

At the Crossroads of Islamic Feminism: Negotiating the gender politics of identity

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The Emergence of the Female Muslim Scholar/Activist

Perhaps more than any other time in history, Muslim women today are directly engaged in the process of questioning Islamic precepts and socio-political values. One of the crucial strategies being employed in this arena is the alternative exegesis of the Qur'an from a woman's perspective. By readdressing the prevailing patriarchal paradigms within Islam, these courageous Muslim scholars hope to develop a more autonomous and authentic female Islamic identity, fostered on increasing women's rights and fully incorporating the stature of Muslim women in Islam. Their theoretical and ethical debate differs from the revivalist male perspectives, by recognizing women as active partners in the reinterpretation process.

In a parallel vein, there is a small but significant movement of women in modern Turkey who have adopted the veil

as the symbol of their Islamic identity and accepted it as the public face of their revivalist position. For them the veil is a liberating and not an oppressive force. In the context of the prevailing social structures that shape women's lives, the veil is a means of bypassing sexual harassment and "gaining respect". But the fact remains that in Turkey, the headscarf is officially banned in public offices and universities, by way of a constitutional law since the 1980's.¹ With an interesting twist, the Turkish context represents the veiling movement as an outcome of a new, more literal interpretation of Islam by highly educated and politicized Muslim women whose recently acquired visibility and strongly articulated identity is challenging preconceived cultural, religious, and political realms.



**It was not God who wronged them,
 But they wronged their own souls
 The Qur'an (30:9)**

A Dual Debate

As the discussion above suggests, women in the Muslim world

today are fighting two different pressures: one stemming from the internal patriarchal system of scripture and law and the other emitted by external societal forces threatening national, religious and cultural boundaries. This paper delves deeper into the growing phenomenon of “Islamic feminism,” a movement of women who are maintaining their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam in both theory and practice. To provide an analytical framework, two distinct camps of Muslim women will be compared and contrasted: the Muslim women attempting to reinterpret the Qur’an from a female perspective and the Muslim women in Turkey demanding the right to wear the headscarf. Both groups of women profess similar ideals, motives and beliefs – namely freedom of choice and a full exercise of identity – however, they differ in their methodologies, which may or may not produce identical results. The following analysis reveals the varying perspectives of both groups of women and the underlying dynamics and tensions produced by intermingling these comparative models in both concept and reality.

The Female Hermeneutics—a theoretical model

The rereading of the Qur’an is a central project of some Islamic feminists, whose own religious convictions are spurring renewed inquiries regarding women’s role in the Islamic discourse. Fully aware of the high stakes in combating male dominated readings of the Qur’an, without any sanctioned interpretive authority, they are bravely attempting to break the monopoly on religious knowledge, traditionally assigned as a male epistemic privilege in Islam. While it seems inconclusive and controversial if Muslim women share the interpretive space with men, such a dialogue has never been more urgent, although it remains largely one-sided. Nevertheless, a concerted effort to provide fresh interpretations of the Qur’an in

order to present a balanced, nuanced and ultimately more accurate rendition that illuminates its hidden depths and enhances the full relevance of the text is currently under way. The fundamental premise is to challenge laws and policies that are based on orthodox, literalist or misogynist interpretations and in doing so, allow women to seek liberation within an Islamic framework. Primarily, it is a matter of Muslim women seeking to exercise their God given rights within Islam, to use their full intellectual capacity (aqal), and to remove the male bias of an inherently gender neutral faith. The ensuing discussion elaborates on this challenge by examining the work of two prominent Muslim women scholars, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, who are engaged in the complex task of reinterpreting the Qur’an from a female perspective.

Reading as a Female

The great Muslim jurist Umar ibn al Khattab, known for the accuracy of his judgment, allegedly made a mistake in his interpretation that caused him to be corrected by a woman in his assembly: “Commander of the believers! Why do you deny us a right granted to us by God?” was her simple plea.² There is little doubt that Asma Barlas would join the same chorus today. In her recent book, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, the Pakistani scholar/professor points to the lack of “a creative synthesis of Qur’anic principles” as a result of the failure to “recognize and link the Qur’an’s textual and thematic holism”.³ Her most scathing critique of male interpretations is their inadequate linkage of the Qur’an’s contents within the context of their revelations.⁴ 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”.⁵ As a result, she

argues, the blurring of the Qur'an with its tafsir has eclipsed the sacred message of the Qur'an itself and continues to perpetuate the confusion of Islam with gender oppression.

