

Recovering the Progressive Spirit of Islam: Ijtihad and Its Transformative Possibilities in Islamic Feminism

ERÉNDIRA CERVANTES-ALTAMIRANO

4th Year, BA Combined Honours Political Science and Religious Studies

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta

The term Islamic Feminism is very modern; however, feminism is not new to Islam. Feminism within the Islamic context developed at the end of the twentieth century.¹ Some, however, trace it back to figures like Rokeya Sakhawat² and Malak Hifni Nasif at the end of the nineteenth century,³ and few even argue that the first expressions of feminism in Islam were promoted by Umm Salama and Aisha, two of Prophet Muhammad's wives.⁴ Wherein most western forms of feminism prioritize the category "woman" over religious, ethnic, and cultural differences,⁵ with some going so far as to argue that feminism has no place in religious traditions such as Islam,⁶ Islamic Feminism endorses a religious discourse based on Qur'anic text and addresses Muslim women specifically.⁷ Rather than reject feminism wholesale, though, Islamic Feminists prefer to argue for their place in feminist thought. As Cooke states, "if feminism can be many changing states of consciousness, each reflecting women's understanding of themselves

¹ Margot Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no.1 (2005): 6.

² Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, "Timeline of Contemporary Muslim Women's Activism," *WISE*, available from http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/activism/timeline_results/C83/1908-1992, accessed February 24, 2011.

³ Fadwa El Guindi, "Gendered Resistance, Feminist Veiling, Islamic Feminism," *The Ahfad Journal* 22, no.1 (2005): 60.

⁴ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (New York: Basic Books, 1992): 163, 118, 145.

⁵ El Guindi, 53-54.

⁶ For example, Myfanny Franks reports an example in which the feminist publisher Virago rejected Rana Kabbani's *Letter to Christendom* (1989) arguing that a woman who claims to be self-determining and eloquent while coming from a Muslim background is a liar. Franks, "Islamic Feminist Strategies in Liberal Democracy: How Feminists are they?" *Comparative Islamic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005): 200.

⁷ Badran, 6.

and their situations as related to their social and biological conditions, then it is not bound to one culture.”⁸

Even though Islamic Feminism is sometimes considered an oxymoron, it has emerged as a progressive movement to challenge the current patriarchal order that rules Qur’anic exegesis and Islamic liturgy. In part because feminism more broadly speaking is not well received in many Muslim contexts, such challenges have garnered Islamic Feminists the title of “the bad girls of Islam.”⁹ Through this paper, I aim to analyze Islamic Feminism as a contemporary Islamic movement which proposes a new perspective on Qur’anic exegesis in order to recover the progressive outlook that characterized Islam in the seventh century. Furthermore, I attempt to explain how *ijtihad*, an Islamic legal method, can be used to promote new Qur’anic interpretations and to adapt Islamic theology to the modern context in which Muslims live today. The most prominent examples of this analysis focus on the contributions of Amina Wadud and Asra Nomani, among other feminist Muslim activists.

Islamic Feminism, Ijtihad and Progressive Islam

Islamic Feminism has been proposed by people from different ethnic, cultural and professional backgrounds, including Sa’diyya Shaikh,¹⁰ ¹¹ Fatima Mernissi,¹² Amina Wadud,¹³

⁸ Miriam Cooke, "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 1 (2000): 92.

⁹ Asra Q. Nomani, "A gender jihad for Islam's future," *Washington Post*, Outlook Section, November 6, 2005, available from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/04/AR2005110402306.html>, accessed October 15, 2009.

¹⁰ Sa’diyya Shaikh is a professor at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Her current research focuses on gender and sexuality in the written works of Ibn Arabi. Furthermore, she is collaborating with *Positive Muslims* and the University of Stellenbosch in a research project that looks at Muslim women’s sexuality, reproductive choices, marriage and HIV/Aids in South Africa.

Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, "Sa’diyya Shaikh," *WISE*, available from http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/muslimwomen/bio/sadiyya_shaikh/, accessed June 24, 2011.

¹¹ Department of Religious Studies. "Dr. Sa’diyya Shaikh," *University of Cape Town*, available from <http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/religion/Staff/shaikh.php>, accessed June 24, 2011.

