

Semiha Topal

Islamic Feminists and the Qur'an: Reading Liberty and Emancipation of Muslim Women in the Sacred Text

Introduction

Islamic feminists and 'revisiting' the sacred text

Given the popular image of Muslim women in the Western media, as victims of Islamic law who are forced to veil themselves and serve to their husbands and fathers without being able to express freely their sexuality and womanhood, 'it comes as a great surprise to many Western women and Western feminists to learn that there is, and has been' a strong feminist movement in the Middle East 'at least since the beginning of the twentieth century' (Darraj, 2003: 190), which has picked up speed especially in the last decades.

Although they 'have always been aware of gender inequality,' Muslim women could not 'be critical of androcentric elements in their culture and religion' contrary to feminists in the West throughout the first half of the twentieth century; since they 'have been under pressure to conform' to the nationalist discourse. During this time, 'any dissent could be construed as a kind of betrayal, which made it difficult for them to use the existing political vocabulary to express feminist demands' (Mir-Hosseini, 1999: 9).

However, when independence was won, and Islamist regimes started to rise, women found themselves excluded from politics and gradually from public life; they were indeed betrayed by their brothers. Therefore, they were no longer forced to be either a Muslim or a feminist, since they believed that a woman could only become a true Muslim when she gained her freedom (Cooke, 2000: 91). Their feminism was

based on Islam, rather than Western civilization; thus, they were named as “Islamic feminists” by Western academia, and gradually in the Muslim circles, as well.

Being aware that the usage of the term “feminist” in an Islamic attempt seems to be problematic, they feel the need to emphasize that ‘feminism is much more than an ideology driving organized political movements.’ For them, feminism is an ‘analytical tool’ to assess ‘how expectations for men’s and women’s behaviour have led to unjust situations, particularly but not necessarily for women’ (Cooke, 2001: x). It ‘offers or at least dreams of challenging alternatives which seem less divisive, more integral and wholesome (King, 1989: 16). Underlining the pluralist aspect of third-wave feminism, they respond to the assumptions about incompatibility of feminism and Islam by arguing that feminism is not the possession of the West anymore, although it has started in the West.

Islamic feminists attract attention with their deliberate choice ‘to work within the systems that are trying to marginalize them’ (Cooke, 2000: 93), which is identified by Saadallah (2004) as a ‘*tactical change* in the feminist movement’ (217).

During the past decade, some women in Muslim communities have been asserting their identities as feminists concerned with Islamic epistemology. Saying no to those who claim to speak for them, these Islamic feminists are engaging in public debate about the proper roles and duties of Muslim men and women. Who are these Islamic feminists?... (Cooke, 2000: 93)

Islamic feminists came into being as one of the outcomes of ‘the rise of political Islam in the 1970s,’ in which Muslim women could find ‘an arena within which [they] could reconcile their faith with their new gender awareness,’ –an awareness which

has happened at all three levels: textual interpretation, political ideology, and personal experience. Thus we have the emergence, now widely debated, of an Islamic feminism in the

form of feminist readings of the Shari'a, with repercussions at the other levels. (Mir- Hosseini, 1999: 6)

Rereading the Shari'a from a feminist perspective has formed the essence of Islamic feminism. In their 'quest for equality, equity and empowerment within an Islamic context,' they 'are dismantling the status quo of male-dominated Islamic interpretation and acculturation which serves to reinforce women's subjugation' (Saadallah, 2004: 219). Because they believe that the existing Shari'a, which 'is unfair to women in their rights of divorce, legal testimony, political participation and access to employment,' is not based on 'an authentic reading of [Islam's] foundational texts.' Hence, what these Islamic feminist thinkers have been trying to do is to 'revisit' the so-called misogynist Qur'anic verses and *abadith* (narratives about the life and words of the Prophet) 'to deconstruct patriarchal interpretations and to construct feminist alternatives.' Contrary to the patriarchal interpretations 'that serve male interests,' Muslim feminists are aiming to 'render the tradition fair to both genders' (Bennet, 2005: 136).

Aiming to find evidence for their firm belief that 'the image of women has been shaped by patriarchy as much as by revelation' (Esposito, 2001: 3), Islamic feminists focus their attention on the historical and cultural context of the Qur'anic verses and their interpretations. One of the broadest study on the position of women in the Qur'an has been done by Asma Barlas (2002) with her book called *Believing Women in Islam*, in which she defends the idea that misogyny was 'assimilated into Islam' during the first few centuries of Muslim history, 'by way of the commentaries and super-commentaries on the Qur'an (*tafsir*) and the narratives telling the life and praxis of the Prophet (*abadith*)' (9). Unlike the traditionalists and the Western oriented modernists, she emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between Islam and the Shari'a, which is the interpretation of Islam by certain people in certain cultural and historical contexts:

Since we often do not distinguish between texts, cultures, and histories when studying Islam, we tend to ignore this inver-

sion. As a result, we end up confusing the Qur'an with its Tafsir, and confusing Islam with patriarchy and the practises of repressive Muslim states that have a history of using Islam for their own political ends. (Barlas, 2002, 9)

Similarly, Amina Wadud (1999) draws attention to the domination of male interpretation in traditional Qur'anic interpretation, which excluded 'women and women's experiences' or 'interpreted [it] through male vision.' In her book *Qur'an and the Women* she points at the lack of female participation in the 'creation of basic paradigms through which we examine and discuss the Qur'an and Qur'anic interpretation' (2), which resulted in misogynist interpretations of the Qur'anic verses that 'encourage the stereotypes about women and men' (35). While justifying 'the restrictions placed on the women's right to pursue personal happiness within the context of Islam,' these interpretations pose the greatest danger when they are attributed to 'the Qur'an itself rather than to the authors who wrote them' (35).

Riffat Hassan (1999) is another Muslim feminist who complains about the lack of female participation in the interpretation of primary Islamic sources (Qur'an and Ahadith). In her article 'Feminism in Islam' she writes that:

...these sources have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. While it is encouraging to know that women such as Khadija and A'isha (wives of the Prophet Muhammad) and Rabi'a al-Basri (the outstanding woman Sufi) figure significantly in early Islam, the fact remains that until the present time, the Islamic tradition and Muslim culture remain overwhelmingly patriarchal... (in Sharma & Young, 1999: 250)

Although the situation of women in non-Islamic societies show that 'there is nothing innately Islamic about misogyny, inequality, or

patriarchy' (Barlas, 2002: 2), what drives Muslim women to specialise in Qur'anic interpretation is the fact that these three are justified by means of Islam, claiming that they are derived from the Qur'an. Because of this, although political activism is important in resisting the misogynist laws in the Islamic countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, Islamic feminists believe that no profound changes can be achieved in these societies unless Muslim women come up with equally legitimate egalitarian readings of the Qur'an (Barlas, 2002: 3). 'In order to become effective voices in the theological deliberations and discussions on women-related issues that are taking place in the contemporary Muslim world,' says Riffat Hassan (1999), 'there is an urgent need for Muslim women to engage in a scholarly study of Islam's primary sources' (253).