In her critical assessment of patriarchal readings, Barlas highlights a number of conceptual dilemmas, the most endemic of which is 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).⁶ The conundrum routinely 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 for both male and female interpretations, Barlas subscribes a large portion of the blame to patriarchal readings that absorbed the many norms that are labeled as "Islamic" to Qur'anic teachings. The failure to "connect God to God's speech" she claims, has resulted in blurring the principle of God's Unity or Tawhid and inevitably produced the disjuncture between Islam in theory and Islam in practice.⁷

While Barlas readily acknowledges that multiple meanings of the Qur'an are a natural consequence of its numerous layers, she also points to the Qur'anic emphasis on reading the text as "a cumulative, holistic process".⁸ What seems most significant to her mind, is the need for every individual to discover his or her own meanings by exercising individual reason and intellect. By drawing inspiration directly from the Qur'an for critical engagement, she notes 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.⁹ As a "believing woman" Barlas is primarily interested in challenging the assumption that only men seem to have the authority to dictate what God really means. But she is quick to add that patriarchal readings can be derived by both men and women by

devaluing the female perspective. She also concentrates not only on what the Qur'an says but also on what it does not say, thus viewing silence as symbolically suggestive.

Reading for Liberation

Keenly aware of the gender imbalance in the prevailing male dominated interpretations of the Qur'an, Amina Wadud, has also created a new hermeneutics that is inclusive of the female experiences and voice; one that would yield greater gender parity to Islamic thought and practice. One of her goals is to establish some form of definitive criteria for evaluating the extent to which the position of women in Muslim cultures accurately (or not) mirrors the actual Qur'anic intentions for women. The need to validate the female voice and bring it out of the shadows is an essential part of her mission. 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 distill the language and meaning of Qur'anic statements within a more balanced framework that underscores the inherent universalism of Islam.

According to Wadud, male restrictive readings have failed to distinguish the general from the specific within the Qur'an which causes them to elevate some ayat above others while de-emphasizing their full contexts. She blames the conservative male ulama for ignoring the doctrine of the Qur'an's universalism, which they themselves profess, while adhering to a "unicultural perspective" of the Prophet's community, a view that "severely limits the application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself".¹⁰ In addition, she questions the canonization of readings generated over a thousand years ago in the name of sacred history which possibly leads to a redemptive future and limits the built in flexibility within Islam that encourages adaptation. For Wadud, the relevance of the Qur'an can only be maintained through a continual process of

re-interpretation and re-evaluation by each new generation of Muslims.¹¹ In this way, she aims to foster a perennial system of checks and balances to measure the applicability of Qur'anic theory with practice.

Implications of the female hermeneutical model

While no reading of the Qur'an (male or female) can ever be wholly conclusive or objective, subjectivity, in and of itself, does not rule out the possibility of saying something essentially true. However, the question that both Barlas and Wadud fail to readily answer is: whose truth is believable and upon which criteria is it based? 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. Since Islam is not bound by space, time or context, it should also be possible to question how and if the Qur'an's teachings address and accommodate ideas that are compelling in this day and age. For dissent to be meaningful, it must contend with some discursive framework it seeks to counter. According to Asma Barlas, the failure to distinguish religion and religious knowledge, as well as to register the ways in which the later changes, is the most troublesome issue for Muslim revivalists, male or female. Despite 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 version of Islam. Consequently, Islam itself can become more and more fragmented until the point where it will be difficult to know which brand of Islam to subscribe to—be it patriarchal, matriarchal, traditionalist, neo-traditionalist, modernist, post-modernist, none or all of the above. With a colorful palette ranging from political, militant, to spiritual and Sufi variations, Islam has never

suffered from a dearth of interpretations. Will the female model add one more voice to this chorus? How can this feministic *ijtihad* continue without forsaking the essential unity of Islam?

