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# Bodies and Contexts: An Investigation into a Postmodern Feminist Reading of Averroës

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**Abstract:** In this article, I contribute to the wider discourse of theorizing feminism in predominantly Muslim societies by analyzing the role of women's political agency within the writings of the twelfth-century Islamic philosopher Averroës (Ibn Rushd, 1126–1198). I critically analyze Catarina Belo's (2009) liberal feminist approach to political agency in Averroës by adopting a postmodern reading of Averroës's commentary on Plato's *Republic*. A postmodern feminist reading of Averroës's political thought emphasizes contingencies and contextualization rather than employing a literal reading of the historical works.

**Keywords:** postmodern feminist theory, Plato, Averroës, Islamic feminism, premodern Islamic political thought, political agency

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The proliferation of scholarship in the English language on Averroës (Ibn Rushd) has grown exponentially in recent decades. This is due to several factors, including an increased interest in exploring feminism within Islam, an increased interest in questions of political legitimacy in Islamic political thought due to contemporary political conflicts, and an increased interest among North American and European scholars in progressive (liberal) Islamic thought. Of these recent endeavors, there are only a handful of attempts to reinterpret Averroës's political thought by linking it with contemporary feminist projects in political theory or, more recently, the move towards developing an "Islamic feminist" strand of political thought (Moghadam 2002; Majid 1998). In contrast, there have been several recent feminist projects on reinterpreting and repositioning premodern Christian thought and the earlier Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. In this article, I explore how women's political agency is being conceived in Averroës's work through a postmodern feminist lens by emphasizing contingencies and contextualization rather than employing a literal reading of the historical works.

This article is divided into three parts, with a brief section of concluding remarks for further research at the end. The first section begins with an introduction to Averroës's political thought in order to situate Catarina Belo's work, "Some Considerations on Averroës' Views Regarding Women and Their Role in Society" (2009). I investigate the feminist scholarship Belo references regarding Plato's *Republic* in order to make explicit any underlying theoretical commitments to a liberal feminist model of women's political agency.

Section two challenges the assumption that a liberal feminist conception of agency as presented by Gregory Vlastos in "Was Plato a Feminist?" (1994) is representative of the past four decades of feminist scholarship on Plato's *Republic*. I do so by examining contrasting interpretations of Plato, beginning first with Janet Smith's "Plato, Irony, and Equality" (1994) and then moving towards a postmodernist reading of Plato by Monique Canto (1994), in order to determine if Plato's *Republic* and Averroës's later commentary on it should be considered examples of early feminist thought. A closer analysis of the positions of Canto

and Smith is necessary since “the majority of feminists have concluded that Plato’s philosophy is sexist,” as noted by Nancy Tuana (1994, 3). It is not self-evident how Plato’s or Averroës’s political thought can be reconciled with the Western canon of feminist thought that is often perceived as antagonistic towards religious or nonliberal conceptions of agency.

The third section develops a postmodern feminist analysis by evaluating Belo’s representation of political agency in relation to the state. I reconsider Belo’s main arguments concerning Averroës’s *Commentary on Plato’s Republic* from a postmodern feminist perspective by drawing on insights from the analysis of Plato’s *Republic*. I conclude that Belo’s 2009 article is very useful to readers who are interested in the political legitimacy of women within Averroës’s thought. And, with a few caveats, Belo’s rendering of Averroës as filling both roles simultaneously, as an early feminist and as an Islamic philosopher, is a worthwhile combination in pursuit of future research on how the contemporary progressive Islamic movement can benefit from Averroës’s pioneering ideas.

### **A Liberal Feminist Reading of Plato and Averroës**

Before I can investigate Belo’s liberal feminist reading of Plato and Averroës, it is important to situate Averroës within the history of political thought and to introduce his main political writing, the *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*. Averroës (Ibn Rushd) is one of the seminal Arabic scholars during the premodern period of Islamic thought. He was born and spent most of his life in the city of Córdoba, the heart of intellectual life within the Almoravid state. Both his father and grandfather were well-known juristic scholars, which allowed Averroës to have an extensive education for his time (Arnaldez 2000, 6). Averroës was trained in theology, medicine, astrology, and legal thought, and was well versed in both Arab and Greek philosophy. It has been commonly claimed by scholars until recently that Averroës expressed two incompatible worldviews, one as an Islamic judge and one as a philosopher (Arnaldez 2000, 5). Today, scholars have begun to reject this dualistic interpretation in favor of viewing his judicial and philosophical writings as consistent with one another.