So how will this liberatory and egalitarian reading of the Qur'an be done? Both Wadud and Barlas point at the need for using a hermeneutical model in reading the Qur'an, by looking at the context in which the Qur'an was revealed –'how it says what it says,' and the '*Weltanschauung* or world-view' of the Qur'an (Wadud, 1999: 3). Through this hermeneutical method, they aim to reach 'a synthesis that integrates all the causes related to a given verse...with an analysis of its psychological and social impact,' which Mernissi (1991) complains that she can not find anywhere 'despite the proliferation of commentaries and interpretations of the Qur'anic text' (93). As for questioning the legitimacy of the misogynist interpretations, they need, says Barlas (2002), 'to examine who has read the Qur'an historically, how they have read it...and the extratextual contexts in which they have read it' (5). This is necessary because the traditional *tafsir*, which has been done by male Islamic scholars, is claimed to have reached its perfection in the fourth century after the death of the Prophet, thereby, closing the door of *ijtihad* (personal interpretation) and forcing the following generations to imitate their interpretations. However, in various verses 'the Qur'an [itself] condemns blind imitation' and 'the blind following of the tradition of forefathers' (Mermer, 2005):

And when it is said unto them: Follow that which Allah hath revealed, they say: We follow that wherein we found our fathers. What! Even though their fathers were wholly unintelligent and had no guidance? (The Qur'an, 2: 170)

The Qur'an persistently invites its reader to think and use his/her own reason in order to find the best meaning in it, which reveals that there are many other ways of interpreting the verses, though not all of them are desirable. Being the word of God the Infinite, the Qur'an is an infinite text, 'an ocean without shore,' in the great Sufi master Ibn Arabi's words; therefore it can not be limited to only one interpretation, which is also emphasized by Wadud (1999):

...the assertion that there is only one interpretation of the Qur'an limits the extent of the text. The Qur'an must be flexible enough to accommodate innumerable cultural situations, because of its claims to be universally beneficial to those who believe. (6)

However, in their attempt to read the Qur'an in a meaningful way for women living in the modern era, the greatest problem they confront with is the gendered nature of the Arabic language, in which the Qur'an was revealed. Especially the use of the masculine pronoun 'He' for God, reinforces the Western feminists' claim that Islam is also a patriarchal religion like Judaism and Christianity. Wadud tries to overcome this challenge by admitting that 'although each word in Arabic is designated as masculine or feminine,' it does not mean that that word is 'necessarily restricted to the mentioned gender' (1999: 7). Since the Qur'an is a 'divine text,' it 'must overcome the natural restrictions of the language of human communication' (7). According to Barlas, also, the Qur'an is Arabic only because 'the Prophet was an Arab' (2002: 17). Bearing in mind that the Qur'an persistently emphasizes the inimitability of God by saying that 'And there is none comparable unto Him' (The Qur'an, 112: 4) they defend the idea that attributing a specific gender to God is against the teaching of the Qur'an. Barlas criticizes the translation of terms like *Rabb* and Allah

‘that have no human counterpart or equivalent’ into English as “King” or “Lord” ‘which not only are androcentric but which also fail to convey the sense of creatorship and sovereignty implicit in terms like *Rabb* and Allah.’ She argues that,

Even when the Qur’an refers to God as “He,” it does not mean that God is male, or like one...In that God’s representation as “He” or as “King/Lord” is, in fact, premised on our idea of males and what we take to be definitive about their social and sexual roles, it is a similitude, and thus contrary to the Qur’an’s injunctions...However, instead of recognizing the limitations of language, Muslim theology confuses it with Divine Reality, ignoring how this confusion results in humanizing God. (105)

Therefore, in their process of rereading the sacred text of Islam, the first thing they settle in their readers’ minds is the gender-neutral usage of the masculine terms like “man,” “mankind,” and “Adam.” Otherwise, they say, women would be exempted from all Islamic rules if these words were rendered to the specific male sex (Barlas, 2002: 104-105). And only in this way, can the Qur’an claim its universality and eternal guidance to all human beings; and only in this way can an egalitarian and liberatory reading of the Qur’an be done, which we will see in the following pages.

The feminist reading of the Qur’an will be analysed in two parts: the first part will deal with the egalitarian verses of the Qur’an, which forms the basis of the Muslim feminists’ claim that ‘the Qur’an is egalitarian and antipatriarchal’ (Barlas, 2002: 5). In this part, the traditional and modern feminist comments on the verses about creation and the position of man and woman towards God will be explored by giving special attention to the works of Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002).

Besides Wadud and Barlas, many other Islamic scholars such as Fatima Mernissi (1991), Riffat Hassan (1999) and Barbara F. Stowasser (1994) have also traced for the reasons of the introduction

of misogynist laws to Islam, which establish an unequal relationship between males and females in issues such as marriage, polygyny, divorce, veiling (*hijab*) etc., which have been claimed to be derived from the Qur'an. Believing that the patriarchal interpretations of certain verses in the Qur'an have resulted in the unfair treatment of women throughout the history of Islam, they have looked for ways of rereading those verses in the light of the egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an, which will be analysed in the second part. All the Qur'anic verses will be taken from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall's translation of the Qur'an, except for the ones given with reference to a specific author.

Before starting to analyse how feminists interpret the Qur'an, it should be reminded that all the scholars whose views will be examined, are Muslims, which means that they have already accepted that the Qur'an is a divine text, the word of God. Therefore, none of them have any doubt on the divine origin of the verses under question; what they question is the 'legitimacy of [their] patriarchal readings,' which they do 'on the basis of a distinction in Muslim theology between what God says and what we understand God to be saying' (Barlas, 2002, 19).

PART I

READING GENDER EQUALITY IN THE QUR'AN

I. Verses on Creation

The strongest argument of the patriarchal discourse on the superiority of men is the Biblical creation story, which portrays the man "Adam" as the first human being, and the woman "Eve" as the second(ary) human being that was created from the crooked rib of Adam (Genesis II: 21-27, in Stanton, 1993 [1895]). Although the Qur'an does not include any reference to this order of creation, Muslim women have not been able to be safe from this false etiquette, nor could they exempt themselves from the burden of the Biblical Eve, who caused the fall of Adam from the Heaven by tempting him towards eating the forbidden

fruit (Genesis III: 1-7). While the Qur'an always speaks 'in completely egalitarian terms' 'in the context of human creation,' the Biblical account of human creation has become 'a part of Muslim heritage through its assimilation in the *hadith* literature' (Hassan, 1999: 255).

Nevertheless, Muslim feminists and advocates of gender equality in Islam, pull attention to the Qur'anic verses on creation, especially the following one which declares that all human beings were created from a single source:

O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from [min] a single soul [nafs] and from [min] it created its mate [zawj] and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women. (The Qur'an, 4: 1)

According to the conservative or traditional exegesis, this single source, which is referred as the *nafs*, is Adam, the first human being; and the mate created from it, is Eve. In a report written for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1990, Shaykh AbdulKhalik from The Islamic Assembly of North America says that:

Allah (Glorified and Exalted be He), the Lord and Creator, calls humanity to fear Him and to know that He has created them from a single soul, *Adam, humanity's father* (may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him). From Adam, Allah created his mate, and she is Eve. (emphasis mine)

Likewise, Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi (1977), one of the strongest voices in the contemporary Islamist movement, establishes the commonly held belief that the first human being was the man, and 'it was from him that the family of man grew and the human race multiplied' (12).

With the influence of the narrated *ahadith* supporting the Biblical account, traditionalist Islamic scholars like Sheikh AbdulKhalik and Mawdudi –most of whom are male– interpret the *nafs* as Adam and its *zawj* as Eve, although grammatically *nafs* is feminine and *zawj* is masculine, as put forward by Wadud (1999: 18-19).

Wadud (1999) sees this verse as the basis of her argument about gender equality in Islam, since it ‘presents the basic elements in the Qur’anic version of the story of the origins of humankind that...is commonly understood as the creation of Adam and Eve’ (17). In order to clarify the exact meaning of this verse, she handles the three important words which can give way to both liberatory and misogynist readings. The first word, *min* for example, can mean ‘from’ or ‘of the same nature as,’ says Wadud, and states that while the first meaning suggests that woman was created from man, the second one suggests that ‘your mates are the same type or kind as you are,’ establishing ontological equality between sexes (18-19).

