

Tradition and Modern Life: Changing Roles of Women
DVC with US Embassy, New Delhi, 13 August, 2002

Asma Barlas
(Department of Politics, Ithaca College, New York, USA)

I'd like to begin by thanking the US Embassy in India-especially Miriam Caravella and Shajahan Madampat-for inviting me to participate in this conference. I'd also like to begin by apologizing to all of you for reading my comments. Shajahan has impressed upon me the need to keep the introduction formal, and this way, anyone who's interested, can get a transcript of my talk. Also, I've been able to document the sources I've cited, which becomes difficult to do if one is speaking informally.

The topic of our conference is rather broad and also complex and one can approach it from any number of perspectives. However, I've been asked to speak about it from the vantage point of my work, "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an, which has just been published by the University of Texas Press. I'm supposed to speak for half an hour and then we'll have an open dialogue.

Let me say at the outset that I look at this conference as enabling a process of mutual learning. If you're hoping to learn about certain theoretical issues from me, I want to learn about the women's movement in India from those of you who are working in the field. I'm specially interested in strategies for social change since I'm often asked what is being done to improve the condition of women in our part of the world and I don't always know because although I'm from Pakistan, I've been in the US for about twenty years now and am out of touch with the work of activists in the subcontinent.

I've structured my introduction in three parts; I'm first going to talk about how people, specially in so-called "traditional" societies think about religion and its implications for women. (I say "so-called" because labels like traditional/modern or religious/secular can be problematic, but I won't get into that today.) I will then share with you the basic arguments I make in my book on the Qur'an and will end by speaking about some of the challenges that face Muslim women today. Even though I'm going to be speaking about Islam and Muslims, I think you'll find that my argument has broader implications.

Religion, Tradition, Patriarchy: conceptual and definitional issues

I think it's fair to say that historically patriarchies have abused both sacred and secular knowledge to discriminate against women. In religious patriarchies, the ideological source of women's oppression are misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts which allege that God "Himself" has established men as rulers over women. In secular patriarchies knowledge of disciplines like

biology and psychology have been used to argue that men and women are not just biologically different, but also unequal.

I should clarify that by patriarchy, I mean a system of sexual hierarchy and inequalities that privileges men over women both in their biological capacity as males and in their social roles of fathers and husbands. In religious patriarchies, this system draws on a masculinized representation of God as male and, in the case of Christianity, as Father. Such representations then serve as a justification for “rule by the father/husband” over women. Interestingly, even those religious groups that don’t sacralize God as Father-like Muslims-nonetheless buy into the legitimacy of father’s and husband’s rule over women by drawing implicit parallels between God and males.

Some feminists argue that the problem lies in the nature of religion itself, specially in the worship of God as against goddesses. They make this claim on the grounds that societies that worshipped goddess cults were egalitarian. Truthfully, however, such societies were also misogynistic and men, not women, were the real locus of power in them. Consider the ancient Greeks who, in spite of strong female goddesses in their pantheon, believed that women were just lesser men who lacked the ability to reason. On this basis, they excluded women from public and political life and the rights extended to men.

Unfortunately, sexual discrimination, inequality and oppression have been, and remain, universal although they do take different forms in different societies at different moments in history. To me, therefore, the problem does not lie with religion, but with how we choose to interpret it. And this leads me to make several observations:

- Every religion is open to both oppressive or liberatory, reactionary or progressive interpretations; therefore if only repressive readings becomes dominant in a given society, we need to question why.
- History teaches that the dominant ideologies in a given society more often than not reflect the interests of the dominant groups in that society. In a similar way, interpretations of a sacred text or of tradition that become hegemonic in a given society also serve the interests of the most influential groups in that society. We should then not be surprised that in religious patriarchies only those readings of scriptures become popular that legitimize male power and authority over women.
- However, since religion, tradition, and history are always plural (polysemic), their more egalitarian aspects have to be repressed in order to underwrite the hegemony of repressive interpretations. Now, repression can be carried out by means of both coercion and consent. Some states rely primarily on force, as did Afghanistan under the Taliban. Others rely mostly on consent which is achieved by the “tendency of public discourse to make some forms of experience readily available to consciousness

while ignoring or suppressing others.” If people constantly are confronted with certain readings of sacred texts (or, of history or tradition or any other subject), they find it hard to imagine alternatives.

- When some people do offer new interpretations of religion (or history or of knowledge itself), their work is often marginalized while the people themselves can face threats to their safety, specially in states that have authoritarian and repressive regimes. (However, even in democracies, public discourse functions to generate consent for dominant ideologies.)
- Conservatives in particular condemn new readings of sacred texts and religion because of their fear that such readings will undermine the legitimacy of interpretations inherited from the past, most of which are anti-women. In the name of tradition and religious purity, they obstruct the development of religious knowledge, forcing a sort of stasis upon it. (I should clarify that religion and tradition are not identical even though they are linked. For instance, many of the practices that have become associated with Islam, like beheading or stoning to death for adultery, or female circumcision, are not prescribed by the Qur’an but derive from preIslamic traditions that many Muslims continue to embrace.)
- Since, to conservatives, women symbolize and embody tradition, they fight to “protect” women from such ostensibly corrupting influences. As we’ve witnessed, women’s bodies become the battlefield in the struggle to define the legitimate and illegitimate, the authentic and inauthentic. (Among Muslims, for example, notions of sexual modesty extend only to discussions about “the veil” and always exclude the Qur’an’s provisions for male sexual modesty that are just as significant.)

