

## MUSLIM FEMINISM – EXPERIMENTS IN LIBERATORY HERMENEUTICS

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### ***Abstract***

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainstream Muslim reformers tentatively embraced a paradigm shift, from the classical orthodox position in which the human mind simply discovers the rulings (*al-ahkam*) of divine law and extends them to new cases on the basis of consensus (*ijma'*) and analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), to a position where reason, now empowered to discern right from wrong and to ferret out the *ratio legis* behind the divine injunctions is granted the privilege and responsibility to make legal rulings according to the spirit of the *shariah*. The inadequacy of classical methods brought them to notice a paradigmatic crisis epistemological and methodological levels of the traditionist Muslim thought. The absolutist view of knowledge and consequently the ahistorical and a-empirical methodology along these two lines is spurned by them. The shift allowed ultimately a more realistic attitude of knowledge based on the constant discovery and trial. Most of these reformists, which may be classified as Critical Modernists, believe that Islamic law must be made to accommodate the sweeping changes imposed on Muslim societies in the modern period. Although most of them are conservatives in many ways, the implications of the points of theory they choose to emphasize indicate a shift in epistemology and hermeneutics. For them, the connection between the revealed text and modern society does not turn upon a literalist hermeneutic, but rather upon an interpretation of the spirit and broad intention behind the specific language of the text. This paper argues that the Muslim Feminists are a part of this stream of Critical Modernists and attempts to show that their approach, which favors the spirit of the texts over their literal reading, has become a hermeneutic of choice practiced by a wide spectrum of Muslim thinkers, the Muslim Feminists being one of those.

Muslim feminism is part of a new reformist or modernist religious thinking that is consolidating a conception of Islam and modernity as compatible, not opposed. Reformist thinkers do not reject an idea simply because it is Western, nor do they see Islam as providing a blueprint, as having an in-built programme of action for the social, economic, and political problems of the Muslim world. Following and building on the work of earlier modernist reformers

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such as Mohammad Abduh, Muhammad Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman, they contend that the human understanding of Islam is flexible, that Islam's tenets can be interpreted to encourage both pluralism and democracy, and that Islam allows change in the face of time, space and experience.<sup>1</sup> Instead of searching for an Islamic genealogy for modern concepts like gender equality, human rights and democracy, these new thinkers place the emphasis on how religion is understood and how religious knowledge is produced. Not only do they pose a serious challenge to legalistic and absolutist conceptions of Islam, they are attempting to carve a space within which Muslim women can realize gender equality in law.

### ***Classifying Feminism in the Islamic Environ***

Feminism began as a universalist belief during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term feminism is credited to Hubertine Auclert who presented the concept in 1880 in her journal, *La Citoyenne*, criticizing male domination and beginning to make claims for women's rights. The term may have originated in France and the West, but feminism is not a Western idea. Feminism has as its ultimate goal the triumphal emancipation of the woman as a unique, distinct individual with a mind uncluttered by patriarchal beliefs and an abusive submission to tradition. In its most humane sense, the concept of feminism is a conscious process of self-renewal in thought, feeling and action that aims at deconstructing and transforming the prevailing order of reality.

It was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the feminist movement emerged in the Muslim Middle East to struggle for women rights in the society. The creation of the movement started after that the middle- and upper class women had got aware about the oppression the women in the society were getting through. The aim of the middle- and upper class women was to make changes in the patriarchal state system. The Muslims feminism was not a new movement. In the beginning of the nineteenth century Islamic thinkers such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Sayyid Jamal-ad-Din Asadabadi, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Reza, Qasim Amin, and later "the Sister's movement" in the Arabic countries tried to give a

modern, liberal, reformist and feminist reinterpretation of Islam. Their ideas never became dominating in any Islamic country, but during the 1980s and 1990s, a similar tendency to reinterpret Islam in a feminist context reappeared in several Islamic countries.

