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Women's status in Islamic texts and feminist interventions

Before any fruitful discussion on feminist readings of Islamic texts can be had, it is necessary to define what we mean by "text," "sacred text," and what texts specifically we are talking about. The Qur'an begins with the following letters: Alif, Lām, Mīm (Sūrat al-Baqarah 2: 1). These letters (muḥaṭṭā'āt) are still today a mystery in regards to their meaning, yet they form the first verse of Sūrat al-Baqarah, the longest of the suras, and, apart from the opening, Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, the first. Disregarding these, the first verse reads: "This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah" (Sūrat al-Baqarah 2: 2). Clearly, it is of importance that the Qur'an is introduced as an authoritative text. Indeed, throughout this sura and others, it is said time and again; this is the undeniable word of God. This, of course, makes the text both religious and sacred, which relies on generally held belief. However, as emphasized by Jonathan A.C. Brown (2009), Associate Professor of Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations at Georgetown University, you cannot look at the Qur'an as a book of law.

Even as it is considered a religious text, one must define what "text" in itself means, in the context of the Qur'an and ḥadīth. The Qur'an is of course not (only) meant to be a text, to be read. It is a recitation, and above all, a revelation; existing with or without the written words. "Text" then could be defined as that which carries a message, or meaning. It "can be read" in that it can be interpreted. Qur'an, ḥadīth, oral history, tradition, jurisprudence, sunnah, etc. are all texts in this manner. A clear example is shari'ah, which is not a literal text, you cannot go to a book store and ask for a copy of shari'ah law, but it still functions as one; it is interpreted and referenced as if it was a literal text. Take ta'zīr, which are punishments that are not prescribed in either Qur'an or ḥadīth. Is it text? If not, how is it read, and derived? Going even further, even things such as ijtihād, meaning independent reasoning on a religious legal issue, and

‘ijma, meaning consensus on a religious legal issue - both bases for Islamic jurisprudence - can be seen as texts, carrying meaning and the ability to be interpreted.

Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Abdullah Saeed (2006) discusses “text” as an approximation, and refers to different types of text as Qur’ānic classifications. This shows how not all Qur’ānic text can be treated the same way. Without going into the different ways of classifying the texts, one example of how texts differ in the way they should be treated is texts related to “Paradise.” In order to think about “Paradise,” we use “popular, religious, and historical narratives and our imagination” (Saeed 2006, 91), which may have little to do with “the reality” of Paradise. “In this type of text, the meaning we arrive at and the reality to which it refers do not correspond” (Saeed 2006, 91). Therefore, approximate meaning is the only possibility, and it could be argued that claiming absolute truth is impossible. See for example Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4:13: “These are the limits [set by] Allah, and whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger will be admitted by Him to gardens [in Paradise] under which rivers flow, abiding eternally therein; and that is the great attainment.” The text is a representation, not necessarily an objective description, a “pale shadow of the Ultimate Reality” (Ali 2006, 134).

A primary issue faced by feminists reading the Qur’ān is who is being addressed by the text. While women are at times spoken of in the Qur’ān, they are rarely spoken to. The imagined reader of these texts are men, even though some will make the argument that the grammatical male form can, depending on the situation of the verb, also be the universal form. However, this is easily debunked by the fact that no matter the grammatical form, the content often reveals a gendered reader, such as 4:20: “But if you want to replace one wife...” or 2: 221: “And do not marry polytheistic men [to your women] until they believe.” Here, one may argue that the text does not say “to your women,” but in this case, it is in fact the grammar that reveals the intent. Rather than, as in the verse prior, using “lā tankihū,” meaning “do not marry,” the text says “lā tunkihū,” meaning “do not marry away.” In other words, the text both reveals men as the recipients of the text, and as being in charge of women’s marital affairs. There are, of course, cases where women are the direct recipients of the text, although these tend to be for specific women, such as “the wives of the prophet” (see Qur’ān 33: 30-33) or to believing men and women alike (see Qur’ān 24: 30-31; 33: 35-36).

There are, of course, more ways than one to read a text, especially when it's a text of such importance to so many people, as the Qur'ān. The same goes for ḥadīth and jurisprudence. The problem, however, is that some attempts to reread and reinterpret these texts tend to be selective, or polish over some parts in order to argue for a "larger purpose." That is not to say that a feminist reading (which is different from a "female reading") is any less appropriate than traditional, literalist or "male readings," and Haifaa Jawad (2003, 107 [footnote 2]), Senior Lecturer in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Birmingham, rightly points out:

The androcentric interpretations of the Islamic texts tend to create resentment among educated Muslim women who believe that the gender pattern in the Muslim world rather than reflect [sic] the Divine imperative is in fact a male social construct aimed at keeping women in a position of inferiority. They tend to believe that Islam is being used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation.