The result of all this is that, in many people’s minds, religion and tradition have become so deeply linked to oppression that they’ve turned away from both altogether. This is troubling for two reasons. First, it shows that they’ve bought into the same oppressive readings of religion and tradition that they condemn. Secondly, by turning away from religion and tradition, the more progressive elements leave the field open to extremists, whose power thus is magnified beyond their small numbers. That is why I maintain that the problem of religious extremism is the problem not only of the extremists, but also of the moderate and progressive believers who have abandoned the fight without a fight.

Everything I’ve said, I’ve said with Muslims in mind, but I think you will find that it can apply to other communities as well and perhaps some of you will speak about that later.

I want now to discuss my own work on the Qur’an.

“Believing Women” in Islam

As a Muslim woman who was born and raised in a Muslim country, I experienced Islam mostly as a negative ideological force even before the country experienced the full brunt of Zia's "Islamization" program. Much before that, I'd heard that Islam privileges males and, in the words of the Moroccan feminist, Fatima Mernissi, puts a "sacred stamp . . . onto female subservience." As a Muslim woman living in the US, I also experience Islam mostly as a negative force, specially in the aftermath of 9/11, and when I'm called on to explain oppressive Muslim practices and institutions like the veil and the harem. In fact, the harem and veil have become so synonymous with Islam that we've forgotten the Greek origins of the harem as well as the fact that the Qur'an doesn't ask women to cover their faces and, on my reading, their hair.

And, yet, I also experience Islam as a liberatory force when I read the Qur'an which I read as establishing certain inalienable rights for women. I also find that not only does the Qur'an not condone or authorize sexual inequality or patriarchy, but that it also affirms the ontological equality of the sexes and similarities of their natures. In a sense, then, it is this "striking difference between what can be safely inferred from the Qur'an itself and what has frequently been read into it" that led me to write my book.

Essentially, I make a simple argument in it, but I do it in a series of steps. First, I argue that the meanings we read into or out of the Qur'an-or any other text, for that matter-are a function of the methodology we use to read it. To put it differently, religious texts don't interpret themselves, people do and people don't read and interpret texts in an epistemological or methodological vacuum. They always bring their own insights and knowledge and biases into the interpretive process. We should therefore be able to question both the meanings generated from the Qur'an as well as the methods used to generate those meanings instead of treating the method itself as sacred and indisputable.

Secondly, I argue that the Qur'an itself recognizes that some readings of it may not be appropriate because it cautions us to read it for its best meanings. In this context, I argue that the Qur'an also suggests certain principles for reading it; such as treating it as a textual whole, privileging the foundational ayat (verses) over the allegorical, and paying attention both to its own language and structure as well as to the contexts of its teachings (by the way, contextualizing the Qur'an's teachings does not amount to denying its universality. This is a complex argument, which I make in Chapter 2).

Thirdly, Muslims must learn to read the Qur'an in light of their egalitarian idea of God, specially since we view the Qur'an as God's Speech. In this context, I argue that three attributes of God can encourage us to read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal text:

- The first is the theologeme of Tawhid, or God's Unity, which maintains that God is One and that God's Sovereignty is indivisible. I argue that believing

in the concept of Tawhid rules out designating men as rulers over women or as intermediaries between God and women. To my mind, such arguments amount to a form of male worship and constitute a heresy, or shirk.

- A second attribute of God is that God is Just and never does any zulm to anyone; the meaning of zulm in the Qur'an is to transgress against the rights of another. I argue that if God is Just, then God's Speech (i.e., the Qur'an) cannot teach any form of zulm either. However, patriarchies are a form of zulm because they transgress against women's rights by oppressing them. We should therefore be willing to reexamine those readings of the Qur'an that are oppressive to women.
- A third aspect of God's Being as defined in the Qur'an is that God is unlike all creation and hence unrepresentable. In fact, the Qur'an explicitly forbids using similitude for God. As such, linguistic references to God as "He," are a function of the limitations of human language and do not mean that God is a male or has a special affinity with males. There is thus also no reason to think that men are made in God's image; in fact, the Qur'an does not teach that God created humans in the Divine image. It does teach that God created them from a single self (nafs).

That is the gist of my argument and method. In addition, I discuss how Muslims came to read the Qur'an and how the adoption of a conservative method became normative and how this method has generated interpretations that discriminate against women and why these interpretations became dominant historically. Fortunately, there is a great deal of wonderful scholarship on the development of Islamic knowledge on which one can draw.

