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BEYOND BUTLER: GENDER IDENTITY, QUEER THEORY, AND FIṬRAH ISLAMIC THEOLOGICAL AND JURISPRUDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES ON PERFORMATIVE GENDER THEORY: A CRITICAL ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

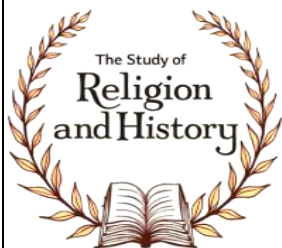
This article explores the contemporary intellectual conflict between the Islamic tradition and queer theory, particularly the performative gender framework established by Judith Butler. While queer theory posits that gender is a socially constructed performance lacking any inherent metaphysical or divine ground, the Islamic framework asserts that gender is an intentional act of divine creation. This study addresses the urgent crisis of identity among Muslim youth—specifically in Pakistan—arising from the widespread dissemination of queer theoretical claims through digital media. The research employs an interdisciplinary methodology, utilizing analytical-descriptive readings of primary Islamic sources (Qurʾān, ḥadīth, and classical fiqh) alongside a comparative theological analysis of Western gender discourse. Central to this analysis are the concepts of fiṭrah (the primal nature inscribed on the human soul) and karāmah insāniyyah (unqualified human dignity bestowed by the Creator). The article argues that these two principles, when structured through a maqāṣid-based jurisprudential methodology, provide a more coherent, humane, and philosophically sound account of the human person than the internally inconsistent anti-essentialism of queer theory. By examining classical treatments of gender ambiguity (khunthā), the study demonstrates that the Islamic tradition possesses the necessary resources to address contemporary gender identity challenges with both normative clarity and compassionate rigor.

Keywords: *Fiṭrah, Karāmah Insāniyyah, Queer Theory, Judith Butler, Gender Identity, Islamic Jurisprudence, Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah.*

Introduction: The Stakes of a Philosophical Confrontation

The question of gender—what it is, where it originates, and what moral obligations it generates—has emerged as one of the defining intellectual contests of the twenty-first century. In Western academic and policy discourse, this question has been substantially shaped by queer theory, a field of inquiry whose foundations rest upon a radical rejection of biological essentialism and metaphysical naturalism. Its most influential articulation remains that of Judith Butler, whose landmark text *Gender Trouble* (1990) argued that gender is not a stable attribute inhering in a pre-social subject, but a performative accomplishment continuously reproduced through stylized repetition of acts.¹ The implications of this claim extend well beyond academic philosophy: if gender has no natural or divinely inscribed basis, then normative frameworks regulating gendered behavior—including those grounded in religious law—are exposed as contingent, coercive, and potentially unjust.

For Muslim-majority societies, and for Muslim communities embedded within pluralistic Western states, this theoretical current arrives not as a neutral intellectual curiosity but as a direct challenge to foundational convictions about creation, human nature, and moral order. The challenge is intensified by the penetrating reach of digital media, which has made queer theoretical vocabularies—gender fluidity, non-binary identity, the performativity of sex—accessible to Muslim youth in cities from Karachi to Kuala Lumpur, often stripped of their academic genealogies and presented as self-evident truths. The result is a generation



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confronting a genuine crisis: the apparent irreconcilability of their inherited religious formation with the identity frameworks offered by the dominant global culture.²

This article contends that the apparent irreconcilability is largely illusory, and that the Islamic intellectual tradition possesses philosophical resources of sufficient depth and sophistication to engage, critique, and ultimately surpass the claims of queer theory on their own terms. The argument proceeds through four coordinated moves. First, it reconstructs the philosophical architecture of Butler's performativity thesis with sufficient precision to permit genuine critical engagement rather than caricature. Second, it excavates the Islamic concept of *fiṭrah* as a robust metaphysical and anthropological category capable of grounding a coherent account of gendered human nature. Third, it brings the principle of *karāmah insāniyyah* into dialogue with queer theory's genuine moral concerns—particularly its rejection of contempt and its insistence on the dignity of every human being. Fourth, it examines the classical jurisprudential treatment of gender ambiguity (*khunthā*) as evidence that the Islamic tradition has always possessed the conceptual tools to address liminal cases without dissolving normative categories.

