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BEYOND THE LIMITS OF POPULAR FEMINISM: RE-READING BELL HOOKS THROUGH RACE, RELIGION, RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

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Abstract: This article critically examines the limitations of popular feminism through the perspectives of bell hooks, intersectionality, and religious epistemology. It argues that although contemporary popular feminism has increased the visibility of diverse women, it often continues to universalize the experiences of white, middle-class, and secular women. Particular attention is given to the epistemic position of pious women, who face a double marginalization: patriarchal constraints within religious traditions and exclusion from feminist legitimacy unless their experiences are expressed in secular terms. Drawing on Black feminist theory, Islamic feminism, feminist theology, and debates on hermeneutic authority, the study explores religion as both a social identity and a source of knowledge production. Methodologically, the research employs a critical literature review and document analysis. The findings demonstrate that feminist inclusivity requires not only representation but also the transformation of epistemic authority, citation practices, and interpretive legitimacy. A faith-sensitive and intersectional framework is proposed.

Keywords: bell hooks; Popular Feminism; Intersectionality; Islamic Feminism; Religious Epistemology.

Introduction

This article discusses the limits of popular feminism not only through representation, but also through the knowledge regimes produced in relation to religion and religious epistemology. The central claim is as follows: even when popular feminism occasionally renders race and class visible, it often codes religion either as a repressive residue or as a private domain that should remain outside public debate. Pious women therefore encounter a twofold pressure. On the one hand, patriarchal interpretations within religious traditions continue to operate. On the other hand, the feminist public sphere recognizes them as acceptable knowing subjects only to the extent that they are secularized. This double bind becomes even more visible in theology, religious interpretation, and public legitimacy. The issue is not only whether women are represented, but which languages of knowledge are treated as legitimate. Even when women's labor in religious interpretation becomes visible, its relation to the feminist order of knowledge is often treated as a secondary question (Asad, 1993; Dalaman, 2021; Demirkol, 2023).

The study therefore follows three research questions. First, why does popular feminism still present white, middle-class, and secular women's experience as the "general experience of women"? Second, how does the visibility of pious women and faith-based interpretive communities reveal the epistemic limits of this universalist claim? Third, what theoretical consequences do bell hooks's critical feminism and intersectionality produce for theology, religious epistemology, and interpretive authority? In answering these questions, the article deliberately avoids unverifiable quantitative narratives. Rather than relying on sensational percentages circulating in public discourse, publication counts of unclear provenance, or statistical generalizations whose page-level basis cannot be traced, it takes peer-reviewed journal articles and official institutional data as its evidentiary ground. The

argument therefore proceeds from a source-traceable basis of discussion rather than from an abundance of impressive but weakly grounded numbers (Akülkü, 2024; Phipps, 2019).

Studies on bell hooks in Turkey provide an important basis for discussing the limits of popular feminism. Yet most of these studies remain limited in considering hooks together with theology, religious interpretation, and the epistemic subjectivation of pious women. The same is true of the literature on intersectionality. Although the concept has gained theoretical visibility, its application to citation regimes, hermeneutic authority, and institutional legitimacy remains fragmented. This article aims to overcome that fragmentation by bringing Black feminist theory, Islamic feminism, women exegetes, and religious epistemology into the same analytical line of inquiry.

The body of work produced in intersectionality studies over the last three decades shows that the concept is not merely a label that places identities side by side. It offers a structural framework that can operate at the levels of theoretical application, institutional analysis, and epistemic critique. This literature also shows the extent to which the language of intersectionality can become flattened in popular discourse. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the critical meaning of intersectionality in the line of bell hooks, Collins, and Crenshaw, and its contemporary public uses (Cho et al., 2013; Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Methodologically, the study relies on a critical literature review and document analysis. Source selection was limited by three criteria: peer-reviewed journal or academic publisher status, direct relevance to the topic, and bibliographic traceability. The study therefore excludes unverifiable quantitative claims. It supports its theoretical claims through primary works and peer-reviewed literature, and its institutional claims through an official activity report. Page numbers in the text are retained only for verifiable documentary passages. General page ranges indicating entire articles are removed from in-text citations to avoid creating the impression of claim-specific page evidence.

Research objective and problem statement

bell hooks's feminist intervention does more than expand the language of inclusivity. More fundamentally, it renders visible the question of which women's experience is treated as normative for "womanhood." For hooks, feminism is meaningful insofar as it aims to end sexism and sexist exploitation. Yet that aim produces a constitutive contradiction when it rests only on the experience of privileged women. hooks's work therefore exposes the internal hierarchies of feminist theory. As the experiences of Black women, poor women, and women positioned far from institutional centers are rendered invisible, feminist theory begins to operate less as an emancipatory discourse than as a norm-setting language. Turkish assessments of hooks emphasize precisely this point: hooks's objection is directed less at men as such than at the blindness created by privilege within the feminist movement. Her thought should therefore be read not as an inclusive slogan, but as the structural critique of privileged forms of feminism (hooks, 1981; hooks, 2000; Işık, 2022; Bolat, 2023).