The other part of my argument, which I make in the second half of the book, is that Qur'an advocates the equality of the sexes and I read its teachings on a broad range of issues, including marriage, divorce, polygyny, and sexuality, to show that the Qur'an does not establish fathers or husbands as rulers or guardians over women or teach that men are ontologically superior to women. To the contrary, it establishes them as equals.

For instance, the Qur'an does not give the father any rights that it does not give to the mother. And it certainly does not teach the concept of blind obedience to the father. This is clear from its injunctions to disobey the parents if they attempt to make their children "join In worship with [God] Things of which [they have] No knowledge" (31: 13-14). I examine the significance of this call to disobedience at length by reading the Qur'anic accounts of Abraham and his father.

The Qur'an also does not establish the husband as ruler over his wife or even as head of the household. The word qawammun, mistranslated as caretakers, managers, guardians, and, on some accounts, jailors, refers to act of providing economically for the wife and children, not to ruler ship. In fact, the Qur'an

establishes mutuality and love as the basis of marriage and names women and men as each other's awliya, or guides and "in-charge."

The Qur'an also stresses the similarity and equality of women and men by locating human origins in a single self. There is no narrative that prioritizes man's creation or endows man with faculties or attributes that are denied to women. Thus, not only does the Qur'an not define women and men in terms of binary oppositions, but it also does not portray women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the tradition of Western/ized patriarchal thought. Unlike the latter, the Qur'an does not even associate sex with gender, or with a specific division of labor, or with masculine and feminine attributes; rather, "since they manifest the whole," the Qur'an does not endow humans with a fixed nature (Barlas, 2002).

For instance, there is not a single verse in the Qur'an to the effect that men's social roles are a function of male biology or that biological differences between women and men make them unequal. It is true that in some things, the Qur'an treats women and men differently, but difference does not necessarily imply inequality, as many feminists themselves argue; moreover, the Qur'an does not ascribe its different treatment of women and men to the fact that they are male or female. Indeed, one cannot deduce a theory of gender from the Qur'an because even though it recognizes sexual/biological differences, it does not assign them any gender symbolism. This is a crucial point because most theories of sexual inequality do in fact confuse biology with its social constructions (gender).

The Qur'an's position on human sexual natures and praxis also is revolutionary inasmuch as it teaches that women and men have the same sexual natures. It does not, for instance, claim that a particular type of sexual identity, drive, or proclivity for certain types of behaviors is specific to either sex. Further, the Qur'an recognizes the importance of sexual desire and the need for its fulfillment, but it also establishes a framework for the expression of desire. And while the Qur'an's emphasis on chastity reveals some anxieties about sex, the Qur'an does not treat sex itself as dangerous or dirty. Rather, it views sex as fulfilling, and wholesome.

The only basis on which Islam distinguishes between human beings is on the basis of their moral personality and their praxis. As Sachiko Murata says, Islam "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."

In sum, unlike those people who blame Islam's "uncompromising monotheism" for women's oppression, I believe that Islam is liberatory. Islamic monotheism, properly understood, dislocates rule by the father/husband, as well as theories of male sovereignty that are at the root of women's oppression. But, of course, for

the legitimacy of readings like mine to be established, there need to be enough people interested in religion and, as I've said earlier, most progressive Muslims are seeking shelter in secularism. That leaves people like myself rather isolated and without a community to call our own. Never the less, Muslim women all over the world are taking up the challenge to reinterpret Islam and I'm specially indebted to scholars such as Amina Wadud, Azizah al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan, and Leila Ahmed, among others, for having done pioneering work in the field of Islamic studies.

And, this brings me to the final stage of my presentation: women's roles.

Women's Roles

Actually, I'm going to say the least on this subject and I'm more comfortable speaking about the challenges women face since the notion of roles is so amorphous.

In countries where literacy (defined minimally as the ability to read and write one's own name) is in the range of 15-20% , where three quarters of the population lives in rural areas with feudal vestiges, and where female feticide has become so popular, it is quite a challenge to teach anyone that a scripture enjoins sexual equality. In Pakistan, men are still murdering women in the name of "honor" and in India, there is a virtual carnage of each other by Hindus and Muslims that makes any talk of equality seem irrelevant.

And yet, perhaps the very existence of such practices makes it all the more necessary for well-meaning and decent people to come together to fight them. In such situations, I think the responsibility of educated women and men is that much greater because they have resources at their disposal that the majority of people don't.

In this context, I want to make the obvious point that, in order to bring about a change in the status of women, we need to bring about a change in men's attitudes towards women as well as tradition and religion. I therefore don't advocate exclusivist movements; to the contrary, enlightened women and men need to work together towards shared ends.

Finally, I believe it is important for progressive Muslims to understand that the best way to challenge repression carried out in the name of Islam is from within Islam itself. Many of the rights and freedoms that secular Muslims crave can also be derived from an enlightened reading of the Qur'an and we have to learn to read it in such a way as to be able to recover its radically egalitarian message of equality.