The methodological orientation of this article is broadly that of comparative theology and philosophical jurisprudence. Primary Islamic sources—Qur'ānic text, authenticated ḥadīth collections, and the treatises of the major madhāhib—are read through the lens of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, the theory of the higher objectives of Islamic law, which provides a systematic framework for evaluating legal rulings in terms of their preservation of essential human goods.³ This approach is complemented by a careful, philologically grounded reading of Butler's major works and the broader queer theoretical tradition, drawing on the scholarship of commentators who have subjected these works to rigorous internal critique.

Reconstructing Butler: The Architecture of Performativity

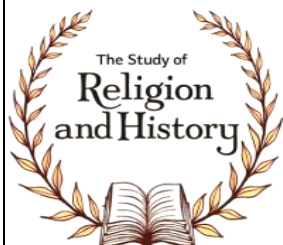
Gender as Performance: The Core Thesis

Judith Butler's intervention in gender theory cannot be understood apart from its philosophical antecedents. Drawing on J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, Jacques Derrida's critique of iterability, and Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis of power and the subject, Butler constructed a model of gender in which the category of "woman" (or "man") is not a stable identity that one is, but a regulatory ideal that one does.⁴ Her famous formulation—that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results"—dismantles the commonsense assumption that gender expression flows from an antecedent gendered self.⁵

The theoretical force of this move depends upon a specific reading of the relationship between discourse and materiality. For Butler, the body itself is not a pre-discursive biological given but is constituted through regulatory norms that render certain bodies intelligible and others abject.⁶ This position was elaborated in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), where Butler conceded that she had been misread as claiming that bodies are "merely" constructed, and insisted instead that materialization is itself a process—one in which norms that govern the recognition of bodies as human are deeply implicated.⁷

Internal Tensions in the Performativity Framework

Butler's framework, whatever its undeniable intellectual creativity, contains tensions that have been identified by critics across the political and philosophical spectrum. The most fundamental is the problem of the agent of performance. If there is no subject prior to performance—no "I" who performs—then the question arises: who or what performs? Butler's



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response, that the subject is constituted through the iteration of norms, threatens to collapse into a determinism that undermines the very political agency her project is designed to enable.⁸ The philosopher Seyla Benhabib identified this difficulty with precision, noting that Butler's position renders it unclear how subjects can reflectively appropriate, subvert, or resist the norms that constitute them if they have no standpoint outside those norms.⁹ Similarly, Martha Nussbaum's influential critique in "The Professor of Parody" argued that Butler's theoretical apparatus, precisely because it refuses to posit any stable human nature or basic human needs, ultimately leaves progressive politics without normative foundations—unable to say why any particular arrangement of power is unjust rather than merely different.¹⁰

From a different angle, feminist philosophers working within the tradition of critical realism have challenged Butler's anti-essentialism on ontological grounds. Philosophers such as Sally Haslanger have argued that while social construction plays a significant role in shaping gender categories, this does not require the wholesale abandonment of the claim that biological sex constitutes a real, causally efficacious dimension of human existence.¹¹ The move from "gender is partially socially constructed" to "gender (and sex) have no pre-discursive reality" is a philosophical non sequitur—a conflation of the epistemological claim that our knowledge of nature is mediated by concepts with the ontological claim that nature itself is constituted by those concepts.

The Epistemological Problem: Anti-Essentialism and Self-Refutation

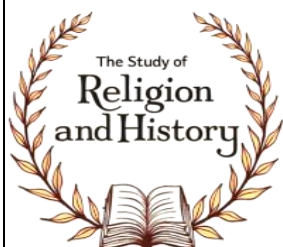
Perhaps the most structurally damaging critique of Butlerian gender theory concerns its epistemological self-positioning. Queer theory, in its anti-essentialist mode, claims that all identity categories are contingent, historically produced, and politically interested. Yet this claim is itself advanced as a universal truth about the nature of identity—a move that appears to exempt queer theory's own foundational propositions from the historicism it applies to everything else.¹² This tension between the universalist aspiration of the critique and the particularist logic of its method constitutes what philosophers of science would recognize as a performative contradiction: the very act of asserting anti-essentialism as a general truth undermines anti-essentialism as a methodological commitment.

