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The Woman Question: Changing Perceptions on the Muslim Woman in the light of Modern Readings of the Qur'an

Dr. Abida Farooqui

Contemporary readings of the Holy Qur'an have challenged many of the traditional interpretations of classical exegetes, especially those pertaining to gender. This paper analyzes the methodology adopted as well as the arguments put forth by modern Islamic scholars that challenge the cavils of orthodoxy and open new perspectives on gender. The paper looks into their disagreement as well as critical engagement with the literal verse by verse interpretation of the text termed as 'atomistic' by Fazlur Rahman. (Sardar, 2011) It also explores how they create new meanings by adopting a hermeneutical and new historicist approach. While contextualizing verses and exploring the rationale behind instituting certain laws that are construed today as misogynistic, they point to the fallacy of universalizing certain practices that were specific to the context of Arabia to which the verses were revealed. The scholars taken for study are Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas and Ziauddin Sardar.

Keywords: classical exegeses, contemporary readings, androcentrism, hermeneutics

Contemporary interpretations of the Qur'an have challenged the methodology as well as the conventional interpretations put forth by classical exegetes. Ziauddin Sardar outlines the four-pronged methodology that had been used by classical commentators to read the text. The first is the notion that the Qur'an is an "integrated text" that is 'internally consistent.'" (ibid, 2011) The second is the notion that the

main source for the interpretation of the Qur'an is the Qur'an itself. The third is reliance on the life of the Prophet as the second most reliable source for interpreting the Qur'an and the fourth is validating the local customs of Mecca and Medina as authentic and universal. This paper tries to examine how modern readings problematize the traditional methodology and explore the contradictions and silences in the text that attest to the possibility of new meanings. The paper also looks into the methodology and rationale behind the modern interpretations of the Qur'an with respect to gender and the meaning they contest as well as create.

Fazlur Rahman finds fault with the traditional line-by-line interpretation which he terms as "atomistic." (ibid, 2011) His contention is that it does not do justice to the spirit of Islam and hence the need to go beyond the Sunna and see the role played by the social and historical conditions of Mecca and Medina in regimenting Islam. He finds it important to examine the customs, institutions and general way of life of Arabia and differentiate the universal and specific laws of Islam in order to do justice to the message of Islam.

Female scholars who have challenged the androcentric interpretations of the Qur'an have been labelled as Islamic feminists. Their attempts have been held circumspect by Western feminists for not conforming to their mould of feminism as well as by Islamists who allege that they are influenced by Western feminism. This is system generated file. Whatsoever, their readings hold value in the contemporary context of increased gender awareness. The readings of Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas and Ziauddin Sardar have been taken for this study. Though they differ in their readings and methodology, they unite in their purpose to offer "a reading that confirms that Muslim women can struggle for equality from within the framework of the Qur'an's teachings." (Barlas, 2002) All the scholars base their arguments on the basic assumption that the "Qur'an's epistemology is inherently antipatriarchal." (ibid, 2002)

Mernissi (1991) raises an important question about the failure of Islam to grapple with modern notions of gender while the religions of Judaism and Christianity that espoused similar ideologies succeeded in doing the same. The methodology modern Islamic scholars adopt to

reconcile the tenets of Islam with modernity is a combination of the linguistic, the hermeneutical and the new historical. The subtitle of Wadud's text *Rereading the Sacred text from a Woman's Perspective* explicitly proclaims the aim of her book. She likens her female-centric reading to "gender jihad." (Wadud, 1999) Her hermeneutical approach distinguishes between the universal and particular messages of the Qur'an and debunks the tendency to read the specific injunctions of the Qur'an as universal laws, which according to her ossifies the Qur'anic teachings depriving them of dynamism. Her deconstructive reading focuses on not just what the Qur'an says but what it does not say. In a similar vein, Asma Barlas also reads meaning into the silences in the Qur'an as the possibility of not merely consent but "opposition, resistance, neutrality, indifference, or whatever, depending on the context." (Barlas, 2002)