By the late 1980s, a new way of thinking in the Muslim world about gender began to emerge, a discourse that is 'feminist' in its aspiration and demands, yet 'Islamic' in its language and sources of legitimacy. Several secular feminist scholars, for instance, Fatima Mernissi and Aziza Al-Hibri, who earlier criticized Islam, changed their position and tried to offer a feminist interpretation of Islam, making it quite difficult to place Muslim feminist into a 'neat' category. Some versions of this new discourse initially came to be labelled 'Islamic Feminism'<sup>2</sup> – a notion that remains contested by both the majority of Islamists and some secular feminists, who see it as antithetical to their respective positions and ideologies, and as a contradiction in terms.<sup>3</sup> Islamic feminism is both highly contested and firmly embraced.<sup>4</sup>

Jan Hjärpe, a Swedish scholar of theology separates Islamic feminism from Muslim feminism. He identifies four feminist trends in Islamic cultures: *Atheist feminism*, *Secular feminism*, *Islamic feminism* and *Muslim feminism*.

#### ***Atheist Feminism***

Atheist feminism proposes that religion per se is anti-women. They believe that women's movement could develop only by challenging the influence of religion in society.

#### ***Secular Feminism***

Secular feminists situate their calls for reform outside the religious paradigm. They are not interested so much in reforming Islam, but in promoting a secularized version of societal governance which allows for equality of men and women.

Secular feminism broadly refers to feminist movements in the Muslim world which have drawn their inspiration from Western models which view religion as part of the 'problem'. Historically, secular feminists in the Muslim world were largely drawn from the upper-middle class and include figures such as Huda Sha'wari who

founded the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women in 1914, and, who, after a visit to Rome, famously removed her face-veil after stepping off the boat in Cairo.

Secular feminists espouse a neutral view about religion. They argue that the relationship between Islam and feminism depends first and foremost on whether liberal or patriarchal view of Islam is dominant in the society. They also hold that under a theocratic government or a religious movement woman's emancipation is impossible. But they do not think that feminist movements necessarily have to attack religious beliefs.

While the secular feminists have had some success in parts of the Muslim world, however, because religion plays an important role for the vast majority of Muslim peoples, secular feminists' inability to work within the religious paradigm restricts its progress.

### ***Islamic Feminism***

Islamic Feminism is the feminist articulation of Islamism, another modern movement which rejects Westernisation and yet calls for the revival of Islamic law and practice. Specifically, the Islamists adopt a worldview in which their usually literalist interpretation of Islam is considered divinely mandated. Their approach is considered to be the only, true and infallible interpretation of Islam and to which all aspects of personal faith and societal structure should be subordinated. Islamist feminists often hold the view that Islam promotes a patriarchal structure of family and society, but which isn't inherently oppressive to women. The Muslim man is the head of the household, but he should not be a tyrant in his own home. A woman's rightful nature, according to Islamists, requires that her role is primarily that of home-maker and care-giver to children. Paid work is a secondary option which should not conflict with her primary role.

Islamism is found in the revival movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jama'at-i Islami, works of Ayatullah Mutahhari, and Islamist feminists include Zaynab al-Ghazali.

Islamic feminism is mostly state feminism, or a part of fundamentalist and religious movement, and according to this trend, women's identification with religious movements help Muslim

women's emancipation. Nesta Ramazani, an Iranian scholar, for instance, points out that women's gathering in religious mourning, their presence in Friday prayers, and their participation in revolution and war eventually will lead to their emancipation.

### ***Muslim Feminism***

Muslim feminists adopt a worldview in which Islam can be contextualized and reinterpreted in order to promote concepts of equity and equality between men and women; and for whom freedom of choice plays an important part in expression of faith. Muslim feminists cherish an essentially liberal view of Islam and try to adapt it to modern times.

Muslims feminists argue that for a long time, our imagination about Islam was dominated by a patriarchal vision of Islam, but that this is not necessarily an authentic Islam. They argue that primarily focus should be on the teachings of the Koran because much of the Hadith and the Shari'ah is a patriarchal reading of Islam. A fine distinction is thus drawn between the Qur'an which is considered by Muslims to be divinely inspired and suitable for all times, cultures and contexts, and the Shari'ah that are taken as the human fallible interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah that can be revisited and revised as society needs.

Muslim feminists argue that Islam was born into a misogynistic and patriarchal society of the pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah*. Because the Qur'an is situated firmly within a historical context, it naturally recognised and addressed this patriarchal society. Thus there is in the Qur'an a hierarchical double layer which as interpreters we must take into consideration when applying the text to our lives and our societies. They argue that the Koran introduces many powerful female figures who played important roles in Islam and in the Prophet's life, something that many of his successors did not favour. Muslim feminists point out that a liberal and feminist review of the Koran could contribute to the development of women's emancipation in the Islamic country.

