

“She Speaks! Voices of Hope, Strength and Resilience”

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Thank you very much for your generous introduction and, more importantly, for inviting me to share some thoughts on women and Islam. First, though, I want to say how much I appreciate the work that people like Robina Niaz are doing to support women in our communities. Anyone who has ever spoken up against injustice or oppression must know how hard it can be, since one risks the anger not only of those in power but, frequently, also of those who are their victims. In my own experience, for instance, it is the women who attack me most severely when I criticize male privilege and authority.

Here I want to clarify that I don't believe that all Muslim men are abusive or that all women are oppressed; rather, my position is that the cultures of male supremacy that permeate so-called Islamic societies aren't really Islamic.

This is not an easy argument to make and it's easy to understand why it would anger the men; however, it's less obvious as to why it makes some women even angrier. But the reasons aren't too hard to figure out. Muslims are brought up to believe that God “himself” has preferred men to women and put them in charge of women and that a good Muslim woman ought to obey the men in her family. Indeed, in our part of the world, by which I mean South Asia, popular religious texts portray the husband as a worldly God, a “*majazi khuda*,” to whom the wife owes not only obedience but veneration.

It's not just South Asian women who are taught to believe this, by the way. This past week, the BBC reported on a new law in Mali that proposes to give Muslim women equal rights in marriage. One of its most “contentious” aspects is that it would no longer require them “to obey their husbands,” and it is, predictably, the women themselves who are clamoring against it on the grounds that it isn't Islamic and that “We have to stick to the Koran. ... A man must protect his wife, a wife must obey her husband.”¹ As scholars like Amina Wadud have argued, the Qur'an doesn't, in fact, require a wife to obey her husband,² but such ideas are so deeply entrenched in our societies that it is difficult to dislodge them.

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8216568.stm>

² See Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

At their extreme, they produce a diminished sense of self and make the daily indignities and discourtesies and abuse that women have to endure seem like the natural order of things. Questioning this order then also means opening up women's lives to question and that is a painful prospect. Truthfully, how many people like to engage in critical self-scrutiny and, indeed, how many of us are capable of that once we accept certain ideas and practices in our lives as normal?

And the reality is that most Muslims take sexual inequality and oppression as a given for a variety of reasons. One is that they confuse Islam with cultural practices and the Qur'an with religious texts like the hadith. Another is that, in reading the Qur'an, they focus on only three or four lines or words like *daraba* in the "beating verse." Anyone who has read a book will recognize the absurdity of trying to decipher its entire meaning by picking out random words and passages but, unfortunately, that is what most Muslims do when they read the Qur'an.

This isn't to say that most Muslims read the Qur'an; indeed, the majority cannot because it isn't literate. Those who are, meanwhile, don't read it often or don't read it from cover to cover. That is why some of them can make false claims about its teachings while carrying a copy in their hands (this has happened twice at public functions where I gave a talk). The reason, I believe, is that they have a "second-hand knowledge"³ of the Qur'an by which I mean knowledge derived from texts like the hadith or the local mullah or a specific scholar.

Depressingly, even early Muslim exegetes who knew the Qur'an well, have left us commentaries not warranted by the text and infused by the misogyny of their own times. Yet, to point out this obvious fact is to elicit contempt and rage since I'm told this is how Muslims have read the Qur'an for 1,400 years and I am no religious scholar and, on top of it, I'm a woman. A millennium and a half after the Qur'an was revealed, and at a time of so many advances for women, it seems most Muslims still cannot bring themselves to take a woman's word seriously!

This is the background against which we need to understand the silence of many people in our communities, especially women, who experience the ravages of male supremacy. From the outside, it is easy to assume that they would want to speak up but all sorts of pressures compel them to silence. Even privileged people find it hard to swim against the tide of social conformity by "rocking the boat," so imagine how much harder it is for those who are vulnerable to do so. That is why I am honored to be at an event celebrating women who are willing to raise their voices, irrespective of the costs to themselves. What hangs in the balance is not only their own welfare but also the moral and psychological health of Muslim communities. I say this because resisting oppression can also free the oppressors from its clutches, as the brilliant Paulo Freire argued.

³ The phrase is Edward Said's and he used it to describe Western approaches to Islam. *Covering Islam* (NY: Vintage, 1997).

The Qur'an and women

I want to shift focus now and speak about women and Islam and I feel it would be most in keeping with the theme of this year's iftar if I were to offer a personal testimony of my own encounter with the Qur'an and how and why I came to read it as a liberating and anti-patriarchal text. However, before anything else, I want to explain what I mean by the terms male supremacy and patriarchy.