The second important word is *nafs*, which is translated as ‘Self,’ ‘Soul’ or ‘Spirit’ and it is usually considered to be referring to Adam in traditional exegesis. According to Wadud, however, *nafs* refers to ‘the common origin of all humankind’, that forms ‘an essential part of each being, male or female’ (19). Interestingly, this single source of human beings is grammatically feminine, which goes parallel with the idea of the feminine originator of life –or the Divine Feminine– in many pagan religions. Asma Barlas, for instance, interprets this Self as the Divine Self ‘which incorporates within itself all attributes’ and evenly distributes these attributes between man and woman ‘who derive their existence from it’ (2002: 135). Taking into consideration that the *nafs* is also translated as the “spirit,” and the word Adam refers to all humankind rather than a single sex in the Qur’an (Hassan, 1999: 255), the verse 15: 29 that says ‘So, when I have made him [Adam] and have breathed into him of My spirit,’ can be considered a supporting statement for Barlas’ claim that humankind did not originate from the man (Adam) but from a single Self/Spirit that belongs to God. Even the use of “man” both in the Qur’an and in the Bible is meant for all humanity rather than the specific sex, which we see in The Book of Genesis, Chapter One: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him: male and female image, created he them’ (Genesis I: 27). As understood from the use of

“man” separately from the “male” and “female,” the first verses of the Bible establishes the equality of sexes in creation, as well as revealing that God has both ‘male and female’ images, which reinforces the claim of Islam that God is transcendent of both genders. The masculine pronouns in the phrase that ‘In the image of God created He him,’ on the other hand, only reflect the ‘paucity’ of human language, which ‘may give rise to many misunderstandings’ (Stanton, 1993: 15).

Zanj is the third word Wadud (1999) closely examines, which is grammatically masculine, but commonly accepted as the second human being, Eve. This word, which means mate or spouse, is commonly considered as woman although it is ‘conceptually neutral’ in the Qur’an (20). The use of *zanj* in this particular verse reveals that ‘women and men...constitute a pair’ (Barlas, 2002: 134), –a pair which ‘is made of two coexisting forms of a single reality, with some distinctions in nature, characteristics and functions, but two congruent parts formed to fit together as a whole,’ in Wadud’s words (1999: 21). The patriarchal discourse in Islamic exegesis considers this pair as a binary opposition, placing the man in the advantageous position by claiming that man represents the norm and the viceroy of God on earth, since God taught Adam all the knowledge of the world (2: 31); while the woman lacks the capability of religious perfection since she can not perform her religious duties while she is menstruating, which they base on a weak (non-reliable) *hadith*. However, argues Barlas (2002), the Qur’an ‘only privileges virtue over evil’ and persistently declares that men and women are at a same distance towards committing sin or religious perfection (137). As for the issue of God’s teaching all knowledge to the man, the related verses say that:

And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth, they said: wilt Thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely I know that which ye know not.

And He taught Adam all the Names, then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform me of the names of these, if ye are truthful. (2: 30-31)

What we see in this passage is that Adam is referred to as the ‘viceroy in the earth’ and the ‘one who will do harm therein and will shed blood,’ which makes it clear that the word Adam –which means “of the soil” in Hebrew (Hassan, 1999: 254) – is used by God to refer to all humankind, rather than the first male human being. Also from the verse 7:11, which says that: ‘O men We have created you, and then formed you, and then we said to the angels, prostrate yourselves before Adam!’

it is obvious that the name Adam symbolizes the whole human race...So, when the Qur’an says that ‘He taught Adam all the Names (al-asma)’...it is actually telling us that all human beings were taught all the Names. (Mermer, 2005)

The theme of being created in pairs also challenges the traditional understanding of the timing of human creation, in other words, the creation of man before the woman, thus rendering the woman to the status of being created for the man. Although the Bible says that man and woman were created in the same day and ‘blessed’ and ‘called... Adam’ by God (Genesis 5:2), it also claims that the woman, Eve, was created from the rib of Adam (Genesis 2:21-25), which makes the woman ‘a mere afterthought,’ as Stanton (1993) points at: ‘The world in good running order without her. The only reason for her advent [becomes] the solitude of man’ (21). This second account has been the dominant one in patriarchal societies, which has established the woman ‘as the Other in Christian thought’ (Barlas, 2002: 138); and Islam could not be an exception from this situation. Although the Qur’an never implies the creation of the woman from the rib of the man, the patriarchal Islamic society managed to impose this misogynist account by way of *ahadith*, the authenticity of which are under suspicion. The 10th century Qur’an commentator al-Tabari (c.839 - 923) quotes the common tradition in the Islamic society concerning

the purpose of women's creation, which is exactly same with the Biblical account:

After Iblis [the Satan] had refused to prostrate himself before Adam, and had been cursed and expelled from the Garden, Adam was made to dwell there. But he felt lonely without a mate...Then God cast a slumber over him, took a rib from his left side, soldered its place with flesh ...and from the rib created his wife Hawwa' in the form of a woman so that Adam would find rest in her. When Adam awoke, he saw her at his side and said –according to what they allege, and God knows best– ‘my flesh, my blood, my wife,’ and he found rest in her. (cited in Stowasser, 1994: 28-29)

The verse 4:1 confirms the first account of creation in the Bible, by showing that ‘God's original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman’ (Hassan, 1999: 255). For Wadud (1999), this verse shows that ‘Allah never planned the creation of humankind with a male person,’ since

it does not even state that Allah began the creation of humankind with the nafs of Adam, the man. This omission is noteworthy because the Qur'anic version of the creation of humankind is not expressed in gender terms. (19)

As well as not being created after the man, the woman, according to the Qur'an, is not the only guilty one in committing the first sin of humankind, i.e. eating from the forbidden tree. Contrary to the ‘negative Greco-Roman and Biblical-Judaic implications that woman was the cause of evil and damnation’ (Wadud, 1999: 25) by tempting Adam to eat from the forbidden tree after being deceived by the Satan (Genesis III: 1-7), the Qur'an talks about this event by using ‘the Arabic dual form to tell how Satan tempted both Adam and Eve and how they both disobeyed,’ except for one occasion, when it ‘singles out Adam’ (25) in telling how Satan whispered to *Adam*, not Eve:

And verily We made a covenant of old with Adam, but he forgot, and We found no constancy in him. ...We said: O

Adam! This [Satan] is an enemy unto thee and unto thy wife, so let him not drive you both out of the Garden so that thou come to toil...But the Devil whispered to *him*, saying: O Adam! Shall I show thee the tree of immortality and power that wasteth not away? Then they twain ate thereof, so that their shame became apparent unto them, and they began to hide by heaping on themselves some of the leaves of the Garden. And Adam disobeyed his Lord, so went astray. (The Qur'an, 20: 115-121, emphasis mine)

Although it is unanimously accepted by all Islamic scholars that the concept of original sin does not exist in the Qur'an, and therefore Eve is not the only sinner in their disobedience to God, we still see that in the minds of ordinary Muslims, female sexuality is seen as the root of all evils, which are again imposed into Islamic tradition through various ahadith, such as '...but for Hawwa' no female would be a traitor to her husband' (cited in Hassan, 1999: 258). Despite having no basis in the Qur'an, the male *ulama* (Islamic scholars) of the deeply patriarchal Islamic societies in the mediaeval ages grabbed this account in the Bible as an evidence to their view of 'women's innate nature as weak' but at the same time 'dangerous to the established moral order' (Stowasser, 1994: 21). The lack of details in the Qur'an regarding the events in the Garden, and the allurement of the Biblical story for the male interest, made the Qur'anic story to undergo 'a fundamental reinterpretation' only four centuries after the death of the Prophet. While the woman in the Qur'an was 'a participant in human error, repentance and God's challenge to recover human pristine innate nature (*fitra*) through struggle for righteousness on earth,' she turned into the tool of Satan in tempting the "man of reason" by using her sexuality, and thus 'afflicted with the curse of moral, mental, and physical deficiency.' On the other hand, the man—the accomplice of the woman in eating from the forbidden tree and her 'spokesman' in demanding forgiveness from God—'now alone embodied the human conscience, was aware of his error, and repented; free of God's curse, he was forgiven' (Stowasser, 1994: 30).