These Reformists, who emerged in the closing years of the century as part of an internal response to political Islam, display a refreshing pragmatic vigour and a willingness to engage with non-religious perspectives. Though many of these scholars still avoid the term ‘feminist’ and instead call themselves Muslim women scholars or activists, they have also sheltered feminist voices and feminist scholarship, which are shifting the old and tired debate on ‘women’s rights in Islam’ onto new ground.<sup>5</sup>

***Liberatory Hermeneutics of Muslim Feminism***

Fazlur Rahman saw the key to an Islamic reformation in a new awareness of hermeneutics.<sup>6</sup> Keenly aware of the gender imbalance in traditionist interpretations of the Qur’an and Islamic law, the Muslim Feminists have created a new hermeneutic that is inclusive of the female experiences and voice; one that would yield greater gender parity to Islamic thought and practice. Rather than approaching the Qur’an in a literalist and verse-by-verse manner, they advocate reading it holistically and identifying “general principles” that may then be applied to diverse situations.<sup>7</sup> General principles or themes are regarded as means to weigh multiple interpretations and not to erect singular interpretations.<sup>8</sup>

While Muslim feminists insist that no single Qur’anic interpretation may be prefaced with “God says,” it is axial to Islam that God does speak through revelation. The modern relativism that deems all human efforts to grasp Divine messages to be as subjective and therefore as valid or invalid as all others, cripples Islam’s inherent capacity to inspire. Barlas asserts that “the interpretive process is open to question, not the revelation itself”.<sup>9</sup> What seems most significant to her mind, is the need for every individual to discover his or her meanings by exercising individual reason and intellect. By drawing inspiration directly from the Qur’an for critical engagement, she highlights that there are some 750 allusions in the Qur’an, as opposed to 260 on legislative matters, that instruct believers to “reflect and make the best use of reason” in trying to decipher its multifarious depths.

In opposition to Muslims who advocate *taqlid*, the Muslim feminists, akin to their canonical and post-canonical predecessors, argue that *ijtihad* is essential if humans are to extract from God's message guidance suited to each day and age. For instance, Barlas regards analytical reasoning as essential to Qur'anic interpretation, and like Ibn Rushd criticizes al-Ghazali, who, according to her reading, "held that real knowledge comes only through unmediated religious experiences and intuition and not through rational or philosophical inquiry".<sup>10</sup>

The Muslim feminists argue that the Muslims who abjure rational reinterpretations of the Qur'an overlook the central role that reason played in constructing classical interpretations in the first place. "Many Muslims," writes Barlas, "hold that modern readings of the Qur'an...are tainted by biases, while...they embrace the religious knowledge produced by a small number of male scholars in the classical period as the only objective and authentic knowledge of Islam".<sup>11</sup> In sum, they urge rational, up-to-date methodologies of Qur'anic interpretation, and by implication, rational approaches to living life 'Islamically'. They, however, depart from the classical modernists' trust in "the sovereignty of reason"- not by dismissing reason, but rather by demoting it from sovereignty. Reason is, in their eyes, not capable of "knowing" everything. Even if it were conceivable that a person could intellectually grasp the text in its entirety, the intellect would be several steps removed from encompassing all wisdom, for the text (*mushaf*) is not the Qur'anic discourse, and the Qur'anic discourse is not "the Archetype of the Book".<sup>12</sup>

One of the most important strategies for a feminist reading is to read what is in the text without relying on the perspectives of earlier interpreters. This means that the feminist interpreter needs to examine the text in its original language in order to arrive at meanings untainted by translations and interpretations. They tend to argue that absolutization of particular readings of scriptures has compromised the vitality of the Muslims. They stress that the Qur'an, if understood correctly, should inspire diverse visions and practices. Its message is