In my book,⁴ I've used a rather rigorous definition of patriarchy but, tonight, I am using the term simply to denote the idea that (here I am quoting from two different sources): a "wife must always be guided by the will of the master of the house, be he father, husband, or grown son," and, the woman must submit to the man "who is responsible for the maintenance of this system [patriarchy] be he her husband, father, or brother."⁵ The first quote is from the *I-Ching*, a 5,000 year old Chinese classic, and the second from the work of Abul Ala Maududi, whose influence extends far beyond his native Pakistan and who died in 1979.

The reason I juxtaposed these two quotes is because they illustrate how similar patriarchal ideas have been across vast expanses of time and space and cultural difference. I also wanted to emphasize that patriarchy predates monotheism. I make this point because many feminists link the two. For instance, Christian feminists argue that religious patriarchy has its roots in a view of God as Father, as well as in the Biblical teaching that God made man in "His own image" and then extracted Eve from Adam's body thus setting up a "hierarchy of being."⁶

Even if this is so for Christianity, such an argument cannot be applied to Islam since the Qur'an not only does not designate God as father but says that God is "far above anything that men may devise by way of definition."⁷ Indeed, it goes so far as to declare: "woe unto you for all that you attribute to God by way of description."⁸ Moreover, in the Qur'anic account of creation, God created men and women from a single *nafs*, or self, made them both vice-regents, or *khalifa*, and gave them both equal capacity for moral personality. And, yet, as we know, Muslim societies are the most intractably patriarchal today. (As for the ancient Chinese, they didn't even believe in a divine being and yet they held that women must subordinate themselves to men.)

In July, former president Jimmy Carter broke with his church precisely because

⁴ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women" in Islam* (University of Texas Press, 2002).

⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ Margaret Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 446.

⁷ 21:21; Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Maktaba Jawarhar ul Uloom, n.d.) p. 490

⁸ 21:18, *ibid.*, p. 489.

of this practice of subjugating girls and women. “The truth,” he said, “is that male religious leaders have had – and still have – an option to interpret holy teachings either to exalt or subjugate women. They have, for their own selfish ends, overwhelmingly chosen the latter.” This choice, he goes on to say, justifies all sorts of “persecution and abuse of women throughout the world,” including “slavery, violence, forced prostitution, genital mutilation and national laws that omit rape as a crime. ... it also costs many millions of girls and women control over their own bodies and lives, and continues to deny them fair access to education, health, employment and influence within their own communities.”⁹

Carter has taken the words right out of many of our mouths. Specially what he says about how Christian leaders have interpreted the Bible – without attention to context, selectively, and in favor of men – is equally true of how Muslims have historically interpreted the Qur’an. However, I didn’t know this when I began reading it, so let me now talk about how and why I came to read the Qur’an.

Reading the Qur’an¹⁰

Like many Muslim children, I was taught to read it in Arabic but I was not taught Arabic itself. For years I had no idea what I was reading, or why it was good to read the Qur’an without meaning. Much later, I learned that Muslims don’t regard the translated Qur’an as real, hence the emphasis on reading it in Arabic. Of course, there’s no substitute for doing so, but I also think that God’s word is real in *all* languages. After all, we also believe in revelation to Jews and Christians and this revelation wasn’t in Arabic. It is thus reasonable to assume that what is sacred is divine revelation and not the language it is in.

Basically, then, I read the Qur’an in translation, all by men. I make this point as a way to note women’s absence from this field and also because I’m often attacked for imposing new meanings on the Qur’an. The truth, however, is that my anti-patriarchal reading draws on male translations and the fact that I can still read the Qur’an as I do has to do with reading it in light of certain principles that the Qur’an itself suggests, such as reading it as a totality rather than selectively, privileging its clear or foundational verses, and looking for their best meanings.

Initially, however, I didn’t know these principles and nor did I know that what we read a text to be saying depends on how we read it and also on who reads it and in what kinds of social and historical contexts. That is why, as Carter’s letter makes clear, one has a choice as to how to interpret scripture, something most

⁹ Jimmy Carter, “Losing my religion for equality,” July 15, 2009.
<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/losing-my-religion-for-equality-20090714-dk0v.html?page=-1>

¹⁰ Parts of what follow draw on an earlier talk, “The Pleasure of our Texts.”

Muslims will deny, as they will the idea that meaning and language are not fixed and transparent.