This internal incoherence is not incidental; it is symptomatic of a deeper philosophical problem. The rejection of any stable human nature removes the normative ground on which the ethical claims of queer theory—that queer lives matter, that gender non-conforming individuals deserve dignity and legal protection—depend for their force.¹³ Without some account of human nature, however minimal, the appeal to human dignity becomes arbitrary—a rhetorical gesture rather than a philosophically grounded claim. It is precisely this gap that the Islamic conceptual framework, centered on *fiṭrah* and *karāmah*, is positioned to fill.

Fiṭrah: The Ontological Ground of Gendered Human Nature

The Qur'ānic and Prophetic Foundations of Fiṭrah

The concept of *fiṭrah* occupies a position of foundational importance in Islamic anthropology. Its Qur'ānic locus classicus is verse 30:30: "So set your face firmly towards the Religion, as a pure natural believer, God's *fiṭrah* on which He made mankind. There is no changing God's creation. That is the true Religion."¹⁴ The verse establishes three interlocking claims: that there exists a primordial human nature (*fiṭrah*), that this nature is the work of divine creation (*fiṭrat Allāh allatī faṭara al-nāsa ʿalayhā*), and that this nature is, in principle, unchangeable (*lā tabdīl li-khalq Allāh*).



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The ḥadīth literature elaborates this concept with considerable nuance. The most widely cited tradition—reported in both Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim—records the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as saying: "Every child is born upon the fiṭrah."¹⁵ Classical commentators diverged on the precise meaning of fiṭrah in this context, but the predominant interpretation, articulated by Ibn Taymiyyah and followed by the majority of later scholars, understands fiṭrah as the innate disposition toward recognition of God's unity (tawḥīd), together with a set of morally and intellectually orientating propensities that constitute the normative baseline of human existence.¹⁶

Classical Scholarly Elaborations: Ibn Qayyim and Al-Ghazālī

The most systematic classical treatment of fiṭrah in relation to human nature is found in the work of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350), particularly his monumental *Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa'ādah*. Ibn Qayyim distinguishes between fiṭrah al-munazzalah (the revealed fiṭrah, consisting in revealed knowledge and obligations) and fiṭrah al-mafrūṭah (the innate fiṭrah, consisting in the natural dispositions of the human constitution).¹⁷ This distinction allows him to argue that the normative structure of human existence is not externally imposed upon an otherwise neutral biological substrate but is inscribed in the very constitution of the human being as such. The Sharī'ah, on this account, does not suppress nature but perfects it—directing natural inclinations toward their divinely intended ends.

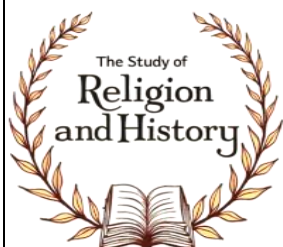
Al-Ghazālī's treatment in the *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* approaches fiṭrah from a different angle, situating it within his broader account of the human soul (nafs) and its relationship to the body.¹⁸ For al-Ghazālī, the human being is constituted by a soul that transcends material determination yet is expressed through the body in ways that are normatively significant. Gender, on this account, is not a surface performance but an expression of a deeper ontological constitution that the soul shares with the body in a relationship of mutual co-constitution. This position is philosophically more sophisticated than simple biological determinism, anticipating by centuries the kind of phenomenological account of embodiment developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Fiṭrah as a Philosophical Response to Performativity

The concept of fiṭrah offers a direct and philosophically substantive response to Butler's performativity thesis. Where Butler posits an empty field of social norms that constitute gender through repeated performance, fiṭrah posits a divinely inscribed natural constitution that normative practice either honors or distorts. This is not, it must be emphasized, a crude biological determinism of the kind that Butler rightly critiques; fiṭrah does not reduce gender to chromosomes or anatomical configuration, but grounds it in a divinely intended mode of being that encompasses biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.¹⁹

Crucially, the fiṭrah framework preserves the philosophical requirement that any adequate account of gender must meet: it provides a stable normative ground without collapsing into the kind of determinism that denies human agency. The human being, on the Islamic account, is not passively constituted by discursive norms (as in Butler) nor mechanically determined by biological drives, but is a being-in-relation—called to inhabit a divinely intended nature through free moral agency, disciplined by Sharī'ah and oriented toward God.²⁰ This triadic structure of nature, freedom, and divine call offers a richer account of the gendered subject than either biological reductionism or performative anti-essentialism.