The significance of this critique lies in the fact that popular feminism often obscures the tension between universal language and selective representation. Public feminism, especially in social media, advertising, popular culture, and publishing, intensely produces a discourse of "including all women." Yet this discourse remains incomplete when it does not ask which women gain the possibility of speech, whose injury is heard more quickly, and which experience enters epistemic circulation. hooks's central contribution becomes clear here: the task is not merely to add more women to the feminist ranks, but to dismantle the central norm that defines the experience of womanhood. For this reason, hooks's corpus demands a transformation deeper than the quantitative expansion of representation. That transformation requires changing both conceptual language and the forms through which institutions produce knowledge (Işık, 2022; Collins, 1990; Akülkü, 2024).

The popularization of intersectionality does not mean that popular feminism has automatically become plural. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intervention showed that women's experiences cannot be read along a single axis. Yet in public circulation, the concept has at times been reduced to a simple marker of diversity. Intersectionality, by contrast, is an analytical framework that shows how women's experiences of inequality are produced through the mutually constitutive effects of race, class, gender, religion, citizenship, embodiment, and sexuality. It therefore raises not only the question of who

constitutes the feminist subject, but also the question of which omissions knowledge production systematically reproduces. Studies examining the reception of this concept in Turkey show that it has become increasingly visible in the academy in recent years, while its translation into institutional and epistemic levels remains limited (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Akülkü, 2024; Batu & Görmez, 2024).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse is decisive at this point. Mohanty shows that constructing the "Third World woman" as a homogeneous and passive category reveals that feminist discourse has not fully broken with colonial knowledge production. This objection becomes even more important when religion is under discussion. When pious women are represented as unmodernized figures waiting to be saved or as subjects unable to speak on their own behalf, feminist discourse reproduces a secular narrative of progress as a universal truth. Feminist critique then becomes a knowledge regime that not only diagnoses domination, but at times reproduces it. Intersectionality is therefore not an inventory in which identities are simply placed side by side. It is a critique of the norms that constitute the subject and of the hierarchical networks of knowledge that sustain those norms. Re-reading hooks in relation to religion and religious epistemology matters precisely here: the issue is not to add pious women to feminism after the fact, but to interrogate feminism's constitutive blind spot toward religion (Mohanty, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Dalaman, 2021).

The growth of intersectionality literature in Turkey is an important development, but this growth has two limits. First, the concept often remains at the theoretical level and is not sufficiently applied to institutional processes. Second, religion is frequently left at the margin of the discussion. Yet theology and religious interpretation are not only fields in which women experience victimization. They are also fields in which women produce knowledge. These fields should not be considered only in conflict with feminism, but also in a tense dialogue with it. Otherwise, the discourse of intersectionality is reduced to a secularized rhetoric of pluralism and loses its connection to hooks's critical legacy. The issue here is not to add pious women to theory, but to expose which forms of knowledge feminist theory excludes from the outset (Akülkü, 2024; Batu & Görmez, 2024; Demirkol, 2023).

What makes bell hooks's intervention important for the field of religion is that exclusion is not confined to race, class, and gender. Religious belonging can also become one of the invisible boundaries of feminist legitimacy. When pious women are transformed by public feminist language either into victims to be defended or into subjects who must be translated into a secular frame, their capacity to produce knowledge is obscured. For this reason, hooks's critique of inclusivity has constitutive significance for the visibility of women who become subjects within religious interpretation (hooks, 1981; hooks, 2000; Collins, 2000; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Methods for problem solving and validation

Popular feminism gains visibility within the neoliberal public sphere while also becoming commercialized. As Sarah Banet-Weiser shows, the discourse of empowerment has become a central element of the advertising industry, brand strategy, and affective consumption. Feminism can thereby be reduced from a political program aimed at transforming structural inequalities to a discourse of individual confidence, visible success, and self-love. Angela McRobbie reads this process as a postfeminist formation that appears to preserve feminism's public legitimacy while blunting its political force. Nancy Fraser similarly emphasizes that some demands of second-wave feminism have acquired an unexpected compatibility with neoliberal narratives of flexible labor and individual success. This literature explains why hooks did not simply demand a "more inclusive feminism." The problem concerns not only on whose behalf feminism speaks, but also the economic and cultural regime within which it circulates (Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009; Fraser, 2013).