I should also clarify that I started to read the Qur'an with meaning because I wanted to know God, whose word it is. But, I will also confess that I was drawn to it by the painful experience of a divorce as well. It was then that I found out that some Qur'anic verses are the basis for Muslim law to discriminate against women. These verses are read as saying that men are women's guardians, superior to them, even if only by a degree, entitled to marry multiple wives and to beat them, inherit double a woman's share in property, and so on. I had read these verses for myself and, frankly, had no argument against them though they did raise all sorts of questions in my mind. For instance,

- The Qur'an says that God is uncreated and beyond our capacity to define. If this is so, why does the Qur'an refer to God as "he?" And, if God is not a male, why would God favor men and discriminate against women?
- The Qur'an says that God is just and never does *zulm* to anyone and yet the Qur'an allows men to do *zulm* to women. (At that time, I thought *zulm* meant harm; as I have found, its real meaning is to transgress against the rights of another.)
- The Qur'an says that men and women are from the same *nafs* and are each other's guides and friends (*awliya*). If this is so, then why are men women's guardians and why do they have a degree above them? Was the single *nafs* defective and did the defective part come to women?
- The Qur'an tells husbands to deal kindly with their wives even if some among them they are their enemies. Why, then, does the Qur'an allow a husband to beat a wife and why does it permit polygyny?

As I said, I didn't know in my youth that we can arrive at very different meanings if we read an entire verse rather than one or two lines or words or, better yet, read the entire Qur'an, or if we pay attention to grammar and syntax in the original Arabic and to how words are translated in English, or that Qur'anic references to God as "he" are a function of language and not of divine ontology, or that historical context had anything to do with why the Qur'an spoke of polygyny, a particular form of divorce, or other things.

I eventually discovered all this from reading texts other than the Qur'an. For instance, the history of early Muslim societies and of religious knowledge revealed how anti-women ideas had seeped into Islam through the hadith and Qur'anic exegesis; the discipline of hermeneutics de-mystified the process of interpretation; feminist critiques of patriarchy allowed me to define it in a

comprehensive way and to differentiate between difference and inequality; philosophy of religion opened up insights into the relationship between God and God's word, and so on.

In light of this new knowledge, the mystery of why Muslims read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text began to dissipate once I came to understand that it had always been read in patriarchies by men and by means of a method that did not treat the text as a unity. Then, too, dominant readings fixated on only one meaning of a word even though language itself is polysemic; in fact, the renowned scholar, al-Ghazali, believed that each verse had more than 60,000 levels of meaning.

When I applied these insights to the so-called "anti-women" verses, I began to find answers to some of my earlier questions. For instance, the "beating verse" begins to look more complex when we acknowledge that "daraba" can mean everything from hit, to separate, to ignore, and we need to start asking why Muslims have chosen to stick so narrowly and stubbornly to just one meaning.

The edifice of polygyny, on the other hand, begins to collapse once we note that the Qur'an only speaks about it as a way to ensure justice for *female orphans*; in other words, not every man can marry four wives. However, even in the case of orphans, the Qur'an enjoins monogamy so that a husband won't be partial, hence unjust to a wife. And, of course, I realized that polygyny was a normal historical practice with some prophets, like David, having 900 wives and concubines.

Similarly, the "qawwamun" verse that is today read as establishing male power and guardianship over women was read by some early exegetes as referring to the husband's financial responsibility for the family. As for the much vaunted degree, it is a reference to a husband's rights in a divorce, nothing more, and scholars disagree on what that right is; some, like Muhammad Asad, argue that it refers to the man's right to rescind a divorce he has already pronounced.

As for inheritance, it is far more complex than presented; for instance, if there is only one surviving daughter, she gets half the share in her parents property and a surviving mother, double the father's share. And, if two women can be called to give evidence in place of one man with respect to a transaction of a debt, a wife who has been accused of adultery by her husband on his own witness can also testify on her own behalf and her word is legally the last.

Finally, I began to wonder why Muslims ignore all those verses that establish women and men as equals, such as:

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.¹¹

Many people react to these verses by quoting others, like the ones I mentioned earlier, or criticizing me for emphasizing women-friendly verses, or making the illogical and offensive argument that men and women may be equal before God but that women are unequal before men. And, we are back to the misogynistic claims that I mentioned at the start of my talk.

The line between enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong and policing others is a fine one, but it must be observed since, as the Qur'an also says, there should be no compulsion in religion. I therefore want to end by making it clear that I don't pretend to have found the best meanings of the Qur'an and nor do I want that everyone should embrace these. My point has been to show that the search for such meanings can open up liberatory possibilities that are foreclosed when we project misogyny, sexual partisanship, and violence into the text and thus onto God. To my mind, this amounts to a derogation of God and I fear that more than I fear the anger of Muslims. Mohamed Taha called the Qur'an the "methodology of ascent to God."¹² That is, it allows us to know a just and merciful Sustainer and if we cannot read this Sustainer's word on behalf of justice and equality, we have failed in our task as ethical readers of the Qur'an, to say nothing of our vocation to be among those who voluntarily submit to God.

In the end, each one of us is called to make a choice as to what kind of a Muslim we want to be and, in the end, each one of us will answer for this to our Maker, alone.

¹¹ 33:35; in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an* (NY: Tehrike Tersile Qur'an, 1988) p. 1116-17.

¹² M.M. Taha, *The Second Message of Islam* (Syracuse University Press, 1987), p.148.