

Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Women's Liberation
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I would like to congratulate the Islamic Council, especially Abdennur Prado, for organizing this International Congress on Islamic Feminism and to thank them for inviting me to speak at such an historic event. I am truly honored to be here.

I've been asked to share my work on the Qur'an, and I will do so with the intent of demonstrating a connection between a Qur'anic hermeneutics and Muslim women's liberation. Specifically, I will argue that Muslims can and indeed must read the Qur'an as a liberatory and antipatriarchal text, and I will also show why one doesn't have to be a woman, or a feminist, to read it as such.

Admittedly, these are audacious and perhaps even counter-factual claims to make given the reputation Islam has acquired as a misogynistic religion because of how women are treated in most Muslim societies. As we know, at best they are regarded as second-class citizens and, at worst, they are openly persecuted.

I don't deny that the discriminatory treatment of women in many Muslim has a great deal to do with how Muslims practice Islam. After all, it was in the name of Islam that the Taliban victimized women, that the Saudi monarchy doesn't let them drive cars, and that a Pakistani man feels that he can kill his daughter in the name of family honor.

I also don't deny that the Qur'an can be read as discriminating against women or that "the enveloping maleness" of religious texts creates problems for them or that the images of the woman in the Muslim unconsciousness are indeed misogynistic.

But, I do look at my own life and that of other Muslims and ask if these lives mirror the Qur'an's teachings and if Muslims and Islam are one and the same, and I am forced to conclude that they are not. That is to say, not everything a Muslim does is Islamic, much less Qur'anic.

I also question whether the problem with the Taliban, the Saudis and the Pakistani man isn't that they are choosing to interpret Islam in a particular way that allows them to justify their own misogyny. In other words, I ask if the Qur'an can be read in more than one way and I'm obliged to concede that it can.

I also ask if the Qur'an is the same as its exegesis and I am led to conclude that it is not. Indeed, Muslim theology and the Qur'an itself make a distinction between divine discourse and its interpretations.

However, just because we can read the Qur'an in more than one way doesn't mean that every reading is necessarily correct, even if the majority holds it to be so. We have only to recall that most people in the world once supported slavery and even today, a majority believes that women are innately inferior to men.

If we simply followed the majority, there would be no meaningful change in the world and religions would not have been able to emerge in certain social contexts.

So, then, how do I explain the oppression of Muslim women and how do I approach Islam? Let me answer this through a series of propositions.

First, Islam is not the same as Muslims, just as Spaniards are not the same as Spain and Christians aren't the same as Christianity. Of course, there are deep connections between them, but they are not identical or interchangeable.

Second, sexual inequality can be explained in terms not just of religion, but also of the nature of the state and political-economy, cultural practices that may have nothing to do with religion, the history of a given society, social class, and most of all, the system of patriarchy about which I will say more in a few minutes.

Even where we can ascribe sexual inequality and oppression to religion, the reality is that religious knowledge is not a pre-existing ontological fact; it is a social construct by which I mean that someone somewhere has to create it by means of specific methodologies and in specific historical contexts.

Today, we associate this insight with post-modernism but, among Muslims, this view was articulated as early as the 11th century by the famous theologian, Muhammad al-Ghazali, who argued that religious knowledge was historically grounded and was thus neither sacred and nor universal.

Tradition, too, he said, was a selective reconstruction of history that necessitated making certain choices and not others. On this basis, al-Ghazali challenged the idea that any interpretive school could a priori claim to know the truth which, he believed, could only be arrived at by means of reasoning and through a dialogue.

In the spirit of both, he urged exegetes to develop a set of methodological criteria that could allow them to judge between the legitimacy of different readings of the Qur'an. Unfortunately, however, a millennium later Muslims have yet to take up his challenge in a serious or systematic way.

Even so, my point in mentioning al-Ghazali is that Muslims have historically recognized the relationship between religious knowledge and the means of its construction even if many of them like to deny it today.