Commercialization sometimes produces a selective aesthetic of diversity rather than expanding representation. Differences of race, body, religion, and class become visible in this aesthetic insofar as they support the inclusive image of the brand, but they do not move to the center of structural inequality. For pious women, the problem is even more complex. Popular feminism often

leaves women with headscarves, religious belonging, or conservative forms of life at the periphery insofar as they do not conform to the "sexy," "independent," and visibility-centered codes of empowerment discourse. Commercialized feminism therefore normalizes not only whiteness and class privilege, but also an ideal of secular publicity. From hooks's perspective, the selective character of empowerment rhetoric requires vigilance toward new forms of domination. As some women's visibility increases, other women's experience can become more silent (Bolat, 2023; Phipps, 2019; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

A critique of popular feminism does not mean that the feminist public sphere is wholly ineffective. On the contrary, public visibility has kept many issues on the agenda, including sexual violence, wage inequality, online harassment, and workplace discrimination. Yet this visibility often operates through an unequal distribution. Questions of whose experience becomes newsworthy, which language is recognized as legitimate, and whose speech is deemed "progressive" remain decisive. Pious women are often turned into objects requiring explanation rather than being taken seriously as epistemic subjects who establish their own interpretations. One of the problems of popular feminism is therefore not only that it excludes identities, but also that it hierarchizes legitimate forms of subjecthood. The relation between theory and media must consequently be treated not only as a politics of representation, but also as a politics of knowledge (hooks, 2000; Işık, 2022; Phipps, 2019).

The MeToo movement created a historical rupture in rendering sexual violence visible, yet the limits of that achievement have also been debated. Alison Phipps's analysis of "political whiteness" and "white woundedness" is especially important here. According to Phipps, public feminisms sometimes organize themselves around white women's victimhood, thereby relegating race, migration, police violence, colonialism, and economic precarity to secondary positions. This reading does not deny the significance of #MeToo. It asks, rather, around which subject feminist sensitivity in public circulation becomes organized. When combined with hooks's perspective, this debate shows that popular feminism not only leaves some women outside, but also generalizes the experience that remains at the center (Phipps, 2019; Ransby, 2018).

For pious women, the limit of MeToo and similar movements becomes visible in a different way. Sexual violence, institutional pressure, and patriarchal control are also highly real problems within pious communities. Yet when the voices of women who articulate these problems encounter the presuppositions of the secular public sphere, a double mechanism of selection often emerges. On the one hand, it is questioned whether their critique of religious authority speaks from within the tradition. On the other hand, the secular feminist sphere often regards that critique as legitimate only insofar as it is detached from its religious ties. The experience of pious women thus becomes visible either through intra-communal silence or under the obligation of secular translation. This condition clearly reveals the gap between popular feminism's claim to universality and its linguistic and cultural practices (Mahmood, 2005; Mir-Hosseini, 2013; Dalaman, 2021).

This discussion also shows why the problem of representation cannot be reduced to the axis of quantitative diversity. The issue is not only that more "different women" appear on feminist platforms, but also the frame within which that visibility is organized. If religious belonging is still coded as backward, problematic, or something to be overcome, a multicultural and multi-identity appearance does not itself produce equality. After #MeToo, the task before feminism is therefore not merely to collect more testimony, but to transform the frame within which testimonies are interpreted. The significance of hooks and Black feminist theory emerges here: without asking for which lives victimhood becomes politically readable, the language of justice remains internally limited (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000; Phipps, 2019).

The limits of popular feminism are produced not only in the media, but also in academic circulation and citation regimes. Which texts are treated as "core readings," which names as "introductory texts," and which theories as a "special field" determines the circulation of feminist knowledge. Selected studies on bell hooks and intersectionality in Turkey reveal two sides of this situation. On one side, there are works that foreground hooks's critical potential and diagnose the

blind spot of white feminism. On the other side, religious interpretation, theology, and the labor of women exegetes are discussed within a more separate cluster of literature. This division makes it harder to think of the same women as both feminist and religious knowledge producers. Academic circulation thus produces an indirect hierarchy by separating fields, even when it is not directly exclusionary (Işık, 2022; Bolat, 2023; Demirkol, 2023).

As shown in Table 1, selected studies published in Turkey on bell hooks, Black feminism, intersectionality, and Islamic feminism indicate an expansion of the literature. Yet the same table also shows disconnection across fields. Studies on bell hooks and Black feminism concentrate mainly on theoretical critique and problems of representation, whereas studies focused on theology, tafsir, and Islamic feminism gather around interpretation, authority, and religious knowledge production. In other words, the literature that discusses the racial and representational dimensions of feminism and the literature that discusses religious interpretation do not meet sufficiently around the same academic table. One of the article's main contributions is precisely to force these two literatures into conversation. The experience of pious women can be understood neither solely within the women's movement nor solely within theology. It is the joint product of intersecting regimes of knowledge (Akülkü, 2024; Demirkol, 2023; Demirayak, 2025).

