

Does the Qur'an Support Gender Equality?
Or, do I have the autonomy to answer this question?¹

Workshop on Islam and Autonomy
University of Groningen, November 24, 2006

Asma Barlas

I would like to thank the board of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, and specially Dr. Marjo Buitelaar, for inviting me to give the keynote address this evening. She has asked me to talk about my work on the Qur'an, but, before I do so, I want to say a few words about this [poster](#) advertising my talk.

I asked for it to be projected on the screen because I believe it says something about the pre-structure of understanding that some of you may be bringing into your encounter with me and I want us all to be aware of that as I speak.

In some obvious ways this picture of a burqa-clad woman with the question "Does the Qur'an support gender equality?" written across it suggests that the very question is absurd. Indeed, this rather clever juxtaposition may render my talk tonight symbolic at best and superfluous at worst. At the very least, this poster gives a false start to my talk and puts all the onus on me of then having to argue against it. And, as a feminist friend of mine said, why would anyone want to do all the work that requires? Of course, I don't have the option not to do this work because to keep silent would be to leave uncontested the Orientalist overtones and undertones of this poster.

It's not that pictures of burqa-clad women are themselves Orientalist. The burqa defines the lives of many Muslim women whether some of us like it or not. Rather, what strikes me as Orientalist are the uses of the burqa in constituting the Muslim Other as a way to constitute the non-Muslim Anglo-European Self. Isn't that why the face of this veiled woman rather than my unveiled face is on this poster? Your immigration minister, Rita Verdonk, says "We want to see whom we are talking to."² If that is true, why was the anonymity of this covered face thought to be better publicity for my talk, or a more provocative way to arouse interest in it, than the specificity of my own face. Why the decoy?

You may say that this is the lived reality of many Muslim women against which we must situate theoretical discussions of women's rights in Islam and I would

¹ I am grateful to Ulises Mejias, Zillah Eisenstein, and Naeem Inayatullah for helping me think through and articulate my ideas in this paper and, in some cases, to even give me the language for doing so.

² Gregory Crouch, "Dutch Consider Banning Burqas in Public," NYT, November 18, 2006.

agree with you. But, I would also suggest that what is at stake is not the lived realities of Muslim women about which, frankly, most people don't care. Rather, what is at stake is the Anglo-European investment in the veil as an "imaginary anchor"³ that allows them to stabilize their epistemic privilege vis-à-vis the other.

We know that the other is constituted "through sexual as well as cultural modes of differentiation," and what better marker of cultural difference than the veil?⁴ Not only does it serve to distinguish inside from outside, but it is also "one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmatically achieved."

I would like to suggest, then, that this poster is "about the cultural representation of the West to itself by way of a detour through the other."⁵ And the other pays a price for this detour since it requires that she be "made lacking what the subject has [but also made] . . . threatening to the stable world of the subject by her radical difference." The Other is thus always already "born accused."⁶ And that is the site this poster has opened up for me and from which I will be speaking.

Mapping the terrain

At the outset let me make it clear that I don't believe that the Qur'an offers a theory of sexual equality. Theories of sexual/ gender equality are pretty new, even for Europeans, and I do not attempt to read one into the Qur'an. What I do argue is that the Qur'an opposes patriarchy and this opens up the space for Muslims to develop a theory and practice of sexual equality from its teachings.

I ask for your patience as I unpack this argument because it requires me first to map the theoretical and theological terrains for engaging the Qur'an.

Many Muslims and non-Muslim Anglo-Europeans believe that the Qur'an "is directly accessible and can . . . be taken literally."⁷ Others, meanwhile, agree that we can interpret it in different ways but then they often turn around and argue, inconsistently, that the Qur'an makes men absolutely dominant over women. Both these propositions are untenable and they arise, I believe, in a failure to deal with the tensions that need to be negotiated if we are to talk meaningfully about the Qur'an's teachings. So I will start by discussing three sets of tensions.

³ Quoted in Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, Cambridge University Press, 1988: 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6

⁷ Wilna Meijer, "Tradition, Historicity and Reflexivity. A Conceptual Framework for Islamic Education." Paper for workshop on "Islam and Autonomy."