Averroës lived under the Almoravid dynasty that subscribed to the Mālikī school of legal thought, and at times some of his more controversial ideas led to periods of exile from Córdoba (Arnaldez 2000, 14–15). It was within this turbulent context that Averroës was commissioned to write several commentaries on Greek philosophical works, in particular those of Aristotle (Ivry 1999, 183). He could not read Greek, and there were no authoritative translations in Arabic, so he had to sift through incomplete or poor translations in order to compose his commentaries. In the Mediterranean during the twelfth century, Averroës was unable to acquire a translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, although he was aware through other works that the text had existed at one time. Finding Aristotle’s *Politics* unavailable, he wrote a commentary on Plato’s *Republic* instead. In his commentary on the *Republic*, it is not always clear at which points he is giving a descriptive account of Plato’s text and where he is extending Plato’s original argument to be consistent with his twelfth-century Islamic worldview (Averroës 1974, xiv).

When trying to understand Averroës’s philosophical writings, it is important to remember that he was very familiar with a variety of theological positions but practiced one consistent with the dominant Mālikī school of Islamic jurisprudence. Averroës read Plato’s *Republic* as if it should be immediately applicable to his current situation, and because of this his commentary demonstrates a need to amalgamate political life in Córdoba in the twelfth century with political life in Plato’s *Republic* (Averroës 1974, xiv–xvi). It is still

unknown whether Averroës wrote his commentary based primarily on Galen's notes or if he had access to a copy or portion of Plato's original text in Arabic.

Another important controversy surrounding Averroës's commentary on the *Republic* concerns the translations currently available in English. Erwin I. J. Rosenthal's first translation in 1956 was based on a later sixteenth-century Hebrew manuscript (MS Munich) (Averroës 1956). Twenty years later, Ralph Lerner completed a second translation but this time chose to use an older Hebrew manuscript (MS Florence) as the primary source and the MS Munich as a secondary reference (Averroës 1974, viii). Although this is the only English translation currently in print, there was enormous debate at the time of its printing over whether it was superior to Rosenthal's (Sigmund 1975; Butterworth 1976; Mulgan 1977). According to Sigmund's 1975 review, "Lerner makes little attempt to analyze Averroës' work, ignoring in his introduction the way in which Averroës blends Aristotle's *Ethics* with Plato's thought" (Sigmund 1975, 236). In response, Butterworth (1976) and Mulgan (1977) rejected Sigmund's comments as "erroneous and inadequate" (Butterworth 1976, 505). Since Belo does not explore this issue beyond siding with Rosenthal's translation because of the available Hebrew text not found in Lerner's version, both translations are used and referenced in this article.

In the first of three treatises that compose the commentary, Averroës develops the idea of the virtuous city alongside Plato's notion of the ideal state in the *Republic*. Averroës begins with an analogy positing that the virtuous city is like a body, such that the existence of each of its parts is necessary only insofar as it supports the function of the body as a whole (I 45.3–8). In support of this notion, he informs the reader of the four virtues that are the foundation for the virtuous city (I 48.12–15). The first virtue is wisdom, understood as both practical and theoretical knowledge, which is central for the ruler of the city (I 48.12–29). The three remaining virtues are: courage required of the guardians; moderation required of citizens against excess; and justice, which takes the form of the injunction that each citizen should perform only one task. According to Averroës's model for the virtuous city, kingship in the form of a monarchy or aristocracy is the ideal form of governance (I 52.23–27).

In the second treatise, Averroës describes how the king in Plato's republic is very similar to an imam, with an extensive list of qualities that are essential for this position (II 61.8–24). Some of the primary qualities include being trained in the theoretical sciences, having a good memory, being a lover of truth and a pursuer of learning, not dwelling on sensual desires, and not valuing the accumulation of personal wealth (II 61.23–62.17). Based on these attributes, a virtuous ruler could potentially emerge under the right circumstances; however, it is uncommon for anyone to possess all of these qualities. In the third treatise, Averroës describes five conditions that need to meet in a ruler or rulers in order to achieve virtuous governance; they are "wisdom, perfect understanding, good persuasion, good imagination, and capacity for war" (III 80.23–25). These two conceptions of the virtuous city and the virtuous ruler demonstrate the way in which Averroës's main ideas closely parallel those found in Plato's original text.