My own position, therefore, is that what Muslims read the Qur'an to be saying depends partly on how they read it and that different readings of the same text yield "fundamentally different Islams" for women as Leila Ahmed has argued.¹²

So, even though I don't believe that we can explain Muslim women's oppression solely in terms of the Qur'an, I do believe that liberatory readings of scripture can go a long way in challenging the abuse of religion to oppress them.

Here I should also mention that the reason certain readings of the Qur'an—in particular, antiwomen and patriarchal readings—are dominant among Muslims has less to do with their accuracy than with who has had the authority to define Islam historically and to enforce the hegemony of a specific reading of it.

For instance, while women have always faced discrimination in Afghanistan, it was only under the Taliban, who had the power to enforce their interpretation of Islam on the people, that they endured the peculiar depredations that people now associate with "Islam itself."

Having said that, I should note that even though Muslim societies differ greatly in how they interpret and practice Islam, most Muslims nonetheless believe that the Qur'an privileges males; i.e., they read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text. That is why a Qur'anic hermeneutics of liberation becomes important and this is what I have attempted to offer in my book "Believing Women" in Islam.

I'm going to change focus now and speak about this reading before I return to the question of why Muslims interpret the Qur'an as a patriarchal text.

"Believing Women"

At the core of my reading is the issue of patriarchy to which I have referred a number of times by now but without defining it. So, what do I mean by it?

Quite often, scholars, especially feminists, criticize Islam for being a patriarchal religion and quite often, scholars, especially Muslim, defend it against such a charge. For the most part, however, neither says what they mean by patriarchy.

This may seem like a small point but it isn't because one could go on arguing about something without agreeing on what that something even is! So, the first

thing I do is to define patriarchy and I use two definitions that can be applied to both religious and secular contexts historically and today.

Thus, on the one hand, I define patriarchy as a mode of rule by the father that assumes a real as well as symbolic continuum between the Father /fathers; i.e., between a patriarchalized view of God as Father and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband's claim to rule over his wife and children.

As we know, this form of patriarchy existed historically and some feminists believe that "patriarchal religions" serve to perpetuate it even today.

I apply this definition to read the Qur'an because the Qur'an was revealed in the seventh century to a tribal Arab patriarchy and my aim is to see if it endorses traditional modes of patriarchy by representing God as Father/male or teaching that God has a special relationship with males or that males embody divine attributes and that women are by nature weak, unclean, or sinful.

Moreover, does the Qur'an say that rule by the father/husband is ordained by God and an earthly continuation of God's rule, as religious patriarchies claim?

However, as we know, this form of patriarchy isn't universal, so I also define patriarchy in secular terms, 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.'"

(I borrow this definition from Zillah Eisenstein, the well-known U.S. feminist.)

I apply this definition to read the Qur'an because for Muslims the Qur'an is as applicable today as it was in the seventh century and it is important to see if it advocates gender differentiations, 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 and secular patriarchies tend to do?

With these two comprehensive definitions of patriarchy in mind, I looked at a whole range of the Qur'an's teachings, from its definitions of God to its account of human creation, ontology, sexuality, the family, and marital relationships.

Too often people read only the so-called misogynistic verses or those verses that deal with isolated issues, like veiling and polygamy, and, as a result they come away with a partial and often wrong understanding of the Qur'an's teachings.

That is why I have tried to get at the totality of its teachings by examining its position on issues that at first don't seem relevant to a discussion of patriarchy, like the nature of God. (I will return to this point in a bit.)

I also examine the Qur'an's position on issues that I believe impinge on sexual equality and while the Qur'an does not use this term, I read it with the intent of discovering if its teachings allow us to theorize the equality, sameness, similarity, or equivalence, as the context demands, of women and men.

The conclusion I come to is that the Qur'an does not support patriarchy or sexual inequality and, indeed, that Qur'anic epistemology is inherently anti-patriarchal.

How do I come to this controversial and seemingly counter-factual conclusion?

To begin with, the Qur'an does not represent God as Father/male and in fact explicitly forbids sacralizing God as such, or even from using similitude for God.