polysemic – possessed of multiple meanings, and, thus open to variant readings.<sup>13</sup> Even the companions of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) differed in their understandings of some verses, and as far as history recounts, the fledgling Muslim community made no effort to impose conformity on them.<sup>14</sup> A tendency exists for those in power to endorse religious teachings that perpetuate their status. In her critical assessment of patriarchal readings, Barlas asserts that the state's ongoing involvement in sustaining the hegemony of conservative interpretive communities and of religious meaning has injected coercive power into the very heart of knowledge construction in many Muslim societies.<sup>15</sup> Historically, moves toward communal solidarity and consolidated power structures have favored "restrictive modes" of Qur'anic understanding to the point that such modes have become so entrenched that today it is difficult to read the Qur'an in liberatory modes.<sup>16</sup> The difficult task of reinstituting liberatory readings is taken on by the Muslim Feminists. Barlas advocates critiquing the methods by which Muslims produce religious meaning and rereading the Qur'an for liberation endeavouring to determine whether the Qur'an teaches or condones inequality or oppression, or, conversely, permits and encourages liberation for women.<sup>17</sup>

Barlas highlights a number of conceptual dilemmas, the most endemic being a philosophical clash between the Qur'an as revelation - Divine Discourse, and as text - a discourse fixed in writing and interpreted by humans in a time/space continuum. A conundrum perpetually facing interpreters is how to safely infer meaning from the Qur'an without reading into the text too much. Although this seems to be an interpretive issue irrespective of whether the interpreters are male or female, Barlas ascribes a large portion of the blame to patriarchal readings that absorbed many norms that are labeled as "Islamic" to Qur'anic teachings. The failure to "connect God to God's speech", she avers, has resulted in blurring the principle of God's Unity or *tauhid* and has inevitably engendered a disjuncture between Islam in theory and Islam in practice. Her most scathing critique of male interpretations is their inadequate linkage of the Qur'an's contents within the context of their revelations. According to Barlas,



the assimilation of the commentaries and the commentaries upon commentaries of the Qur'an (*tafsir*) became secondary religious texts that enabled the "textualization of misogyny in Islam".

Amina Wadud, ardent to explore the reasons why the Qur'an uses gendered words differently – referring sometimes to males only, sometimes to females only and at other times referring to both females and males, endeavours to read Qur'an "as it is" in her *Qur'an and Woman*.<sup>18</sup> A further facet of reading the Qur'an "as it is" is to read individual verses or parts of verses as parts of a holistic text rather than reading it in an 'atomistic' manner taking verses in isolation without due regard for the overall morality of the Qur'an. While internal consistency is not a new concept in Qur'anic interpretation,<sup>19</sup> this concept had not been adequately employed in feminist readings. Moreover, often fragments of verses are used to imply a general principle when, in fact, the fragments are parts of verses that relate to specific questions. One of Amina Wadud's objective is to establish some form of definitive criteria for evaluating the extent to which the position of women in Muslim cultures accurately mirrors the actual Qur'anic intentions for women. In *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Wadud convincingly argues against a monolithic, misogynist interpretation and attempts to distil the language and meaning of Qur'anic statements within a framework that underscores the inherent universalism of Islam.

According to Wadud, male restrictive readings have failed to distinguish the specific within the Qur'an which causes them to overstress some verses while de-emphasizing their full contexts. She reproaches the traditionist male ulema for ignoring the doctrine of the Qur'an's universalism which they themselves profess, while adhering to a "unicultural perspective" of the Holy Prophet's community - a view that, according to her, "severely limits the application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself".<sup>20</sup> She also questions the canonization of readings generated over a thousand years ago in the name of sacred history which limits the built-in flexibility within Islam that encourages adaptation. For Amina

Wadud, the relevance of the Qur'an can only be maintained through a continued process of re-interpretation and re-evaluation by each new generation of Muslims.

An oft quoted example of such use of verse fragments is the *darajah* question. The word *darajah* refers to a degree or a level and is used in different contexts in the Qur'an. For example, one striving in the way of God with one's wealth and person obtains a *darajah* (4:95) above others. Similar is the case of one migrating for the sake of God (9:20). The word becomes contentious in the context of 2:228 – 'men have a degree over them (women)'. This fragment is often used to argue that men are superior to women and have been granted more, intellectually, physically, morally, etc., by God than women. However, the meaning of the fragment becomes clearer when it is placed within the context of the whole verse:

Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what God has created in their wombs, if they have faith in God and the Last Day. And their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period, if they wish for reconciliation. And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (or advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.

The Muslim Feminists point out that the verse is not making a general statement about the relative position of men to women but is referring to a particular instance in the context of divorce.