Regarding women's role in society, Averroës appears to accept Plato's general position that men and women share the same nature and ability to fulfill societal obligations (I 53.20–24). According to Averroës, "since some women are formed with eminence and praiseworthy disposition, it is not impossible that there be philosophers and rulers among them" (I 53.24–26). This line of reasoning extends from the discussion of the "cities of women" in Plato. It provides the theoretical space for Averroës to imagine a wider sense of social justice that extends to women. Averroës's description of the present situation of women in society is telling:

The competence of women is unknown, however, in these cities since they are only taken [in them] for procreation and hence are placed at the service of their husbands and confined to procreation, upbringing, and suckling. This nullifies their [other] activities. Since women in these cities are not prepared with respect to any of the human virtues, they frequently resemble plants in these cities. (Averroës 1974, 59; I 54.5–10)

In contrast to the society in which he lived, Averroës seems to agree with Plato in suggesting that women have the same natural potential as men. As he determines, “it is clear from the case of the females that they are to share with the males in war and the rest—it is fitting that, in choosing them, we seek for those very natures that we sought for in the men and they should be trained in the same way through music and gymnastic” (I 54.14–18). This statement might be expected to raise some concern that Averroës’s apparent erasure of gender difference could nullify the potential for achieving social justice in practice.<sup>1</sup>

Belo (2009) confronts the issue of political legitimacy of women in Averroës’s writing and implicitly asks the question: Should Averroës be considered an early feminist theorist? Her analysis draws mainly on his *Commentary on Plato’s Republic* and secondarily on *Distinguished Jurist’s Primer* (1–5). Belo acknowledges the importance of understanding the ambiguities surrounding any analysis of Averroës’s thought and puts forward the argument that Plato’s *Republic* should be interpreted as promoting sex equality and therefore Plato can be viewed as an early feminist theorist (4–6). In addition, she argues that Plato’s feminist tendencies were accepted and adopted by Averroës based on several indicators. First, Averroës did not explicitly label certain ideas as coming from Plato (and not himself), as he did in several other instances; second, Averroës decided to not omit several key passages from Plato’s dialogues that were likely to be controversial in Averroës’s day; and third, Averroës privileged the rationality of both sexes over the blatant social and religious inequalities present in his lifetime (6–11, 20). Belo concludes that it is not inconsistent to consider Averroës an early Islamic forebear of feminism because

He urges society, in particular his Muslim contemporaries, to allow women a greater role in public affairs, for the benefit of the entire state. Averroës does not see a contradiction between this and his Muslim faith—as the difference between the genders is at bottom physical. (Belo 2009, 20)

Belo’s conclusion, although politically desirable to many, at first glance appears to be potentially premature and requires further investigation. There are several reasons why this is necessary: first, to clarify to what extent Plato’s *Republic* and the ideas Averroës later adopted were really arguing for feminism according to a more diverse theoretical assemblage of feminist scholars than Belo thought it was necessary to cite; second, to take a closer look at Belo’s methodological assumptions in how to approach the *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*; and third, to determine whether Averroës could indeed be considered an early feminist or if he purports an antifeminist stance that would be more consistent with his admiration for Aristotle and the prevailing misogynistic worldview of Islamic scholars during the twelfth century.

Belo positions her inquiry into the status of women in Averroës’s thought within the history of philosophy by opening with the following question: If later rationalist philosophers such as Spinoza and Hegel were particularly misogynistic in their understanding of political legitimacy, how is it that a much earlier Islamic rationalist philosopher produced such a seemingly progressive, even feminist, account of political legitimacy (2009, 2)? However, the question she does not ask is what role could Averroës’s Islamic education and worldview have on the development of more progressive political thought. It is evident from the very beginning of Belo’s discussion that it remains centered on the Western philosophical tradition rather than on any serious consideration of Arab or Islamic philosophy.

Belo proceeds to examine the influence of Aristotle and Plato on Averroës’s thought by focusing on two of Averroës’s works, his *Commentary on Plato’s Republic* and the *Distinguished Jurist’s Primer*, in order

to gain an understanding of how Averroës perceived women's role in society (4). She relies on Gregory Vlastos's "Was Plato a Feminist?" (1994) to support her assumption that Plato's political thought in the *Republic*, and potentially Averroës's later commentary on it, should be considered as supporting a feminist politics (6). The importance of this move will become clearer in the next section, where I examine a wider sampling of feminists interpretations of Plato and introduce a variety of perspectives that surround this question. First, however, it is necessary to take a brief look at the history of feminist scholarship on Plato's *Republic* to gain a fuller understanding of why this is such an important issue in understanding Belo's overall appraisal of Averroës.

