

## The Qur'an, Sexual Equality, and Feminism

University of Toronto, January 12, 2004

Asma Barlas

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I'm very happy to be here tonight; as you know, this panel was scheduled for last April and I'm so glad that Margaret McMillan and Toronto University persevered in their efforts to reschedule it.

The title of my presentation is "The Qur'an, Sexual Equality, and Feminism" and I'm going to begin where Margot Badran has just left off: by sharing my perspective on feminism and why I don't call myself a feminist even if my work can be seen as an articulation of Islamic feminism.

As Margot has defined it, Islamic feminism is a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks *the practice* of rights and justice for *all* human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.

If *this* is Islamic feminism, then clearly, I *am* an Islamic feminist. Indeed, if this is Islamic feminism, one would assume that *all* practising Muslims would be Islamic feminists since we all read the same Qur'an. But as we know not all Muslims are Islamic in the sense in which Margot means, and not all Muslims read the Qur'an in the same way.

Muslim feminists, for instance, derive their mandate not from the Qur'an but from the conviction that Islam is a patriarchal and misogynist religion that "professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality and puts a sacred stamp [onto] female subservience." These are the words of the noted Moroccan feminist, Fatima Mernissi<sup>1</sup> and she's certainly not alone in holding such views. Muslim feminists almost universally consider Islam oppressive because they view God "himself" as being misogynistic.

It shouldn't therefore surprise us that most Muslim feminists don't believe in a God and nor do they find it meaningful to engage the Qur'an, or even to read it. Of course this doesn't keep many of them from making all sorts of wrong claims about it. For instance, Nawal el Sadawi, the well-known Egyptian novelist, once wrote that the Qur'an advocates stoning to death for adultery which it doesn't. (In fact the Qur'an doesn't prescribe stoning in *any* context.)

It is not just this sort of ignorance that I find problematic; it is also the fact that Muslim feminists habitually confuse the Qur'an with its patriarchal readings or, as I like to say, *misreadings*. I find this particularly ironic, given feminist theorizing on language and interpretation which, one would think, would lead them to contest oppressive readings of the Qur'an rather than taking them as the only authentic readings of the scripture. Of course, to do that, one would have to be invested in the idea of a God beyond gender and sexual partisanship as well as in the Qur'an but, as I've just said, Muslim feminists are not.

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<sup>1</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, London: Zed, 1996: 13-14.

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So, in a sense, Muslim feminism is the antithesis of Islamic feminism and unfortunately, it is Muslim feminism, not Islamic feminism, that Muslim communities are most familiar with. And, it is Muslim feminism that most Muslims are suspicious of, for good reasons

From what I've said, it should be clear, then, that Muslim feminism is completely at odds with the sort of work I am interested in doing, which is to argue on behalf of women's rights and sexual equality from within a Qur'anic framework.

For the term Islamic feminism to acquire salience, we will need to learn to distinguish between Islam and Muslims as well as between different feminisms. Until we do, there are many Muslim women, like myself, who will resist the label feminist because of what it currently symbolizes.

Having said that, I want to acknowledge the importance of feminist theorizing, specially about patriarchy from which I've learned a great deal. I also consider Margot's work to be fundamentally important in theorizing Islamic feminism but I do wonder if we should clarify what is at stake in labeling the Qur'anic worldview she speaks of as necessarily *feminist*, rather than Qur'anic. Perhaps we can pursue this issue in the Q&A session.

I know this is a very sketchy introduction to a complex topic but the focus of my talk really is the Qur'an's position on sexual equality and patriarchy and I'm going to devote the rest of the time allocated to me to talk about this position as I've analyzed it in my book, "Believing Women."

Since Margot and I would like this session to be as much of a dialogue as possible, I'm only going to touch on the salient aspects of my argument; so I want to apologize in advance if some part of this summary sounds too simple-minded and if you have any questions, I'd be happy to try and address them at the end.

### **"Believing Women"**

One of my objectives in writing this book was to challenge both conservative and feminist readings of Islam as a religious patriarchy and one of the claims I make is that we can read the Qur'an in liberatory ways; in fact, I go further and claim that the Qur'an is an antipatriarchal text.

I know many people, including feminists, are put off by this claim but I make it on the basis of a scrupulous reading of the Qur'an's teachings on a wide range of issues, from the nature of God to human creation, ontology, sexuality and marital relationships.

