In recent times, Tunisia has been the object of scholars and media attention due to its success in the transition from Ben Ali rule and a more democratic form of government. In particular, the debate around the new constitution has been at times harsh, especially in the West. Little attention was paid to the Islamic feminist movement, as Tunisia is seen as a westernized country since its independence in 1956, and the presence of Islam is covered as suspicious in Western media as confirmed, for instance, after the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, when free elections saw the Annahda party as the winner.

Therefore, scholars did not investigate Islamic feminism in the country always preferring to frame the analysis in a dichotomist opposition between westernized-secular women and religious ones tout court (where religious means fundamentalist).

As I will argue in what follows reality is more complicated and nuanced, especially if we take into account Tunisia’s history and the development of a school of thought about religion which sets itself somewhere in between of the two aforementioned sides.

In fact, short after the independence (1956) the Tunisian leader Habib Bourguiba set up a reform of the educational system. He pledged for a modern Tunisia inside the Muslim frame: he called himself al-muğāhid al-akbar, the great performer of ġīhād, and all he did, although at times really far from tradition, was intended as a possible reading of the religious sources. Among his several reforms, there was the renewal of the school system, which affected Universities too, and among these, the well-known az-Zaytūna. This late was since centuries the intellectual centre of the region due to the presence of a madrasa where īmām, judges, intellectuals and administratives were formed. During the colonial rule, the role of az-Zaytūna had been confined to form professionals in religion, law, and Arabic literature and in 1875 the Siddīqī college was founded. There, pupils were taught simultaneously in French and Arabic and as a consequence, the role of the az-Zaytūna slowly changed as it was not possible for whom studied there to get jobs in the modern administration.

After independence, Habib Bourguiba ended the relation between university and mosque. In fact, the law of 20 April 1956 establishes the institution of a modern university and on May, 1st 1961 the
University of Tunis opens the Faculty of Theology and šarīʿa, and so the prestigious Az-Zaytūna, where generations of ulamāʾ had been formed, became assimilated to public Universities.\(^1\)

As a consequence, women could become scholars in religious studies with an approach different from tradition. These women studied during the Seventies and are now full scholars who challenge the Islamic fundamentalism within a religious discourse. This is important to bear in mind because other women’s groups, more detached from the religious discourse, have not the same impact on society and therefore Islamic feminism the Tunisian way is the turning point in fighting radical Islam.

Among the scholars who are active in the present day Tunisia, we can quote Nāḡīa Al-Warīmī Būʿgīla (Najia Alwarimi), Zahīya Ğūwīrū, Āmāl Qarāmī (Amal Grami) and Ulfa Yūsuf (Olfa Youssef). They all share a strong scholarly background together with a public engagement so that we can call their commitment a gender jihad, as Amina Wadud calls it in her well-known book.\(^2\) All these scholars reshaped the debate on the role of Islam in society and on Qur’anic hermeneutics. They play the role of public intellectuals detached from the Islamic feminism movement as conceived in other Muslim countries. Their role has become more visible after the 2011 revolution. Tunisians began to discuss openly a certain number of issues: the role of religion, the status of women, secularity, and other theoretical subjects considered fundamental in developing a civil and democratic state (Amel Grami 2014). One of the strongest debate was the one on religion, in particular with respect to the understanding of šarīʿa law which was not a novelty per se, as it was present from independence, but which, after the falling of the regime, acquired a preponderant weight in the public sphere.

In Tunisia, the history of women status and family law shows that this issue has been a core interest after the independence and therefore there is no such need of entering the Islamic feminist movement especially by women of the fifties generation. The influence of Islamic feminism is more perceivable among younger women, who found in these movements a way to develop new strategies of social and political struggle in society. Unlike other Islamic feminist movements, that draw on Islamic sources to promote women’s rights, in Tunisia women’s rights discourse developed by Islamic feminism refers mainly to piety and choice, religiosity and rights (Bayat, 2007: 76).

\(^1\) President Ben Ali – in order to please the Islamists’ party - founded three institutions on 1987 to form the new az-Zaytūna University: The high Theology Institute (1988), The High Institute for Islamic Culture and the Islamic Studies Centre in Qayrawān.