Nor does it sacralize fathers or fatherhood by which I mean it doesn't treat them as sacred. It does recognize that patriarchies exist and that, within patriarchies, men are the locus of authority, and it does address men more often than it does women, but this is not the same as condoning patriarchy.

In fact, the Qur'an repeatedly warns that "following the ways of the father" has kept people from God. To my mind, there is no clearer way to define patriarchy than as the ways of the father, which we can interpret literally as rule by the father or symbolically as patriarchal traditions.

The Qur'an also doesn't teach that men are ontologically superior to women or are entitled to rule over them or to be heads of the household in the sense in which they were in traditional patriarchies.

To the contrary, it says that wives and husbands are each other's guides and friends (*awliya*) and that mutuality and love (*sukun*) should be the basis of marriage.

Like other scholars, 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*. *Nafs*, by the way, is feminine plural). As Riffat Hassan and Amina Wadud have argued, the Qur'an doesn't say that God created the *nafs* of the man before that of the woman. In other words, it doesn't prioritize man's creation over woman's.

The Qur'an also does not say that men have attributes or faculties that women do not. In fact, the Qur'an does not sexualize human beings or engender them by defining them in terms of masculine or feminine traits. Rather, it teaches that each human being manifests the whole.¹

So, on all accounts, I am led to argue that the Qur'an does not authorize or sanction traditional modes of patriarchy.

Because the Qur'an does not associate sex with gender I also argue that it does not support modern forms of patriarchy either.

Thus, while the Qur'an recognizes biological differences between women and men, it does not assign these differences any gender symbolism, for instance, by linking men and women to specific gender roles.

There is not a single verse that says that men's social roles are a function of their biology, or that biological differences between men and women make them unequal.

However, it is true that the Qur'an treats women and men differently with respect to some issues, especially marriage (and I will be happy to take questions on this subject later). But treating people differently does not always mean treating them unequally, as many feminists now themselves argue.

Moreover, the Qur'an does not tie its different treatment of women and men to any claims about biological superiority or inferiority. There is not a single verse that says that men and women are opposites, or that women are like lesser or defective men, or that the sexes are incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the tradition of modern misogyny.

In other words, the Qur'an does not treat man as normative or Otherize women.

Strictly speaking, therefore, we cannot derive a theory of gender inequality from its teaching since the Qur'an has little or nothing to say about gender. Nor does it treat sex as a defining feature of moral personality.

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

¹ Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, Albany: SUNY, 1992, p. 43.

The Qur'an also acknowledges the importance of sexual desire and the need for its fulfillment, although 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 humans is on the basis of their moral praxis.

As Sachiko Murata 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." ²

Due to time limits, I have shared only part of my reading and I've also simplified it, but, hopefully, this should give you some sense of why I believe the Qur'an opposes patriarchy and why Muslim women can struggle for equality from within a Qur'anic framework.

My hermeneutics of the Qur'an

At this point in my argument, many Muslims—specially conservatives—want to know the method by which I arrive at such a reading, specially if they hear the word "hermeneutics" which they think is a Western, hence unIslamic, import.

Time and again, young Muslim men have lectured me, and they invariably are men, about the inappropriateness of using a "hermeneutics on the Qur'an."

It is too bad, of course, that such critics forget that Islam is not associated with either East or West and that Muslim civilizations flourished in both parts of the globe, partly because of their openness to knowledge.

And it is also too bad that I came to read al-Ghazali only after I wrote my book, or I could simply have told my early detractors that I am merely taking up his challenge to develop criteria for reading the Qur'an and for deciding on the legitimacy of different readings.

As it is, what I do say to those Muslims who are suspicious of my hermeneutics of the Qur'an is that I have derived it from my understanding of the Qur'an's teachings, in particular its descriptions of God, which I regard as constituting the core of Qur'anic epistemology.

² Murata, *Tao of Islam*, p. 44

Since, for Muslims, the Qur'an is literally the word of God, I believe our readings of it cannot be separable from our understanding of God. That is why I locate the hermeneutic keys for reading the Qur'an in the nature of divine self-disclosure, by which I mean how the Qur'an defines God.