It is worth noting that treating men and women differently does not always amount to treating them unequally, nor does treating them identically necessarily mean treating them equally. Both Barlas and Wadud would concur in the end that a reading of the Qur'an, no matter how good, is just a reading that attempts to approximate the essence of the Qur'an. This may be why the Qur'an distinguishes between itself and its exegesis, by condemning those "who write the Book with their own hands, and then say: 'This is from God'". (2:79; in Ali, 38)¹² Perhaps more acrimonious critics of women scholars such as Wadud and Barlas engaged in the reinterpretation of the Qur'an, will allege that their achievements obscure the political, ideological and religious differences among Muslim women and mask the valiant efforts of socialists, democrats and other feminists striving towards modernism and progress. But their argument is significantly weakened by the alternative comparative scenario of Turkish women activists who are aiming to advance Islamic causes within a secular framework.

Turkish women/activists - a real world model

At first glance, it seems highly anomalous why women living in a country shrouded in the motto of secularism have begun demanding the right to wear the Islamic headscarf which is officially banned in Turkey. In 1937, when the Turkish state was declared constitutionally secular, religious institutions were completely dismantled with state institutions extending surveillance over religious matters.¹³ While Turkish secularism did initially improve the status of women by granting them more rights and increasing their stature in society, it also paved the way

for Islamist opposition. This is precisely what happened when the dispute over the headscarf ban flared up en masse during the mid 1980's and continues to be the source of fierce political/religious debate today. For the first time in the Turkish Republic's history, the majority view which equated Islam with women's "imprisonment" at home is being challenged by the appearance of highly educated, elite, politicized and religiously oriented women espousing an "Islamic way of life" and a full assertion of their God given rights, through open demonstrations, hunger strikes and political rallies in which they effectively employ the weapons and tactics of modern democracy to redefine gender roles.

Interplay of similar elements

1. Redefining gender roles

Turkish women advocating the right to wear the veil are looking outside the scriptures (having taken them at face value) and concentrating their efforts in battling a state hegemony that restricts their rights to choose freely. In this context, veiling is a political statement to redefine gender roles whose contemporary actors are university students, government officials, future intellectuals and professionals, not marginal, uneducated, frustrated groups. In a similarly inclined mode, the women interpreting the Qur'an are above all advocating an enlightened female identity that surpasses the clutches of male ordained thought and regulations. By approaching the discourse of change from inside the realm of Islamic scriptures, they are essentially attempting to liberalize women through a structural and theoretical rereading of the Qur'an that will revitalize outdated paradigms and unshackle the male control in the field of religious knowledge.

2. Blurring the contours of traditionalism/modernism/ secularism

In Turkey, the veiled, educated woman appears to be a walking paradox, for she

doesn't quite fit the Turkish concept of modernity that equates education with enlightenment and a release from the conservatism of Islamic religion and traditions. What some critics fail to notice is that veiling in the Turkish case is not simply an act of religious zeal but firmly rooted in liberal concepts where gender discrimination and the equality of rights are mantras for social change. As stated by Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle, "it can be said the questions of women, modesty and sexuality are discerned and problematized by the contemporary Islamist movements, more as a result of critical dependence on modernity rather than of loyalty to Islamic religion".¹⁴ In a unique way, the conflict over the veil in Turkey exemplifies the convergence of secularism, modernism and Islamism. Though it is important to detect that none of these ideologies exist in complete isolation but in fact, borrow freely from intersecting precepts. The Turkish women's defense of the veil is based on values related to personal and moral dignity, professional ambitions and an urge to reach emancipation from patriarchal, social and institutional pressures, all of which are a blend of traditional/modern/secular principles. The women scholars rereading the Qur'an are also blurring these distinctions by upholding intersecting values linked to individual freedom, religious virtue and system change.

3. Playing with the private/public divide

Turkish veiled women are not simply passive conveyers of their provincial cultures. They are rather active and self-asserting women who demand access to the public domain within an encapsulated existence construed according to the principles of the Islamic faith. By adopting the scarf, they attempt to update or revive Islamic virtues and merge them with the economic and educational opportunities open to women within the modern setting. Their entry into the public sphere is not at the periphery,

where traditions prevail, but in the urban settlements and universities, where modernism flourishes. In this process of “emancipation”, veiling acts as a regulator of space, where the private sphere merges with the creation of a secure public arena bolstered by faith. In a similar vein, Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud are also smudging these spatial distinctions. By looking inside the Scriptures for religious innovation, their mission is to construct a blueprint for action in the public spaces that affect the lives of Muslim women. The need to reinstate the woman as an educational agent, both in the mosque and the public university, one who will outline her own priorities and define her own boundaries, is an essential narrative of the transitivity of public/private spaces.