Another familiar example is the variegated nuances of the expression "*qawwamun*" (4: 34). Al-Hibri refers to old Arabic dictionary definitions and concludes that the definitions are varied, some open to hierarchical authoritarian interpretations, some not. *Qawwamun* can also mean "providers of guidance." However, hierarchical authoritarian interpretations appear to have prevailed as meanings were colored by jurists' own authoritarian perspectives.<sup>21</sup> Farida Bennani argues that *qawwamun* refers to a duty, and not

leadership or control. She argues that the word *qawwamun* is derived from the root *qwm* which means “to stand up,” “to take care of,” or “to guard.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, a husband is a servant to his family, and not the leader of his family. Amina Wadud-Muhsin argues that *qiwamah* is the responsibility of a man during the time his wife bears a child. She argues that a woman deserves *qiwamah* in a mutually dependent relationship where she chooses to take on child-bearing as her primary responsibility.<sup>23</sup> She deserves physical protection and material sustenance; otherwise, it would be a serious oppression against the women. The verse, according to her line of reasoning, refers to the responsibilities where marital partners decide to undertake different roles within the marriage.

Constant recourse to the moral-ethical framework of the Qur'an has been an important strategy for feminist interpretations of Islamic scripture. Developing an understanding of the moral-ethical imperatives of the Qur'an is argued by the Muslim Feminists to be an important guide in the interpretation of any Islamic scripture or the understanding of any Muslim problem. That these imperatives encourage towards gender equality is clear. According to Leila Ahmed, the Qur'an displays a tension between ‘pragmatic’ and ‘ethical’ perspectives as far as the position of women is concerned. She contends that the pragmatic perspective was context-bound and the ethical perspective is the one that should persist and determine gender relations.<sup>24</sup> Asma Barlas in her book, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, also points to what she terms a lack of “a creative synthesis of Qur'anic principles” as a result of the failure to recognise the Qur'an's textual and thematic holism.

The Muslim feminists also suggest that to understand the Qur'an, one must place its pronouncements within their historical context. They call on Muslims to distinguish clearly between normative Islam and historical Islam. They argue that believers of all kinds envisage the question of meaning not from the angle of unchanging transcendence—that is, of an ontology sheltered from all historicity—but in the light of historical forces that transmute the most sacred

values, those regarded as most divine by virtue of their symbolic capital and as inseparable from necessarily mythical accounts of the founding, and from which each ethnocultural group extracts and recognizes what it calls identity or personality. Mahnaz Afkhami, a vocal advocate of revision of the andocentric interpretations of the Qur'an asserts that "the original Word of God is infinite in depth and scope and hence ... applicable to evolving situations."<sup>25</sup> The Qur'an, according to the Muslim feminists, is not only polysemic but is also organic and responsive. It qualifies as an "interactive medium," if one accepts Barlas' suggestion that a comment by the Prophet's wife Umm Salama shifted Qur'anic discourse towards greater gender-inclusivity.<sup>26</sup>

Also advocated is a second facet of "historicization," which involves adapting Qur'anic guidance for the current era. In the rare passages that refer directly to legislative issues, for instance, the Qur'an displays a situational character. Qur'anic legislative intent should, therefore, be extracted on the basis of *ratio legis* (the principle of the law). If a time comes when legislation does not faithfully and correctly realize the *ratio*, the law needs to be changed or re-interpreted. The dual processes of historical contextualization have been termed by Barlas as "reading behind the text" and "reading in front of the text".<sup>27</sup> In the first process, one moves from the concrete case treatments of the Qur'an-taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account-to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. In the second, there is a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining. Employing Fazlur Rahman's historicist approach is at once part of the theory of the nature of the Qur'an as text and a strategy within a feminist method. The case of women's witness in credit transactions<sup>28</sup> is a good example of how his approach is useful in arriving at meaning for the Qur'an in new contexts and how this can be useful for a feminist hermeneutic.

Within modernist movements, tensions frequently develop between, on the one hand, the aspiration to accommodate pluralistic,

multifaceted visions, and practices and accepting the existence of different values, commitments, and rationalities,” and, on the other hand, the pull toward the conflation of... different values and rationalities in a totalistic way, with a strong disposition to their absolutisation.<sup>29</sup> Such tensions are evident in the Muslim Feminists’ accounts of historical and contemporary developments in Qur’anic interpretation. The methodology that the Muslim feminists appear to propose for Qur’anic interpretation are remarkable for maintaining pluralism and eschewing absolutism, while also honoring the original Qur’anic discourse as an absolute that prevents pluralism from becoming unprincipled relativism.