\(^2\) In The Gender Jihad, 2006, Amina Wadud refers to women’s capacity to bring about a “cognitive subversion” inside Islam, which can offer an alternative to the male monopoly of the religious exegesis of the sacred texts of Islam and of related jurisprudence.
focusing on family, and complementarity of man and woman in society. Although often associated with charity and relief assistance, these groups engage in discussing women’s role and empowerment in Tunisian society. The main difference between them and other more secular movements is that they believe women and men are complementary due to biological differences and that therefore they play different roles within the family – although they are equal in personal value. This is probably the reason why Islamic feminism as represented by contemporary movements in other countries is not so widespread in North African societies, as it could not presents itself as the one that struggles for women’s rights.

What above mentioned does not preclude a discussion in Tunisia among different groups of women and this is a peculiarity too, as in no other Arab country the interaction between Islamic and secular feminism has been and is so fecund. Moreover emphasizing “Islam” as the primary characteristic of women’s movements is misleading because women's conditions within and outside Muslim-majority societies are poorly described by religion per se. The status of Muslim women is rather explained by using determinants other than religion, which, in turn, should be distinguished between religion as theological tenets and theodicy, and religion as an interpreted code and performed everyday practice (Varisco, 2005).

The work of Olfa Yūsuf inserts itself in this line of thought. She is a daughter of the independence movement and had the opportunity to enter the public debate on religion in the Eighties. Her mother studied at the az-Zaytūna (Olfa Youssef 2011: 1) while she studied at the higher Insitute of Teachers in Sūsa, where she is born. She graduated in Arabic Language and Literature in 1987. In 1989 she became a professor at Manūba University and short afterwards she hosted broadcast programs, among them a daily comment on religious issues during the month of ramadān, which contributed in giving her a certain notoriety. In 2002 she received a Ph.D. in the Arabic language, taught at the Higher Institute of Language in Tunis and in 2008 became director of the National Library. She resigned from this post short after the 2011 revolution. In a television interview (Olfa Youssef 2001a) she adduced unhealthy work environment as a reason for this decision, without further details. Presumably, her resignation was due to her having worked under Ben Ali regime. She is the author of books, papers, articles and interviews in newspapers, and has animated several television and radio programs.

Besides being an academic, Olfa Youssef is very popular due, not only to her academic work and her presence on television but also to her use of tools and style that resemble the ones of popular preachers. In fact, as Amine Tais (2015: 17) affirms, “she has learned these lessons well”, and she uses all the tools at her disposal: classical media (radio and television), social media (she has an
active Facebook page and a blog), as well as the more traditional written word, but in the form of booklets written in a simple language that discuss common issues, and that are often in the form of a munāẓara, a conversation between two people about a certain subject, each one of whom has a different opinion on it.

After the 2011 revolution, Olfa Youssef engaged herself in the political debate and was often on the news speaking out against gender inequality. On May 2, 2016, for instance, she strongly reacted to the statements of the imam of Sfax (a town in southern Tunisia) who pledged for hanging all homosexuals. She stands up for gender rights and for high sensitive issues, as for instance drinking alcohol or the possibility for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man, both subjects to which she dedicated a chapter in her book Sept controverses en Islam (2012).

Qur’an and psychoanalysis

Among Youssef’s scholarly works, the most interesting is certainly her study on the Qur’ān. In fact, in her analysis, Youssef refers to modern disciplines like linguistics, semiology, and philosophy in order to deconstruct the main discourse on interpretation. Like other women scholars – I think especially of Asma Barlas - she focuses on the ambiguity of the text and on what the text does not say. In her book on the subject, Le Coran au risque de la psychoanalysis (2007), she highlights the polysemy of the text, affirming that the ontological knowledge of religion is not pre-existing; on the contrary, this is a social construction created at a given historical time according to a particular methodology and specific historical meaning. As Barlas does, Youssef starts from sūrat Āl Imrān, v. 7:

> It is He who caused the Book to descend to you. In it are signs, ones that are definitive. They are the essence of the Book and others, ones that are unspecific. Then, those whose hearts are swerving, they follow what was unspecific in it, looking for dissent and looking for an interpretation, but none knows its interpretation but God. And the ones who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believed in it as all is from our Lord. And none recollects, but those imbued with intuition.³

The text itself tells us that better readings than other exist, but leaves to find them to the humankind, as for instance in sūrat az-zumar, v. 18:

> Those who listen to the saying of the Quran and follow the fairer of it. Those are those whom God guided. And those, they are imbued with intuition.