One of the least discussed forms of exclusion in popular feminism is the obligation to translate the pious woman into public language. This obligation does not operate as an explicit ban, but as the condition of legitimate speech. When a pious woman articulates gender inequality, problems of authority, or institutional discrimination, she is often expected to background her own religious references and use a more secular, universally accepted language. The public sphere thereby remains apparently plural while producing a silent hierarchy over which languages count as directly intelligible and legitimate. This hierarchy determines not only what pious women say, but also how they are compelled to say it. Any discussion of feminist theory's relation to religion must render this pressure of translation visible. Domination does not always operate through silence. It can also operate by predefining the legitimate form of speech (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Asad, 1993).

The limits of popular feminism can be traced not only in media, but also in academic circulation. Bibliometric studies and new research on digital activism show that gender debates have entered broad circulation, while that circulation has not produced an equal epistemic distribution. Questions of which texts are foundational and which are secondary, which languages are translated and which remain local, should be understood as academic extensions of the visibility regime of popular feminism (Yardibi & Adalı, 2025; Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009; Fraser, 2013).

Table 1. bell hooks, Intersectionality, and Religion in Selected Turkish-Language Literature

Study	Year	Focus	Function in This Article
Işık	2022	bell hooks and the definition of feminism	Systematizes the critique of inclusivity in Turkish-language literature.
Bolat	2023	women left in the shadows	Makes the practical limits of universalist claims visible.
Akülkü	2024	intersectionality paradigm	Opens the articulation of identities at a theoretical level.
Demirkol	2023	women researchers and tafsir	Makes the female subject in religious interpretation visible.
Altuntaş	2023	women theologians and representation	Discusses hierarchical authority patterns in religious interpretation.

Source: Prepared on the basis of peer-reviewed Turkish-language articles.

In contemporary feminist debates, religion often has a double status: it is seen either as the most rigid carrier of patriarchy or as a form of belonging that should be withdrawn into the private sphere in the name of liberal pluralism. This binary frame does not fully grasp religion either as a constitutive element of social power or as a field of knowledge actively interpreted by women. Saba Mahmood's study of women's piety in Egypt is decisive precisely for this reason. Mahmood showed that the pious female subject is not merely a subject submitting to oppression, but one who becomes a subject within religious practices and forms an ethical self. This approach unsettles the presuppositions of secular feminist language toward religion. The question here is not only whether women are free, but how freedom is defined and which forms of subjectivity are recognized as legitimate (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Debates on Islamic feminism reveal one of the most important blind spots of popular feminism: the assumption that a critical relation to religious texts is possible only through secular externality. Yet the literature on Islamic feminism has shown that interpretive struggles carried out from within the Qur'an, hadith, and fiqh traditions can also provide theoretical and practical grounds for women's claims to equality. Margot Badran reads this line not as an eclectic effort to attach religion and feminism to each other by force, but as an intellectual struggle that takes both Islamic references and the principle of equality seriously. Ziba Mir-Hosseini treats women's search for equality not as a secondary field trapped between Islamic law and feminism, but as a site of struggle in which the tension between the two languages becomes productive. This literature unsettles the secular center of popular feminism because it shows that demands for equality cannot be built only through a secular vocabulary (Badran, 2009; Mir-Hosseini, 2013; Al-Sharmani, 2014).

Recent studies that think across the examples of Egypt, Iran, and Turkey show that there are transitions, articulations, and new generational interpretations between secular Muslim feminism and Islamic feminism rather than a sharp rupture. This makes it difficult to read feminism's position toward religion through binary oppositions. Critique from within religion and critique from outside religion sometimes diverge and sometimes intersect. What matters is to trace the hermeneutic and institutional consequences of this difference. If theology is read only as a field in which tradition is reproduced, the critical knowledge that women develop within it becomes invisible. Conversely, when feminist theory reads religion only as a repressive category, it cannot understand internal struggles over interpretation. Islamic feminism therefore shows that not an easy reconciliation, but a difficult and indispensable dialogue, is possible between the two fields (Dalaman, 2021; Al-Sharmani, 2014; Badran, 2011).

In the Turkish context, discussions of pious women's knowledge production require a careful and verifiable evidentiary basis. Sensational rates of increase or publication counts of uncertain provenance weaken rather than strengthen academic debate. By contrast, the 2023 activity report of the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (DIB) offers limited but traceable indicators regarding women's institutional visibility. According to the personnel table in the report, the institution employed 29,311 women and 110,874 men. Women therefore constituted approximately 20.9% of the total 140,185 personnel. These data show that women have a visible basis in institutional structures connected to religious services. Yet this visibility does not automatically mean that a critical, intersectional, or feminist epistemic transformation has occurred (DIB, 2023, p. 25).

