

Douglas Mattsson

Interview with Amna Mahmood

Meet the Doctor

Congratulations Amna Mahmood on successfully defending your dissertation *Feminism in Islam, Social Media and Religious Change. A Study of Multidimensional Decolonial Muslim Feminist and Queer Initiatives in Scandinavia* (2025) and now having become a doctor in the field of the study of religions.

Can you tell us a bit more about yourself. Who are you? Both as a person and a researcher?

Thank you so much for the opportunity to talk about myself and my work. My Ph.D. is in the study of religions from the University of Oslo. My research interests include Islam in Scandinavia, gender and religion, Islamophobia and decolonial theory. At the moment of writing, I'm also starting a position as a substitute lecturer in the study of religions at my department and teach undergraduate courses, such as Islam in Europe.

I'm also active in the campaign for the academic boycott of Israeli institutions both nationally in Norway and more locally at my home university. This is in addition to other anti-racist and anti-colonial communities in Oslo.

What was your dissertation about?

My dissertation was about feminism in Islam in Scandinavia, the role of social media in activism and religious change. I was guided by three main research questions: how is feminism in Islam understood by a handful of activists in the region, what role does social media platforms play and what processes of religious change does Muslim/Islamic feminism represent, if any?

To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Muslim and/or queer feminist activists and collected data from their Instagram and Facebook platforms as well as textual material, such as chronicles and books, that they had written.

Which results did you find particularly interesting in your dissertation?

While my initial focus was on how the Muslim and/or queer feminist activists address patriarchy, misogyny and men's dominance in Islamic settings, such as in mosque leadership or chaplaincy-positions (so-called "hospital imams" or "army imams"), it was interesting to see how they broadened the scope of feminism in Islam to include the fight against racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, homophobia, transphobia as well as imperialism and colonialism. This is why I describe feminism in Islam as "multi-dimensional" in the title, because the activists I talked to link together various forms of oppression and understand feminism beyond women's empowerment, sexual liberation and gender equality. The activists are also highly critical of the orientalism and coloniality in what they refer to as "white", "western" or "colonial" feminism. In other words, they can be placed in a position in-between patriarchal Muslim communities on one side, and the oriental and colonial feminist and queer movements on the other side. Ultimately, Muslim/Islamic feminism is viewed as a critical alternative to the larger, established feminist and queer movements in Scandinavia and teachings and practices of larger, established mosques and Muslim communities. This way of understanding feminism resonates with how the scholar and activist Françoise Vergès conceptualizes "decolonial feminism" as opposed to "civilizational feminism."

Did anything surprise you?

In addition to the focus on anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles in Muslim/Islamic feminist activism in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, I was surprised by how few references it was to the Qur'an or hadith, or other religious Islamic texts. The activists did refer to the Prophet Muhammed, prominent Muslim women in Islam's history and religious stories, such as Khadija, Aisha and Fatima, but more often than not they referred to feminist and queer theorists, such as Sarah Ahmed and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Prominent Muslim or Islamic feminist scholars and thinkers, such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas was also referred to. The activists I spoke to, were also familiar with concepts such as femonationalism, homonationalism and decoloniality, and utilized them frequently in their social media posts and chronicles. We discussed them during the interviews as well.

Was there something in the process that you found challenging? If so, what and why?

I do not have previous experience with data collection on social media platforms and am also short of a degree in media studies. I believe the greatest challenge was to collect, structure and analyze the social media-material. But, as a media studies professor reminded me during a course on media ethnography: I have to remember where my home is – the study of religions – meaning that my dissertation is not a dissertation in media studies and I'm not supposed to become an expert in that field, rather learn from and employ some of its methods and theory.

Another challenge appeared during the data collection from Salam Norway's Instagram account in the fall 2023. Salam Norway is a feminist and anti-racist organization for queers in Norway with Muslim backgrounds. Since its establishment in 2017, Salam has counteracted so-called *pinkwashing* of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In October 2023, when the Gaza genocide started, this issue dominated Salam's Instagram posts (like everyone else's). I was witnessing the genocide and realized that I had to include Muslim queer solidarity with Palestine in a separate analytical chapter. In the chapter I focus on how Salam connects the Palestinian liberation struggle with the queer liberation struggle. The chapter also explains the struggle against homophobia and homonationalism as a Muslim/Islamic feminist issue. Moreover, to write about events that are unfolding brings its own set of challenges.

In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently?

I think I could explore the potential of social media posts to cause social and political change more in my dissertation, for instance in a separate chapter. Hopefully I can explore this in a future book.

Were there aspects about working on your dissertation that you found particularly fun or rewarding? If so, which ones and why?

Doing a Ph.D. in Scandinavia is really a privileged job, and the three years it took to finish my project have been both challenging and rewarding. I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity. To name something specific, it was the meeting with the Muslim and/or queer feminist activists. They taught me a lot, and I appreciate them for taking the time to meet me and participate in my research and share their insights with me. Some of them



expressed their excitement for the project and the fact that a multicultural and Muslim woman is doing the work. I found their trust in me to convey their insights, works, stories and experiences particularly rewarding. I believe in the potential of academic practice in the humanities and social sciences to highlight marginalized histories and struggles and criticize oppression,

and I hope I can do more of this work and see more of that in the future.

Now that you have become a doctor, is there something special you would like to do afterwards? Any academic (or non academic) interests that you would like to begin pursuing?

I finally have time to read for leisure! I'm excited to do more of that now that the dissertation is not hovering over me, especially fiction.

When it comes to academic interests, I'm starting a substitute position as a lecturer in my department as mentioned above. I look forward to working with students and with the field of study in a different way. Teaching at the university is also new to me, and I look forward to learning and growing as a person.

Do you have any future research projects in mind? Or areas of research you would like to delve into?

To be honest, since I got the lecturer-position, I have not prioritized future research projects ideas. My focus has primarily been to prepare for full-time teaching, but I am writing some articles and book chapters. That is a nice way to revisit and elaborate on my Ph.D. work.

I hope I get opportunities to supervise students on their bachelor or master projects, that would be fun and rewarding!

If one would like to get in contact with you for future research projects or presentations, how can we reach you?

My email address is amna.mahmood@ikos.uio.no.