The first of these is between sacred and religious knowledge. By sacred knowledge I mean the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as the revealed word of God and therefore as perfect, timeless, and unchanging. By religious knowledge, I mean all attempts to engage, explain, and interpret the Qur'an, hence religious discourse in general. Like many other Muslims, I view religious knowledge as limited, fallible, and historically bound.

Obviously, sacred and religious knowledge are deeply interconnected, but, they are not reducible to one another and in fact there are disjunctures and gaps between them. It is in these fissures that I locate the ideological and historical roots of Muslim women's oppression. To take a particularly egregious example, the Taliban's anti-women pogrom in Afghanistan, that they carried out in the name of Islam, had nothing to do with the Qur'an's teachings which does not advocate prohibiting women from working, wearing the burqa, whipping women if their feet show, and so on.

Of course, the Taliban were an extreme example, so I should also say that most Muslims view Islam as a religious patriarchy that, allegedly, "professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality" and puts "a sacred stamp . . . onto female subservience."⁸ These are the words of the noted Moroccan feminist, Fatima Mernissi, but most conservative Muslims also hold this view. So, ironically, many feminists, Anglo-European, and Muslim patriachs are on the same wave-length on this issue!

I am among those, however, who argue that the reason the Qur'an has been read as a patriarchal text has to do with who has read it, how, and in what contexts. To make it clear, historically only male scholars have read the Qur'an, mostly in a piecemeal and decontextualized way, and always within patriarchies. That is why I call the dominant reading of Islam a mis-reading which implies, of course, that I believe there can be a correct reading of scripture. And this brings me to a second set of tensions having to do with interpretation.

There are those who continue to insist that the Qur'an can be read in only one way, but, as we know, every text is open to multiple readings. However, once we accept the principle of textual polysemy, on what grounds can we argue against one reading and in favor of another? This is one of the biggest conundrums for scriptural hermeneutics but, as I will argue, the Qur'an itself provides Muslims a way out of it. If Muslims haven't taken this way out, it is, I believe, because of political, not theological reasons.

⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*. London: Zed, 1996: 13-14.

And this brings me to the final set of tensions I want to consider here: between hermeneutics and history and I can state these in terms of the following paradox: On the one hand, most Muslims treat not only the Qur'an, but, also dominant readings of it as timeless and beyond history. On the other hand, however, they defend such readings in the name of tradition and communal history. So, history is employed both to defend early Qur'anic exegesis, some of which is anti-women, and to discourage new readings of the text, specially by women. And this is what explains the discursive continuities in patriarchal readings of the Qur'an as well as on "women's issues" for 1,400 years.

Engaging these tensions

These are some of the tensions that I try and negotiate in my own work, starting with the relationship between the Qur'an and its readings. While it is a fine line to draw, Muslim theology, and indeed the Qur'an itself, distinguishes between "the divine speech and its earthly realization."⁹

I believe that it is partly the failure to make this distinction that explains the long history of sexism and misogyny in Muslim societies. (Muslims didn't invent sexism and misogyny, of course, but they have legitimized them by reading theories of female inferiority into the secondary texts and even into the Qur'an.) By secondary texts I mean specifically the hadith, or narratives that purport to record the Prophet's life and praxis and which contain the most infamous anti-women strictures that many people mistakenly ascribe to the Qur'an.

Personally, I think it is not just unfortunate that Muslims have come to interpret the Qur'an by way of the hadith, but it is also theologically and methodologically problematic inasmuch as the best way to read the Qur'an is by the Qur'an. I will make this point by discussing the criteria the Qur'an gives us to read it and also to judge between the contextual legitimacy of competing readings.

Reading the Qur'an by the Qur'an

The first criteria is textual holism. As the Qur'an says, the whole of it is from God and it criticizes those who read it piecemeal and selectively. Referring to the law given to Moses, it accuses some people of making "it into (Separate) sheets for show, While ye conceal much (Of its contents)" (6:91; in Ali, 316).¹⁰ It also censures "those who divided (Scripture into arbitrary parts), . . . and have made

⁹ Josef van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology." In Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Quran as Text*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996: 189.