Table 2 shows the following point: women's presence in religious services in Turkey is neither so limited that it can be ignored nor so balanced that it can independently confirm a claim of equal representation. The fact that women constitute approximately one fifth of personnel shows that the institutional gender distribution remains markedly male-dominated. The central question is what kind of knowledge regime this institutional visibility establishes. Women's interpretive labor must be assessed not only through numerical presence, but also together with visible female authorities, decision-making processes, citation practices, and the criteria of legitimacy in religious interpretation. The issue is therefore less quantity than the epistemic horizon to which institutional presence is attached (DIB, 2023, p. 25; Demirkol, 2023).

The Turkish literature on women's position in religious knowledge production points to a more sober conclusion. The visibility of women researchers in tafsir, hadith, and theology is increasing, but this increase is not homogeneous and its institutional effects vary by field. Demirkol's study of women researchers' contributions to tafsir shows that women become visible not only as objects of interpretation, but also as interpreting subjects. Altuntaş's work on women theologians shows that representation is not only a matter of visibility, but also a question of challenging hierarchical patterns of authority. These findings are important for interrogating popular feminism's presuppositions that construct pious women as passive figures (Demirkol, 2023; Altuntaş, 2023).

Debates centered on Egypt provide a distinctive laboratory for understanding how the religious female subject can be misread by secular feminist language. Secular feminist critiques such as those of Nawal El Saadawi have been highly influential in making visible the naked violence of patriarchy in the region. Yet pious women's interpretations that emerged in the same context show that this critique is not the only possible language. In debates on Islamic feminism, the central question is not whether women speak outside or inside religious tradition, but which form of speech is accepted as legitimate in public and academic spheres. In the Egyptian case, the distance between secular feminist discourse and pious interpretation points to the politics of translation in global feminism: some women's claims to equality can be translated easily into a universal language, whereas claims expressed through religious references require more explanation, more defense, and more legitimacy work. This condition shows that not only local patriarchies, but also transnational feminist knowledge networks, operate selectively (Ahmed, 1992; Hatem, 1998; Al-Sharmani, 2014).

The comparison between Turkey and Egypt also shows that the relation between religion and feminism cannot be read through a linear narrative of secularization. In both contexts, women relate to religious texts and institutional structures in different ways. They articulate demands for equality, justice, and interpretive right sometimes through secular legal language, sometimes through theological hermeneutics, and sometimes through a hybrid discourse that combines the two. The rigid distinction between "real feminism" and "religious womanhood" therefore does not rest on historical and sociological evidence. It is primarily a normative assumption. bell hooks's idea of coalition remains important for overcoming such normative distinctions. Coalition is born not from sameness, but from the will to make the demand for justice common across differences. To regard pious women's discourse as deficient because it remains within religion is a continuation of the privileged feminist gaze that hooks opposed (hooks, 2000; Dalaman, 2021; Demirayak, 2025).

This politics of translation can also be traced in academic literature. Feminist languages that enter English-language circulation more easily are not heard to the same degree as forms of knowledge production embedded in local languages, theology, or traditions of religious interpretation. This shows that pious women's intellectual labor occupies an unequal field not only in terms of content, but also in terms of its capacity for circulation. Discussions of religion and feminism should therefore ask not only which argument is more emancipatory, but also through which institutions an argument can circulate. Women writing in theology often produce knowledge that cannot reach the center of global feminist literature, but that transforms the local context in depth. Re-reading bell hooks in Turkey therefore also means making visible inequalities of translation, citation, and circulation (Mohanty, 1988; Demirkol, 2023; Altuntaş, 2023).

It is insufficient to explain the pious woman's knowledge position only through the question of representation. Recent studies on feminist Qur'anic hermeneutics, women theologians, and women's labor in tafsir show that the tradition of religious interpretation is not only a patriarchal inheritance. Women develop critical and constitutive interventions within this field. At the same time, these interventions face a twofold test because of intra-traditional resistance and secular feminist skepticism. The relation between religion and feminism is therefore too plural and contested to be reduced to the binary of rescue or rejection (Altuntaş, 2023; Karateke, 2025; Şaraldı, 2025; Ay, 2023; Şakar, 2024; Şola, 2021; Uydaş, 2023; al-Hibri, 1997; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002).

Table 2. Selected Indicators of Women's Institutional Visibility in Religious Services in the DIB 2023 Report

Indicator	Value	Interpretation / page
Total personnel	140,185	Institutional scale; DIB 2023, p. 25
Women personnel	29,311	Approximately 20.9%; DIB 2023, p. 25
Men personnel	110,874	Shows the asymmetry in the institutional gender distribution; DIB 2023, p. 25

Source: Prepared on the basis of data from the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2023 Administrative Activity Report.

bell hooks's feminist intervention is read in this article not as a matter of technical transfer, but as an epistemic critique that asks who speaks in the name of knowledge and with what authority. While hooks's thought exposes privileges within feminist discourse, it also renders visible how the distinction between legitimate subject and legitimate knowledge is constructed. This reading has particular importance for theology and religious interpretation. In this field, knowledge is not only an academic argument. It is a dense field of meaning regulated by tradition, authority, sacredness, and public legitimacy. The visibility of pious women as interpreting subjects therefore produces an epistemic problem broader than representation (hooks, 1981; hooks, 2000; Collins, 2000).