Asma Barlas,¹⁴ and Asra Nomani,¹⁵ among others. The movement has become influential in many countries through activist organizations such as Shura Yabafazi,¹⁶ the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk,¹⁷ the Unión de Mujeres Musulmanas de España,¹⁸ and the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality.¹⁹ In addition, the internet has become a major tool in the spread of feminist interpretations of Islam and discussions on the topic, and forums such as Muslimah Media Watch²⁰ play an important role. Nonetheless, it is in the West where we find some of the most publicized examples of Islamic feminists such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Asra Nomani, to mention a few. Despite the challenges, these women have contributed to

¹² Fatima Mernissi is a Moroccan scholar and writer and former professor at Mohammed V University. During the 80s and 90s she performed sociological research for various organizations, including UNESCO. In 2003 she won the Prince of Asturias Award for Letters along with Susan Sontag. She retired from academia in 2005 to focus solely on writing. Many of her books largely focus on women's role and place in Islam.

African Success, "Biography of Fatima Mernissi," *African Success*, available from <http://www.africansuccess.org/visuFiche.php?id=619&lang=en>, accessed June 24, 2011.

¹³ Amina Wadud is an African-American scholar in Islamic Studies, an activist and one of the few female Imams in contemporary times. Wadud, who converted to Islam during the era of "second-wave feminism," has dedicated her academic writings to performing feminist exegesis of the Qur'an and defending women's position in Islam. Wadud is better known for having led a number of mixed-congregation prayers. Trisha Sertori, "Dr. Amina Wadud: For a Progressive Islam." *The Jakarta Post*, Life Section, November 19, 2009, available from <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/11/19/dr-amina-wadud-for-a-progressive-islam.html>, accessed June 24, 2011.

¹⁴ Asma Barlas is a Pakistani professor at Ithaca University and the director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity. A great part of her research focuses on gender, sexuality and violence, particularly in the context of the Qur'an. Nowadays, she is also interested on Western violence against Muslims and the exclusion of Islam from civility and civilization. Ithaca College Faculty. "Asma Barlas," *Ithaca University*, available from <http://faculty.ithaca.edu/abarlas/bio/>, accessed June 24, 2011.

¹⁵ Asra Nomani is an Indian-American former reporter for the Wall Street Journal. Nowadays, she is better known for her controversial activism, which includes campaigns for the complete inclusion of women in Muslim communities, participating in mixed-congregation prayers and openly condemning conservative and orthodox Islam. Nomani worked for Salon magazine after 9/11, reporting from Pakistan. In 2002, Daniel Pearl, a well-known journalist and Nomani's friend, was kidnapped and murdered by extremist Muslims in Pakistan. Pearl's assassination led Nomani to start a widespread activist role against religious extremism in the context of Islam and against the segregation of women in Muslim communities. Asra Q. Nomani, "Biography," *Asra Q. Nomani*, available from <http://www.asranomani.com/Biography.aspx>, accessed June 24, 2011.

¹⁶ Na'eem Jeenah, "The national liberation struggle and Islamic feminism in South Africa," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29, (2006): 28.

¹⁷ Jeenah, 31.

¹⁸ Web Islam Comunidad Virtual, "Unión de Mujeres Musulmanas de España," *Web Islam*, available from <http://www.webislam.com/?ent=7581>, accessed February 24, 2011.

¹⁹ Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality, "Activism," *WISE*, available from <http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/activism>, accessed February 24, 2011.

²⁰ Muslimah Media Watch, "About MMW," *Muslimah Media Watch*, available from <http://muslimahmediawatch.org/about-2>, accessed on February 24, 2011.

Islamic theology and liturgy by reinterpreting sacred texts and attempting to extract the cultural elements that Islam has absorbed from the patriarchal societies in which it has evolved.