¹⁰ All the translations are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an* (NY: Tehrike Tersile Qur'an, 1988).

the Qur'an into shreds (as they please)," and it warns that God will "Call them to account" for their misdeeds (15: 90-93; in Ali, 653). The Qur'an also condemns those who "change the words from their (right) times And places" (5:44; in Ali, 255), and who dwell only on its allegorical verses while ignoring its clear ones as a means to sow discord among people.

Most importantly, the Qur'an asks us to read for its "best meanings." This injunction not only confirms that we can read the Qur'an in multiple ways but also that not all our readings may be equally good or acceptable. Significantly, the Qur'an does not say that only some people can read it for its best meanings and nor does it define what it means by best, but, leaves it to us to decide. To me, this opens up a textual democracy of meanings since it allows us to exercise our own agency and choices in constructing religious knowledge.

It also opens up possibilities for political democracy inasmuch as it allows us to argue that we cannot arrive at a shared notion of the best so long as women are excluded from the processes of knowledge construction, and so long as Muslims don't enjoy the civil and political liberties necessary for engaging in an open public dialogue, or for expressing dissent without fear of persecution.

Lastly, and most importantly, the Qur'an provides some theological criteria for reading it through its description of God. There are infinite divine attributes and at least ninety-nine divine names, but I can only consider the hermeneutic implications of two aspects of God's self-disclosure for reading the Qur'an.

One is Tawhid, or God's unity. God is one and hence God is the only ruler and sovereign. No one else—prophets or kings or fathers or husbands—can claim sovereignty over others. Secondly, God is uncreated and unrepresentable. The fact that we tend to masculinize God linguistically doesn't mean that God is "really" male and, in fact, the Qur'an even forbids using metaphors for God. This conception of God who is sovereign and who is neither father, nor son, nor man, nor male, and nor even created, is one of the sites from which I read the Qur'an as an anti-patriarchal text because I believe this conception of God defines what I like to call Qur'anic epistemology.

The Qur'an and patriarchy

In order for me to make this point—and I finally come to the heart of my talk—I need to clarify what I mean by patriarchy since I haven't defined the term so far.

I view patriarchy as a continuum at one end of which are representations of God as Father and of fathers as rulers over wives/ children, and at the other end, a

politics of sexual differentiation that privilege males while Otherizing women.¹¹ The virtue of this definition is that it can be applied to different historical periods as well as to religious and secular forms of male privilege and it is broad-ranging enough to encompass a wide array of the Qur'an's teachings.

If one applies this definition to read the Qur'an, one finds no support in it for either form of patriarchy and much that challenges patriarchal epistemology.

First, as I just said, the Qur'an does not represent God as Father and in fact it explicitly forbids Muslims from sacralizing God as Father. Nor does it sacralize fathers or fatherhood. To the contrary, it warns that blindly "following the ways of the father" has kept people from God. To me, this says that there is an inherent conflict between monotheism and traditional patriarchy for what else is traditional patriarchy if not "the ways of the father?" Of course, the Qur'an does recognize that patriarchies exist and that men are the locus of authority within them, and it does also frequently address men. But to recognize patriarchy or to speak to men is not to advocate patriarchy.

Second, the Qur'an also does not use biological sex to privilege males and to Otherize women. Unlike Westernized misogyny, the Qur'an does not represent women and men as opposites, or women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal. Indeed, the Qur'an does not even associate sex with gender. That is to say, it recognizes sexual (biological) differences but it does not assign them any gender symbolism. There is thus no concept of gendered man or woman in the Qur'an.¹² Not a single verse links men and women to a specific division of labor or define their roles as a function of their biology, or say that biological differences make women and men unequal.

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. Moreover, difference does not always imply inequality and the Qur'an does not tie its different treatment of women and men to any claims about biology or inequality.