Prior to the 1970s, feminism had not had a significant influence in the historiography of philosophy, including most major works in Greek philosophy such as Plato's *Republic*. According to Natalie Bluestone's (1987) in-depth study of feminist scholarship on Plato's *Republic* that was conducted across seven languages and in archives across three continents, it was not until the early 1970s that virtually any scholarship of Greek philosophy began to take seriously Plato's call for equal treatment of men and women in terms of education and with regard to political leadership (3, 23–26). Early European scholars such as Leonardo Bruni, who translated many of Plato's works into Latin, avoided translating the *Republic* and avoided making it available to European audiences in part because of Plato's heretical views on women in politics (Bluestone 1987, 3–5). After Marcilio Ficino's translation of the *Republic* at the end of the fifteenth century, European scholars were finally able to read the text. Biases against the suggestion of women in leadership roles, however, did not allow for the work's interpretations to include serious discussion of feminist political ideals or even basic equality between the sexes (4–5). According to Bluestone, even the more recent nineteenth-century revival of Plato's works by German scholars, who claimed to appeal to a higher level of objectivity and a return to the original Greek texts, was unable to overcome their own more subtle but no less misogynistic resistance to the political legitimacy of women as rulers (4–5).

By the 1970s, a new generation of scholars that now included feminist philosophers had emerged; however, Bluestone reports that they were not in agreement regarding Plato's true intentions in the *Republic* (1987, 5–6). Feminist analyses stretch across a wide spectrum, from claiming Plato to be the forerunner of the twentieth-century feminist movement to condemning him as a predecessor of modern political thought ingrained with oppressive notions of patriarchy (5–10). For the purposes of this paper, two complementary works from opposing scholarly circles were chosen in an attempt to work through some of the main arguments surrounding Plato's *Republic* and feminism, with the goal of providing a more balanced approach to Belo's reliance on Vlastos (Belo 2009, 6).

One of the concerns with Belo's analysis is her acceptance of how Vlastos defines feminism narrowly in terms of striving for equality of individual rights for women, which relies on a liberal feminist foundation that is unable to reconcile non-rights-based discussions of women's agency when considering Plato's *Republic* (Vlastos 1994, 11–12). Feminist discourses today are not typically bound by such constraints and have benefited from the interaction of a multiplicity of perspectives, from radical feminisms to multicultural feminisms to postmodern feminisms. Not only does Belo's analysis of Plato's *Republic* appear to be limited in this respect; the range of possible interpretations of women's subjectivity in Averroës's thought her study considers is also limited, and therefore, Belo's examination needs to be reconsidered. To begin this process, Vlastos's main argument is presented before being critiqued through the lens of studies by Janet Farrell Smith and Monique Canto.

Vlastos begins his analysis with four general statements about Plato's views toward women and formulates the rest of the article as an expansion of these statements:

(1) In the ideal best society outlined in Books IV to VII of the *Republic* the position of women in its ruling elite, the so-called guardians, is unambiguously feminist. (2) In that same society the position of the great majority of its free women, composing its industrial and agricultural class, is unambiguously antifeminist. (3) In the alternative, second-best, society laid out in the *Laws*, the position of free women is a hybrid, feminist in some respects, antifeminist in others. (4) In his personal attitude to the women in his own contemporary Athens Plato is virulently antifeminist. (Vlastos 1994, 12)

Instead of directly addressing each of these statements, Vlastos selects the first as being the most important for arguing that Plato was a feminist because he considers the role of philosopher-queens in an ideal society as being far more important than misogynistic elements of Plato's personal life or what Plato wrote when referring to women in Athens (12). Vlastos is fascinated with what he sees in Plato's ideal society: that it rejects not just the ancient Greek worldview according to which women should not have political status but also the prevailing assumption that women are not capable of performing the same labor as men (14–15). Vlastos does investigate some of Plato's less flattering statements regarding women in Athenian society (469d, 431b–c, and 605d–e). He dismisses the importance of these statements by claiming that they are observations of Plato's contemporaries, and therefore inferior to the ideal society that replaces any of the actually existing socially constructed roles for women and men (15–18). Vlastos concludes that Plato should be considered an early feminist. What Belo takes away from Vlastos's argument is that "feminism is grounded in Socrates' moral teachings to the effect that virtue is not class-bound or gendered" (Belo 2009, 6). However, this point is not elaborated in Vlastos's article and a further investigation into other plausible interpretations would be beneficial for gaining a deeper understanding of women's multiple roles in Plato's *Republic*.

Belo states in her article that one of the key problems when analyzing Averroës's text is distinguishing between Averroës's own thoughts and ideas and those of Plato. Both Averroës's original Arabic text and Galen's paraphrase in Arabic have been lost, which creates a difficult task for contemporary translators who attempt to reconstruct Averroës's original Arabic meaning from the Hebrew translations and render it in a third language, such as English. Averroës does offer some guidance, according to Belo, by opening certain passages with "he said" (referring to Plato) and others with "we say," referring to Averroës's own understanding (5). Another important marker for distinguishing Averroës's thought as a philosopher from his role as commentator are the historical examples that he employs when wrestling with certain concepts. Belo approaches this task by locating the key passages that Vlastos references and then determining which passages Averroës in fact appears to endorse.