***Limitations of the Muslim Feminist Hermeneutical Attempts***

The limitations of Muslim Feminism in its present phase are poignantly underlined by an interesting article by Anne Sofie Roald. She notes that Christian feminist theologians such as Rosemary Reuther, Phyllis Bird and Elisabeth Shussler Fiorenza “are part of an established scientific tradition within Christian theology.” This is a historical-critical method which allows them to “perceive the Bible as written by human beings and in particular by men.” This is “an assumption which is not possible in an Islamic exegesis.” The Muslim feminist theologians seek to evaluate Islamic sources, criticize the interpretation of Islamic sources, and stress the equality of men and women in the Quran. Their method concentrates mainly on textual analysis and thus works methodologically in search of evidence to establish laws and regulations suitable for modern society. Roald concludes that “The interpretation of the Islamic sources by women is a new project and the next decades will show us whether this project has any future.”

As an ideology, policy, and social movement, feminism generally has been connected to secularism. It is not surprising that many secular feminists found Islam to be a major opponent for the feminist movement. For example, Shahrazad Mojab and Haiddeh Moghissi, two Iranian secular feminists, argue that Islam is a challenge to feminism. Mojab argues that from an initial total rejection of Islam, feminism has moved towards a more sophisticated

readjustment. According to Mojab, Muslim feminism is not a serious challenge against patriarchy and it is still far from independence, secularism, and democracy. She sees the Muslim feminist movement as more of a compromise with patriarchy than a realistic movement for the emancipation of women.

It can be claimed that liberal and milder interpretations of Islam, which try to distance themselves from traditional Islam's misogynist rules and accept gender equally, can improve the status of women in Islamic countries to a certain degree. But Question is to what degree a liberal review of Islam can improve women's rights. The experience of political Islam shows the difficulties of compromise between Islam and feminism.

A lack of consensus is evident even among Muslim feminist authors in their views regarding how the values and ideals put forward in the Qur'an can be translated into society while also retaining their foundation in sacred discourse. Arkoun writes,

Contemporary exegesis offers another example of the semantic disorder and dangerous confusion about the Qur'an and what can be deduced from it in the current context of ideologies of liberation. This kind of exegesis leads one to forget the primary function of revelation: to reveal meanings without reducing the mystery...with an infinite capacity to signify things, including the truth of being.<sup>30</sup>

One may wonder whether Barlas's exegesis is not of the kind to which Arkoun takes exception. Her analysis of the story of Ibrahim and the Divine command to sacrifice his son casts light on Qur'anic portrayals of patriarchal authority.<sup>31</sup> But doesn't such one-pointed analysis obscure broader themes of the story, such as trust, humility, and sacrifice, that have more far-reaching potentials to ameliorate oppression in all its forms rather than just its patriarchal forms? There is always an apprehension that the urge to re-examine Qur'anic teachings in liberatory modes may put the Qur'an at the service of liberation, rather than freeing humans to receive from the Qur'an its own liberating message.

A critical question that Muslim Feminists fail to readily answer is: whose truth is believable and upon which criteria is it based? For dissent to be meaningful, it must contend with some discursive framework it seeks to counter. There will always be various interpretations of the religious texts. While admitting that contemporary readings of the Qur'an, especially those by women, run the risk of immediate dismissal, they still insist that applying new insights to read the Qur'an is both unavoidable and justifiable. In spite of the stated advantages of female readings of the Qur'an, it is also conceivable that a reformist or woman-centric interpretation of religious scriptures and laws risks being marginalized as yet another deviant version of Islam. Though Riffat Hassan avers that "ijtihad is open to all who have knowledge of religious matters" it remains, at best, a normative statement, not a social reality.<sup>32</sup> Given the currently used interpretive framework, feminist interpretations are not accepted as authoritative by the majority of the Islamic scholars and might fail to garner support from the Muslim community.