I also make this claim based on a very comprehensive definition of patriarchy that encompasses both its traditional/ religious and its modern/ secular forms.

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Historically, religious patriarchy was a form of rule by the father that derived its legitimacy from re-presentations of God as Father and of the father/ husband as sovereign over wives and children. In other words, God was sovereign over man and man was sovereign over women.

I apply this definition in reading the Qur'an because the Qur'an was revealed to a traditional patriarchy, and my aim is to see if it endorses this mode of male authority by representing God as Father/ male or by teaching that God has a special relationship with males or that rule by the father/ husband is divinely ordained and an earthly continuation of God's Rule.

Additionally, my aim is to determine whether the Qur'an teaches that males embody divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean, or sinful, as religious and traditional patriarchies have claimed.

However, as we know, this form of patriarchy has been overtaken and in our own day and age, male privilege has acquired a more nuanced and secular form. So, I also use another definition, offered by my colleague Zillah Eisenstein, who defines patriarchy 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.'"<sup>2</sup>

I apply this definition in reading the Qur'an because the Qur'an is universal and its teachings are applicable today and my aim is to see if it endorses modern forms of male authority by referring to or by advocating gender dualisms, differentiations, or inequalities on the basis of biological differences between women and men.

Specifically, I ask whether the Qur'an privileges men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treats man as the Self and woman as the Other, or views women and men as opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do.

In a nut-shell, my argument is that the Qur'an does not advocate traditional patriarchy because, to begin with, it does not represent God as Father or male and in fact it explicitly forbids sacralizing God as Father or using any sort of similitude for God.

It also does not render fathers or fatherhood sacred. In fact, its teachings suggest that there is a natural conflict between patriarchy and monotheism inasmuch as patriarchy treats men as sovereign whereas monotheism treats God as the only sovereign.

I should say, however, that the Qur'an does recognize that in historically existing patriarchies, men are the locus of authority and it does address men living in these

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<sup>2</sup> Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984: 90.

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patriarchies, but addressing men is not the same as condoning or advocating patriarchy. To the contrary, the Qur'an repeatedly warns that "following the ways of the father" has prevented people from the path of God. To my mind, there is no clearer way to define patriarchy than by referring to the ways of the father, which we can interpret narrowly as rule by the father or more broadly as tradition.

The Qur'an also doesn't teach that men are ontologically superior to women or are entitled to rule over them or even to be heads of the household in the sense in which they were in traditional patriarchies. To the contrary, it designates women and men as each other's "guides" (*awliya*) and establishes love and mutuality (*sukun*) as the basis of marriage.

I also contend that in Islam sexual equality is ontological in that the Qur'an teaches that God created humans from a single self (*nafs*); as Riffat Hassan and Amina Wadud have pointed out, there is no mention that God created the *nafs* of the man before that of the woman. In other words, the Qur'an does not prioritize man's creation over woman's.

Nor does the Qur'an endow men with attributes or faculties not given to women. Indeed, it does not define men and women in terms of masculine or feminine traits. Rather, it takes humans to "manifest *the whole*"<sup>3</sup>

I believe the Qur'an also does not advocate modern forms of patriarchy because it does not associate sex with gender. That is to say, while the Qur'an recognizes biological differences, it does not assign these differences any gender symbolism.

For instance, the Qur'an also does not link women and men to a specific division of labor (or 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.

Now it is true that the Qur'an treats women and men differently with respect to some issues, but this doesn't mean that it establishes *them* as being unequal. There are no verses that tell us that men and women are opposites, or that women are like lesser or defective men or that the two sexes are incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the tradition of modern misogyny.

I should also point out two other things. First, differences in themselves do not necessarily imply inequality. This is a feminist insight that I find very useful. Secondly, the Qur'an does not tie its different treatment of women and men to any claims about biological superiority or inferiority.

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<sup>3</sup> Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, Albany: SUNY, 1992, p. 43; her emphasis.

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So, strictly speaking, we cannot derive a theory of gender inequality from its teaching since the Qur'an does not treat gender as a defining or constitutive category.

The Qur'an's position on sexuality also is revolutionary in that it suggests that women and men have the same sexual natures; it therefore doesn't ascribe a particular type of sexual behavior, or drive, or identity to men or women.

