

## Reading the Qur'an: Challenges and Possibilities for Muslim Women

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In this workshop, we will look at the Qur'an as both a text that is used to oppress women and also as a means for their emancipation and liberation as well. Such a focus is meant to help us understand the problems and challenges women face both in Muslim countries and also within immigrant communities in the West.

### Background

Most problems for women stem from the fact that Muslims on the whole buy into an ideology of male supremacy that manifests itself in a variety of forms. These range from misogynistic attitudes towards women, to laws that discriminate against them, to outright violence against them in the shape of domestic abuse and, most egregiously, the heinous "honor" killings.

Unfortunately, because most Muslims ascribe this ideology to Islam itself, it is hard for women to contest sexist and patriarchal readings of the Qur'an that have the weight of 1,400 years of history and tradition behind them. However, as I hope to show in this essay, the strongest argument against male privilege (patriarchy, broadly defined) may come from the Qur'an itself.

### Parameters of the workshop

In the short time available to us, we can only scratch the surface of two complex and controversial questions: why do Muslims read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text, and is it possible to read it, instead, as being liberatory for women?

Below, I provide my perspective on these questions; the case study at the end of the essay will allow participants to arrive at their own conclusions. However, before proceeding any further, I'd like to make some caveats.

### Three caveats

First, although Muslim understandings of the Qur'an impact how they treat women, this doesn't mean that all Muslims have actually read the text; indeed, most rely on a second-hand knowledge of the Qur'an's teachings that is often

infused with ideas that have no scriptural sanction.<sup>1</sup> And, of course, even those Muslims who do read the Qur'an do not always live by its teachings.

Second, in spite of the discrimination they encounter, Muslim women don't live identical lives or, for that matter, uniformly oppressed ones; nor is it right to ascribe their status in specific societies to the Qur'an alone. As many scholars<sup>2</sup> have pointed out, a whole host of factors besides religion shapes women's lives.

Lastly, it is too much of a racist stereotype to view all Muslim men as violent or to assume that only Muslims commit violence. So-called "honor" killings, for instance, are not as pervasive as the Western media would have us believe, and misogyny and violence against women persist even in the liberal and democratic societies of the West even if they take somewhat different forms.

Having said all this, I believe that one reason sexual inequality and misogyny are so prevalent among Muslims is that they are clothed in religious and scriptural language and imagery. That is why it is important to engage the Qur'an in order to challenge, and also to change, Muslim attitudes towards women.

### History, hermeneutics, and patriarchy

In large part, the reason Muslims read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text is because of how they read it. As an example, I would like to take verse 4:34 that is read as establishing men's dominion over women (I have divided it into three parts and kept some words in Arabic whose English translations I have underlined):

Men are [qawwamun ala] the protectors  
And maintainers of women,  
Because God has given  
The one more (strength)<sup>3</sup>  
Than the other, and because  
They support them  
From their means.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, many Muslims believe that the woman was created from the man's rib even though there is not a single statement to this effect in the Qur'an which says they both originated in a single nafs, or self.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, El-Sohl C. and J. Mabro, eds. Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality. Oxford: Berg, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali's use of the word "strength" is a pure interpolation since there is no word in this verse that can be translated as saying that God gave men more strength than women. Also, he leaves out the qualifying phrase "some of them over others." The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988.

Therefore the righteous women  
Are [qanitat] devoutly obedient and guard  
In (the husband's) absence  
What God would have them guard.

As to those women  
On whose part ye fear  
[nushuz] Disloyalty and ill-conduct,  
Admonish them (first),  
(Next), refuse to share their beds,  
(And last) [daraba] beat them (lightly)  
But if they return to obedience,  
Seek not against them  
Means (of annoyance).  
(4: 34, in Ali, 190).

Although qawwamun is usually translated as protector or maintainer, as Azizah al-Hibri argues, "this is not quite accurate. The basic notion involved here is one of moral guidance and caring." Even if one reads qawwamun as referring to a man's financial role in maintaining the family, such a role is contingent since it is only possible in "matters where God gave some of the men more than some of the women, and in what the men spend of their money." In light of this stipulation, it is clear that "men as a class are not 'qawwamun' over women as a class."<sup>4</sup>

Reading this verse as establishing men's superiority over women also undercuts the Qur'anic teaching that men and women are each other's awliya, meaning "'protectors,' 'in charge,' 'guides,'" according to al-Hibri. But how, she asks, can "women be 'awliya' of men if men are superior to women? ... How could women be in charge of men who have absolute authority over their lives?"

And, just as one can have different readings of qawwamun, so can one of the three other words that seem to be inimical to women: qanitat, nushuz, and daraba.