For instance, the Qur'an teaches that God is one and God's sovereignty is indivisible; this is the doctrine of Tawhid, the core principle of Islam.

To me this suggests that the Qur'an cannot designate men as rulers over women or as intermediaries between God and women since that encourages male worship, which undermines the principle of Tawhid.

The burden is then upon Muslims to reread the Qur'an in a way that does not inject theories of male privilege and ruler-ship into it.

The Qur'an also tells us that God is just and God's justice lies in never doing *zulm* to anyone by transgressing against their rights. As such, I believe that the Qur'an also cannot teach men to do *zulm* to women. Since patriarchy is founded in *zulm*, in that it allows men to transgress against women's rights and indeed even to recognize certain rights, the Qur'an cannot possibly condone it.

The burden is therefore again on Muslims to reread the Qur'an in a way that does not indirectly ascribe *zulm* to God by projecting patriarchy into it.

The Qur'an also says that God is beyond sex/gender and unrepresentable; as such, I believe we should view masculinist references to God (as "He") as bad linguistic conventions and not as accurate statements about God's being.

This is an important point because, as many feminists argue, men legitimize their power over women by representing God as male. But God is not a male and there is no reason to assume that God has special affinities with males,

The burden is then upon Muslims to reread the Qur'an in a way that does not confuse God with the language used to talk about God or to debase our concept of God by displacing sexual partisanship onto God.

In addition to applying these theological principles to read the Qur'an, I also read it for its best meanings and as a thematic and hermeneutic whole rather than piecemeal or in a selective or decontextualized way. I also privilege its clear verses over its allegorical ones, all of which the Qur'an asks its readers to do.

This is why my reading of the Qur'an is different from the dominant one, because the method I use to read it differs substantially from how Muslims have read it historically.

So, it seems appropriate at this point to say something about why the majority of Muslims have read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text.

Interpreting Islam

I believe this has to do with who has read it (basically men), the contexts in which they have read it (always patriarchal), and the method by which they have read it (one that ignores the principles the Qur'an suggests for its own reading).

That is why I begin my book by talking about the relationship between authority and knowledge and between texts and the contexts in which we read them as well as between method, meaning, and gender, although 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 authoritative.

To me, therefore, the most important relationship isn't between gender and reading. As I said at the start of my talk, one doesn't need to be a woman or a feminist to read the Qur'an as I do, but one does need to embrace a liberatory view of God and to respect the principles the Qur'an outlines for its own reading.

Unfortunately, however, much of the religious knowledge that Muslims regard as canonical has been produced by means of a method that can only be described as linear, atomistic, and hermeneutically flawed.

But because of how religious authority came to be structured in Muslim societies, most Muslims continue to embrace this method, and the knowledge that results from using it, as Islamic.

Much of this religious knowledge was also produced by male scholars in the first few centuries of Islam, which were coterminous with the European Middle Ages.

Even though Muslims were at their zenith at this time of European decline, it was nonetheless an era of enormous misogyny that also found its way into Islam by way of the secondary religious texts and Muslim cultural practices.

Added to this is the fact that many of the Qur'an's provisions threatened existing relationships between women and men and between the rulers and the ruled and produced a strong conservative resistance that led to de-radicalizing parts of the Qur'an very early on as several scholarly studies have shown.

In other words, I'm suggesting that hermeneutic and existential questions are interconnected and that one can't arrive at liberatory readings of any religion in oppressively patriarchal and antidemocratic circumstances.

Many people, including disillusioned Muslims, believe that Islam itself is anti-democratic and patriarchal, but, as my work shows, a religion—like a text—is polysemic in that it is open to multiple readings.

To me, then, the intellectually more defensible question is to ask why Muslims have come to regard certain interpretations of the Qur'an as authoritative, or canonical and that requires us to engage the history of religious knowledge and authority.