Contrary to the Qur'anic account, traditional Muslim scholars interpreted this event to be symbol of the relationship between female sexuality and the Satan, 'branding...women as the devil's gateway' (Hassan, 1999: 261). Mawdudi (1977) –the most influential scholar of fundamentalist Islam– for example, interprets this event in the Garden as Satan's plan to pervert the human race by attacking on their sex instinct, which, he claims, is 'the greatest weakness of the human race.' In order to 'open the door of indecency before them and beguile them into sexuality,' Satan plans to tempt Adam and his wife to eat from the forbidden tree, and thus 'to expose their nakedness to them.' He claims that Satan used the woman in his plan to make the first human pair to disobey their God, and up to today, female body has been one of his most effective tools in destabilizing the moral order in the society. He says:

Even to this day, Satan and his disciples are adopting the same scheme of depriving the woman of the feelings of modesty and shyness and they cannot think of any scheme of "progress" unless they expose and exhibit the woman to all and sundry. (cited in Hassan, 1999: 260)

Mawdudi's assertion that when Adam and Eve saw their naked bodies, they were irresistibly 'beguiled into' sexual intercourse, is rejected by Riffat Hassan (1999) who points out that, 'the human pair's first act on discovering their exposed state was...covering themselves with leaves,' instead of doing an "indecent" act. She also criticizes Mawdudi's shifting his focus from the human pair's nakedness to the female nakedness, which, she says, 'is typical of Muslim culture' (261).

Given the fact that the Biblical story defines Eve as the temptress, who causes the "fall" of mankind from the Heaven and thus creates a rift between the man and his God, we see that 'this connection of women, sex and sin' is not only typical of Muslim culture, but it also 'constitutes the fundamental patterns of Western patriarchal thought' (Millet, 1970: 54). In order to refute this claim, Hassan (1999) argues

that being sent to earth ‘can not be a punishment for humankind,’ since Adam (the human being) ‘was always meant to be God’s viceroy on earth’ (259), as seen clearly from the verse 2:30 in which God says to the angels that He is ‘about to place a viceroy in the earth.’ Therefore, as seen in the Qur’an, the events in the Garden are not about any “fall” or female weakness in resisting to committing sin; it is all about ‘the moral choice that humanity is required to make’ between good and evil (259), in other words, it points at the ‘individual responsibility’ of each human being, as well as the mercy of God and His guardianship over his creatures (Wadud, 1999: 24).

Hence, all the accounts on creation in the Qur’an clearly emphasizes the individual value of all human beings, who are created simultaneously from a single origin to be the vicegerents of God on earth, by following the guidance of God and avoiding of the temptations of the Satan (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002; Hassan, 1999).

II. Difference vs. Equality

The Qur’an clearly states in the verses on creation that there is no ontological difference between man and woman, since both are created from a single origin (which is most probably the Self of God). Not only are they same in origin, but they are also equal in terms of individual responsibility in performing their duties as the vicegerents of God on earth. Nevertheless, this vision of equality, which is clearly stated by God in the Qur’an, has not been adopted by Islamic societies, in which patriarchal traditions have maintained their hegemony despite the Qur’anic reformations. Islamic feminists emphasize this point, claiming that the ‘numerous Qur’anic references to equality between man and woman are commonly disregarded’ (Sonbol, in Esposito & Haddad, 2001: 124), in favour of the verses addressing to specific social conditions which are more liable to be interpreted in the advantage of men. Given the obvious statements in the Qur’an, nobody can claim that women and men are not equal; however, many commentators of the Qur’an including the most progressive ones

defend the misogynist practices in the Shari'a under the guise of "difference." Their common argument is that:

although woman, as a human being, occupies equal status with man and is treated as equal, and enjoys equal rights, privileges etc., the fact remains that there is a difference between the sexes...As woman, her special function in life is different from that of a man and she is naturally equipped with a different physical, physiological, biological, and even psychological structure. Islam has taken these natural differences between the sexes into account in differentiating roles and allotting functions to each sex. Therefore, to talk of absolute equality between men and women is complete nonsense. (Rahman, 1980: 396-398)

As highlighted by Stowasser (1994), the Qur'an does not make any reference to any kind of innate difference between the male and female human beings. Thus, she says, the conservatives –both mediaeval and contemporary– have to rely on the *hadith* literature as a foundation for their claim that women are created as 'sensitive, emotional, supportive and caring;' while men are created with 'decisive will, power of reason, and physical strength.' According to 'the contemporary conservative voices,' the *hadith* that claims women to have been created from a crooked rib and that she should be 'enjoyed as crooked as she is' is not a negative statement about women; on the contrary, they say, it defines the 'natural disposition' of women 'and the preponderance of emotions over rationality, with which God has distinguished them, unlike the male in whom rationality surpasses the emotions.' Together with this, ironically, they never neglect to make sure that 'neither men nor women are inferior to one another' (37).

What Muslim feminists protest about this argument of difference is the situation that the biological differences between man and woman have been turned into functional differences of the sexes in social and spiritual life, imprisoning the woman at home with the "sacred" and "natural" duty of childbearing and childrearing, while allocating the

man all the tasks in the social, religious and political realm. Since women are innately loving, merciful, emotional and physically weak, claim even some women scholars, ‘their first...holy and most important mission’ is being ‘a mother and a wife’ (Zaynab al-Ghazali, cited in Shehadeh, 2003: 131). This idea results from the misreading of the creation of the woman *after* the man *to be* a wife to him and a mother to his children. However, the Islamic feminists have already refuted this belief with their reinterpretation of the verses on creation; therefore, they believe that the prolificacy of the woman does not necessitate that she was *only* created to be a mother and a wife –an idea which hampers her moral perfection and individual value. As Wadud (1999) suggests,

Although the male and female are essential contingent characters in the creation of humankind, no specific cultural functions or roles are defined at the moment of creation. At that moment, Allah defines certain traits universal to all humans and not specific to one particular gender nor to any particular people from any particular place or time. (26)

The lack of any reference to sexual difference in defining individual responsibilities in the Qur’an is underlined by Barlas (2002) as well, who defends that God ‘does not link moral agency or individuality...to sexual differences;’ and adds that the Qur’an certainly ‘does not teach that because women are biologically different from men they also are morally or socially unequal, deficient, weak, inferior to, or less than, men (144). The only difference that the Qur’an takes into account in classifying human beings is, ‘belief and unbelief’ (146), which is clearly stated in the following verses:

O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made `you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! *the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct.* Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware. (The Qur’an, 49:13, emphasis mine)
And whoso doeth good works, whether of male or female, and he (or she) is a believer, such will enter paradise and they

will not be wronged the dint in a date stone. (The Qur'an, 4:124)

According to Barlas and Wadud, these verses in the Qur'an shows that the sexual and racial differences between human beings serve only to develop mutual understanding and dialogue between each other and thus encourage each other to be 'better in conduct,' which is commonly considered to be 'piety' (Wadud, 1999: 37). Although the verse 49:13 abolishes all kinds of discrimination, gender is not included in the patriarchal exegesis within this list of discriminations, complains Wadud, and she quotes Mawdudi's interpretation of this verse as an example:

...in these verses 'The whole of mankind is addressed' in order to prevent a great evil which is universally disruptive, and that is prejudice due to 'race, colour, language, country and nationality.' (cited in Wadud, 1999: 38)