The first passage Belo analyzes is from Averroës's first treatise where he states that if the nature of men and women is the same, then they can perform the same function (artisan, guardian, or philosopher) in society, including the art of war (Belo 2009, 7; Averroës 1966, 164; I 52.29–54.18). According to Belo, Averroës concludes from his understanding (*naqūlu*) that men's and women's capabilities are different by a slight degree. It is possible for women, as a group or individually, to be more capable at certain tasks, and both women and men should serve the same functions for the state, even as priests (*imāma* and *imām*) (Belo 2009, 7–8; Averroës 1966, 164–65; I 53.1–54.18). Although Averroës does say men are more capable than women in general, Belo interprets his commentary as being supportive of a basic equality for women in his ideal state. It is significant for Belo that Averroës is taking a "non-essentialist" approach to the nature of women and men and is not assuming that women are of necessity intellectually or morally deficient, as is common in many rationalistic arguments in support of sex equality (10–11). A further example provided by Belo in her argument for Averroës's empirical support for equality between the sexes is his criticism of

the status and treatment of women in Muslim Spain because their role in procreation had become a burden on the state (9–11; 54). These examples show how Averroës links the virtuous city to his everyday lived experience.

Averroës retains Plato's conception of a communal life between women, men, and children; however, he begins each passage with "he said" (*qāla*) to clearly designate that it was Plato's idea rather than his own (Belo 2009, 10). It is unclear, according to Belo, whether Averroës might have endorsed communal living in his version of a virtuous city, and consulting Rosenthal's and Lerner's commentary on their translations of Averroës's text only further muddles the issue (10). Rosenthal states that it was only Plato's belief and not one that Averroës was likely to endorse, while Lerner claims the opposite was true and the fact that Averroës included this discussion at all was a sign he must have endorsed it on a philosophical level (10). It is clear from our earlier discussion that Belo privileges the translation and commentary of Rosenthal over Lerner, which affects her analysis. She concludes her argument with a comparison between the views toward women by Avicenna and Averroës in order to draw out the progressive nature of Averroës's political thought for his time (17–20). Further, Belo states that Averroës "considers women on par with men in essence and intellectual ability" (20); consequently, Averroës is seen as clearly supporting feminist ideals in keeping with Vlastos's definition of feminism as striving for equality of individual rights for women.

### Challenging a Liberal Feminist Reading

Janet Farrell Smith's article "Plato, Irony, and Equality" (1994) presents a very different appraisal of Plato's *Republic* as an early potentially feminist text. Smith begins her analysis by asking the question: What was Plato really trying to achieve in writing Books IV–VII of the *Republic*? Was he arguing for how to construct a society based on sex equality? Or was he providing a theoretical roadmap for implementing and supporting a just society? Although the answer to these questions may seem obvious to some, Smith is attempting to reorient the reader away from overemphasizing one of the means, sex equality, to achieving a just society, and thereby failing to consider the underlying aim of Plato project. There are three errors, according to Smith, that are commonly made by scholars when interpreting the writings of Plato. The first is the projection of contemporary meanings and cultural significance of concepts like "sex equality" into Plato's dialogues. The second is failing to recognize that Plato was not focusing on the social role of women and was indecisive towards women's role within the social hierarchy. The third error is when scholars overlook or misinterpret Plato's use of irony as a rhetorical device because of overly literal readings of the *Republic* (Smith 1994, 26–27).

The term "sex equality" as understood today is not a concept that would have been familiar to Plato. Smith reminds us as well that "Plato disdained democratic egalitarianism" to the extent that he would likely reject contemporary feminist concepts such as sex equality and, most pointedly, our modern understanding of the basis for a "just" or "fair" society (27). Smith argues that the contradictory statements made by Plato against the ability, nature, and virtue of women should not be dismissed as merely commentary on the Athenian society of his day (28–29). Instead, Plato is attempting to combat these negative characteristics of women in his ideal society as a way to enhance the overall virtue of the city without a clear pronouncement that women would, or should, hold equal status with equal responsibilities to men. Plato's recognition of the idea that women have the potential to function within society in the same roles as men is not the same as suggesting that women have the same right or innate ability, a distinct argument, which, as Smith argues, is being projected into the past by scholars such as Vlastos and Belo.