Hammer affirms that although the interpretation of Islamic scriptures by female scholars is not new to Islam, Islamic female scholarship is a very modern phenomenon since the analysis of gender as a category has its origins in the twentieth century.²¹ As Franks points out, men have traditionally controlled the interpretative sphere of the sacred texts, which has meant that Islam's thirteen centuries of existence have remained predominantly patriarchal.²² Consequently, key concepts in Islam such as sexuality, gender, and power relations have been defined by those living in and influenced by patriarchal spheres.²³ Islamic feminists oppose this chain of male-controlled interpretations by proposing new exegeses of the sacred texts. Despite the opposition that they face from some mainstream Muslim scholars and Western feminists, Islamic feminists neither appeal to a Western feminist discourse nor renounce their Muslim faith because they consider Islam an inherently important part of their identity.²⁴ The uniqueness of the movement rests on the fact that Islamic Feminism does not negate Qur'anic revelation; instead, it challenges the way male scholars have given women a second-class citizen status and have validated this fact through personal Qur'anic exegeses and the legitimization of hadith and sunnah as primary texts. Yet, Islamic feminists also rely on personal interpretations of the Qur'an, the sunnah²⁵ and women-friendly²⁶ ahadith²⁷ to support their own discourses.

²¹ Juliane Hammer, "Identity, Authority, and Activism: American Muslim Women approach the Qur'an," *The Muslim World* 98 (2008):443.

²² Franks, 202.

²³ Elizabeth Leo, "Islamic Female Sexuality and Gender in modern feminist interpretation," *Islam & Christian Muslim Relations* 16, no. 2 (2005): 139.

²⁴ Cooke, 94.

²⁵ Sunnah refers to the example given by Prophet Muhammad. Franks, 202.

²⁶ Riffat Hassan, "Challenging the Stereotypes of Fundamentalism: An Islamic Feminist Perspective," *Muslim World* 91, no. 1/2 (2001): 5-6.

²⁷ The sayings of the Prophet. The verification of ahadith (plural form of hadith) is a complex process that requires the ahadith to have a strong *isnad* (list of transmitters), and the content should not oppose the

In addition, the feminist Islamic framework has been developed through the use of *ijtihad*, which has been used for centuries in the Sunni and Shi'a traditions.²⁸ *Ijtihad* is not only an interpretative method, but also a legal one. As Ahmadi explains, *ijtihad* is a classic Islamic methodology that refers to independent interpretation of the religious sources, such as the Qur'an, hadith and sunnah.²⁹ Interestingly enough, *ijtihad* is not an innovation of the movement. Islamic scholars have traditionally used *ijtihad*, since the early days of Islam, to interpret the Qur'an.³⁰ Islamic Feminists have adopted the same traditional interpretative methods that have been used to exclude women from the public sphere to counter segregation within Islamic scholarship and liturgy.

However, some tensions arise when defining who can practice *ijtihad*. On the one hand, advocates of liberal and moderate Islam argue that *ijtihad* is a source of knowledge that is not limited to Islamic jurists, and that it can be employed by any Muslim who has knowledge of the Arabic language and the scriptures.³¹ Hence, under this understanding of the term, *ijtihad* provides the Muslim believer with the possibility to study and interpret the sacred texts while applying specific legal rulings to her or his own life. On the other hand, the legalistic view on *ijtihad* is that its practice requires expertise not only on the Qur'an and Arabic, but also on hadith, sunnah and traditional Islamic scholarship.³² Islamic jurists often refer to authoritative scholars such as Al-Bukhari to define the terms for the practice of *ijtihad*. According to Al-

Qur'an. If a hadith is in contradiction with the Qur'an, then it is considered invalid. Ibid.

²⁸ Leo, 130.

²⁹ Fereshteh Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran. Feminism in a New Islamic Context," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no.2 (2006): 36.

³⁰ Shaykh Mashhoor Hasan Aal Salmaan, "Is the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?," *SalafiManhaj*, 2008, available from http://www.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj_DoorOfIjtihad.pdf, accessed March 27, 2011, 1.

³¹ M.A. Muqtedar Khan, "Two Theories of Ijtihad," *Ijtihad: A Return to Enlightenment, Muqtedar Khan's Column on Islam and Global Affairs*, March 21, 2006, available from <http://www.ijtihad.org/ijtihad.htm>, accessed on March 28, 2011.

