

Islam, women, and equality (part II)

Asma Barlas

(The first part of this essay, which is an edited and amended version of a talk I gave at Ithaca College, was published on April 8.)

I raise two sets of questions in my book as a way to flesh out the Qur'an's position on equality. First, is the Qur'an a patriarchal or misogynistic text? When I ask this question, "I am asking whether it represents God as Father/male or teaches that God has a special relationship with males or that males embody divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean, or sinful. Further, does it teach that rule by the father/husband is divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's Rule, as religious and traditional patriarchies claim?"

Alternatively, does the Qur'an advocate gender differentiation, dualisms, or inequality on the basis of sexual (biological) differences between women and men? In other words, does it privilege men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treat man as the Self . . . and woman as the Other, or view women and men as binary opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do?"

Second, I ask whether we can read the Qur'an for liberation. When I ask this question, "I am asking whether its teachings about God as well as about human creation, ontology, sexuality, and marital relationships challenge sexual inequality and patriarchy. Alternatively, do the teachings of the Qur'an allow us to theorize the equality, sameness, similarity, or equivalence, as the context demands, of women and men?" (Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women," in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of Islam*: University of Texas Press, 2002: 1).

As is obvious, these questions presuppose a particular view of patriarchy and in passing I should mention that no one until now had applied a definition of patriarchy to read the Qur'an even though, as I noted earlier, many Muslims regularly condemn Islam as a patriarchal religion.

"I define patriarchy in both a narrow (specific) and a broad (universal) sense in order to make the definition as comprehensive as possible. Narrowly defined, patriarchy is a historically specific mode of rule by fathers that, in its religious and traditional forms, assumes a real as well as symbolic continuum between a patriarchalized view of God as Father/male, and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband's claim to rule over his wife and children. I apply this definition in reading the Qur'an because the Qur'an was revealed in the context of a traditional patriarchy, and my aim is to see if it endorsed this mode of patriarchy by representing God as Father or by representing the father or husband as ruler over his wife and children.

Since the Qur'an's teachings are universal and since father's rule has reconstituted itself, I also define patriarchy more broadly, as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by 'transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the 'Other'" (Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984: 90. I should note

that in her later work, Eisenstein does clarify that difference doesn't mean inequality, which is a crucial point to which I will return).

Using this definition, I show that it is possible “to answer the first set of questions—is the Qur'an a patriarchal or misogynistic text—in the negative, while [answering...] the second—can the Qur'an be a source for women's liberation—in the affirmative”(Barlas, p. 2)

To begin with, the Qur'an does not represent God as Father or male; indeed, it explicitly forbids sacralizing God as Father or using similitude for God. Nor does it sacralize fathers or fatherhood. It does recognize that in historically existing patriarchies, men are the locus of authority and it does address patriarchies, but addressing a patriarchy is not the same as condoning or advocating one and indeed, the Qur'an repeatedly says that “following the ways of the father” has prevented people from the path of God.

My reading of the Qur'anic accounts of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad (pbuh), also suggests an inherent conflict between monotheism and patriarchy inasmuch as the latter sacralizes men and their authority over women and children, which the Qur'an does not do.

Thus, contrary to what many Muslims claim, the Qur'an does not establish men as ontologically superior to women or as rulers over them; rather, it designates women and men each other's “guides” (*awliya*) and establishes love and mutuality as the basis of marriage. Moreover, in Islam sexual equality is ontological in that the Qur'an teaches that God created humans from a single self (*nafs*). It does not privilege the man's creation or endow him with attributes or faculties not given to the woman. Rather, humans “manifest *the whole*” (Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, Albany: SUNY, 1992, p. 43; her emphasis).

The Qur'an also does not define men and women as opposites, or portray women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal. In fact, it does not even associate sex with gender; thus, while the Qur'an recognizes biological differences, it does not assign them any gender symbolism making it difficult to derive a theory of sexual and gender inequality from its teachings. The Qur'an also does not link women and men to specific gender roles. There is not a single verse that suggests that men's gender roles are a function of their biology, or that biological differences between men and women make them unequal.

Therefore, while the Qur'an does treat women and men differently with respect to some issues this doesn't mean that it establishes them as unequal. For one thing, difference in itself does not imply inequality. For another, the Qur'an does not tie its different treatment of women and men to any claims about biological superiority or inferiority.

The *only* basis on which Islam does distinguish between human beings is on the basis of their moral praxis...; as Sachiko Murata (p. 44) says it “distinguishes between those who have faith and those who do not: the 'believers' and the 'unbelievers.' In all the perspectives of Islamic life and thought people are separated into groups according to the degree to which they fulfill the purpose of life.”

It is not just on the basis of such teachings that I describe the Qur'an as antipatriarchal, but also on the basis of the claim that the antipatriarchal nature of Qur'anic epistemology flows from Islamic conceptualizations of God. This part of my argument maintains that since there is an intrinsic relationship between God Being's and God's Speech, we need to connect them, which means we need to base our readings of the Qur'an in our understanding of God.

For instance, the doctrine of *Tawhid* maintains that God is One and God's sovereignty/rule is indivisible. To my mind, this means that we should not read the Qur'an as designating men as rulers over women, or as intermediaries between God and women, since this constitutes *shirk*. Similarly, the Qur'an teaches that God is Just and never does *zulm* to people (*zulm*, in the Qur'anic context, means transgressing against another's rights). As such, I believe God's Speech also cannot teach transgression against the rights of humans. Since patriarchies do transgress against women's rights by oppressing them, I argue that the Qur'an cannot possibly endorse them and we should read its provisions with this idea in mind. Likewise, the Qur'an teaches that God is unrepresentable; as such, linguistic references to God as "He" should be seen as limitations of human language and not accurate statements about God's Reality.

If we apply such criteria to read the Qur'an and also read it for its best meanings and as a thematic whole, privileging its clear verses over its allegorical, as the Qur'an itself recommends, then we arrive at an interpretation that captures the radically egalitarian nature of its teachings. (To be concluded next time.)