The Qur'an also acknowledges the importance of sexual desire and the need for its fulfillment, albeit within the framework of a moral sexual praxis whose standards are virtually identical for men and women.

In the end, the *only* basis on which Islam distinguishes between human beings is on the basis of their moral praxis...; as Sachiko Murata<sup>4</sup> 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."

This, then, is my reading of the Qur'an on the basis of which I contend that the Qur'an opposes patriarchy and supports equality.

I should note that I arrive at this reading not only by analyzing the Qur'an's verses, but also by examining what I call Qur'anic epistemology, in particular its conceptualizations of God. In Islam, God is the Truth and the source of Truth which is why I believe that all readings of the Qur'an must begin with a sound theological understanding of God. As I point out in my book, there are many signs of God's self-disclosure in the Qur'an which can provide hermeneutic keys for reading and understanding the Qur'an itself.

For instance, the Qur'an teaches that God is one and God's sovereignty is indivisible; this is the doctrine of *Tawhid* or divine unity. To my mind, this suggests that we should not read the Qur'an as designating men as rulers over women or as intermediaries between God and women, because this leads to male worship, which constitutes a form of *shirk*, a violation of the cardinal tenet of *Tawhid*.

Similarly, the Qur'an teaches that God is Just and never does *zulm* to people (*zulm*, in the Qur'anic context, means transgressing against their rights). As such, I believe that we also should not read the Qur'an as allowing men to transgress against women's rights which happens in patriarchies. In fact, I believe this is another reason that the Qur'an doesn't sanction patriarchies, because they commit *zulm* against women.

The Qur'an also tells us that God is beyond gender and is unrepresentable; as such, I believe we should view masculinist references to God (as "He") as bad linguistic conventions and not as accurate statements about the nature of divine being. This is an

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4 Murata, *Tao of Islam*, p. 44

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important point because, as many feminists point out, men legitimize their power by representing God as male.

I should clarify that I arrive at this reading by using a method I derive from the Qur'an itself. In particular, the Qur'an instructs us to read it for its best meanings and as a thematic and hermeneutic whole rather than piecemeal or in a selective or decontextualized way. It also tells us to privilege its clear verses over its allegorical ones and not to seek means for discord by looking for hidden meanings in it.

Applying all these criteria to read the Qur'an yields a quite different interpretation of it than the dominant ones and confirms that Islam is not a religious patriarchy and that its teachings can become the basis for theorizing the equality, sameness, similarity, or equivalence of women and men, depending on the context.

Of course, if my reading is correct, the question is why haven't Muslims read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal and liberatory text? This is the question with which I actually begin my book and this is the question with which I would like to end my talk.

### **Interpreting Islam**

Part of my intent in writing *"Believing Women"* was to show that what we read the Qur'an to be saying depends on who reads it, how, and in what particular contexts.

My own view is that the reason Muslims historically have failed to read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal text has to do with who has read it (basically men), the contexts in which they have read it (basically patriarchal), and the method by which they have read it (basically one that ignores the hermeneutic and theological principles that the Qur'an suggests for its own reading).

I therefore begin my book by making visible the relationship between authority and knowledge, texts and the extratextual contexts in which we read them, and between method, meaning, and gender, though I don't believe that there is a fixed relationship between gender and reading (after all, most women have been socialized into accepting men's readings as authentic).

To the extent that hermeneutical and existential questions are connected, we will need to reform the structure of religious authority and knowledge as they exist in Muslim societies today if we are to arrive at the best meanings of the Qur'an. After all, we don't read texts in a vacuum and we don't produce religious knowledge in a vacuum. Unless we can restructure the contexts in which we read the Qur'an and produce religious knowledge, we will not be able to challenge sexist and patriarchal readings of it.

This is, of course, easier said than done and, at this point, people invariably ask me how we can bring about change and reform in our communities. And at this point, I invariably say that we need to work collectively to break new intellectual ground and be

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willing to take the risks that come with such an enterprise. However, as I argue in the conclusion of my book: “we will be unable to change anything unless, as the Qur’an says, we begin by changing what is in our own hearts and by opening them to the truth. As [Abdolkarim] Soroush so exquisitely puts it, the “stunning beauty of the truth . . . lies beyond the veil of habits,” and too many of us are enmeshed in this veil to see it.