³² Ibid.

Bukhari, *ijtihad* also entails the ability to draw precedent from previous cases, discussion with other scholars on the matter and wisdom.³³ Hence, a number of Islamic scholars refute the use of *ijtihad* in specific cases, such as within Islamic Feminism, by calling it *bid'a* (an innovation), which is an invalid use of the method and an unacceptable foundation of Islamic law.³⁴

Some Islamic feminists, like Nomani, argue that Islam was originally a dynamic and progressive tradition, and that *ijtihad* allows contemporary Muslims to recover that dynamism and progressivism.³⁵ In light of this desire to return to a more progressive origin, some people are motivated to reinterpret the sacred texts in order to extract what Sa'diyya Shaikh calls the "Shirk of Patriarchy." *Shirk*, the sin of idolatry, denotes the worst sin in Islam because it means to attribute equals to Allah.³⁶ Shaikh argues that some Muslim scholars often place patriarchy above Allah's message. She further explains that patriarchal exegeses of the sacred texts 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.³⁷

As Shaikh points out, some Islamic sources, which have been used to demonize and undermine womanhood, are in opposition to Qur'anic accounts.³⁸ For instance, Riffat Hassan observes that many negative attitudes towards women have their origin in misogynistic Qur'anic exegeses and inclusion of non-Qur'anic sources in the interpretative process.³⁹ Hassan demonstrates this through the creation account, where she explains that the Qur'an describes the creation of humanity as an evolutionary process that started with the creation of both Adam and

³³ Scott C. Lucas, "Legal Principles of Muhammad B. Isma'il Al-Bukhari," *Islamic Law and Society* 13, no. 3 (2006): 296.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.

³⁵ Asra Q. Nomani. Telephone interview by the author. 23 October 2009.

³⁶ Sa'adiyya Shaikh, "Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadith: a Feminist Interpretation," *Islam & Christian Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1 (2004): 99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Hassan, 3.

Eve in a single event.⁴⁰ Yet, many Muslims believe that Adam was created first and that Eve was extracted from his rib. This version may have its origins in Jewish or Christian accounts, and it has been reinforced through a number of ahadith that describe Eve as coming from Adam's rib.⁴¹ Despite the fact that the Qur'anic account does not differentiate between the creation of Adam or Eve, in this and other instances, ahadith have become more authoritative and have been used to seclude women to the private sphere even when they contradict the Qur'anic message.

Despite protests from some legalists, as discussed above, *ijtihad* has become Islamic feminists' main tool to reinterpret Islamic sources, and it has allowed them to construct a notion of gender that is somewhat free of patriarchal intervention.⁴² In this sense, *ijtihad* is also a way to find a deeper connection with the sacred text. Despite the conflict that this has caused among various Muslim groups, 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 *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning—to challenge the ways in which Islam has been distorted by sharia rulings issued mostly by ultraconservative men.⁴³

The importance of this process, in the context of Islamic feminism, is that, as Omid Safi affirms, the Qur'anic analysis has been a male-dominated field even when it comes to women's issues. This has resulted in at least half of the Muslim community not having a say in matters that interest them and being subjected only to the patriarchal interpretations that male theologians offer;⁴⁴ therefore, he concludes, "the problem is not the Qur'an, it is not God. It is patriarchy, a

⁴⁰ Ibid, 4

⁴¹ Ibid 4-6.

⁴² Leo, 130.

⁴³ Asra Q. Nomani, "A gender jihad for Islam's future," 1.

⁴⁴ Omid Safi, "Shattering the Idol of Spiritual Patriarchy: Towards a Gender-Fair Notion of Prayer in Islam," *Tikkun* 20, no. 4 (2005): 59.

profound human error that must be addressed, resisted and corrected.”⁴⁵ Many Islamic feminists think that the way to contest patriarchy and correct the “mistake” is through women’s engagement in *ijtihad*.