Karāmah Insāniyyah: Human Dignity as Theological Category



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The Qur'ānic Grounding of Karāmah

The principle of karāmah insāniyyah—human dignity—is established in the Qur'ān with an explicitness that has no parallel in pre-modern Western ethical traditions. Sūrat al-Isrā' (17:70) declares: "We have honored the children of Adam and carried them on land and sea and provided them with good things and greatly preferred them over many We have created."²¹ The Arabic term karramnā—a Form II verb derived from the root k-r-m, denoting nobility, generosity, and honor—establishes human dignity not as a contingent social achievement but as a divine bestowal, anterior to and independent of any particular social arrangement or legal status.

This Qur'ānic grounding distinguishes the Islamic concept of human dignity from its modern Western counterparts in philosophically important ways. The Kantian conception of dignity, while deeply influential, grounds dignity in the rational autonomy of the human subject and is thus structurally dependent on a particular philosophical anthropology that is itself contested.²² The Islamic conception, by contrast, grounds dignity in the creative act of God and therefore applies to every human being simply by virtue of membership in the species Adam created and honored by divine fiat. The implications are far-reaching: no human being can be legitimately treated with contempt, cruelty, or humiliation, regardless of how they have deviated from normative expectations.

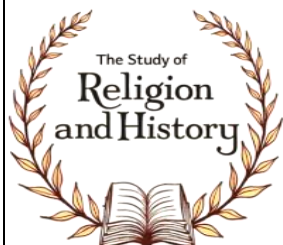
Karāmah and the Ethics of Pastoral Engagement

The principle of karāmah insāniyyah has direct and important implications for how the Islamic tradition ought to engage with individuals experiencing gender dysphoria or gender identity conflicts. Classical legal discussions of khunthā (gender ambiguity) and the modern medical phenomenon of intersex conditions reveal a jurisprudential tradition that has consistently refused to deny the full human dignity of individuals whose biological constitution does not conform to the normative binary.²³ This is not an accommodation of gender fluidity in the Butlerian sense, but a recognition that divine creation encompasses biological variation—and that legal and pastoral responses to such variation must be guided by both normative clarity and compassionate rigor.

Contemporary Muslim scholars working in the field of Islamic bioethics have emphasized that the recognition of karāmah does not entail the normative endorsement of every identity claim or lifestyle choice, but it does impose absolute constraints on the manner in which those who deviate from normative expectations may be treated.²⁴ The famous principle of fiqh—al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar (commanding right and forbidding wrong)—must itself be exercised within the constraints of karāmah: correction is legitimate, humiliation is not. This distinction is crucial for pastoral practice in contemporary Muslim communities grappling with gender identity challenges.

The Comparative Advantage: Dignity with Normativity

A philosophically significant advantage of the Islamic framework over queer theory is precisely its capacity to combine robust normative commitments with an equally robust commitment to human dignity—a combination that queer theory, precisely because of its anti-essentialism, struggles to achieve. Queer theory's rejection of normative categories is motivated by a genuine moral concern: that such categories have historically been used to stigmatize, marginalize, and harm gender non-conforming individuals. This concern deserves full moral seriousness.²⁵



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However, the theoretical move from "normative categories have been misused" to "normative categories are inherently oppressive" is a non sequitur of the same logical structure as the move from "religious institutions have perpetrated harm" to "religion is inherently harmful." The Islamic tradition, in its most intellectually sophisticated expressions, has always understood that normative categories require interpretive wisdom and pastoral sensitivity in their application—precisely the function that the discipline of fiqh, and particularly the maqāṣid tradition, is designed to perform.