However, the Qur'an is clear in its rejection of any discrimination between men and women in many other verses, both undermining the 'claims about male privilege' and 'the tendency to associate' maleness with moral praxis and femaleness with potential corruptedness. As given in the verse 9:71 that says:

And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends [awliya'] one of another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish worship and they pay the poordue, and they obey Allah and His messenger. As for these, Allah will have mercy on them... (The Qur'an, 9:71),

the Qur'an does not view women as inferior to men in terms of reaching moral perfection, contrary to various narrated *ahadith* which claim that women are less than men in terms of performing religious duties and using their reason. By ordaining men and women as protectors of one another, states Barlas, 'the Qur'an assumes both that women and men have the same *ability* to reason and also similar *patterns* of reasoning' (2002: 147, author's emphasis). She strongly objects to the traditional assumption that 'men are better able than women' to

acquire piety or to practice their religion 'either in their biological capacity as males, or in their social capacity as fathers, husbands or interpreters of the sacred knowledge' (143). To support her argument that God 'judges between [men and women] on the basis of the same criteria' (143), she makes reference to the verse 33: 35:

Men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who persevere (in righteousness) and women who persevere, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who guard (their modesty), and men who remember Allah much and women who remember Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward. (The Qur'an, 33:35)

Mernissi writes that this verse was revealed upon the question of one of the Prophet's wives (Umm Salama) about the lack of direct reference to women in the Qur'an (1991: 118). It establishes the fact that regardless of their sex, all believers who obey the rules of God will be rewarded equally, since –as already mentioned– the only difference God makes between human beings is belief and unbelief. Together with this verse, the verses that say

That He may bring the believing men and the believing women into Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide, and may remit from them their evil deeds.
That, in the sight of Allah, is the supreme triumph
And may punish the hypocritical men and the hypocritical women, and the idolatrous men and the idolatrous women, who think an evil thought concerning Allah. For them is the evil turn of fortune, and Allah is wroth against them and hath cursed them, and hath made ready for them hell, a hapless journey's end (The Qur'an, 48:5-6)

become the standing points for Barlas' argument that God has not 'endowed men with capabilities or potential that [He] did not confer upon women.' According to the Qur'an, she suggests, God 'expects both sexes to live by the same principles and views them both as being equally capable of doing so, or not' (2002: 144).

If the Qur'an establishes the equality between men and women in individual responsibility, value, reward and punishment, by declaring that both are at the same distance towards sins and good deeds, then how come today, why has 'the burden of sin and shame' been 'put on the shoulders of women, who therefore must be secluded lest they cause evil' throughout the history of Islam? Why have women been subjected to physical violence from their husbands, while the Qur'an explicitly says that men and women are protecting friends of one another in verse 9: 71? Why the man has been given the right to divorce his wife whenever he wants and marry up to four wives, while the woman has been deprived of these rights? And finally, if the Qur'an establishes that men and women are created from a single origin, then why do Muslim men force women to cover all their bodies while men are only required to cover their body from the knee to the navels? These questions are the greatest challenge for Muslim feminists, who sincerely believe that it is possible to read gender equality in the Qur'an, while the above practices are also based on various Qur'anic verses by the male exegetes.

Part II: Women's Response To Some Controversial Matters In Male-Female Relationships

I. Women's Position in Marriage

The Qur'an declares that God created men and women with the same nature to make them 'find *sukun* [rest or comfort]' in each other and 'ordained between them love and mercy' (The Qur'an, 30:21). There-

fore, marriage is described as the ideal relationship between male and female human beings in the Qur'an, giving equal value to wives and husbands. Nevertheless, despite the egalitarian teachings of Islam on marriage, 'there is a tendency among Muslims to define husbands as guardians over their wives and as wife beaters,' which pushes Muslim women to revisit the Qur'anic verses that constitute 'the origin and validity of their claims' (Barlas, 2002: 184).

One of the most important verses that give men the chance to claim male superiority over females is 4:34, which puts men to be "in charge of women" and give them "authority" to "beat" their wives, as commonly interpreted:

"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is most high, great (above you all). (The Qur'an, 4:34 in Ali)

In order to find a more egalitarian meaning for this verse, Wadud (1999) rephrases it by giving the problematic words in their original form. Her version goes as follows:

Men are [qawwamuna 'ala] women, [on the basis] of what Allah has [preferred] (faddala) some of them over others, and [on the basis] of what they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are [qanitat], guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear [nushuz], admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them. (4:34, in Wadud, 70)

She starts her analysis by establishing the use of “on the basis of” for the Arabic word *bi*, which, she says, ‘in a sentence...implies that the characteristics or contents before *bi* are determined ‘on the basis of’ what comes after *bi*.’ Therefore, she makes it sure that ‘in this verse...men are *qanwamuna ‘ala* women only if two conditions exist: the first condition is preference (*faddala*), and the other is that they support the women from their own means’ (70). Then she goes on her interpretation by focusing on these terms, to clarify the first part of the problematic verse. As for the word *faddala*, which points at a preference made by God, commentators have not been able to reach a consensus over the nature of this preference. While Yusuf Ali translated it as ‘because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other’ (The Qur’an, 4:34 in Ali), by ‘transforming an injunction about social duties into a claim about male biology and ontology’ (Barlas, 2002: 185), Pickthall makes a more general statement by translating this phrase as ‘because Allah hath made one of them to excel the other’ (The Qur’an, 4:34 in Pickthall). However, both Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002) draw attention to the point that it is impossible to make a general statement out of this word, since this preference is restricted to the material preference (and specifically inheritance) and also restricted to ‘*some* of the men, not all of them’ (Wadud, 1999: 71, author’s emphasis). It is restricted to material preference, as the verse continues with the statement that ‘they [men] support them [women] from their means’ (The Qur’an, 4:34 in Ali). Thinking that

men can only maintain women by means of [financial] resources, rather than by means of brute strength, or virtue, or intelligence and so on, attributes which Muslim exegetes say God has bestowed in greater measure on men than on women, (Barlas, 2002: 186)

it is clearly understood from this verse that men are not preferred by God to women as a class, and it can not be generalized to say that God prefers men over women. The same principle is valid for the phrase ‘men are *qanwamun ‘ala* women,’ which has been generally interpreted as ‘men are in charge of women’ (in Pickthall), ‘men are

protectors and maintainers of women' (in Ali) and more sharply as 'men are the managers of the affairs of women' (Mawdudi in Wadud, 1999: 71). Hassan (1999) says that it cannot be translated as manager, since *qanwamun* linguistically means "breadwinners" or "those who provide a means of support or livelihood" (264).

For Wadud (1999), *qiwamah* (the state of being *qanwamun*) is given to men as a responsibility rather than an award, in a way to balance the childbearing responsibility of the mother, which is of great importance in the continuation of the human race. Therefore, she says, the Qur'an 'establishes [men's] responsibility as *qiwamah*: seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities which jeopardize that primary demanding responsibility that only she can fulfil.' Nevertheless, this division of labour is not obligatory for all men and women, since there are men who cannot earn enough to maintain their family and there are women who do not have children. So, Wadud says that '...This verse establishes an ideal obligation for men with regard to women to create a balanced and shared society. This responsibility is neither biological nor inherent, but it is valuable.' She adds that this verse basically aims to cultivate an attitude inclined towards responsibility (73-74).