Feminist Islamic Theology and Liturgy

Islamic Feminism has opened many possibilities for women. As a result, some have focused on theological interpretations and others have aimed for political activism. Similarly, a few of them have taken radical approaches to feminist Islamic practices while others have shaped their own experiences within the framework that the movement offers. Well known scholars such as Fatima Mernissi have progressively taken an Islamic feminist approach by confronting patriarchy in Arab cultures, but not revelation itself; this has allowed them to incorporate Muslim women into the feminist discourse and to broaden their audience.⁴⁶ Other women such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have engaged in theological and historical interpretations of the texts in order to find women’s “real” place in Islam. Likewise, women like Asra Nomani have taken over “radical” activism in order to bring Muslims’ attention to women’s issues in the community.

However, many of these attempts to reinterpret Islam have been highly criticized, marginalized and dismissed by authoritative Islamic scholars. This can be seen through a number of rulings dealing with the issue of women as imams that call for women to give up their liturgical aspirations, including the opinions of authorities such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi⁴⁷ and

⁴⁵ Ibid, 61.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Women's rights in the Muslim world: reform or reconstruction?," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 8 (2006): 1490.

⁴⁷ Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, “Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi comments on females leading co-gender Friday prayers and on women leading other women,” *Islamopedia Online*, April 10, 2010, available from <http://www.islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/dr-yusuf-al-qaradawi-comments-females-leading-co-gender-friday-prayers-and-women-leading-other>, accessed on March 28, 2011.

Shaykh Muhammad Imdad Hussain Pirzada.⁴⁸ Asra Nomani's experience with her own Muslim community demonstrates the negative responses caused by alternative interpretations within some communities. Nomani is a journalist, writer and Islamic feminist who started challenging the patriarchal practices and customs of her community in Morgantown, West Virginia, in 2004. Nomani's contributions to the movement are expressed through her approach to orthopraxy. She started a campaign in her local mosque in Morgantown for women to be allowed to pray behind the men in the main hall and to enter the mosque through the main door, instead of being secluded in a separate room and being forced to enter the mosque through the back.⁴⁹ This simple request for justice towards women's basic Islamic rights has been condemned and criticized. However, Morgantown's mosque is not the only one. According to Beiser, two thirds of the U.S's mosques require women to pray behind partitions or in different rooms.⁵⁰ This may be religiously problematic since there is a hadith that states, "The best rows for men are the first rows, and the worst ones the last ones, and the best rows for women are the last ones and the worst ones for them are the first ones."⁵¹ Arguably, this is used as proof that, during the early days of Islam, women used to pray along with men in the same congregation but in different rows. Yet, although Nomani was successful in guaranteeing women a praying space behind the men in her mosque, the community has resisted her efforts and Nomani and her family have been ostracized.⁵²

⁴⁸ Shaykh Muhammad Imdad Hussain Pirzada, "Can a woman become Imam?" *The Official Website of Shaykh Muhammad Imdad Hussain Pirzada*, October 2008, available from http://mihpirzada.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=67&Itemid=47, accessed on March 28, 2011.

⁴⁹ Vince Beiser, "Asra Nomani," *Mother Jones* 31, no. 1 (2006): 16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

⁵¹ *Sahih Muslim*, Book 4, Number 0881, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, *Translation of the Sahih Muslim*, 2005, available from <http://www.iium.edu.my/deed/hadith/muslim/index.html>, accessed on May 1, 2011.

⁵² Beiser, 16-17.

In an interview, Nomani points out that the main challenges for women in Islam are the narrow interpretations 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, and that they tend to endorse patriarchal attitudes in order to guarantee their status and economic security. This represents a challenge for the promotion of women's rights in Islam. Nevertheless, she has enrolled in an ambitious project to return Islam to what she sees as its original progressive spirit through Islamic Feminism. In Nomani's words, Islamic Feminism offers "a new interpretation of an unequal interpretation." She elaborates by saying that the narrowness in Islamic exegesis has led to distorted versions of Islam.⁵³

A central problem in contemporary Islam is the fact that some Muslims (male and female) tend to construct their identity through the image of women as second-class citizens or even as the "other." Therefore, women are sometimes perceived as spiritually, intellectually and politically inferior. The Islamic feminist project attempts 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 and its sacred texts. This status would allow women to claim their rights in different areas such as family law, marital relations, political engagement, religious scholarship, and liturgy, among others.