Amina Wadud, for example, maintains that nushuz refers to marital discord, not to a wife's rebellion against her husband. (This seems to be borne out by verse 4:128 that refers to a wife who fears nushuz on her husband's part.) Even if the wife initiates the nushuz, it does not follow that the Qur'an enjoins obedience to the husband. As Wadud says, it "never orders a woman to obey her husband . . . [or make it] a prerequisite for women to enter the community of Islam." That is

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<sup>4</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory," in al-Hibri, ed., *Women and Islam* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982) pp. 217-218; her emphasis

why she herself interprets qanitat as signifying an attitude of obedience on the part of all believers to God and not the wife's obedience to her husband.<sup>5</sup>

As for daraba, it too has multiple meanings, including not only "to strike," but also to "set an example," and "to separate." Moreover, it is not the same as darraba which means "to strike repeatedly or intensely."<sup>6</sup> Even if one does not agree with Wadud that the verse is "prohibiting unchecked violence" against women,<sup>7</sup> it is still worth asking why, of all the meanings of the word, Muslims have picked the worst! After all, the Qur'an also says that God created mates for us of our own natures so that we can dwell with them in love and tranquility and it counsels believers to forgive even those spouses who are their avowed enemies.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, to arrive at this different understanding of the verse, one not only needs to re-examine the meaning of isolated words, but, also to take a holistic approach to the Qur'an rather than reading it "verse-by-verse."<sup>9</sup>

One can't prove too much with just one example, but, the point of giving it is to show that words don't always have only one meaning and, like all other texts, the Qur'an also lends itself to different readings. We therefore need to ask why only anti-women readings of it have become dominant among Muslims instead of taking these readings as a natural function of the text "itself." After all, the text is dependent on us to interpret it!

In this context, one can argue that one reason Muslims have read the Qur'an as a text that privileges males is that, historically, only male exegetes living in patriarchal societies have interpreted it. In other words, patriarchal readings of the Qur'an have to do with who has read it, how, and in what specific contexts.

### The Qur'an, hermeneutics, and liberation

Many contemporary Muslim scholars read the Qur'an differently, as supporting sexual equality and, in fact, as condemning patriarchy. And they get to such a reading not just by re-interpreting specific verses, but, also by embracing a very different understanding of theology and methodology than do most Muslims. Here I will discuss my own work which is illustrative of such an approach.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Wadud, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Wadud, 77; 76.

<sup>8</sup> See 64:14; in M. Asad, *The Message of the Quran*. (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980) p. 871.

<sup>9</sup> Wadud.

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion see Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

Since Muslims regard the Qur'an as the word of God, I believe the appropriate starting point for reading it should be a theologically sound understanding of God. In other words, we should seek the hermeneutic keys for interpreting the Qur'an in the very nature of the divine being whose word we believe it is.

For instance, if the Qur'an tells us that God is just and that God's justice lies in never doing *zulm* to anyone (transgressing against their rights),<sup>11</sup> then, we should not read *zulm* into the Qur'an either. My view is that since patriarchies do in fact transgress against women's rights, reading patriarchy into the Qur'an has the effect of ascribing *zulm* to God. We should therefore be willing to rethink patriarchal readings of the Qur'an even if many Muslims accept them as true.

Similarly, if the Qur'an tells us that God is one and only God is Sovereign (the doctrine of *Tawhid*), then we cannot legitimately read the Qur'an as setting up men as sovereign over women and as intermediaries between God and women.

Likewise, if the Qur'an says that God is unlike anything created—hence beyond sex/ gender—then we should regard references to God as “He” as bad linguistic conventions rather than as accurate claims about God's being. (Men often claim privileges on the grounds that a masculinized God has some special affinity with them; however, this is an insufferable homo-social heresy that we need to reject.)

A second aspect of my hermeneutics is to read the Qur'an by means of a method the Qur'an itself suggests: to read it as a whole, to privilege its foundational ayat or verses over its allegorical ones, and to read it for its best meanings. The last is a significant injunction because it shows that we can read even God's word in less than good ways and it also places on us the moral obligation to read it for the best. (Of course, to arrive at a shared notion of the best, Muslims need to have the freedom and opportunity to debate religious meaning openly.)

Lastly, I read the Qur'an in light of a clear definition of patriarchy which I treat as a continuum at one end of which is the tradition of rule by the father/ husband, and at the other, a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males. The virtue of this definition is that it encompasses both religious and secular forms of patriarchy and allows us to explore the Qur'an's stance on both.

Using these principles I arrive at a very different--and antipatriarchal—reading of the Qur'an whose main features I can summarize as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> See Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran: A Study in Semantics*. Vol. II, (Japan: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959), p. 152.

To begin, unlike religious patriarchies, Islam does not represent God as male/Father and, in fact, it explicitly forbids sacralizing God as Father. The Qur'an also does not valorize fathers or fatherhood, in the manner of traditional and religious patriarchies. To the contrary, it repeatedly warns against "following the ways of the father,"<sup>12</sup> which we can read either literally as father's rule or more broadly and symbolically, as a blind adherence to tradition (taqlid).

The Qur'an does recognize, however, that patriarchies exist and that men are the locus of power and authority within them, and it does often address men. But, to be clear, addressing men is not the same as sanctioning patriarchy.