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah and the Jurisprudence of Gender

The Maqāṣid Framework: An Overview

The theory of maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah—the higher objectives or purposes of Islamic law—represents one of the most sophisticated contributions of classical Islamic jurisprudence to moral philosophy. Its systematic elaboration is conventionally attributed to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, who identified five essential goods (al-maṣāliḥ al-ḍarūriyyah) that Islamic law is designed to preserve: religion (dīn), life (nafs), intellect ('aql), lineage (nasl), and property (māl).²⁶ Later scholars, particularly Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī and Abū Ishāq al-Shātibī, refined and extended this framework, with al-Shātibī's *al-Muwāfaqāt* providing its most systematic pre-modern treatment.²⁷

Contemporary scholars have extended the maqāṣid framework to address questions not directly anticipated by the classical jurists. Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, in his discussion of Islamic renewal (tajdīd), has argued that the preservation of human dignity (karāmah) should be recognized as an independent objective of Islamic law, supplementing the classical five.²⁸ Jasser Auda's systems-theoretic reading of maqāṣid offers a still more dynamic framework, one that is particularly well-suited to engagement with contemporary bioethical and social challenges including questions of gender identity.²⁹

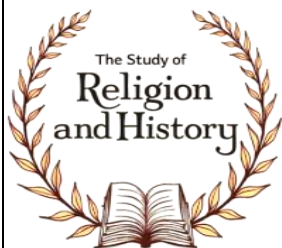
Ḥifẓ al-Nasl: Protecting Human Lineage and Its Implications

The maqāṣid objective most directly relevant to questions of gender is ḥifẓ al-nasl—the protection of lineage, progeny, and the integrity of the family as the fundamental unit of human social organization. Classical jurists understood this objective to include the preservation of the biological conditions for human reproduction, the legal clarity of parentage (nasab), and the integrity of family structure as the primary institution for the moral formation of the next generation.³⁰

From the perspective of maqāṣid, the queer theoretical project of dismantling normative gender categories is not merely a philosophical error but a socially consequential program that threatens one of the five essential goods that Islamic law is designed to protect. This is not to say that every individual who struggles with gender identity is a threat to social order—such a claim would be both empirically unfounded and morally incoherent. It is to say, rather, that a theoretical and political program systematically aimed at dissolving the normative distinction between male and female, and at rendering all gendered arrangements equally valid, poses genuine risks to the social and anthropological conditions for human flourishing.³¹

Maqāṣid and the Limits of Normativity: Avoiding Rigidity

The maqāṣid framework also provides resources for avoiding the opposite error: a rigid and literalist application of normative categories that fails to respond with wisdom and compassion



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to the genuine complexity of human experience. Al-Shāṭibī's principle that the objectives of the law are to be achieved through the facilitation of human welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), not through formal compliance divorced from its purposes, provides the jurisprudential foundation for a pastoral approach to gender identity challenges that combines normative commitment with practical wisdom.³²

This principle has been applied in classical and contemporary *fiqh* to the treatment of individuals with conditions of intersex (*khunthā mushkil*). The classical jurists recognized that biological reality does not always present in neat binary form—a recognition that is not a concession to Butlerian anti-essentialism but evidence of a tradition committed to dealing with reality as it actually presents itself, rather than as a simplistic ideology would prefer it to be.³³ The appropriate response to such cases, in the *maqāṣid* framework, is patient jurisprudential investigation oriented toward the welfare of the individual within the constraints of revealed norms—not the wholesale abandonment of those norms in the name of an abstract principle of identity self-determination.

The Khunthā in Classical Jurisprudence: Complexity without Dissolution

Defining Khunthā in the Legal Literature

The term *khunthā* (literally "softness" or "yielding," used in *fiqh* to denote a person of ambiguous sex) represents the classical Islamic jurisprudential engagement with gender complexity.³⁴ The major legal manuals of all four Sunni *madhāhib*—Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfi'ī, and Ḥanbalī—devote substantial attention to the legal status of the *khunthā*, addressing questions ranging from inheritance shares and marriage eligibility to ritual requirements of purity (*ṭahārah*) and the regulations governing gender interaction.