This observation leads to the second point Smith is making, namely that Plato's main argument in the *Republic* was not about the formation of a new society based on equality between the sexes or even one that promoted equal ability and virtue among women and men across multiple levels of social hierarchy (28–30). According to Smith, Plato's argument regarding the nature of women and the selection of philosopher rulers (454a, 454c, 455a, and 540c) is not sufficient to argue he supported sex equality but rather that he believed "there is no evidence that sex differences do affect civic practice" (31–32). Smith sums up her criticism by arguing that in describing the ideal society Plato focuses on what he views as the best that can be derived from women as individuals; however, he is not considering what he views as the best that can be derived from women as a group (33–37, 45–46). The elitist and aristocratic nature of Plato's references to men and women possessing similar natures or capacities should not be overlooked if we are to take seriously Vlastos' claim that Plato is an early feminist. It is interesting that Belo interprets Averroës's *Commentary on Plato's Republic* as referring not just to women as individuals but to women as a group (7–8; I 53.1–54.18). It appears that Averroës is able to escape Smith's second criticism based on his rational and empirical support for equality between men and women, especially given the significance of his leading statements regarding women as high priests in his (Islamic) ideal state.

The third point Smith is suggesting is that Plato's use of irony and rhetoric in the *Republic* raises doubts about the intentions behind his views on women and therefore puts into question whether he should be considered an early feminist (27, 29). Irony in Plato, according to Smith, is an instrument that allows for his more extreme or controversial recommendations to seem less radical to his Athenian audience (29–30). However, our sense of irony today is very different, and what was intended to make the audience laugh before a more serious proposition was presented in many cases appears to the modern reader as inconsistent or as though Plato was supporting claims that he knew his audience would never accept. Smith does acknowledge Plato's assertion that women should have the same basic opportunity as men to function in the highest roles in his ideal state. However, this equality extends only as far as it supports the moral supremacy of the state. It remains unclear if Plato believed that patriarchy should be eliminated in his ideal state (Smith 1994, 45–46). While Belo does not address Smith's work directly, I consider this last criticism to be less damaging for Belo's conclusion that Averroës's conception of an ideal state was not patriarchal because the Islamic idealism within Averroës's commentary does appear to be more genuine in its concern for equality, both in relation to Averroës's daily life and on an intellectual level. However, Belo's comparison between Avicenna and Averroës at the end of her article does raise questions as to how much Plato's rhetorical genius may have inadvertently transferred into Averroës's thought. It is plausible that Averroës was intentionally transferring Plato's mastery of irony into a new but no less misogynistic context.

In summary, there are three points to be taken away from Smith's analysis that raise doubts about Vlastos's approach and will require locating additional evidence to determine if Plato should be regarded as an early feminist. First, Smith points out that Vlastos and others who are arguing that Plato was a feminist are imposing contemporary meanings of concepts like gender equality onto Plato's texts without adequately addressing their applicability. Second, Plato only considered the social and moral status of women as a group to be equal to men insofar as this position was consistent with benefiting the society as a whole. Although this means some women could conceivably become guardians or a philosopher ruler, it does not guarantee that the status of women as a group would necessarily change significantly in relation to their status in the society Plato lived in. Third, Smith suggests that Plato's use of an ironic framing of controversial concepts dilutes many of his more progressive statements, positioning them potentially beyond the capacity of his main argument. Smith raises several doubts regarding the conclusions Vlastos draws and hence undermines

also Belo's reliance on Vlastos's argument. Ultimately, Smith's initial criticism strikes the hardest blow to Belo's argument. It is unclear if Belo would be willing to consider a nondemocratic and nonegalitarian version of sex equality as still feminist in nature. In order to attempt to find a resolution to this debate, an alternative definition of feminism is needed to shed light on whether Plato could have been an early feminist.

### **A Postmodern Feminist Reading of Plato**

Monique Canto's article "The Politics of Women's Bodies: Reflections on Plato" (1994) proceeds from a postmodern feminist position, which challenges the reader to rethink the aim of feminism by moving beyond arguments for equal rights. It also asks us to address a more practical question: How is Plato constructing a "political life" (Tuana 1994, 5; Canto 1994, 51)? Canto begins by deconstructing the concepts of "presence," "desire," "time," and "representation" of women's bodies in both Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* (49–50). In contrast to the three authors discussed in the previous section (Smith, Vlastos, and Belo), Canto acknowledges her biases and unapologetically accepts her positionality as a postmodernist feminist scholar, which in many cases will lead to radical or antihegemonic understandings of previously canonical categorizations. She argues that Plato's object of study should be viewed as "women's bodies" because it is women's bodies that constitute an ideal state in Plato's *Republic* and a just state in Plato's *Laws* (52–54, 57–64). Canto is moving one step ahead of Vlastos in her interpretation of how women are positioned in Plato's dialogues by suggesting a performative rather than a legalistic understanding of feminism as a necessary step in understanding Plato's subtle shift from the *Republic* to the *Laws* (64–65). In contrast with Belo's article, Canto takes a radical departure both from Belo's methodology of performing a historical reconstruction and from her underdeveloped theoretical orientation.