We have already touched upon the issue of men as the intended readers, but it is also a fact that, historically, men have been the main interpreters. This is a fact that is lamented by some scholars, such as Amina Wadud, PhD and author specialized in Islam and women's rights, and Leila Ahmed, Professor of Divinity at Harvard University. It also means that alternative, feminist or feminist-leaning readings have historically been provided by men as well: "Since the ulama include practically no women, it is no surprise that its internal critics are male" (Ali 2013, 62). Today, however, there is a substantial and growing number of non-male religious thinkers and scholars, although almost entirely confined to academia rather than religious institutions, providing challenging and alternative readings of the classical Islamic texts. Their work shows the importance of being aware of one's own, as well as other's, positionality. In other words, one must ask, from which perspective is this interpreted and with what intentions?

On determining the status of women in the Qur'ān, Wadud (1999) argues that there are no specific, stereotyped roles for either men or women proposed in the Qur'ān. Rather, she argues, there are in the Qur'ān three different categorical roles relating to women. First is the contextual – wherein the text acts as a mere representation of the historical and social reality of the individual woman, without either promoting

or critiquing that role. The second category is that “which fulfils a universally accepted (i.e. nurturing or caretaking) female function” (Wadud 1999, 29). The third and last category is the non-gendered role (human being); representations of women engaging in activities in which the gender of the performer is simply coincidental. There are a few problems with this categorization; the most glaring of which is that it seems to suggest that the Qur’ān, in fact, has nothing to say about women. “Woman,” as a role, is always either bound by context, biology or “humanity,” and never determined by religious mandate. While, of course, representations of women and women’s roles in the Qur’ān needs to be viewed in light of their context, it is also necessary to understand that the representations themselves carry a message, and that message is arguably never neutral. For example, Wadud (1999, 88) writes in regards to male authority that “[as] with other matters in society, the Qur’anic solutions to social problems reflect the prevailing attitudes in ancient Arabia.” At the same time, many passages of the Qur’ān do actually promote these attitudes, such as in Sūrat al-Nisā’:

Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand (Qur’ān 4:34).

Interestingly, although not brought to light by Wadud herself, this contextual situation of women’s roles can also be connected to the understood “universally accepted female function”:

With regards to leadership, the ancient (and modern) Arabian patriarchy yields certain advantages for men. Certainly, where males had public privileges, experiences, and other advantages, they were best suited to operate in the political and financial arena (Wadud 1999, 88).

In other words, rather than being divinely ordained, promoted by the Qur’ān as a God-given role, the position of men as leaders was socially constructed. This, however, becomes inconsistent with Wadud’s claim of female function. I would argue that the ideals of nurturing and caretaking are not “universally accepted” at all, but rather symptomatic of the hete-

rosexual matrix – the constructed binary gender system – and thus integral to gender-based oppression.

Furthermore, Wadud uses the example of Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, to show how female leaders are portrayed in a positive light. She even goes as far as to say that “other than the prophets, she is the only ruler in the Qur’an who is given favourable consideration” (Wadud 1999, 89). However, by going to the sources, we find that this might be a flawed reading. First of all, Bilqīs is never once mentioned by name, unlike for example Solomon who could be seen as the actual protagonist of this story. After Solomon finds out that the Queen of Sheba and her people worship the sun, rather than Allah, he sends a letter to her about converting. In response she sends him a gift, but no indication that she or her people will convert. Here, Wadud omits a few verses and writes that “[in] verse 42, the story resumes after she has decided to pay him a personal visit. As a ruler, such a decision carries importance” (Wadud 1999, 41). Describing it in this way makes it appear as if Solomon’s request stayed with Bilqīs, that she contemplated it even after responding, and finally, independently, decided to pay him a visit. In fact, verse 37 reads, from the perspective of Solomon, proclaiming after receiving and rejecting Bilqīs’ gift:

Return to them, for we will surely come to them with soldiers that they will be powerless to encounter, and we will surely expel them therefrom in humiliation, and they will be debased.

This seems to suggest that the Queen of Sheba did not travel voluntarily, and that she was to be humiliated for being from the “kāfirīn,” the infidels (a word actually used in the Qur’an to describe her). Indeed, her later conversion, described by Wadud as an “independent acceptance of the true faith (Islam), despite the norms of her people” (1999, 41), seems to be coerced through means of humiliation. First she is made to believe that her throne, previously described as magnificent, has, unbelievably, been transported to Solomon’s palace. Secondly, when she is about to enter the palace, the floor is made so smooth with glass that she believes it is water, and she uncovers her shins to wade through. This is when she surrenders and says “My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to Allah, Lord of the worlds” (Qur’an 27:44). While it is never explicitly stated why this changes her mind, Solomon’s influence is clear, and it seems somewhat dishonest to portray Bilqīs as converting by her own independent and thought-through decision.