In the context of theology, the first task of feminist critique is to analytically distinguish interpretive struggles within religious tradition without coding that tradition as a monolithic and immutable field of patriarchy. Women exegetes, women theologians, and Islamic feminist thinkers are not actors who critique sacred texts only from the outside. They are also knowledge producers who reconstruct the relation among text, authority, and justice from within. Feminist theory must therefore evaluate religious interpretation not only as a source of oppression, but also as a field in which hermeneutic interventions against inequality are produced (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 2013).

The concept of religious epistemology constitutes the central conceptual node of the article. Religion is not only belief or identity. It is a regime of meaning that determines what counts as knowledge, who counts as an interpreter, which language is legitimate, and which critique is acceptable. Talal Asad's critique of the construction of religion as a universal category in modern Western thought is therefore decisive for feminist theory as well. When religion is read as a private residue outside the secular public sphere, pious women's knowledge production is subordinated from the beginning. This creates an epistemic problem that tests popular feminism's claim to inclusivity from within (Asad, 1993; Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

This problem is even more visible in the Turkish context. Women's labor in religious interpretation often has to pass through two different filters of legitimacy. Intra-traditional authorities may treat women's interpretation as exceptional or secondary. Secular feminist circles may find the same interpretation insufficiently emancipatory because of its religious references. The pious woman thus faces both the hierarchical reading of tradition and the translation pressure of secular publicity. This double position clearly shows why intersectionality must treat religion not as a secondary axis, but as a constitutive category (Crenshaw, 1991; Dalaman, 2021; Demirkol, 2023).

The digital public sphere both renders this tension visible and intensifies it. Social media and online feminist networks can bring pious women's interpretations into broader circulation. Yet the same media can also reduce complex hermeneutic debates to rapid labels and polarizing identity schemes. The visual, rapid, and affective communicative style of popular feminism can flatten issues such as religion, which require knowledge of context, text, and tradition. Digital visibility therefore does not itself produce epistemic justice. How knowledge circulates and which voices are recognized as credible must also be examined (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Phipps, 2019; Yardibi & Adalı, 2025).

The contribution of women theologians and women interpreters should be understood in this context not as an exceptional success of representation, but as a theoretical intervention that

transforms the hierarchy of knowledge. Feminist Qur'anic hermeneutics does not confine women's relation to sacred texts to the binary of passive acceptance or external rejection. It opens the historical, linguistic, and political conditions of interpretation to debate. This approach unsettles the hierarchical distinction by which male interpretation is regarded as "classical" and women's interpretation as a "special field." The issue is therefore not whether women exist within religious tradition, but the epistemic status through which that existence is recognized (Altuntaş, 2023; Karateke, 2025; Şaraldı, 2025; Şola, 2021; Uydaş, 2023).

Black feminist thought provides a strong methodological ground for this discussion. Collins's analysis of the relation among knowledge, positionality, and domination shows that objectivity is often constructed by rendering privileged positions invisible. When this approach is transferred to theology, the question of which interpretations are considered general and which are treated as special cases becomes central. Pious women's interpretations should be read not only as narratives of experience, but as theoretical resources that show the limits of dominant categories (Collins, 1990; Collins, 2000; Batu & Görmez, 2024).

Within this framework, a more coherent feminist approach should be considered at three levels. The first level is analytical: race, class, religion, and gender are not variables added to one another after the fact, but structures that participate simultaneously in the constitution of subject and knowledge. The second level is hermeneutic: women's contribution to the interpretation of religious texts should be accepted not as a special representational field, but as a constitutive component of meaning production. The third level is institutional: the visibility of women as interpreters, researchers, and decision-makers should be evaluated not only in terms of numerical representation, but also in terms of epistemic authority (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Akülkü, 2024).

This approach carries the problem of inclusivity in popular feminism to a deeper level. The issue is not merely to add more different women to the public sphere. It is to interrogate which knowledge is kept at the center, which religious references are treated with suspicion, and which forms of critique are accepted as legitimate. In this context, pious women are not a category of "diversity" added to feminism from the outside. They constitute an analytical position that tests feminism's own secular presuppositions (Mohanty, 1988; Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Consequently, the relation among theology, hermeneutic authority, and feminist epistemology is not merely a search for conciliatory synthesis. The central issue is to develop a theoretical sensitivity that preserves feminism's critique of religion while not treating religious knowledge production as irrational or secondary in advance. Such a sensitivity makes possible the critique of patriarchal religious interpretations and brings pious women's capacity to produce knowledge through their own concepts into the center of feminist theory (Badran, 2009; Mir-Hosseini, 2013; al-Hibri, 1997).