However, in the hands of the conservatives, this responsibility to be the breadwinner turns into a position of leadership in the family granted to men by God, because of their physical strength and rational skills. Since 'there must be someone as the head of the family' in order to 'maintain the discipline,' says Mawdudi (1977), 'Islam gives this position to the husband,' who has 'the duty to work, and do all those tasks which are performed outside the household,' while the woman is 'freed from all activities outside the household so that she may devote herself fully to duties in the home and in the rearing of her children –the future guardians of the nation' (44). Being "freed from" all outside activities, he claims that 'women have been ordered to remain in their houses and discharge the responsibilities assigned to them,' which are childbearing and raising them, as well as assuring the

comfort of their husbands who maintain the family. For Mawdudi and all other conservative male scholars, who interpret verses on women from their own perspectives, this division of labour, which imprisons women within their houses, is perfectly fair. They believe that

Islam does not want to tax them [women] doubly: to bring up their children and maintain the household, as well as to earn a living and do outdoor jobs would be a clear injustice. Islam, therefore effects a functional division of labour between the sexes. (Mawdudi, 1977: 44)

Hassan (1999) protest at this inversion of the exemption from earning their lives into a prohibition from working outside of their homes. She underlines that, men's being breadwinners

...does not mean that women cannot or should not provide for themselves, but simply that in view of the heavy burden that most women shoulder in childbearing and rearing, they should not have the additional obligation of providing the means of living at the same time. (264)

Barlas also opposes this assumption of man-as head of family, which is upheld by a great majority of Muslim people. According to her, 'even though the Qur'an charges the husband with being the breadwinner, it does not designate him head of the household, especially as the term has been understood in Western feudal cultures.' The designation of fathers or husbands as the head of family is part of patriarchies, which existed long before Islam, and as Barlas argues, the Qur'an 'does not adhere to' the patriarchal system, as seen in many verses that open war against the fathers who does not let their households or tribes abandon their traditional beliefs and become Muslims. Therefore, designating the husband as the head of the household is something the Qur'an does not favour, suggests Barlas (2002: 187). This verse, then only suggests that God preferred men to be the breadwinners in the society, since women are already responsible for the most important task of providing the continuance of the human race.

The second part of the verse 4:34 is more problematic for women than the first part of it, since it allegedly gives the husband to beat his wife when she disobeys him.

So good women are [qanitat], guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear [nushuz], admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them. (4:34, in Wadud, 70)

Thus the problematic words that need to be solved here are *qanitat*, *nushuz*, and *daraba*, which is the original word for scourge. Wadud says that ‘the word *qanitat* used here to describe “good” women,’ is ‘falsely translated’ as “obedient,” and then “obedient to the husband,” since ‘in the context of the whole Quran’ *qanitat* ‘is used with regard to both males and females’ (1999: 74). Thus, as Barlas also points at, this word refers to an act towards God, not another human being (2002: 187), which makes the assumption of obedience to the husband redundant. Besides, the word which refers to the act of obeying to another human being is expressed with *ta’u* in the last sentence of the above passage. In this respect, argues Wadud, the Qur’an does not reduce being a good woman to obedience to the husband (1999: 77), contrary to numerous *abadith* which claims obedience to the husband to be analogous to obedience to the God, saying that for example, ‘...the woman who does not discharge her duties to her husband is disobedient to Allah, and the discharge of duties toward Allah depends on the discharge of duties towards the husband’ (in Hassan, 1999: 268).

Having falsely interpreted the word *qanitat* as “obedient to the husband,” traditional exegetes insist on their mistake by also assuming the word *nushuz* to mean “disobedience to the husband.” From their point of view, a good woman should be obedient to her husband, who is the maintainer therefore head of the family; and when she rejects or fails to obey her husband, he has the right to beat her. Whereas, Wadud again reveals that *nushuz* cannot mean “disobedience to the husband,” as it used ‘for both the male and the female’ in the

Qur'an (1999: 75). When it is used for males in the Qur'an in the verse 4:128 ('If a woman feareth ill treatment from her husband...'), it is translated as "ill treatment," not "disobedience," which discloses the male assumption that there is nothing like a man's disobedience towards his wife, as a man's obedience to his wife cannot be a matter of thought, either.

Thus, as Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002) agree, the word *nusbuḥ* does not refer to the disobedience of the wife towards her husband, but, they say, 'it is a state of disorder between the married couple,' in case of which the Qur'an gives these suggestions as possible solutions: The first step is dialogue and mutual agreement; if it doesn't work, the second step is separation of the beds; and as a last resort, "scourge" is permitted (1999: 75), the nature of which has been interpreted by male scholars in so many different levels from 'hitting with a toothbrush' (Yamani, 2005: 51-55) to 'beating' (Mawdudi, in Hassan, 1999: 263). Therefore, Islamic feminists have paid great attention to the true meaning of this problematic verb, which is originally *daraba* in the Qur'an.

Hassan (1999) rejects its alleged meaning as beating or any physical damage, claiming that 'when used in a legal context as it is here, it means "holding in confinement," ...[and] in Surah 4: An-Nisa': 15, women who are proven to be guilty of immorality are also given the punishment of being confined to their homes' (265). For Wadud (1999), it can mean "to strike" but at the same time "to set an example." This verb has also a second form as *darraba*, which means "to strike repeatedly or intensely." However, she says

in the light of the excessive violence towards women indicated in the biographies of the Companions [of the Prophet] and by practices condemned in the Qur'an (like female infanticide), this verse should be taken as prohibiting unchecked violence against females. (76)

Therefore, taking the mentioned verb in its second form is contrary to the general view of the Qur'an. Barlas (2002) draws attention to

this point as well, by pointing out the historical condition at the time of revelation, in which ‘men did not need any permission to abuse women.’ At such a time, she says, this verse ‘simply could not have functioned as a license’ but only ‘a restriction insofar as the Qur’an made *daraba* the measure of last, not the first, or even the second resort.’ Therefore, while this verse was restrictive ‘even during those most abusive of times,’ it cannot be considered today ‘as an authorization at a time when we claim to have become more, not less, civilized’ (188).

II. Divorce and Polygyny

Another problematic issue deriving from the patriarchal interpretation of specific Qur’anic verses is the position of women in divorce and the relevant verse, which is used by male Muslims to prove their claim that men are superior to women.

Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three (monthly) courses. And it is not lawful for them that they should conceal that which Allah hath created in their wombs if they are believers in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands would do better to take them back in that case if they desire a reconciliation. And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and *men are a degree above them*. Allah is Mighty, Wise. (The Qur’an, 2:228, emphasis mine)

The “advantage” or “degree” men have over women mentioned in this verse is peculiar to one specific context, rather than a universal statement claimed by male exegetes that all men are a degree above all women. For Hassan, this advantage is the fact that ‘women must observe a three-month period called *iddat* before remarriage [to be sure that they are not pregnant], but men are exempted from this requirement’ (266-267). According to Wadud (1999), it refers to the license of men ‘to pronounce divorce against their wives without arbitration or assistance, [since] divorce is granted to a woman...only after intervention of an authority’ (68). Barlas finds the interpretation

of Muhammad Asad (1980), who reads this degree as the advantage of annulling the divorce more appropriate than Wadud's in this context. Asad thinks that, 'Since it is the husband who is responsible for the maintenance of the family, the first option to rescind a provisional divorce rests with him' (cited in Barlas, 2002: 196). Although there are many different ways to interpret this verse, and specifically the last sentence of the verse, it requires great effort to read it as a universal statement that places men (as a class) over women (as a class), as it is manifest that

...the "degree" does not refer to the ontological status of men as males, or even to their rights over women; rather, it is a specific reference to a husband's rights in a divorce and, from all indications, is meant to encourage more, not less, kindness towards women. (Barlas, 2002: 196)

Just as the 'degree' or 'advantage' in this verse on divorce do not privilege males or put them at a higher position than women, a feminist analysis of the verses on polygyny also shows that men are not privileged in Qur'an's treatment of polygyny. Admitting that it may sound odd to us today, 'given its abuses by Muslims historically,' Barlas (2002) asserts that 'polygyny serves a very specific purpose' in the Qur'an, which is 'securing *justice for female orphans*' (190, author's emphasis). The fundamental justification for Muslim men's claim to marry up to four wives stems from their selection of the phrase that says '...marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four...' (The Qur'an, 4:3). However, when the whole verse is analysed in connection with the verse before it, Barlas' suggestion about the female orphans completely makes sense:

Give unto orphans their wealth. Exchange not the good for the bad (in your management thereof) nor absorb their wealth into your own wealth. Lo! that would be a great sin.