There is, nevertheless, still the possibility of a feminist reading of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth. In fact, it is even possible to acknowledge Qur'ānic passages promoting male authority over women as a basis for such a reading. By pointing to the analogous relation between marriage and slavery, as done by Kecia Ali, Professor of Religion at Boston University (2010), or between polygamy and slavery, as done by the late Fazlur Rahman, scholar and philosopher of Islam (2009), and the way in which slavery is viewed today by the majority of Muslims, it is possible to open up for a rereading of passages relating to either of these. Specifically, Ali mentions the term “milk.” Typically understood as ownership, as in milk al-yamīn, it may also be control or authority, and connotes, according to Ali, sexual access. There is an ambiguous meaning, as used both for “control” in marriage, and “ownership” in master-slave relationships; a man yamliku, exercises milk over, both his wife and his slave, and jurists also speak of milk al-nikah (Ali 2010, 164). Paralleling the legal categories of marriage and slavery, such as the payment of dowry with the purchase of a slave, and the release of a wife through talaq with the release of a slave (male or female) through manumission (both terminate milk and “render sex illicit”), Ali argues that if one truly is discouraged by the Qur'ān, as argued by Wadud (1999) and Rahman (2009) among others, then it is quite possible that its practices that are paralleled in marriage, mainly by male authority, are also meant to be abolished over time. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that “the criteria for licit sex upheld by premodern jurists are seldom explicitly stated and certainly not widely defended today.”¹ This is both the strength and the weakness of Ali's argument. Whether or not milk was a criterion of legal intercourse in the context of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth, it is not so today, at least not to a wide extent. This can either mean that male authority in the context of marriage should be reconsidered, or it can mean that the question is rendered moot.

This view largely depends on the idea that the Qur'ān, without explicitly stating it, meant to discourage practices that it simply could not ban, due to their prevalence in pre-Islamic Arabia:

Some prevailing practices were so bad they had to be prohibited explicitly and immediately: infanticide, sexual abuse of slave girls, denial of inheritance to women, zihar, to name a few of the most common. Other practices had to be modified: polygamy, unconstrained divorce, conjugal violence, and concubinage, for example. With regards to some practices,

¹ Kecia Ali, personal communication 02-08-15.

the Qur'an seems to have remained neutral: social patriarchy, marital patriarchy, economic hierarchy, the division of labour between males and female [sic] within a particular family (Wadud 1999, 36).

However, several points in this could be disputed. Sexual abuse of slave girls seems not prohibited at all, and how concubinage was modified is not something elaborated on by Wadud. Ahmed (1992, 41) contends that at the time of the birth of Muhammad, alongside polygamous marriage, there were also polyandrous marriages, as well as matrilineal and uxori-local practices, meaning that the couple lived with or near the family/tribe of the woman, and the children of the couple belonged to the mother. This would mean that "modification" of polygamy actually worked to limit the freedom of women, rather than, as suggested by Wadud, to expand it. Furthermore, is not "staying neutral" just the same as acceptance? In my reading, and as explained above, the Qur'an does promote social and marital patriarchy, such as in 4: 34, where men are named as "in charge of women." Another example is 2: 223, which reads: "Your wives are a place of sowing of seed for you." With this in mind, the Qur'an can hardly be described as neutral. While Wadud contends that the Qur'an never intended for institutions like slavery to continue, there is no way of knowing. Again, it seems to promote slavery as a natural part of domestic life, even if it also promotes the release of (particularly Muslim) slaves. These releases may be telling of the view of slaves as objects with a price, to be used as payment or as punishment for sins, rather than human subjects with rights. Basically, slaves are used and referred to as currency. For example, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (Book 8: 371) shows how manumission can work as dowry (mahr):

Anas added: The Prophet then manumitted her and married her.' Thabit asked Anas, 'O Abu Hamza! What did the Prophet pay her (as Mahr)?' He said, 'Her self was her Mahr for he manumitted her and then married her (Safiya).

Sūrat al-Nisā' prescribes the release of slaves as punishment for sin, but, again, there's little to indicate that the release is a sign of respect for the rights of the slave:

And never is it for a believer to kill a believer except by mistake. And whoever kills a believer by mistake - then the freeing of a believing slave and a compensation payment presented to the deceased's family [is required] unless they give [up their right as] charity. But if the deceased was from a

people at war with you and he was a believer - then [only] the freeing of a believing slave; and if he was from a people with whom you have a treaty - then a compensation payment presented to his family and the freeing of a believing slave. And whoever does not find [one or cannot afford to buy one] - then [instead], a fast for two months consecutively, [seeking] acceptance of repentance from Allah. And Allah is ever Knowing and Wise (Qur'ān 4: 92).