One of the article's central conclusions is that it is insufficient to discuss popular feminism's inclusivity problem only under the heading of representation. The problem cannot be solved by adding more different women to screens, platforms, or publication networks. Exclusion operates not only at the level of visibility, but also at the core of the order of knowledge. A more coherent feminist framework should therefore not treat religious belonging merely as an identity to be represented. It should analyze it as a structure that produces knowledge, authority, and public legitimacy (Asad, 1993; Mahmood, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991).

These conclusions are important not only for Turkey, but for all contexts that think theoretically about the relation between religion and feminism. If feminist theory establishes its position toward religion only through suspicion and distance, pious women are either pushed into silence or forced to defend their own concepts within secular translation. By contrast, a critical but faith-sensitive epistemic approach recognizes the legitimate place of religious knowledge production in feminist debate without absolutizing religion. Such an approach remains critical toward patriarchal interpretations while making visible the implicit exclusions of secular centrism (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Dalaman, 2021; Mir-Hosseini, 2013).

Of course, proposing a faith-sensitive and intersectional framework carries its own risks. The first risk is romanticizing religion as an intrinsically emancipatory field. Women's experiences of inequality can also be reproduced within religious institutions and traditions of interpretation. The second risk is turning intersectionality into merely terminological ornament. If institutions, citation regimes, and interpretive authorities do not change, the academic spread of the concept may not produce transformative effects. The third risk is homogenizing pious women's experience. Religious belonging does not produce a single type of subject. Very different political, theological, and feminist orientations can exist within the same tradition. For this reason, the framework proposed here does not aim to subordinate feminism to religion or to dissolve religion into feminist theory. Its aim is to make the presuppositions that both fields direct at each other more visible and more discussable (Mahmood, 2005; Mir-Hosseini, 2013; Akülkü, 2024).

bell hooks's idea of coalition provides the ethical basis of the faith-sensitive framework proposed in this article. Coalition is not a call for harmony that erases differences. It is a form of shared struggle in which conflict, discomfort, and asymmetry are not denied. The relation between pious women and secular feminists can be established only in this way. No genuine partnership can emerge when one side codes the other as "not yet sufficiently liberated" and the other codes the first as "alienated from religion." The precondition of coalition is to allow different lifeworlds to speak through their own concepts. This does not mean suspending critique. It means not imposing a single legitimate language of critique (hooks, 2000; Collins, 2000; Badran, 2011).

The institutional counterpart of an ethics of negotiation is intellectual durability. An institution, journal, research network, or civil society formation becomes durable insofar as it can carry different women's voices, critical objections, and religious diversity within itself. Structures that reward only consensus may produce order in the short term, but they produce silence and symbolic exclusion in the long term. The institutional success of a faith-sensitive and intersectional framework should therefore be measured not by how little conflict appears, but by how justly and productively conflict can be managed (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Akülkü, 2024; Phipps, 2019).

This approach is especially important for rethinking the relation between theology and feminist theory in Turkey because this field is intertwined with state institutions, debates on public legitimacy, and social polarization. A politics of coalition developed here must therefore transform not only horizontal solidarity among women, but also institutional language, research priorities, and citation habits. Otherwise, the visibility of pious women remains a "success story" and secular feminist critique remains an "external observation." The two fields do not transform one another (Demirkol, 2023; DIB, 2023, p. 25; Dalaman, 2021).

Application of the obtained results

The central dilemma of popular feminism is that it expands inclusivity at the level of representation while failing to transform the knowledge regime to the same extent. bell hooks's thought therefore remains contemporary: hooks offers a radical internal critique that asks not only on whose behalf feminism speaks, but whose knowledge it accepts as central and legitimate. By reading hooks's intervention together with Black feminist theory, Islamic feminism, and debates on religious epistemology, this article has shown that the limits of popular feminism are produced not only by whiteness or class privilege, but also by secular presuppositions toward religion.

The first finding of the study is that pious women do not remain on the periphery of feminist debate by accident. This position is linked to the epistemic order of popular feminism, which normalizes the secular subject. The second finding is that Islamic feminism and women's labor in religious interpretation offer powerful examples that challenge this order. The third finding is that theology and hermeneutic authority constitute a strategic field capable of transforming the debate not only at the theoretical level, but also at institutional and epistemic levels. Official institutional data show that women are visible in religious services. Yet this visibility cannot be assumed to have become equal epistemic authority (DIB, 2023, p. 25).

These results show that secular feminism cannot continue to leave religion as a secondary issue, and that religious institutions cannot continue without questioning traditional patterns that

restrict women as interpreting subjects. The meaning of re-reading bell hooks in the Turkish context becomes clear at this point: hooks should be evaluated not only as the author of an inclusive slogan, but as a thinker who calls for interrogating the knowledge regime, citation order, institutional legitimacy, and interpretive authority.