And if ye fear that ye will not deal fairly by the orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (the captives) that your right hands possess.

Thus it is more likely that ye will not do injustice. (The Qur'an, 4: 2-3)

It is clear from the context of the verse that polygyny here is mentioned 'only in reference to *orphans*,' which subjects polygyny to two conditions: first of all the man should be guarding a female orphan and he should have a fear of being 'unable to do full justice to his charge outside of marriage' (2002: 191) and secondly he should behave in complete justice towards his wives, something the Qur'an elsewhere says to be impossible:

Ye will not be able to deal equally between (your) wives, however much ye wish (to do so)... (The Qur'an, 4: 129)

Allah hath not assigned unto any man two hearts within his body... (The Qur'an, 33: 4)

Reconsidered in relation to these verses, the verse 4: 3 can no longer be read as a general and unconditional license for man to marry more than one wife, 'which Muslims derive from reading half a line of this verse (2002: 191).

What's significant here is that this verse does not refer to any of the justifications given by male Muslim scholars. They claim that 'a financially capable man should care for more than one wife' (Wadud, 1999: 84), which Wadud rejects by underlining that women are not 'financial burdens.' Their second justification is about barren women, who are unable to produce offspring for the continuation of the father's lineage. Wadud argues that the solution for this problem should not be polygyny, since those couples can adopt orphans to fulfil their desires for having children. And lastly, they assert that men's sexual needs are more powerful than women's, so if a man cannot satisfy his sexual desires with only one woman, it is better for him to marry a second, third or fourth wife rather than having illegitimate affairs (84).

This verse clearly shows that men are only allowed to marry orphans in addition to their first wives; whereas, this "small detail" has always

been ignored by Muslim men, who wanted to continue their pre-Islamic practice, although limited to the number four. Even by the most progressive Islamic scholars who still belong to the conservative wing, polygyny is tolerated for a man who wants to have children but his wife is barren; or for a man 'whose wife has a chronic disease making her unable to fulfil her marital duty' or 'is frigid and sexually unresponsive' (Yamani, 2005: 83). Barlas (2002) argues, on the other hand, that 'polygyny does not...serve a sexual function in the Qur'an' (191), and Wadud (1999) agrees with her emphasizing that 'the Qur'anic principles of self-constraint, modesty, and fidelity' are equally expected from both the wife and the husband' (84).

It is clear that the Qur'an does not stress a high, civilized level for women while leaving men to interact with others at the basest level. Otherwise, the mutual responsibility of khilafah (trusteeship) would be left to one half of humanity while the other half remains near the animal state. (85)

III. Veiling and the Male Hegemony on Female Body

Mawdudi (1977) says that in Islam, 'free mingling of the sexes has been prohibited' in order to 'preserve the moral life of the nation.' According to him, 'different spheres of activity' are provided for men and women; and 'outside the limits of the nearest relatives between whom marriage is forbidden, [they] have been asked not to mix freely with each other.' When they have to 'come into contact with each other,' they should abide by the prescribed dress code, which he describes as follows:

No man should expose his body from the knees to the navel. Nor should a woman expose any part of her body except her face and hands to anyone other than her husband. To keep these parts covered is the religious duty of every man and woman. (45-46)

The practice of secluding women from men and ordering them to cover all parts of their body except for their faces (sometimes even do not include it) and hands, while forcing men to cover only their

body from the knees to the navel (which is not even a forced act but rather a natural act), has been assumed to be order in the Qur'an with the intention of 'suppressing all forms of immodesty, lewdness and moral deviation' (Mawdudi, 1977: 46). Indeed, the arbitrary practice of this dress code and segregation has rather worked for the suppression of women in public life, denying them of their rights to have control on their bodies and achieving their full potential as members of their societies. Given this situation, the issue of *purdah* (seclusion) and *hijab* (veiling) has been of great importance for Muslim feminists –especially Mernissi (1991), who emphasize the need for revisiting the relevant verses in the Qur'an, in order to understand the exact nature of this practice. They draw attention to the fact that the practice of segregation between sexes has allegedly started with the following verses revealed in the fifth year of the *Hejira* (AD 627) after an event when the Prophet invited many guests for his wedding with one of his wives but felt extremely disturbed when three of the male guests stayed too much in the chamber of his wife:

O ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you. But if ye are invited, enter, and, when, your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. Lo! that would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of (asking) you (to go); but Allah is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. And it is not for you to cause annoyance to the messenger of Allah, nor that ye should ever marry his wives after him. Lo! that in Allah's sight would be an enormity.

It is no sin for them (thy wives) (to converse freely) with their fathers, or their sons: or their brothers, or their brothers sons, or the sons of their sisters or of their own women, or their slaves. (The Qur'an, 33: 53, 55)

Mernissi (1991) starts her analysis of this verse by claiming that ‘the *hijab* – literally “curtain” – “descended,” not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men’ (85), referring to the occasion of the verse when Prophet Muhammad drew a curtain between himself and one of his male companions in order to stay alone with his new wife. She draws attention to the oversensitive conditions at the time of this legislation, a time when the Muslim community suffers from a lack of confidence towards their Prophet after the loss of the War of Uhud in AD 627, and the rise of the hypocrite’s attacks toward the household of the Prophet in order to instigate chaos in the Muslim community (90-91). In the light of these historical facts and the context of the revelation of this verse,

the hijab revelation...is seen mainly as the legislation of a means to provide domestic comfort and privacy for the female elite of Islam...In addition, the hijab is also seen as a protective device, especially during periods of civic tension when the hypocrites were instigating disorder and stirring up intercommunal fears. (Stowasser, 1994: 91)

Despite being devised as a means to ensure the privacy of the Prophet’s life with his wives and protect his household from all kinds of false accusations of the hypocrites, by restricting their free contact with males outside their household; the legislation of *hijab* had nothing to do with any inherent evil in women’s sexuality. The Qur’an’s intention to protect women from the hypocrites is made clearer with the subsequent verses, on the basis of which the conservatives ‘legitimize a generalized model of veiling for all Muslim women (Barlas, 2002: 53):

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks [jilbab] close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful. If the hypocrites, and those in whose hearts is a disease, and the alarmists in the city do not cease, We verify shall urge thee on against them, then they will be your neighbours in it but a little while. (The Qur’an, 33: 59-60)

While the verse 33:53 secured the privacy of the Prophet's wives within their homes, these verses 'concerned individual female appearance when outside of the home' and 'applied to all Muslim women, not just the Prophet's wives' (Stowasser, 1994: 91). In verses 27-31 in Surah 2, the Qur'an summarizes its legislation on the protection of all Muslim's privacy, both inside and outside the house, by ordering the believers not to enter any house without asking for permission and to 'lower their gaze' in order not to disturb other believers with their eyes. However, the latter order was interpreted by traditional exegetes as a prohibition for both men and women to look at the other sex, then specifically banning men from looking at any women other than their wives and forcing women to cover themselves completely so as to prevent men from looking at them. The second part of this legislation orders the Prophet to

Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest.
That is purer for them. Lo!

Allah is Aware of what they do.