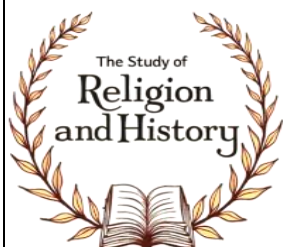
The distinction between *khunthā ghayr mushkil* (a case of ambiguous sex that can be determined through available biological indicators) and *khunthā mushkil* (a case that resists biological determination) is foundational to classical jurisprudential discussions.³⁵ The Ḥanafī jurist al-Kāsānī, in his *Badā'i' al-Ṣanā'i'*, provides one of the most systematic treatments of this distinction, outlining a detailed procedure for determining sex through biological markers and specifying the legal consequences that follow from each determination.³⁶

The Normative Logic of the Khunthā Discussions

What is philosophically significant about the classical *khunthā* discussions is not merely that they acknowledge biological complexity—a straightforward empirical matter—but that they do so within a normative framework that remains robustly committed to the binary structure of gender as a legal category. The classical jurists do not respond to the existence of intersex conditions by concluding that gender is merely a social construction; they respond by developing sophisticated evidentiary and procedural frameworks for determining the biological reality that underlies ambiguous presentation.³⁷

This approach embodies a philosophical stance that is quite distinct from both naive biological essentialism and Butlerian performativity: what might be called informed natural realism. On this view, biological sex is a real feature of human beings that normative frameworks must track—but tracking it requires careful investigation, judicial wisdom, and procedural rigor, precisely because the reality in question is sometimes complex. The existence of exceptional cases does not undermine the normative rule; it requires that the rule be applied with intellectual sophistication rather than ideological simplicity.³⁸

Classical Jurisprudence and the Modern Phenomenon of Transgender Identity



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It is important to distinguish with precision between the classical jurisprudential category of *khunthā* and the contemporary phenomenon of transgender identity, which is conceptually and phenomenologically distinct. *Khunthā* refers to a condition of biological ambiguity in which the underlying sex of the individual cannot be immediately determined from external markers; it is a category defined by epistemic limitation in the face of biological complexity. Transgender identity, as understood in contemporary discourse, refers to a disconnect between biological sex and felt gender identity in individuals whose biological sex is not itself ambiguous.³⁹

This distinction does not mean that the classical framework has nothing to offer in the engagement with transgender identity; on the contrary, the philosophical principles embedded in the *khunthā* discussions—the commitment to investigating reality carefully, the refusal to reduce normative categories to political convenience, the insistence on the welfare of the individual within the constraints of revealed law—provide exactly the right methodological orientation for contemporary jurisprudential *ijtihād* on this question.⁴⁰ What the classical framework rules out is the shortcut of resolving the question by simply endorsing felt identity as the determinative criterion of sex—a move that would dissolve the very normative categories that the *Sharī‘ah* is designed to protect.

Digital Media, Muslim Youth, and the Crisis of Identity

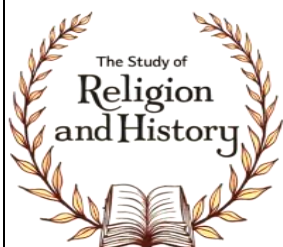
The Epistemological Environment of Digital Modernity

The philosophical analysis of queer theory and Islamic jurisprudence acquires its full practical urgency when situated within the concrete social context of contemporary Muslim youth, particularly in Pakistan. The rapid penetration of smartphone technology and social media platforms into Pakistani society over the past decade has created an unprecedented epistemological environment in which young Muslims are simultaneously exposed to traditional religious formation through family and mosque, and to the identity frameworks of global digital culture through platforms whose content is largely shaped by Western secular assumptions.⁴¹

Research conducted on Pakistani university students has documented significant levels of identity confusion arising from this dual exposure, with a notable proportion of young Muslims reporting uncertainty about how to reconcile the gender identity narratives encountered online with the normative frameworks of their religious tradition.⁴² The response of religious institutions has frequently been inadequate: either a reactive condemnation that fails to engage the genuine existential concerns of young people, or a silence that leaves them without intellectual resources to critically evaluate the claims they encounter. Neither response serves the pastoral needs of the community or honors the intellectual heritage of the Islamic tradition.