For Nomani and other proponents, feminism has a place in Islam. Nonetheless, some Islamic feminists have been criticized for their "radical" approaches. For instance, Nomani's organized protests at her mosque in Morgantown during her campaign to promote women's right to pray behind men in the main hall⁵⁴ resulted in a few threats issued by some conservative

⁵³ Asra Q. Nomani. Telephone interview by the author.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Muslims.⁵⁵ Through her role as the organizer of a mixed-congregation prayer led by Amina Wadud in 2005, Nomani also has been the focus of many media articles and discussions with titles such as “Asra Nomani, the unmarried mother who wants to pray among men!”⁵⁶ and “Asra Nomani’s brave stance against sexism in Islam an inspiration to all.”⁵⁷ When asked about the mixed-congregation prayer, Nomani expresses that it has been one of the most significant experiences of her life.⁵⁸

The issue of female participation in Islamic liturgy has caused explosive reactions in Muslim communities. Nevertheless, Islamic feminists offer justifications for this involvement through Islamic sources and progressive exegeses. In contrast, even when most Islamic schools of thought acknowledge a woman’s capacity to lead other women in prayer, they challenge the appropriateness of 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.⁵⁹ Moreover, the rejection of a woman’s liturgical capabilities has led to an actual lack of knowledge among women with respect to orthopraxy and liturgy. Consequently, Nomani explains that even when women are often allowed to lead other women in prayer, they lack the proper training, so very few women take the challenge.⁶⁰

Muslim women who have decided to approach theology from a feminist perspective do not only aim to reinterpret the texts through *ijtihad* and different theological methodologies, but

⁵⁵ Beiser, 17.

⁵⁶ Haitham Sabbah, “Asra Nomani, the unmarried mother who wants to pray among men!” *Sabbah Report*, June 10, 2005, available from <http://sabbah.biz/mt/archives/2005/06/10/asra-nomani-the-unmarried-mother-who-wants-to-pray-among-men>, accessed on March 28, 2011.

⁵⁷ Crystal Trulove, “Asra Nomani’s brave stance against sexism in Islam an inspiration to all,” *theJustice.org*, April 12, 2005, available at <http://media.www.thejustice.org/media/storage/paper573/news/2005/04/12/Forum/OpEd-Asra.Nomani.Brave.Stance.Against.Sexism.In.Islam.An.Inspiration.To.All-921110.shtml?noreferrer=200609251555&sourcedomain=www.thejusticeonline.com>, accessed on March 28, 2011.

⁵⁸ Asra Q. Nomani. Telephone interview by the author.

⁵⁹ Safi, 60.

⁶⁰ Asra Q. Nomani. Telephone interview by the author.

they also attempt to encourage women to practice independent reasoning and exegesis by themselves. Therefore, women such as Amina Wadud have dedicated a great part of their lives to the theological study of Qur'an and other Islamic sources. Wadud is a feminist activist, who converted to Islam in the 1970s and has become a prominent scholar in Islamic Studies.⁶¹ Wadud's contributions to Islamic Feminism have been well publicized in the West and greatly condemned by some sectors of the Islamic community.

Although she is best known for leading a mixed congregation in prayer in New York, that is just a part of her activist work. In 2004, she delivered a sermon in South Africa for a mixed congregation, and she intentionally used very woman-like examples to explain "Islam" as "surrender." Wadud aimed to exemplify the dual gender nature of Allah, who according to her Islamic exegesis, is regarded as both female and male. This dual nature encouraged women in the congregation to identify with her notion of Allah.⁶² Delivering a sermon on Friday prayers may be seen as a challenge to the status-quo since in some periods in history women have been excluded completely from attending Friday prayers.⁶³ Nonetheless, once again, Wadud challenged the status-quo of the community in 2005 by performing the mixed-congregation prayer that Nomani organized in New York. Important Islamic scholars such as Al-Qaradawi and the Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia reacted with different degrees of disapproval that ranged from inviting Wadud to repent and "revert to her Lord"⁶⁴ to accusing her of being an "unbeliever."⁶⁵ Nonetheless, some progressive Muslims praised her role as *imama* and justified the event by a hadith that states that a woman called Umm Waraqa was appointed by Prophet

⁶¹ Simonetta Calderini, "Islam and Diversity: Alternative Voices within Contemporary Islam," *New Blackfriars* 89, no. 1021 (2006): 324.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 329.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Muhammad to lead her household in prayer.⁶⁶ Yet, the hadith is ambiguous in the sense that it does not specify who composed Umm Waraqa's household: were there just women, or did she lead men in prayer as well?