The relation between religious epistemology and feminist theory is not only a question of representation. Unless citation order, interpretive authority, institutional visibility, and public legitimacy are transformed together, the discourse of inclusivity can conceal epistemic inequality. A more coherent politics of coalition should therefore establish a field of discussion in which different languages of knowledge can transform one another without making secular and pious women identical.

Conclusion

The central impasse of popular feminism is that it expands inclusivity at the level of representation while failing, to the same degree, to transform the knowledge regime. Pious women are one of the clearest examples of this impasse because they confront patriarchal interpretations within religious traditions and secular feminist regimes of legitimacy at the same time. By reading bell hooks's theoretical intervention together with Black feminism, Islamic feminism, and debates on religious epistemology, this article has shown that this double exclusion is not only a cultural problem, but also an institutional and epistemic one.

For theology and religious interpretation, the central conclusion is clear: unless women's presence in the tradition of religious interpretation is recognized as constitutive knowledge production, and unless citation regimes, institutional visibility, and interpretive authority are transformed, the discourse of inclusivity will remain incomplete. A stronger framework must therefore treat intersectionality not only as a theoretical vocabulary, but as an applied epistemic ethic extending from publication networks to digital public debates, from institutional decision-making mechanisms to hermeneutic authority.

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ТАНЫМАЛ ФЕМИНИЗМНІҢ ШЕГІНЕН ТЫС: НӘСІЛ, ДІН, ДІНИ ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЯ ЖӘНЕ ИНТЕРСЕКЦИОНАЛДЫЛЫҚ АРҚЫЛЫ bell hooks-ты қайта оқу

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала bell hooks, интерсекционалдылық және діни эпистемология тұрғысынан танымал феминизмнің шектеулерін сыни түрде талдайды. Ол қазіргі поп-феминизм әртүрлі әйелдердің көрінуін арттырғанымен, көбіне ақ нәсілді, орта тап және зайырлы әйелдердің тәжірибесін әмбебаптандыратынын дәлелдейді. Діни сенімі бар әйелдердің эпистемикалық жағдайына ерекше назар аударылады: олар діни дәстүр ішіндегі

патриархалдық шектеулер мен феминистік легитимділіктен шеттетілу сияқты қос маргинализацияға ұшырайды, әсіресе олардың тәжірибесі зайырлы тілде берілмеген жағдайда. Қара феминистік теория, ислам феминизмі, феминистік теология және герменевтикалық билік туралы пікірталастарға сүйене отырып, дін әлеуметтік идентичность әрі білім өндірудің көзі ретінде қарастырылады. Әдіснамалық тұрғыдан зерттеу критикалық әдеби шолу мен құжаттық талдауға негізделген. Нәтижелер феминистік инклюзивтілік тек өкілдікпен шектелмей, эпистемикалық билікті, дәйексөздік тәжірибені және интерпретациялық легитимділікті өзгертуді талап ететінін көрсетеді. Сенімге сезімтал интерсекциялық рамка ұсынылады.

Түйін сөздер: bell hooks; танымал феминизм; интерсекционалдылық; ислам феминизмі; діни эпистемология.

ЗА ПРЕДЕЛАМИ ГРАНИЦ ПОПУЛЯРНОГО ФЕМИНИЗМА: ПЕРЕЧИТЫВАЯ bell hooks ЧЕРЕЗ ПРИЗМУ РАСЫ, РЕЛИГИИ, РЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИИ И ИНТЕРСЕКЦИОНАЛЬНОСТИ

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Аннотация. Данная статья критически анализирует ограничения популярного феминизма через перспективы bell hooks, интерсекциональности и религиозной эпистемологии. Утверждается, что хотя современный поп-феминизм усилил видимость разнообразных женщин, он часто универсализирует опыт белых, женщин среднего класса и светских женщин. Особое внимание уделяется эпистемической позиции верующих женщин, сталкивающихся с двойной маргинализацией: патриархальными ограничениями внутри религиозных традиций и исключением из феминистской легитимности, если их опыт не выражается в светских терминах. Опираясь на теорию чёрного феминизма, исламский феминизм, феминистскую теологию и дискуссии о герменевтической власти, исследование рассматривает религию как социальную идентичность и источник производства знания. Методологически используется критический обзор литературы и анализ документов. Результаты показывают, что феминистская инклюзивность требует трансформации эпистемической власти, практик цитирования и интерпретационной легитимности, а не только представительства. Предлагается интерсекциональная и учитывающая веру рамка.

Ключевые слова: bell hooks; популярный феминизм; интерсекциональность; исламский феминизм; религиозная эпистемология.