Canto begins with the concept of "difference," which can be understood as everything that inhibits the social, political, and moral development of a just state. One way to understand how an ideal state functions or what an ideal state would look like is to ask what is being left out of the state, i.e., what elements are not present, rather than focusing simply on the list of characteristics that make up the state. Canto views difference as key to understanding this relationship between what makes up an ideal state and what is being left out. Difference, according to Canto, can be largely understood as what Plato ascribed to "women's bodies" during his life in Athens, because it is this site that constitutes the lack of, or the opposite of, "political space," which is where men's bodies are able to move freely (50–51). It is in this sense of difference that Canto challenges the reader to define justice; not based on the past twenty-four hundred years of misogynistic beliefs, but rather on how feminists have and continue to reinterpret the past twenty-four hundred years of philosophy and how Plato should be read today. Instead of assuming Plato's readers occupy a position of passivity, Canto is demanding that they actively engage the text from their own positionality; for her this means an engagement in feminist politics understood as a "politics that could not exist without women" (50).

This concept could have enhanced Belo's analysis of Averroës, in which she reads the latter's commentary in basically the same frame of mind in which he appears to have written it, i.e., from a situated perspective that focuses on the present and is not encumbered by attempts to reconstitute a historical and cultural positionality from the distant past. Belo's argument could have benefited from explicitly acknowledging her positionality to the reader and therefore bringing the author into the text itself in the same way that Averroës is clearly visible in his political writings.

One of Canto's primary concerns is to determine whether difference is being located inside or outside of the state within Plato's thought (49, 51). Instead of being reinforced, difference is challenged and eroded away as Plato lays out his ideal state in books IV–VII of the *Republic*. According to Canto, women's bodies hold a central role in the development and maintenance of a state because they provide essential elements of "procreation" (continuation) and "desire" (pleasure and pain) to political life (50–51). Canto takes quite seriously Plato's idea that men and women are both capable of, and in practice should be, positioned throughout all levels of the ideal state. She argues that this connection between women's bodies and the reproduction (continuation) of the state originates from maintaining a semblance of difference while at the same time redefining the role of gender in society. Canto expands her discussion of difference by connecting it to the more familiar concepts of "otherness" and "othering" discussed in postmodernist or poststructuralist theory. Otherness is a word used to describe the differentiation of one grouping from another and the ability to define oneself, to define what is the same as one's own as that which is contrary to what is foreign, to what cannot be one's own. When Simone de Beauvoir discusses the fate of women through history, she notes that for men,

Once the subject seeks to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is nonetheless a necessity to him: he attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself. (Beauvoir 1989, 139)

Women's bodies are also central to the understanding of Plato's ideal state, according to Canto, because for Plato they function as two key obstacles for allowing an ideal state to emerge and for it to be maintained (50, 53). However, in the *Republic*, Plato is not referring to a state that he believed could plausibly exist within a historical reality; instead, he is arguing for a perfect state that, if it existed, would necessarily solve the fundamental problems of injustice (Canto 1994, 53, 55; *Republic* 458a–b). In order to overcome these fundamental problems that stem from procreation and desire (involving both the desiring subject and the object of desire), Plato calls for the necessity of holding all men, women, and children in common and doing away with parenthood and notions of a traditional family in favor of a communal life and communal education (457d). Both women and men should have the same opportunity to achieve the highest political status, experience the same educational upbringing, and transform procreation into a conscientious political act that is directed by the state, not individuals (Canto 1994, 54–55). To combat desires of other kinds, Plato calls for the banning of images and poetry that could lead to desiring or being desired. By this point, difference, or otherness, has been routed out and expelled from the ideal state. However, women's bodies still persist within the state: "Women, in the city whose political life they make possible, show themselves and look about them, openly and without reserve. Their body is a political body" (54). Canto enthusiastically follows Plato's account of the politicization of women's bodies; yet she is unable to end the discussion with the *Republic* because of its inability to be historicizable and brought into what she is immediately searching for: the "real" (54–56). In contrast, Averroës is able to bridge this gap by bringing in, according to Belo, both empirical and rational elements into his analysis. In a sense, Averroës incorporates the practical specificity that Plato achieved in the *Laws* by extending Plato's proposal for an ideal state in the *Republic* into what is arguably supportive of women's engagement in all forms of (Islamic) politics.