So how are we to understand those verses that most Muslims read as saying that men are women's guardians and have a degree of superiority over women and that they can marry multiple wives and even beat a disobedient one, and inherit double a women's share in property, and so on? I struggled with these verses for many years until I discovered the literatures on hermeneutics, linguistic analysis,

¹¹ Zillah Eisenstein, *The Female Body and the Law*, California: University Press, 1988: 90.

¹² Amind Wadud, *The Qur'an and Woman*, Oxford University Press, 1999: 35.

Qur'anic exegesis, and patriarchy, and these allowed me approach the Qur'an very differently than most Muslims do.

The "wife-beating" verse began to unravel once I realized that the word that is translated as "to beat" derives from the root *daraba* that has several meanings, including "to separate." So I have to ask: what sorts of hermeneutic and political choices went into rendering *daraba* as beating specially when the Qur'an counsels love and mercy and liberality between spouses even if they hate one another? Then, too, translations of *nushuz* as the wife's disobedience became indefensible when I found references to a wife who fears *nushuz* on her husband's part.

Similarly, the whole edifice of polygyny begins to collapse once we note that the Qur'an only speaks about it as a way to ensure justice for female orphans. What sorts of elisions went into re-reading that injunction as giving all men the right to marry four women? Moreover, doesn't the verse on polygyny end by saying that it is better to marry only one wife so that the husband won't be partial to another? (And, for those who associate polygyny with Muslims, let me remind you that, barring Jesus who was celibate, none of the Hebrew prophets was monogamous. Some, like David, had in excess of 900 wives and concubines.)

And, once I realized that the word *qawwamun* also denotes financial upkeep of a wife by a husband—which is how some medieval exegetes read it—I no longer felt obliged to accept its rendition as guardians, much less as rulers. (And those who accept the translation of *qawwamun* as referring to male strength and superiority should know that this is a pure interpolation by the translators.)

Doesn't the Qur'an appoint women and men each other's *awliya*, or guides, and charge them both to enjoin the right and forbid the wrong? As one scholar says, how can they be each other's guides and in charge of one another if men are women's guardians and have "absolute authority" over them?¹³

And, why should we assume that men always inherit twice the share of a woman when the Qur'an says that mothers inherit twice as much as fathers? And why should we read the Qur'an's counsel to take two women as witnesses in place of one man as a two-for-one formula, as Amina Wadud¹⁴ calls it, when a wife's testimony over-rides that of a husband's if he accuses her of adultery? And, if the reference to the degree, or *darajah*, that men enjoy vis-à-vis women only occurs in the context of divorce and reconciliation, why should we take that as a universal statement about male ontology and sexual inequality? Doesn't the Qur'an teach that sexual equality is ontological in that humans were created from a single self

¹³ Azizah al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory?" Women's Studies International Forum, Special Issue: Women and Islam. 5, no. 2 (1982): 218.

¹⁴ Wadud, *ibid.*

(nafs)? In fact, some scholars read this and other verses as saying that the Qur'an did not privilege the man by prioritizing his creation.¹⁵

The Qur'an is also the only scripture that directly addresses women and in language that makes it clear that it does not view them as being less than men:

For Muslim men and women,--
For believing men and women,
For devout men and women,
For men and women who are
Patient and constant, for men
And women who humble themselves,
For men and women who give
In charity, for men and women
Who fast (and deny themselves).
For men and women who
Guard their chastity, and
For men and women who
Engage much in God's praise
For them has God prepared
Forgiveness and great reward. (33:35; in Ali, 1116-17).

In light of these, and other teachings that I haven't had time to consider here, I argue that the Qur'an is not a patriarchal text and that it opens up possibilities for Muslims to theorize radical sexual equality. Of course whether or not we will ever attempt to do this is another matter.

Double captivity

I will conclude now with some comments about Muslims and also myself and it is this poster that provides the point of departure for my remarks by reminding me that, like other Muslim women, I am a "double prisoner."¹⁶

On the one hand, I am partly a prisoner of oppressive readings of the Qur'an by Muslim patriarchies. I say "partly" because to some extent I've been able to free myself by re-reading the Qur'an along the lines I've described. Of course, getting rid of sexual inequality and discrimination in Muslim societies is not so easy since it would require us to deal not just with hermeneutic issues but also with a host of political, economic, and social ones. Even the hermeneutic problems are not so easily resolved since the structure of religious authority in Muslim

¹⁵ Riffat Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective." In Karen Lebacqz (ed.) *Sexuality: A Reader*, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999.