Comparative Tensions

A rise in religious consciousness and social awareness does not undermine the secular structure of a regime, nor does it dismantle the edifice of religious scriptural knowledge. As an example of how an Islamic opposition by women may integrate itself into a modern secular system, Turkey remains a fascinating case study. It is also important to note that for Turkish women activists, a true reconciliation will only be achieved when Islamic values, enshrined in the Qur’anic principles of social justice and equal rights, are not banned from the political realm by a staunch hold on secularism, but also respected and incorporated into the public sphere as a legitimate voice. It is this same voice that women like Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud are attempting to reclaim—a distinctively female voice that also hints at universality, with shades of nuance, balance and dignity that only seek to re-align the power imbalance between male/female, authoritarian/democratic dichotomies.

Islam and Feminism

Both groups of women in this comparative analysis are working within systems that marginalize them to disentangle language, religion, gender and politics, and in the process, becoming publicly visible and

audible. Their brand of feminism is an attitude, a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in seeking social justice. But feminism mingled with Islam is not a coherent identity, rather a contingent, contextually determined, strategic form of self-positioning. Hence the term, “Islamic feminism” invites a double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith based position and on the other hand, to women’s rights both inside and outside the home. It is a living ideology that bridges Islam with activism thereby creating a new female identity that celebrates multiple belongings - be it religious scholar, political activist, university student, or a veiled Minister of Parliament.

The current discourse of Muslim women scholars/activists, through a gradual progression from awareness to rejection to empowerment, is equally challenging the patriarchal values within nationalist and religious ideologues that limits women’s full agency. Despite their different methodologies, both sides or both feminist interpretations agree on the importance and urgency to elevate and liberate Islam from a legacy of patriarchy and oppression, on both theoretical and practical levels. However, in striving for that elusive plane of harmony where Islam is essentially based on a private contract between the individual and God, they still have to grapple with the cultural conundrums and societal values in which they live. But this is the female jihad: to project voices for justice and freedom as public intellectuals, as women and as human beings.

Repositioning the debate

While there is no denying that women in any society are potent symbols of national, cultural and religious identities, it is equally important to critically examine the ways in which they are working to achieve the delicate balance between a private and public identity or alternatively between self and society. The problem is that Muslim feminists who condemn Islam as a patriarchy, both through the male bias in religious texts and in

governing structures such as the case of Turkey, cannot easily escape the male dominated confines because they are so deeply imbedded in Muslim culture and society. At best, they can try to work within these limitations by carving out their own space in the public sphere of discourse and action. As a poignant reminder, only during the hajj do gender differences seem to momentarily disappear: men and women circumambulate the Ka'aba, all dressed in the same simple white cloth. The fact that Muslim women from all walks of life and every persuasion dress exactly the same way as men and participate equally with them shows the

inherent democratic and egalitarian spirit of Islam that is in such desperate need of reviving. As illustrated in both comparative models, Muslim women scholars/activists, as modern day Crusaders, are courageously embarking on this momentous journey, however, the success of their campaigns remains a work in progress.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program on Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

¹ Ozdalga Elisabeth. *The Veiling Issue, Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 21, (Curzon Press) 1998.

² Webb Gisela. *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar Activists in North America*, p. 100, (Syracuse University Press) 2000.

³ Barlas Asma. *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, p. 8, (University of Texas Press) 2002.

⁴ Ibid, p.9

⁵ Ibid, p.15

⁶ Ibid, p. 10

⁷ Ibid, p. 13

⁸ Ibid, p. 18

⁹ Ibid, p. 22

¹⁰ Wadud Amina. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, p. 6, (Oxford University Press) 1999.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 17

¹² Yusuf Ali Abdullah, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary*, 2nd. U.S. ed. (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qu'an, 1998)

¹³ Ozdalga Elisabeth. *The Veiling Issue, Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 33, (Curzon Press) 1998

¹⁴ Gole, Nilufer. *The Forbidden Modern*, p. 49, (University of Michigan) 1996.