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment [beauty and ornaments in Ali's translation] only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils [khumur] over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed. (The Qur'an, 24: 30-31)

These verses give the conservative Muslim males the chance to justify their belief that female body is seducing, therefore should be covered—an idea which is also shared by Jews and Christians who see Eve's sexuality as the cause of men's Fall from the Heaven. In traditional exegesis, these verses have been read

...as giving Muslim males the right to force women to don everything from the hijab (a head veil that leaves the face uncovered) to the burqa (a head-to-toe shroud that hides even the feet; some models even mandate wearing gloves so as to hide the hands). They justify such forms of veiling on the grounds that women's bodies are pudendal, hence sexually corrupting to those who see them; it thus is necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing women's bodies by concealing them. (Barlas, 2002: 54)

Barlas (2002) insists that the usage of both words (*jilbab* and *khumur*) that are described as *hijab* by the conservative males, are actually ordering women to cover their 'bosom (*junub*) and neck, *not* the face, head, hands or feet.' And also, she adds, they are 'meant not to *hide* free Muslim women from Muslim men but to render them *visible*, hence recognizable, by *Jahili* (non-Muslim) men, as a way to protect the women.' She concludes that none of these verses on *hijab*

...frames the issue of veiling in terms of women's sexually corrupt/ing bodies or nature. Thus, the Qur'an's treatment of the public and private display of the human body, male and female, is not premised on a view (shared also by Jews and Christians) of the body itself as corrupt and corrupting. (56)

Indeed, a closer look at the logic of this legislation, which orders men to lower their gaze and women to cover their bosoms and neck (at least) brings us not to the corrupting nature of the female body, but the disturbing and harassing nature of the male gaze, which takes us further to think of their higher potential for sinning. That's why the Qur'an orders them to lower their gaze in order to be pure, as God knows what they hide in their hearts (The Qur'an, 24: 30). Instead of taking this verse as a warning to control their excessive sexual desires and therefore be close to purity, Muslim males have handled it as a means to suppress female sexuality and thus female appearance in the public space. Once more, the Qur'anic verses have been the tool of

patriarchy in maintaining their status quo, which has been indeed threatened by the Qur'an itself.

Conclusion

Can the Qur'an emancipate women?

Considering the deep conservatism in Muslim people regarding the rules of Islam, a great majority of which are taken from the Qur'an, Islamic feminist intellectuals' attempt to reread the Qur'an in a way to ensure the liberation of women is a real act of courage and also a big challenge to the male patriarchs of Islamic exegesis.

Ursula King (1989) observes in the West that 'many people do not even have the patience to listen [to the feminists] for they find feminist voices too disruptive, unreasonable and shrill' (13), which is the same situation in Muslim world with an addition that feminists are mostly blamed for heresy when they direct any criticism towards the Islamic code (*Shari'a*). Therefore, Muslim feminists have felt the need to go back to the primary source of Islam, which has been used as the main justification for the misogynist rules in Islam and at the same time the accusations of heresy made the conservatives towards modernists and feminists. Seeing that 'there is a fundamental contradiction between Islam as interpreted in official policy and equality between the sexes' (Mernissi, 1985: 19), Muslim feminist intellectuals have highlighted the numerous verses in the Qur'an that establish a radical equality between men and women. Although each of these thinkers carried out separate research and analysis in their feminist exegesis of the Qur'an, they all reached common conclusions; namely, equal creation of men and women, the lack of any reference to any inherent inferiority or evil in women, and the equal potential of men and women in committing sin and/or attaining religious perfection. This constitutes the first phase of women's emancipation, which is a spiritual emancipation by reclaiming their mostly denied status as full agencies as perfect, equal human beings. As King (1989) says, 'the liberation of women' has two faces: one is 'economic and social,' and

the other and more important one is ‘fully personal independence and discovery of the true self –a discovery of great spiritual importance’ (18). Muslim women attain the ‘fully personal independence’ in the egalitarian verses of the Qur’an; as for the ‘economic and social’ liberation, the feminist reading of the Qur’an reveals that women are given special care in Islam, giving them the right to hold a property of their own, at the same time holding men responsible for maintaining women’s living expenses. Islam also emancipates women from the oppression of patriarchy, since its teachings are anti-patriarchal, as Asma Barlas (2002) puts it clearly:

If...patriarchy is a continuum at one end of which are misrepresentations of God as Father, and of fathers as rulers over wives and children, and at the other end, the notion of sexual differentiation that is used to privilege males while Otherizing women, then the Qur’an’s teachings are antipatriarchal. (204)

While the primary source of Islam presents absolutely emancipatory principles for women, the secondary sources, mainly the *abadith* literature and the personal exegesis of highly respected mediaeval male scholars, do not let women to experience their freedom and equality provided by the Qur’an. The misogynist and patriarchal traditions of the pre-Islamic societies were infiltrated into Islamic teachings through these secondary sources which were predominantly in the hands of Muslim men. Yes, the Qur’an emancipates women as long as ‘the Qur’anic interpretation continues to be rendered by each generation in a manner which reflects its whole intent’ (Wadud, 1999: 104). However, this Qur’anic interpretation should be accompanied by a seriously critical look towards the sources of the numerous misogynist *abadith* which are equally effective in Muslims’ lives.

Bibliography

Ali, Abdullah Yusuf, The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary. 2nd U.S. ed., New York 1988.

- Al-Mandudi, Abu al-A'la*, Towards Understanding Islam. Translated and edited by *Khursid Ahmed*, Indianapolis 1977.
- Barlas, Asma*, Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an, Austin 2002.
- Bennet, Clinton*, Muslims and Modernity: An Introduction to the Issues and Debates, London & New York 2005.
- Cooke, Miriam*, 'Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies', *Nepantla* 2000, 1:1, 91-110.
- , Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature, New York & London 2001.
- Darraj, Susan Muaddi*, 'Third World, Third Wave Feminism(s): the Evolution of Arab American Feminism.' *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*. Ed. Rory Dicker & Alison Piepmaier, Boston 2003, 188-205.
- Esposito, John L.*, 'Introduction: Women, Religion and Empowerment,' *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & John Esposito, Gainesville 2001, 3-11.
- Hassan, Riffat*, 'Feminism in Islam.' *Feminism and World Religions*. Ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, Albany 1999.
- King, Ursula*, Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise, Basingstoke, Hampshire 1999.
- Mermer, Dr. Yamine*, 'Principles of Qur'anic Hermeneutics.' *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, 5:1., 2005, Retrieved on 10 April 2006. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume5/number1/>.
- Mernissi, Fatima*, Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society, London 1985.
- , Women & Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, Oxford 1991 [1987].
- Millett, Kate*, Sexual Politics, New York 1970.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba*, Islam and Gender: the Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran, London 1999.
- Pickthall, Mohammed Marmaduke*, The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: an Explanatory Translation, New York c 1953.
- Rahman, Fazlur*, Islam: Ideology and the Way of Life, London 1980.
- Saadallah, Sherin*, 'Muslim Feminism in the Third Wave: a Reflective Inquiry.' *Third Wave Feminism*. Ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie & Rebecca Munford, New York 2004, 216-226.
- Shaykh 'AbdulKhalig, 'Abdur-Rahman*, 'The Wisdom behind the Islamic Laws Regarding Women.' Translated by Ali Al-Timimi. Prepared for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 1990, http://www.salafi.net/books/book-2_e.html.
- Shebadeh, Lamia Rustum*, The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam, Gainesville 2003.

Sonbol, Amira El-Azhary, 'Rethinking Women and Islam,' *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & John Esposito, Gainesville 2001, 108-146.

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, *The Woman's Bible*, foreword by Maureen Fitzgerald, Boston, Mass. 1993.

Stowasser, Barbara Freyer, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, New York 1994.

Yamani, Ahmad Zaki, *Woman in Islam*, [London] 2005.

Wadud, Amina, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, New York & Oxford 1999.