³ All quotes are taken from The Sublime Quran, translated by Laleh Bakhtiar, Kazi, Chicago 2007.
This stated, she engages in applying some psychoanalytic concepts to Qur’an interpretation, and this is what makes her work strongly original as she is the first and only one who applies psychoanalytical tools to the text’s interpretation. This she does referring to language: to believe in God is a performative act – it is not by chance that the first pillar of Islam is the šahāda (profession of faith) – as it happens in the word and by meaning of the word (Olfa Youssef 2007: 70-71). As to believe implies only the subject of believing and not the object, this late is only supposed. We could say that God is in this mode of thinking an ‘absent referent’– therefore implying the multiplicity of readings and the impossibility to achieve the ‘true’ meaning of the text, its ‘original’ meaning (in an original meaning does exist). In fact, the ‘absent referent’ is like an empty space that can be filled with anyone’s interpretation. The original Qur’an is, therefore, inaccessible, and all interpretations descend from this postulate in accordance with the aforementioned verse of sūrat Āl Imrān. If the original meaning of the text is impossible to achieve in its essence, the quest is an illusion and considering one’s interpretation as the will of God is a sinful act.

Those who have power in society impose their interpretation using symbolic or physical force, leading to that interpretation becoming imagined in the collective memory of Muslims and thus shaping the identity of whole communities. The psychological dynamics of such constructions are so powerful that giving up the illusion would require a severe symbolic separation that would necessarily be followed by mourning (M. A. Tais 2015: 8).

The īghtihād (hermeneutic struggle), then, is the struggle to reach the original meaning which will never be reached and which will remain a struggle towards a desire. This desire is kept alive by the Umm al-kītāb, the original text, which abides by God and whose trace is present in the book-Qur’an. Youssef’s analysis refers in this reading to the Lacanian psychoanalytical school.

However, the proposed readings tend to be obsessed by the need for answers and, Youssef says, when this happens the Qur’an loses its spiritual dimension and becomes just an instructions book composed by strict non-questionable laws. This is an important aspect in Youssef’s thought: she devoted an entire book to the spiritual dimensions of the five pillars of Islām (Olfa Youssef 2010), that bears the word šawq (strong desire, passion) in its title (Youssef 2010), underlying the impulse that moves all interpretation: the desire for God. The underlying aim is to separate two spheres of action: the political and the religious one. Olfa Youssef does this discussing all aspects of the Muslim’s life, not only those related to female issues, therefore proposing a different perspective on Islamic feminism. In fact, in her work feminism is not only limited to gender issues but includes discussion of class and politics. The political class tends to monopolize Qur’ān interpretation in order to shape the Muslim collective memory and, as a consequence, their identity. Therefore a
change in religious discourse can only occur if Muslims simultaneously pledge for a political change in their countries.

**Less Ego, more action**

Alongside with her activity as a scholar, Olfa Youssef is committed to action in the public sphere. In doing so she performs what I call research-action, using different strategies and forms to express protest or diffuse her thinking and succeeds in merging two different aspects: the intellectual one – as briefly described above and, operating in the political and social arena, the militant one. This means that intellectual and militant feminism are not necessarily separate fields of action; on the contrary, they are only two different aspects of the same project.

As already recalled Olfa Youssef has a Facebook profile (more than 200,000 followers up to the end of August 2016) where she comments on different issues of social and political life. She usually posts a comment on a local or global subject in order to obtain reaction from her readers and engage in open discussion. A post, a question or a brief article are simultaneously posted on her blog, her Facebook page, and her Twitter account in order to reach a wider audience.