Wadud's hermeneutical model takes into account three aspects of the text, in order to derive new meanings: the first being the context in which the text was revealed, the second being linguistic. focussing on not merely the 'what' of the text but the 'how' it is explained and the third being its "'Weltanschauung' or world-view." (Wadud, 1999) Contemporary interpretations adopt the methodology of historicizing the teachings of the Qur'an with respect to gender and incorporating modern understanding of gender into it. Wadud identifies three ways in which the Qur'an dealt with women's issues – the first being overt prohibition with respect to the rules on infanticide, sexual abuse of slave girls, denial of inheritance to women, and so on, the second being modifications of the status quo with respect to polygamy, unconstrained divorce, conjugal violence, system generated proof copy concubinage and so on and the third of maintaining a neutral stance with regard to social patriarchy, marital patriarchy, economic hierarchy and the familial roles of men and women. (ibid, 1999) While classical exegetes have read the open-endedness of the Qur'an on matters of gender and its neutrality towards existing practices as supporting the status quo, contemporary exegetes read it as expounding gradual reform moving to egalitarianism. Asma Barlas affirms *ijtihad* (critical thinking) as a better hermeneutic method than *ijma* (blind reliance on consensus). (Barlas, 2000) Leila Ahmed (1992) reads the patriarchal injunctions of the Qur'an as having revealed at a time when

fierce misogyny was a feature of the Mediterranean and eventually Christian culture in the centuries prior to the rise of Islam. Hence “it was considered wise ... not to totally abolish some of the reprehensible traditions such as polygamy (or slavery), as there were so many difficulties involved.” (Wadud, 1999). Feminist readings read equality of men and women both at the socio cultural as well as the ethico-religious level.

Contemporary readings challenge the notion of the image of God as father which they argue had crept into Islam due to the influence of Judeo-Christian teachings. Wadud calls attention to the absence of neuter gender in Arabic language that led the references to the Creator by the pronoun ‘he.’ (ibid, 1999) She also argues that every usage of the masculine plural form is addressed to both males and females equally, unless it includes specific indication for its exclusive application to male or female.

Modern readings also contest the reigning notion of woman as inferior to man in terms of creation. The verse on the creation of man and woman “from a single nafs” point to the ontological equality of both the sexes. (The Qur’an, 4:1) The Holy Qur’an categorically rejects the Judeo-Christian notion that Eve was created from the ribs of Adam and that the sin was committed at the behest of Eve.

One of the most contested verses in the Qur’an with respect to the status of women is verse 34 of Surah Nisa’. Asma Barlas (2002) lists the different translations of the verse. While Maududi has translated it as “Men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other,” making a strong case for the superiority of males over females, Wadud is of the view that the verse simply means that men are maintainers so that women are not burdened with additional responsibilities beyond her biological function of nurture. (qtd in Barlas 2000) Barlas cites Tabari who argues that men have authority because they spend and hence the verse assumes new dimensions when women have turned from reproducers to producers system generated proof copy. Moreover, in her view this notion, that attests to the superiority of men above women is consistently contradicted by the totality of the Book that espouses the moral and the spiritual equality of both genders. The analogy of partners to

being raiment to each other points to equality. This methodology, where the meaning of one verse that seemingly contradicts the other and thereby cancels the other, opens new vistas of meaning that challenge the classical view.