The Role of Islamic Educational Institutions

The responsibility of Islamic educational institutions—*dars-i-nizāmī* schools, universities with Islamic studies departments, and organizations engaged in popular religious education—to address this challenge is both urgent and largely unmet. The problem is not simply one of providing students with refutations of queer theory; it is one of providing them with a sufficiently deep formation in Islamic anthropology and philosophical theology that they can engage critically with alternative frameworks without intellectual intimidation or existential anxiety.⁴³



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This formation requires, at minimum, familiarity with the Qur'ānic and ḥadīth foundations of Islamic anthropology, the classical philosophical discussions of human nature in the tradition of kalām and falsafah, and the maqāsid-based jurisprudential framework for evaluating contemporary social challenges. It also requires the cultivation of what might be called intellectual confidence rooted in conviction—the capacity to engage seriously with alternative viewpoints without feeling threatened by them, which is itself a mark of the mature Islamic scholarly tradition.⁴⁴

The Fiṭrah as Pastoral Resource

The concept of fiṭrah, properly understood, provides not only a philosophical response to queer theory but also a pastoral resource for young Muslims navigating the complex terrain of gender identity in the digital age. If the fiṭrah is understood—as classical scholars understood it—as a divinely inscribed orientation that provides the normative baseline for human existence, then experiences of gender dissonance can be approached not as evidence that normative categories are illusory, but as occasions for the kind of careful, compassionate, and theologically informed pastoral accompaniment that the Islamic tradition has always associated with the role of the scholar as physician of souls (ṭabīb al-qulūb).⁴⁵

This pastoral orientation does not require the denial of the psychological reality of gender dysphoria or the dismissal of the genuine suffering it can involve. What it requires is a framework within which such suffering can be acknowledged and addressed without the conclusion that the normative structure of created human existence must be abandoned in response to it. The experience of tension between felt inclination and normative structure is, in the Islamic understanding, a constitutive feature of the human moral condition—one that calls for spiritual guidance and communal support rather than the wholesale revision of divinely established categories.

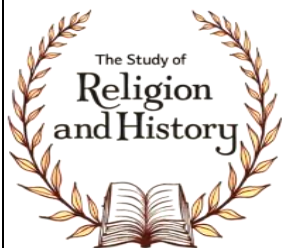
Beyond Butler: Toward an Islamic Philosophy of Gender

The Islamic Account of Sexual Difference

Having examined the philosophical weaknesses of the Butlerian framework and the resources available within the Islamic tradition for a more adequate account, it is possible to sketch, at least in outline, what an Islamic philosophy of gender would look like. Such a philosophy would begin from the Qur'ānic affirmation of sexual difference as a divinely intended feature of creation: "And among His signs is that He created for you spouses from yourselves, that you may find peace in them, and He placed love and compassion between you" (30:21).⁴⁶ Sexual difference, on this account, is not a contingent social arrangement but a divinely intended complementarity inscribed in the very structure of created human nature.

This affirmation of sexual difference as theologically grounded does not entail a simplistic or reductive account of gender roles, as if every detail of gendered behavior were directly mandated by divine fiat. The Sharī'ah provides a normative framework within which considerable cultural variation in gendered practice is entirely legitimate; the fiqh tradition distinguishes carefully between the fixed requirements of divine command (farḍ and ḥarām) and the variable domain in which human custom and circumstance play a legitimate role.⁴⁷ This distinction provides the Islamic framework with a flexibility that its critics often fail to recognize.

Embodiment, Soul, and the Gendered Self



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A fully developed Islamic philosophy of gender would also require a sophisticated account of the relationship between bodily sex and the gendered self—one that draws on the rich resources of the Islamic philosophical tradition while remaining sensitive to what contemporary neuroscience and psychology have contributed to our understanding of gender-related experience. The philosophers of the Islamic falsafah tradition—Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) in particular—developed elaborate accounts of the relationship between body and soul that are more sophisticated than either Cartesian dualism or contemporary physicalism, and that provide conceptual tools for thinking about gender experience in ways that go beyond both biological reductionism and social constructionism.⁴⁸

Ibn Sīnā's "floating man" thought experiment, in which a human being suspended in a featureless void retains awareness of its own self (dhāt) despite the absence of all bodily sensation, points toward an account of personal identity grounded in the soul (nafs) rather than in the body alone—an account in which the body is the expression of the soul rather than its mere container.⁴⁹ Applied to questions of gender, this suggests a framework in which bodily sex and the gendered soul are in a relationship of natural expression and mutual co-constitution, rather than accidental co-occurrence. Experiences of dissonance between felt identity and bodily sex can then be understood as a form of the more general human experience of the soul's imperfect actualization of its divinely intended nature—an experience that calls for spiritual cultivation rather than surgical or social alteration.