¹⁶ Peter Knauss quoted in Yegenoglu, *ibid.*, 144

societies allows only a few male scholars to define Islam for the rest of us. Ironically and troublingly, a religion that did not see it fit to ordain a clergy is now in the grip of a class of virtual high priests who claim to know God's will.

The Qur'an, meanwhile, says that it came for all people, including the unlettered, and it urges each one of us to use our own intellect and reason/ing to decipher its verses. Yet, as we know, Muslim women are excluded from such an enterprise and, where they do engage in it, they are generally marginalized.

It is this aspect of our captivity that most seems to fascinate non-Muslims since it confirms them in their Islamophobia. But, while some of us can escape partially from Muslim patriarchies, there is simply no escaping our captivity at the hands of non-Muslim Anglo-Europeans. Islam is the only religion in the world, I think, that is dominated to such an extent by those who don't belong to it or believe in it. I'm not speaking just of the old Orientalists, but, also of all those who, knowing little or nothing about Islam, feel no compunction in pronouncing loudly and authoritatively about it.

If such interventions were restricted only to misrepresenting Islam, it would be one thing. But, we know from what is happening in Europe, that the state has begun to encroach steadily on how Muslims, specially women, practice Islam. Right here, in Holland, the government is threatening to ban burqas even though it seems less than 30 women out of a population of a million wear them. So why was this even an election issue? Is the burqa being used as a decoy again, and this time, for "a referendum on [the] very existence"¹⁷ of Muslims in Holland?

Is the real purpose of this poster to mobilize people for an assault on Muslims in the name of security and assimilation? I ask this because in the US such pictures were used to mobilize for a war against Afghanistan in the name of security and the plight of Muslim women. The burqa, it seems, can be deployed to justify both annihilating and assimilating Muslims in the name of Western universalism.

This spectrum, of annihilation/ assimilation, is a legacy of the "discovery" of the Americas when Anglo-Europeans were confronted with the problem of the Other in the form of Ameri-Indians and the challenge of making sense of difference. There is a most instructive exchange on this issue in Holland between two 17th century Calvinists, De Laet and Grotius. De Laet argues that, to preserve "the order of the republic," difference must be eradicated. In other words, he wants to exterminate the Ameri-Indians.

¹⁷ Crouch, *NYT*. November 18, 2006

Grotius, "no less sensitive to the need to root order in certainty, nonetheless seeks a less comprehensive uniformity that accepts a space for difference." And he deploys the Ameri-Indians as "allies in a struggle for tolerance among Calvinists."¹⁸

As I said earlier, the Other is thus an "imaginary anchor" for negotiating Anglo-European subjectivities and internecine struggles and this is no less true of the past than it is of the present. One must then wonder what the Dutch insistence that all Muslim women "be more transparent to so-called liberal society" is really about. Is this their way of insisting "to themselves that the parts of themselves that they veil to the public and to themselves now need to become more transparent?"

In posing this question, Naeem Inayatullah wonders whether the "Dutch move to transparency is an insistence that there is no such thing beyond which we cannot know. They declare: we can, must, and should know all; and that we must show all to know all. . . . It is an attempt to arrest absolute mystery [and] to try and bring under control that which can only remain beyond. It is to reduce the infinity of knowledge to a particular moment of need."¹⁹

So, perhaps what we should be talking about is not "Islam and autonomy," but, Anglo-Europeans and their fear of Muslim autonomy. And, even more, about the particular moment of need that is driving Europeans to foreclose the infinity of knowledge and, with it, the possibilities for mutual understanding by representing the secular Western self "as the absolute future for all."²⁰

¹⁸ Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*. Routledge: 2004: 80

¹⁹ Naeem Inayatullah, personal e-mail, November 18, 2006.

²⁰ Ibid.