

The “Bad Girls of Islam”: Islamic Feminists and Their Interpretative Contributions

The term Islamic Feminism in itself is very modern; however, it is not a new movement. Nonetheless, Western feminists tend to find redundant the existence of feminists within religious traditions such as Islam, and Muslim some women reject feminism because of its Western origin (Cooke, 92). Yet, as Cooke acknowledges, “If feminism can be many changing states of consciousness, each reflecting women’s understanding of themselves and their situations as related to their social and biological conditions, then it is not bound to one culture” (92). Even though Islamic Feminism is sometimes considered an oxymoron, it has raised among progressive Muslim circles to challenge the current patriarchal order in Islam. Islamic Feminism has been represented by multiple scholars and activists such as Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud and Asra Nomani, among others. This paper will focus on women’s theological and liturgical contributions to Islam through Islamic Feminism focusing on Asra Nomani’s activism and Amina Wadud’s theological interpretations.

As Myfanwy Franks point out, men have traditionally controlled the interpretative sphere of the sacred texts, which has meant that Islam’s thirteen centuries of existence have remained prominently patriarchal (202). Consequently, key concepts in Islam such as sexuality, gender and power relations have been defined just within the patriarchal sphere that interprets them (Shlala Leo, 139). Islamic feminist aims to break this chain of interpretations by proposing new exegesis of the sacred texts. It is important to mention that Islamic feminists work within the Islamic framework since being Muslim is an inherently important part of their identity (Cooke, 94). Islam’s theology is based on three basic texts, the Qur’an¹, the Sunnah² and the Hadith³.

¹ God’s Revelation through the Prophet Muhammad. Qur’an is considered to be infallible.

² The example of the Prophet Muhammad (Franks, 202).

Consequently, Islamic feminists intend to challenge the patriarchal Qur'anic interpretations, not the revelation itself (Scott, 60). Interestingly, just as men do within patriarchal systems, Islamic feminists acknowledge 'womanhood as a "God-given" characteristic' (Franks, 201). Islamic Feminism originates from the need of Muslim women to reinterpret the sacred texts and extract what Sa'diyya Shaikh calls the *Shirk of Patriarchy*⁴ (99). As Shaikh explains, these patriarchal understandings of the texts do not only exclude and seclude women from participation in politics, scholarship and ritual, but they also contradict the Qur'anic notion of equality of the genders (99). Shaikh's article focuses on hadith because she points out that regardless of the Qur'anic accounts, hadith is used to provide authority to theological interpretations, which may result in hadith interpretations becoming the primary texts over Qur'an (100). It is because of this that many Islamic feminists have immersed in a practice called *Ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* refers to a personal interpretation of the Qur'an, and it has been practiced for centuries (Shlala Leo, 130). *Ijtihad* has become Islamic feminists' main tool to reinterpret Islam, and it has allowed them to construct a notion of gender that is free of patriarchal intervention (Shlala Leo, 130). Omid Safi affirms that Qur'anic analysis has been a male-dominated field even when it comes to women's issues. This has provoked that at least half of the Muslim community does not have a say in issues that interest them and are subjected to the patriarchal interpretations that male theologians offer (2); therefore, he concludes, "The problem is not the Qur'an, it is not God. It is patriarchy, a profound human error that must be addressed, resisted and corrected" (4). There have been different ways in which women have approached Islam, and they vary from rejection to confrontation to accommodation. A good example of a transition between these approaches is

³ The sayings of the Prophet (202). The verification of ahadith (plural form of hadith) tends to be a very complex process that requires the ahadith to have a strong *Isnad* (list of transmitters), and the content should not oppose the Qur'an. If a Hadith is in contradiction with the Qur'an, then it is considered invalid (Hassan, 5-6).

⁴ *Shirk* refers to the worse since in Islam. It is usually used to describe polytheism.

Fatima Mernissi, who started her feminist activist years by rejecting Islam and has moved towards a new Islamic feminist approach by confronting patriarchy in Arab cultures, but not the revelation itself, in order to accommodate Muslim women into feminist discourse (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 1490). By doing this, Mernissi has not only expanded her audience, but she has also contributed to feminist discourse within Islam and Qur'anic interpretations. Other women such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have engaged in theological and historical interpretations of the text in order to find women's 'real' place in Islam. On the other hand, women like Asra Nomani have taken over radical activism in order to bring Muslims' attention to women's issues within the community. However, most of these attempts to reinterpret Islam have been highly criticized, marginalized and dismissed by authoritative Islamic scholars.