In Plato's *Laws*, according to Canto, everything changes because in his later life the philosopher makes a second, more concerted attempt at theorizing a way to overcome the injustice in a state with what Canto views as an early "feminist political manifesto" (Canto 1994, 50, 56–57; *Laws* 805d–807c). Plato's *Laws* differs from his *Republic* in that the dialogue between the three characters in *Laws* is primarily concerned with a historically grounded and temporally bounded just state (56). The metaphor that Plato uses the most

to describe a state in the *Laws* is a “well-compounded bowl” made from a “civic compound” that results from a mixing between the bodies of men and women in the state (57). The key distinction for Canto is that difference is not being pushed out of the city; instead, in Plato’s words, it is similar to “a piece of webbing, or any other woven article, it is not possible to make both warp and woof of the same materials” (*Laws* 5.734e; quoted in Canto 57). Canto sees the Athenian as trying to piece together a balance between the practical constraints of time and desire and the necessity of reproduction and representation that does not allow for the exclusion of women from politics in the state (58). The Athenian, for Canto, is necessarily obliged to institute marriage laws and maintain stability between the dual roles women have to both transition into and at the same time maintain their “otherness” as what already constitutes the political (60–61). Plato’s *Laws* offer, for Canto, a blueprint for how the ideal state in the *Republic* can come to terms with the reality of the human condition. It essentially means the reality of the need for women to be brought into the public arena of politics within the state as “a force of otherness” and at the same time come to terms with how the reproductive and representative needs of the state continue to persist (61, 64–65).

In short, Canto’s work demonstrates a different way from that of Belo’s to situate Plato within contemporary feminist discourse. There are two main points that distinguish their respective methodological approaches. First, Canto focuses on the centrality of women’s bodies in understanding women’s political agency in Plato’s ideal and potentially real states. Second, Canto analyzes “difference” or “otherness” in order to provide a more contextualized understanding of the power relationships constructed in Plato’s dialogues. This, in turn, affords the reader with a clearer connection from Plato’s ideas to the present. I argue that Canto’s approach to Plato should be applied to Averroës’s political thought because many of the current discourses surrounding Islamic feminism(s) value the centrality of women’s bodies and contextualization of “difference” or “otherness” (Badran 2009; Seedat 2013; Mahmood 2005, 2015; Tohidi 2003; Wadud 2006). While that is a project that goes beyond the scope of this article, the analysis of the works of Averroës, Belo, and Canto provides a foundation for the pursuit of such an endeavor.

The renewed interests in premodern Islamic philosophers, such as Averroës, by feminist and religious studies scholars is beneficial when it aids in locating a common place for meaningful dialogue on political legitimacy across religious and secular divides. Two contrasting attempts at formulating an Islamic feminist conception of women’s agency are located in the works of Valentine Moghadam and Anouar Majid (Moghadam 2002; Majid 1998). In the classic article “Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate,” Moghadam presents a theory of Islamic feminism grounded on her observation that feminist movements in Iran can be divided into two strands of thought, one in support and one against the idea of embracing feminism within a contemporary Islamic context. Moghadam’s analysis relies heavily on a common distinction made by liberal feminist scholars between Western (secular) feminisms and an Islamic (religious) feminism. In her conclusion, she is ultimately unwilling to concede that Islamic feminism could be grounded on something other than a liberal feminist conception of women’s agency. Ultimately, Moghadam places a liberal feminist conception of political legitimacy as a necessary precursor for articulating an Islamic feminist perspective. In contrast, argues that an Islamic feminist conception of political legitimacy should move beyond an individual rights-based model of agency that is consistent with “an Islamically progressive agenda—democratic, antipatriarchal, and anti-imperialist” (Majid 1998, 324). The political writings of Averroës offer a bridge between these perspectives by providing a historical basis for what are often viewed as thoroughly (post)modern and Western (read: secular) ideas. In order to appeal to a majority rather than a minority of Muslim societies, advocates of an Islamic feminist approach should consider looking back to premodern Islamic thought with a renewed eagerness in the hope of engaging

a wider audience. Averroës's *Commentary on Plato's Republic* is one example of a place where such a dialogue can begin.

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## Note

1. See Morag Buchan's *Women in Plato's Political Theory* (1999) for a detailed discussion of how the imposition of a modern conception of political subjectivity has led some scholars to overstate the significance of equality in an embodied natural ability at the expense of erasing the female soul. This does not pose the same problem for Averroës's conception of women's political agency, since Muslim scholars and theologians do not typically deny the existence of a distinct yet equal female soul.

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