Wadud (1999) categorizes female roles mentioned in the Quran into three – those specific to the socio-cultural context of the time in which the Qur'an was revealed, those that talk of the exclusively feminine function of nurturing and those that speak of non-gender specific functions. While androcentric cultures have idealized the reproductive role of woman, the Qur'an does not strictly delineate such straitjacket roles for men and women. A case in point she cites is Moses who meets two women from Madyan tending animals as against convention because there were no able-bodied men in the family. According to her, the revelation that God gave to the mother of Moses to cast the child into the river is wahy (revelation), that is normally revealed only to male prophets. The use of masculine plural form qanitin (devout) to refer to Mary elevates her above her gender, making her an example for the whole mankind. The episode in the Qur'an of a queen named Sheba ruling Yemen with sagacity and tact is an attestation that women are capable of governance and leadership. Barlas cites Al-Tabari, one of the religious authorities, who argues that this episode is a shining example to argue against depriving women of their power of administration and decision making. (Barlas, 2002)

Western narratives portray the veil as a symbol of androcentric power and exclusion of females from the public domain. In a new historicist vein, modern readings unravel the socio-cultural context in which the verse instituting the veil was revealed. They read the veil as a symbol of modesty and emphatically deny using the veil as a tool to seclude women from public life. If the veil signified manifestations of modesty in that particular context, modern readings view demonstrations of modesty as culturally and economically determined and hence variable. Mernissi (1991) proof copy tracks the descent of the verse on hijab (literally curtain) as that which was used to separate two men and not a woman and a man. She calls attention to the occasion of the descent of this verse as the wedding feast of the Prophet and Zaynab, when his friends waited longer than usual, invading his privacy and causing annoyance to the Prophet. Another argument on the veil is put

forward by Barlas (2002) that women of those times were openly invited for fornication. Hence the institution of the veil was a way of separating free women from slaves (who were sexually available) to protect them from molestation. Leila Ahmed (1992) argues that throughout Muhammad's lifetime, veiling was observed only by his wives, thereby contesting the argument that veiling has universal applicability.

Regarding the verse that treats the testimony of female witnesses as weaker, modern readings analyze the different situations in which women offer testimony. They argue that the rule which applies to female witnesses specifically while making financial transactions, was instituted at a time when women were barely involved in financial transactions. At the same time, for witnessing a divorce, two witnesses, male or female are accepted and when a husband accuses his wife of cheating, her testimony rules over his. (Sardar, 2011) Modern readings also place emphasis on the fact that women were important contributors to the verbal texts of Islam. Leila Ahmed (1992) describes them as active interlocutors rather than passive, docile followers. Aisha's testimony in transmitting the Prophet's words and deeds to posterity was never discredited on account of her gender. Aisha indignantly challenged the notion that women are religiously unclean: "You compare us now to asses and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there, proof copy lying on the bed between him and the qibla. And in order not to disturb him, I didn't move." (qtd in Mernissi, 1991). Ahmed also invites attention to the fact that Islam is the only major living religion to include women's accounts in its core religious texts.

The religious sanction to polygamy has been read by conventional exegetes as the divine law to cater to the unbridled sexuality of men. Modern readings look at the restriction of wives to four as having put a check on male guardians from unjust management of wealth of the orphaned female children under their care. The injunction to be just to wives carries the implicit sense that monogamy is preferred. Leila Ahmed (1992) reads the verse sanctioning polygamy in the light of the socio-political context of Medina where many women were rendered single due to their migration.

The analogy of woman to tilth has sparked off many extreme reactions as having commodified the woman and sanctioned sexual violence. This negative imagery has been re-read by female scholars in a positive way. For them, the imagery signifies that just like the earth, women bear fruit and hence need to be approached with love, attention and care. Asma Barlas (2002) contends that the tilth could not have signified property at a time when the notion of land as private property was alien to the Arabs. She departs from the conventional interpretation of the verse and reads the imagery of land as connoting that which is “to be protected, not destroyed or polluted.” (qtd in Barlas, 2002)

Feminist scholars also contest the conventional notion of menstruation as pollution. Sardar differentiates between the translations of Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad. While Yusuf Ali translates menstruation as pollution, for Asad, it is a vulnerable condition. (Sardar, 2011). Mernissi (1991) is of the view that Islam was reacting against the phobic behaviour of the Jewish population of Medina for whom a menstruating woman was unclean. Besides as per Islamic law, menstrual taboo extends only to intercourse; it does not forbid sexual intimacy, nor does it call for confinement of women.