Asra Nomani's experience with her own Muslim community demonstrates the negative responses that alternative interpretations cause within some communities. Asra Nomani is a journalist, writer and Islamic feminist that challenged the patriarchal practices and customs of her community in Morgantown, West Virginia in 2004. Nomani's enormous contributions to Islamic feminism are more practical than theological. She started a campaign in her local mosque in Morgantown for women to be allowed to pray behind the men in the main hall, instead of being secluded in a separate room, and being forced to enter the mosque through the back door (Beisner, 1). This solely act of justice towards women's basic religious rights in Islam has been highly condemned and criticized although Nomani was successful in her quest. In an interview with her, Nomani points out that the main challenges for women in Islam are the narrow interpretations of Islam that rule the community nowadays. Nomani seems concerned with the fact that in some cases women present more resistance to change than men in the community, which makes it difficult to promote women's rights in Islam. Nevertheless, she has

enrolled in an ambitious project to return Islam to its original progressive spirit through Islamic Feminism. In Nomani's words, Islamic feminism offers "a new interpretation of an unequal interpretation" (Nomani). Nomani explains that the narrowness in interpretations has led to a distorted version of Islam. By distorted she refers to cases such as Saudi Arabia where women are not allowed to drive and need male escorts or written permissions to travel; or Pakistan where the judicial system declared that a woman is half a witness of a man; or Afghanistan and its restrictions on female education. Nomani affirms that a very central problem is the fact that Muslims (male and female) construct their identity through the image of women as second-class citizens. She describes that even when it comes to women, they believe in the sexist patriarchal discourse of seclusion, and they think that fulfillment of that role makes them more honourable and respectable. However, Nomani's project aims to bring women to activism and engagement inside the religious area, and return to them the first-class citizen status that has been taken away through patriarchal interpretations of Islam. This status would allow women to claim their rights in different areas such as family law, marital relations, political engagement, religious affairs, etc. For Nomani, feminism has a place in Islam. Still, her ideals have been resisted outside progressive Muslim circles and being accused of lacking religious basis. Yet, in her article *A Gender Jihad for Islam's Future* Nomani explains, "To many, we are the bad girls of Islam. But we are not anti-sharia (Islamic law) or anti-Islam. We use the fundamentals of Islamic thinking - the Koran, the Sunnah, or traditions and sayings of the prophet Muhammad, and ijihad , or independent reasoning - to challenge the ways in which Islam has been distorted by sharia rulings issued mostly by ultraconservative men" (asranomani.com). She has been criticized for her radical actions such as a protest in the mosque in Morgantown during her campaign, and her involvement with the organization of a mixed-congregation prayer led by a woman on 2005.

When asked about that particular event, Nomani expresses that it has been one of the most significant experiences of her life. She was the main organizer of this event as part of her project to highlight women's presence in Islam. Nomani contacted another well-known Islamic feminist, Amina Wadud, to lead the prayer. As she points out, most Islamic schools of thought acknowledge a woman's capacity to lead other women in prayer; however, they do not accept women leading men. In regards to this point, Safi explains that this has to do with a notion of spiritual superiority of men over women that cannot be supported in Qur'anic terms (3). Nonetheless, Nomani explains that even when women can lead other women, they lack the proper training to lead a prayer, so few women take the challenge. On the other hand, through this event, Nomani sent a very strong message to the Muslim community. The prayer was condemned by Islamic leaders and even considered invalid. Nonetheless, more than 100 people (men and women) attended the event. Furthermore, Nomani mentions that this event opened many doors for women because in subsequent years the Islamic Society of North American elected a woman as president for the first time, and countries like Morocco have started projects to train women as female imams to counteract the effects of Islamic fundamentalism. Finally, when asked why does she remain within Islam if the challenges are so strong? She responds, "It would be much easier to leave the faith... but it is part of my DNA. But my second reason not to leave the faith or give up the fight is because this is not only about my spiritual worship it is about the world... I would be a bad citizen of the world if I did that" (Nomani).

Like Asra Nomani, Amina Wadud believes in an alternative interpretation of Islam, and she has dedicated a great part of her life to the theological study of Qur'an. Wadud is a feminist activist that converted to Islam many years ago, and has become a prominent scholar in Islamic Studies (Calderini, 324). Wadud's contributions to Islamic Feminism have been well publicized