Furthermore, Sūrat an-Naḥl shows a form of determinism that speaks against favoring slaves, and also, as opposed to the claims made by Wadud, may promote economic hierarchy:

And Allah has favored some of you over others in provision. But those who were favored would not hand over their provision to those whom their right hands possess so they would be equal to them therein. Then is it the favor of Allah they reject? (Qur'ān 16:71).

There are, of course, other approaches as well, such as by Jawad (2003, 107), who writes about “the new development of feminist notions within the Islamic framework, namely the attempt to re-interpret the Islamic sources from a female perspective.” Then there are Muslim feminists such as Irshad Manji, author and educator, who argues that it is less about reinterpretation than *ijtihād* (Manji 2014). The mere existence of such a breadth of interpretative approaches, even within the boundaries of Islamic feminism, shows the possibility of understanding the texts differently and deriving different meanings from them. It also shows the necessity, or at least the want, for a heightened ceiling of religious institutions' accepted views, in regards to alternative readings of the Qur'ān. However, it ought to be mentioned that such readings so far are mostly limited to academia.

Despite their differences, Wadud, Rahman, Jawad and Ali, all share one key point, which is the view of the Qur'ān as carrying a deeper message. In reference to Wadud's criticism of Qur'ānic interpretations that go against justice and equality, Jawad (2003, 114) writes that these “are the very essence of the message of the Qur'an.” This can, however, prove problematic, as such a view easily lends itself to selectivity and more or less intentionally vague analyses. Furthermore, speaking of a “Qur'ānic essence” (essentialism?) is inevitably based on a subjective understanding, and overlooks the nuances of the text. This is acknowledged by Ali who writes:

The fact that the Qur'an has a larger purpose [...] does not excuse sloppy or apologetic readings of difficult passages. However, we do well to remember that there are limitations not only to the work of human interpretive intelligence, but to the Qur'anic text itself, at least as manifested in the earthly realm (Ali 2006, 134).

Ali, thusly, acknowledges certain passages as "difficult," such as relating to sexual ethics. However, instead of referring to a supposed essence, a "larger purpose" of the Qur'anic message as a way to overlook these passages, Ali argues that their actual, divine meaning can never truly be fully understood. This may sound defeatist, but actually opens up for alternative readings. Since, just like contended by Saeed (2006), the Qur'anic message has to pass through human interpretation, leading to "approximate meaning"; it is inevitably influenced by the interpreter. Therefore, it is possible to argue for personal responsibility for one's interpretation and its consequences. With such a view, it is impossible to point to the text and say "this is what it says." Of course, this is a two-way street, which creates difficulties, but perhaps the biggest obstacle of this view is the consequence that morality, then, must come from outside the ostensibly holy message; a claim that many Muslims may find controversial, unless human interpretive intelligence is also seen as a part of God's intended plan for that message. Nevertheless, personal responsibility of interpretation is a recurring point in readings of the Qur'an and ḥadīth that acknowledges inconsistencies and seemingly contradictory messages.

Nevertheless, despite certain methodological flaws in much of the present body of literature, and the ever-present analytical traps that come with challenging dominant readings of religion, these attempts at feminist interpretations of the Islamic texts are still undeniably important. Professor Emerita of Religious Studies at Seton Hall University, Gisela Goodrich Webb (2000-2001, 519), emphasizes how the strength of Wadud is that she offers "a mode of interpretation, that includes women as agents of the on-going 'reading' and interpretation of the Qur'an - particularly discourse on the concept of woman." The interpretation of the texts from new perspectives, indeed an ever on-going process, particularly of certain key terms such as *nafs* or milk, can in itself be seen as a challenge of problematic aspects of traditionalist readings.

In conclusion, feminist readings of Islamic texts typically encounter the same issues as literalist and traditionalist readings, which are the nuances of the texts and the inconsistencies present. These have, as seen, been approached in a variety of manners, some more radical than others.

While Wadud selectively focuses on passages of the Qur'an more suitable to her understanding of its holistic core message, Ali brings in the difficult parts to highlight inconsistencies as a way to open up for interpretation. As such, they share a common goal, which is to encourage re-readings that can challenge what Ahmed (1992, 239) calls "Establishment Islam's version of the Islamic message." With some readings of the Qur'an revealing the status of women as ideally subservient to men, and often portrayed as lacking in agency, this is indeed important work, that in itself works to ameliorate women's lack of agency.

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