On 24th August, 2016, for instance, she published a post about the Burkinis ban which affected beaches in France:

The problem of burkini in France has to do with freedom and its relation to laws. To which point is the humankind free to choose its dress? I think this freedom is a pillar in humankind, but unfortunately, it is bound with the Purgatory in charge in a certain country. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, women cannot go out with uncovered face, in Iran is mandatory to cover one’s head but she can show little hair, in some African tribes women go out with uncovered breast…

Why the majority of dress problem are related to the female body? And which is the limit of nudity so that some countries have special zones for it? Questions that need deep investigation but not here and not now…

What is certain is that France although being a laïc country has no right to forbid burkini unless it will become a theocratic state by reason of its relations with Saudi Arabia.
There were immediately after the post a lot of comments that expressed very different points of view, as for instance:

“Only when Saudi Arabia will permit to foreigner to wear bikini on Gulf seashores will France permit to wear the Islamic burkini on its seashores” or “Let’s say it clear: Islam and Muslim were living in peace in the West with freedom until Daesh arrived and stroke at the core of Europe therefore it’s the right of Europe to

Saber Baccouch

المجتمع الفرنسي ليس له مشكل مع اللباس، النظام إختلق هذه الترهات من أجل تغطير الحروب التي يقوم بها في مالي و التدخل المفرط في سوريا و غيرها و عند حدوث أي فوضى أو عمليات إجرامية من تدبير هذا النظام نفسه بجد التهمة والمتهم حاضرين فيما عليه إلا أن بورطة مزدوجة من الأبرياء

القضية تتعلق بالسياقات الثقافية لمجتمع و البوركيني يتضمن سياق مضاد و عليه فالحق الى الجانب الفرنسي

Ahmedsami Tarhouni

Abu Youssef

L'Oiseau de Minerve

“I have been professor and administrative manager but I perceive myself at most as communicator” (Youssef 2011). Youssef’s goal is to distinguish between the religion (Islam) and the people who practice (Muslim). This distinction has significantly implications, because it allows people to note that not everything that Muslims do is always “Islamic” in the sense that it doesn’t always represent the teachings of the Qur’an (personal conversation). The work of Olfa Youssef and other female muslim
thiners challenges the ‘ulamā’ authority in public. This debate is still ongoing, of course, and it sees the opposition between ideas and strategies not only among Muslim women and men, but also among non-Muslim women and men scholars about the treatment of Islamic medieval sources, about if and how to acknowledge soundness to Prophetic traditions and other fundamental issues. (Reda, 2004; Melchert, 2006; Katz, 2014). When Muslim women engage in the hermeneutic of the sacred text and enter the public arena for debate or action, they break a new ground as interpreters of their tradition, not only regarding the content of this new interpretation, but also with regard to the method applied, which is far from a legal and/or a juridical historical one, but instead moves towards interdisciplinarity and transactionality. This is in my opinion what all critics, Muslim and Western scholars, fail to understand: the issue is not to give a “true” reading (a typical patriarchal attitude) but to propose other readings which have the same right to be performed as the traditional ones, in line with the Muslim hermeneutic tradition. That is to say, to manifold the possible readings of the text among which the she/he believer can choice, and by doing so, to widespread this new “Muslima theology” (Aslan, Hermansen, and Medeni, 2013).

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4 The ‘ulamā’ are those who have been trained in religious sciences. In the classical age they were formulators of Islamic theology and law. In the modern era, their sphere of operation is confined to the mosque and the madrasa (here: school of religious sciences). As imām of the local mosque, the ‘ālim leads daily prayers, delivers the Friday sermon, and teaches children the basics of Islamic law and Qur’ānic recitation. On occasion of birth, death, and marriage, he may also be called upon for prayers or for help in performing the rituals themselves. In rural area, the ‘ālim may be the most educated or wisest man in the area, but not necessarily formally trained; in urban centres, ‘ulamā’ generally posses some sort of credentials or formal education. (ESPOSITO, 2006, sub voce).

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