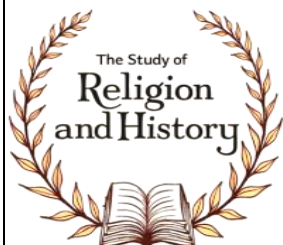
The Islamic Framework and Genuine Human Flourishing

The ultimate criterion by which any account of gender must be evaluated—from within the Islamic tradition—is its capacity to guide human beings toward genuine flourishing (falāḥ). The Arabic term falāḥ, which the Qur'ān uses as a comprehensive term for human well-being in both this life and the next, provides the teleological horizon within which all jurisprudential and theological discussions of gender must ultimately be situated.⁵⁰

Queer theory, whatever its genuine contributions to the critique of oppressive social arrangements, cannot provide an account of falāḥ—because falāḥ requires a teleological framework, an account of the end toward which human existence is directed, and queer theory's anti-essentialism is structurally committed to the rejection of any such framework. The Islamic tradition, by contrast, possesses a richly developed account of human teleology grounded in the concepts of 'ibādah (worship), khalīfah (vicegerency), and the eschatological orientation of human existence toward the encounter with God. Within this framework, gender is not a performance or a social construction but a dimension of the divinely intended vocation of the human being—one that calls for understanding, cultivation, and faithful living rather than deconstruction.

Conclusion: The Coherence of the Islamic Account

The foregoing analysis has established, across several coordinated lines of argument, that the Islamic tradition possesses philosophical resources of sufficient depth and internal coherence to engage the challenge of queer theory not merely as a political opponent but as an intellectual interlocutor—and to do so from a position of philosophical strength rather than defensive anxiety. The Butlerian performativity thesis, examined on its own terms, exhibits internal tensions that are not incidental but structural: the problem of the agent, the difficulty of political normativity without essentialism, and the performative contradiction of universal anti-



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essentialism all point toward a theoretical framework that is less philosophically robust than its enormous cultural influence might suggest.

Against this backdrop, the Islamic concepts of *fiṭrah* and *karāmah insāniyyah* emerge not as traditional obstacles to human flourishing but as philosophical resources of remarkable contemporary relevance. *Fiṭrah* provides what queer theory cannot: a stable normative ground for the gendered self that is neither a crude biological determinism nor an empty social construction, but a divinely inscribed natural constitution that calls for faithful actualization through free moral agency. *Karāmah* provides what queer theory has genuinely sought but cannot theoretically ground: an unconditional dignity that belongs to every human being by divine bestowal, regardless of their conformity to normative expectations.

The *maqāṣid*-based jurisprudential methodology, enriched by the classical discussions of *khunthā*, demonstrates that the Islamic tradition has always possessed the conceptual tools to address gender complexity with both normative clarity and pastoral wisdom—and that the appropriate response to the genuine challenges posed by contemporary gender identity discourse is not a retreat into defensive literalism but an engagement characterized by the intellectual confidence, methodological sophistication, and compassionate rigor that has always marked the tradition at its best.

The crisis of identity confronting Muslim youth in Pakistan and beyond is real, and it demands a real response—one that neither capitulates to the philosophical assumptions of queer theory nor retreats into a simplistic condemnation that fails to engage the genuine human questions that theory, however inadequately, attempts to address. The Islamic intellectual tradition, faithfully recovered and courageously applied, is more than equal to this task. The project of going beyond Butler is, at its deepest level, not a project of refutation but of retrieval: the recovery of a richer, more coherent, and more humane account of the gendered human person from within the inexhaustible resources of the Islamic traditio

Endnotes

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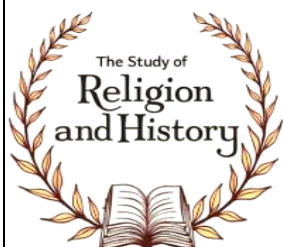
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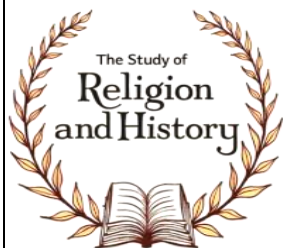
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