and highly condemned by some sectors of the Islamic community. Although she is best known by leading a mixed congregation in prayer, that is just part of her activist work. In 2004, she delivered a sermon in South Africa for men and women, and she deliberately used very woman-like examples to explain “Islam” as “surrender”; this action gained her engagement and sympathy from women in the congregation, but was very criticized since women are not encouraged or even allowed to deliver sermons to mixed congregations (Calderini, 329). Her performance in 2005 in New York as female imam shocked many members of the Muslim community; however, it was praised by others like Omid Safi, who refers to a hadith where Umm Waraqa was appointed by the Prophet Muhammad to lead her household (conformed by men and women) in prayer to justify Wadud’s right to serve as Imam (Safi, 3). In addition, some of Wadud’s most important contributions include Qur’anic interpretation; what’s more important, her works are written not only from a feminist perspective, but from a woman’s feminist point of view, which is a challenge to the traditional Qur’anic accounts by itself. Wadud’s first book *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* is a theological explanation of perceptions of women in the Qur’an and how are they affected by other sources such as the hadith and other male interpreted texts. These issues have been identified by other feminist, such as Riffat Hassan who, like Wadud, reports various popular theological assumptions (although not Qur’anic) about women’s creation and expulsion from paradise, and how this has affected women’s status in Islam (Hassan, 4-6). Wadud’s book aims to extract these assumptions from her Qur’anic reading, and focuses on notions of equality between the genders and its importance for the status of women. While discussing different approaches to verse 4:34 of the Qur’an, Scott explains that Wadud’s interpretations are based on hermeneutics that are meant to show Qur’an’s universality and flexibility (72). For Wadud, Islam can

accommodate many cultures and ethnicities, but also different interpretations, including feminists ones. Wadud's interpretative methods are successful because they consider three factors: Qur'an's unity and how verses relate to the Qur'an as a whole; linguistic analysis that is meant to understand the terms based on their context; and historical and contextual background of the revealed verses (Scott, 73). An interesting example of Wadud's methodological interpretations is presented in Scott's article referring to verse 4:34 of the Qur'an. As Scott acknowledges, the verse presents very difficult challenges for feminist interpretations; however, some scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Muhammad Al-Talbi and Amina Wadud had taken the challenge to reinterpret the verse (Scott, 61):

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women inasmuch as God has endowed some of humankind with greater capacity than others, and inasmuch as they spend of their wealth. Good, righteous women are devoted ones and observant, who guard the secrets as God guards and keeps undisclosed. As for those women from whose determined disobedience and breach of their marital obligations you have reason to fear, admonish them; then, remain apart from their beds; then beat them lightly. If they obey you, do not seek ways against them. God is indeed All-Exalted, All Great.

(The Qur'an, 4:34).

Wadud's account of this verse is explained within its relation to the rest of the Qur'an. She clarifies that the text does not refer to women's disobedience per se, since the Qur'an does not order wives to obey their husbands; instead, it refers to marital discord (Scott, 74). Furthermore, she has to accept that the text does express the word "to beat", but according to her exegesis, the text does not promote violence, but rather it aims to put an end to the excessive violence that women suffered in pre-Islamic Arabia. According to Wadud's interpretation, the verse was revealed to constrain husbands' behaviour towards their wives (74). Nevertheless, as Scott points out, Wadud accepts that just like any other interpretation, hers is not totally objective.

Furthermore, Scott indicates that Wadud's method relies on its own "correctness" just as patriarchal or literal interpretations (75). However, in her second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadud seems to change her mind, and acknowledges that her previous interpretation of the verse was based on her ideal Islam (Scott, 75). Later on, Scott explains that Wadud has decided to say 'no' to the text by acknowledging that although she has been trying to reinterpret the verse for years, she has not been able to accept the fact that Qur'an, in somehow, condones striking a woman (76). On the other hand, she remains firm in her discourse of justice and gender equality in the Qur'an. According to Shlala Leo, Wadud really believes that through this equality women and men have the ability to decide their own roles within society, and that is how Qur'an is adaptable to the modern times (138). Wadud's ritual contributions and theological accounts have been condemned by Muslim scholars all over the world. However, she has been taken as an example by some progressive organizations, such as the Muslim for Progressive Values organization, which has included a full section defending women's rights to lead mixed-congregation prayers on its website (mpvusa.com). Just as Nomani, Wadud has remained within the tradition and has decided to fight for equal rights instead of leaving the religion.

In sum, Islamic Feminism has its origins in Muslim women's desires to challenge patriarchal interpretations and acknowledge their womanhood as a gift from God. Among Islamic feminists there are various women that have contributed to liturgy and theology in Islam. Asra Nomani has made enormous contributions to activism and practice, proving that feminism has a place in Islam. In addition, Amina Wadud has not only contributed to liturgy by delivering sermons in South Africa and leading a mixed-prayer congregation in New York, but also to theology through her hermeneutical approach to Qur'anic verses such as 4:34. Both women have resisted patriarchal interpretations, and have found common ground in the Qur'an to protect

women's rights in Islam. Furthermore, they have acknowledged women's necessity to engage with their religion and their Muslim identity in order to bring change to women's status in Islam.

E. Cervantes-Altamirano

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