It also requires us to understand the structure of contemporary Muslim societies. If we look at these societies today, we find a mostly dismal picture. Many of the regimes in power are viewed by their own people as illegitimate and oppressive.

Moreover, as a result partly of Western support of such regimes and partly of the legacy of Western colonialism, Muslim societies have experienced modernization not as economic development or political freedoms but as a coercive secularism, to quote Karen Armstrong.³

The point I'm trying to make is that Islam doesn't interpret itself, people do, and people cannot be abstracted away from the material circumstances of their lives.

Religions, after all, are not lived in abstract space but in concrete political, social, economic, and cultural conditions.

That is why the question of Muslim women's oppression and liberation needs to be tackled at several levels simultaneously. A Qur'anic hermeneutics of liberation can only go so far in improving their lives.

I am nearing the end of my talk and I want to revert to one of the claims I made earlier: that one does not need to be a feminist to read the Qur'an for liberation.

I want to revert to this subject because I resist the label feminist for myself and it seems appropriate to explain why at a congress on Islamic feminism.

Which feminism?

³ Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, NY: Modern Library, 2000: 166.

Just as it is hard for non-Muslims to embrace a view of Islam that is liberatory, it is hard for me to embrace feminism as liberatory, and I realize that there is not just one feminism but many feminisms. In this I am perhaps like those I criticize!

My resistance to feminism stems not from its central premise that women and men are equally human and deserving of equal rights, but from two facts:

First, I dispute the master narrative of feminism that claims this insight as a peculiarly feminist discovery.

In my own case, for instance, I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Qur'an. In fact, it wasn't until much later in my life that I even encountered feminist texts.

But I do owe an intellectual debt to feminist theorizing about patriarchy and for having given me the conceptual tools to recognize it and talk about it.

Second, it seems to me that, for the most part, feminism has secularized the idea of liberation itself such that feminists often assume that to be a believer is already to be bound by the chains of a false consciousness that precludes liberation.

Thus, one of the most prominent Muslim feminists can claim that Islam is a patriarchal and even misogynistic religion that "professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality and puts a sacred stamp [onto] female subservience."

These are the words of Fatima Mernissi⁴ and she's certainly not alone in holding such views. Muslim feminists almost universally consider Islam misogynistic because they view God "himself" as being oppressive.

Because many Muslim feminists don't believe in the divine, they do not find it meaningful to engage the Qur'an, or even to read it. But this doesn't keep some of them from making false 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, by the way, it doesn't. (In fact the Qur'an doesn't prescribe stoning for any sin or crime.)

⁴ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, Zed, 1996: 13-14.

What I find problematic in all this is not just the ignorance about Islam, but also the fact that, just like the conservative Muslims they criticize, many feminists also 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 reading which—one assumes—would lead them to realize that, like any other text, the Qur'an also can be read in multiple modes, including oppressive ones.

Of course, I realize that just as there are many readings of the Qur'an there are also many definitions and practices of feminism.

One of these is by Margot Badran who has come up with a definition of Islamic feminism as 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.

As I've had occasion to say before, if this is Islamic feminism, then clearly, I am an Islamic feminist.

Indeed, if this is Islamic feminism, one would assume that all practicing Muslims would be Islamic feminists since we all read the same Qur'an.

But, unfortunately, not all Muslims are Islamic in the sense in which Margot means and not all Muslims read the Qur'an in the same way, as I have argued.

To the contrary, as I've suggested, mainstream Muslim feminism is the antithesis of Islamic feminism and it is this sort of feminism that most Muslims are familiar with. And, just as I don't embrace dominant Muslim readings of the Qur'an, I also resist aligning myself with the dominant approaches to feminism.

It seems to me that, 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 symbolizes to most people.

I understand that this may be an overly static view of feminism which is also continually being retheorized in much the same way as I am attempting to retheorize the methods by which Muslims read the Qur'an.

So, perhaps what all of us who are engaged in this exercise need to realize is that we share a spirit of critical inquiry and a commitment to rethink our world in

order to make it a more hospitable place for both women and men. This is not a small commonality to share in a world this is divided over difference.