Significantly, far from privileging men, the Qur'an establishes men and women as ontological equals by locating their origins in the same source and reality:

Reverence  
Your Rabb [Sustainer],  
Who created you  
From a single Nafs [Self]  
Created, of like nature,  
[its] zawaj [mate] and from them twain  
Scattered (like seeds)  
Countless men and women;--  
Reverence God, through Whom  
Ye demand your mutual (rights).<sup>13</sup>

Remarkably, the Qur'an does not maintain that women and men have been given different faculties and, nor does it define men and women in terms of masculine or feminine attributes. Indeed, it does not even associate sex with gender. Thus, while the Qur'an recognizes biological differences, it does not assign them any gender symbolism. Not a single verse suggests that gender roles are a function of biology or that biological differences make women and men unequal. And, inasmuch as sex/gender do not define moral personality in the Qur'an, I believe it is misleading to ascribe sexual inequality to the Qur'an.

The Qur'an's position on sexuality is also revolutionary in that it recognizes the importance of sexual desire and the need for its fulfillment, though always within the framework of a moral sexual praxis whose standards are virtually identical for men and women. The Qur'an also does not differentiate between the sexual nature of women and men by ascribing specific types of urges to them.

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<sup>12</sup> 2:170 in Yusuf Ali, The Holy Qur'an, 67.

<sup>13</sup> 4:1; in Ali, 178.

However, it is true that the Qur'an treats women and men differently with respect to some issues and this has led most Muslims to believe that it treats them unequally. However, this is a crudely reductionist interpretation not only of the Qur'an's provisions, but, also of the concept of difference itself.

Difference is not the same as inequality and treating people differently doesn't necessarily mean treating them unequally; nor does treating them identically always mean treating them equally. Indeed, differences are sometimes essential for recognizing the sexual specificity of human beings.

Moreover, the Qur'an does not tie its different treatment of women and men to any claims about male ontological superiority or female inferiority. There is no narrative in the Qur'an that men and women are unequal or opposites, or that women are like lesser or defective men, or that the two sexes are incompatible, incommensurable or unequal, in the tradition of Western and Muslim misogyny.

In the end, the only basis on which the Qur'an differentiates between humans is on the basis of their moral praxis, and it makes clear that both women and men have the capacity for moral personality and it holds them to the same standards:

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.<sup>14</sup>

These are the reasons that I argue the Qur'an does not support either traditional or modern forms of patriarchy. Indeed, there is much in it that allows one to argue on behalf of sexual equality, which is why I think that Muslim women's movements have one of the best defenses of their cause in the Qur'an itself.

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<sup>14</sup> 33:35; in Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 1116-17.

## Case study

Given the focus of this workshop, it might be useful for you to attempt your own exegesis of a verse as a way to understand the problems and possibilities inherent in the interpretive/hermeneutic exercise. Below, are three translations of verse 2:228 that is generally read as establishing male superiority over women; after reading these translations, please address the questions that follow:

### 1. Muhammad Asad:

And the divorced women shall undergo, without remarrying, a waiting-period of three monthly courses; for it is not lawful for them to conceal what God may have created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. And during this period their husbands are fully entitled to take them back, if they desire reconciliation; but, in accordance with justice, the rights of the wives [with regard to their husbands] are equal to the [husbands'] rights with regard to them, although men have precedence over them [in this respect]. And God is almighty, wise (p. 50).

### 2. M.M. Pickthall:<sup>15</sup>

Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three (monthly) courses. And it is not lawful for them that they should conceal that which Allah hath created in their wombs if they are believers in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands would do better to take them back in that case if they desire a reconciliation. And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them. Allah is Mighty, Wise (p. 53).

### 3. Amina Wadud:

Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three (monthly) courses. And it is not lawful for them that they conceal that which Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands would do better to take them back in that case if they desire a reconciliation. And [(the rights) due to the women are similar to (the rights) against them, (or responsibilities they owe) with regard to] the ma'ruf, and men have a degree [darajah] above them (feminine plural). Allah is Mighty, Wise (pp. 68-69).

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<sup>15</sup> Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York: Mentor Books, no date.

[Ma'ruf though translated as "kindness," has wider implications says Wadud. ]

### Questions

The following questions are meant to get you to think about this verse, the larger issue of interpretation, and the role of the Qur'an in Muslim women's lives:

1. How has the word degree or "darajah" been used in this verse? That is, do you read it as a universal statement about male superiority, or a specific reference to a husband's rights? If it is the latter, what rights? What is at stake for Muslim women in reading this verse differently?
2. Say you are a Muslim woman living in a patriarchal society who reads this verse as referring to the husband's rights in a divorce. How would you defend your reading to someone who disagrees with it?
3. Given that most Muslim women are uneducated, how can they develop their own understanding of the Qur'an?
4. Can one read the Qur'an as a liberatory text in oppressive societies?
5. Would moving "beyond the text" (as some Muslims scholars have begun to advocate) be more helpful in the struggle for equality? In effect, can does religion promote "secular" values like equality?