The main problem with interpretation as the only or even the central tool of women emancipation is that, as many scholars have noted, "Islam has been used in so many contradictory ways that one cannot accept, as both orthodox and orientalists have, a monolithic definition of this religion."<sup>33</sup> The Muslim Feminist interpretations of Islam can add to the already bewilderingly diverse spectrum of interpretations, each claiming to be the true interpretation. Consequently, Islam itself can become more fragmented until the point where it will be difficult to know which brand of Islam to subscribe to.

### ***Conclusion***

There is "a serious need for constructive and bold humanism that would restate Islamic social ideals in order to back up this new legislation."<sup>34</sup> Any reading of the Qur'an is nothing more than an attempt to approximate the essence of the Qur'an. While the Qur'an distinguishes between itself and its exegesis, subjectivity, in and of itself, does not rule out the possibility of saying something essentially true.<sup>35</sup> The interpretative strategies that the Muslim feminists appear

to propose, attempt to reform Islamic approaches to the Qur'an in ways consistent with the modern value of pluralism. At the same time, they avoid casting the Qur'an as one more random phenomenon in a relativistic universe. They suggest an appreciation of pluralism that does not descend into an absolutist insistence on relativism.

The feminist voices and the reformist Islam, of which they are a part and the idea of developing a Muslim feminist hermeneutic, though still in a formative phase, are in a unique position to bring about a much needed paradigm shift in Islamic law and should be studied with seriousness. Their hope of redressing the gender inequalities in orthodox interpretations of the Shari'ah depends on the balance of power between neo-traditionists and modernists and their ability to engage with the advocates of each discourse. The Muslim feminist hermeneutics may need more thinking and writing before clearly usable and acceptable strategies can be developed.

### References

1. For the textual genealogy of this thinking, see Charles Kurzman (ed.) *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
2. The term was coined by expatriate Iranian Feminists in the early 1990s to describe a new discourse among believing women in the Islamic Republic of Iran, who put their ideas in print in a magazine called *Zanan* (Women).
3. There is now a growing literature on Islamic Feminism; see, for instance, Haleh Afshar, *Islam and Feminism : An Iranian Case Study* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998); Margat Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What is in a Name", in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 569, pp. 17-23, January 2002; Elizabeth Fernea, *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Idem, *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Ziba Mir Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Parvin Paidar, *Gender of Democracy: The*



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*Encounter between Feminism and Reformism in Contemporary Iran* (Geneva: UNRISD, 2001); Anne Sofie Roald, *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (London: Routledge, 2001); Abida Samiuddin, R. Khanam, *Muslim Feminism and Feminist Movement: Africa*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Global Vision Publishers, 2002); Mai Yamani, Andrew Allen, *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Leila Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

4. Margot Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What is in a Name", in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 569, pp. 17-23, January, 2002.
5. A large majority of them have focused their scholarship on Quranic interpretation, see, for instance; Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Riffat Hassan, "Feminism in Islam" in *Feminism and World Religions* (eds.). Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Haifa A. Jawad, *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Mail Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* tr. by Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishers, Co., 1991); Amina Wadud, Amina Wadud-Mohsin, *Quran and Women* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1992).
6. For instance, see, Kemal A. Faruki, *Islamic Jurisprudence* (Karachi: Pakistan Publishing House, 1962); Rashid Ahmad Khan, *Islamic Jurisprudence* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1978).
7. Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 8.

8. Barlas posits three recurring concepts to be used as a backdrop for understanding "God's Self-Disclosure, Divine Unity, Justness, and Incomparability". Ibid., p. 13.
9. Ibid., p. 34.
10. Ibid., pp. 15, 80.
11. Ibid., p. 24.
12. Ibid., pp. 34, 39. See also, Mohammad Arkun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* tr. and ed. by Robert D. Lee (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 38.
13. Barlas, "Believing Women", p. 5.
14. Ibid., p. 35. See also, Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 144.
15. Barlas, "Believing Women", p. 88.
16. Ibid., p. 63.
17. Ibid., pp. 1, 4.
18. Amina Wadud and Amina Wadud Muhsin, *Quran and Women* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1992), p. 6.
19. *Tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* or exegesis of the Qur'an by the Qur'an.
20. Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women*, p. 8.
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27. Ibid., pp. 22-23, 25.

28. *The Holy Quran*, 2: 282.
29. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), pp. 591-611.
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31. Ibid., pp. 115-116.
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34. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 5.
35. *The Holy Quran*, 2: 79.