Regarding the verse that purportedly sanctions beating of women, Wadud vouches for the verse to be read not as giving free rein to domestic violence, but rather “as prohibiting unchecked violence against females.” (Wadud, 1999) Hence it was not an endorsement of violence but rather a severe curtailment of existing practices. Modern exegetes are agreed upon that if the verse on wife-beating is read literally, it contradicts the Qur’anic conceptualization of the complementarity of couples as encapsulated by the imagery of being ‘raiment’ to each other. It also contradicts other injunctions of the Qur’an to husbands regarding releasing wives in a good way and providing them with alimony. Barlas (2002) argues that while mutual love and sexual fulfilment in marriage is a normative idea in recent times, it was a radical idea at that time. AI-Tabari calls attention to the fact that beating a woman was not part of the Prophet's tradition and the Prophet's view that only the worst have recourse to such violence. (Mernissi, 1991)

Contemporary readings agree on the point that man and woman, being created from a single soul are not merely sociologically but ontologically related. Wadud (1999) establishes her argument with certitude that the Qur'an does not conceive the two sexes as binaries, where the male is the Cartesian subject and the female its radical 'other.' According to Wadud, the Qur'anic view of gender transcends the conventional essentializing of genders. Having been created from a single soul, "femininity and masculinity are not created characteristics imprinted into the primordial nature of male and female persons." (Wadud, 1999) Hence gender roles are also not as rigid as is traditionally believed.

While Islam is viewed generally as a religion that restricts female freedom and while classical exegeses endorse this view, modern readings challenge this androcentric position by adopting a hermeneutical methodology in reading the Qur'an that disagree with the literal verse by verse interpretation of the Qur'an. Contemporary discourses stress the importance of the spiritual and ethical dimensions of being and the equality of all individuals, irrespective of gender. They also cite examples from history to show women's participation in public life to counter the argument that woman's place is her home. Mernissi (1991) mentions that the Prophet's wives did not see military or political problems as alien to them and were involved in larger affairs like the liberation of prisoners. She system generated proof copy also cites the example of Sukayna, the Prophet's great granddaughter who kept a clause during her marriage that her husband sticks to monogamy. Modern scholars also raise the point that while the four major schools of legal thought, that are largely in agreement with each other on many points, differ in matters pertaining to women. Leila Ahmed (1992) is of the view that it was during the Abbasid period that patriarchal notions got deeply entrenched in Islam, the era being conspicuous for female absence in the public arena. Negative representations of Islam burgeoned with the Western civilizing mission that saw the West as the direct inheritor of ancient Middle East civilizations, refusing to acknowledge the East as a visible entity. Feminist readings challenge the inaccurate colonial understanding of Islam as well as the androcentrism in classical exegesis. Ziauddin Sardar makes a valid point regarding the exegesis of the Qur'an that attributes final and definitive mean-

ings, arguing instead that interpretation is “a dynamic, living process, involving adaptation, additions, abandonment, refinement and improvement.” (Sardar, 2011) Modern readings also note the tendency of traditional exegetes to generalize the particular, thereby confusing the practices of the first Muslim community as non-historical and eternal. They are unanimous in their contention that any “society that claims to be based on God-given eternal values cannot function without wrestling with and striving to reconcile the categories of permanence and change.” (Sardar, 2011)

Leila Ahmed (1992) makes a radical distinction between modern enforcers of technical Islam and their predecessors who developed the laws being reinstituted today. While the latter strove their best to render the Islamic principles of equity and justice within their own patriarchal cultural framework, the former are trying to justify absolute forms of gender discrimination even in the context of increased awareness of human rights and gender equality. Reading against the grain has transformed the role of woman from a ‘veiled’, subordinate being to a being with agency and subjectivity. Modern exegetes regard man and woman as equals on all levels - ontologically, sociologically, morally and spiritually. Their interpretations challenge the cavils of orthodoxy and open new perspectives on gender in Islam.

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