-earth creationists believe the Earth is only about 10,000 years old, and that it was created in six literal days as described in Genesis. See, for example, Henry M. Morris, Scientific Creationism (El Cajon, CA: Master Books, 1985).


Edis, 1999.


International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989, p. 37.

Edis, 1999.