Although this event is considered to be the most important of her career, Wadud's contributions are mainly theological. What is more important, her works are written from a woman's and a feminist point of view,⁶⁷ 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 women's place in Islam through the Qur'anic account. In this work, she applies a number of methods to prove that the Qur'an treats women as equal to men and provides no excuse for the exclusion of women in Islam.⁶⁸ Wadud also addresses the effects that the reinforcement of ahadith has had on women. These issues have been identified by other feminists such as Hassan and Shaikh who expose various popular theological assumptions rooted in hadith, and explain how this has affected women's status in Islam.⁶⁹

Wadud's theological account attempts to extract these assumptions from her Qur'anic reading by focusing on notions of equality between the genders and their importance for the status of women. For instance, 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.⁷⁰ For Wadud, Islam not only can accommodate many cultures and ethnicities, but also different interpretations, including feminists ones. Wadud's

⁶⁶ Safi, 59.

⁶⁷ Not all women's accounts on theology and liturgy are feminist. In fact, many women endorse patriarchal accounts.

⁶⁸ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶⁹ Hassan, 4-6.

⁷⁰ Rachel M. Scott, "A Contextual Approach to Women's Rights in the Qur'ān: Readings of 4:34," *Muslim World* 99, no. 1 (2009): 72.

interpretative methods are worth consideration because they analyze three factors: one, the Qur'an's unity and how verses relate to the Qur'an as a whole; two, a linguistic analysis that is meant to understand the terms based on their context; and three, the historical and contextual background of the revealed verses.⁷¹

Wadud's interpretation of verse 4:34 is considerably different from many traditional accounts because of her consideration of these three factors. As Scott acknowledges, the verse presents difficult challenges for feminist interpretations;⁷² however, some scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Muhammad Al-Talbi, Laleh Bakhtiar and Amina Wadud have taken the challenge to reinterpret the verse, which reads:

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 (4:34).⁷³

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.⁷⁴ Furthermore, she acknowledges that the text expresses 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. In Wadud's interpretation, the verse was revealed to constrain

⁷¹ Scott, 73.

⁷² Ibid, 61.

⁷³ The Qur'an, trans. Ünal, Ali (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2008), 4:34.

⁷⁴ Scott, 74.

husbands' behaviour towards their wives.⁷⁵ Other significant interpretations have also arisen; for instance, Laleh Bakhtiar explains that the word *idribuhunna*, which is commonly translated as "to beat," has more than 25 meanings in Arabic. In *The Sublime Qur'an's* website, Bakhtiar explains her methodology in translating verse 4:34 and argues that common interpretations of the word as "to beat" come from patriarchal exegeses of the text.⁷⁶ Hence, in her own translation of the text, *The Sublime Qur'an*, she interprets the word as "to go away."⁷⁷ However, feminist Qur'anic accounts are just another interpretation out there, and their objectivity can be assessed through the same means Islamic feminists use to critique patriarchal interpretations.

Islamic Feminism: Critique and Challenges

Islamic Feminism has been broadly criticized not only for its innovative Qur'anic exegesis, but also for its claims to legitimacy. Although from a feminist point of view the main problem within Islamic interpretative scholarship is the fact that women have been completely excluded from the practice, one of the main challenges has been found in the legitimization of the movement and the validation of its interpretative processes. For instance, Scott argues that Wadud's interpretative method relies on its own "correctness" just as patriarchal or literal interpretations do.⁷⁸ The same can be said about Bakhtiar's translation of the Qur'an and her linguistic exegesis of verse 4:34. Interestingly, just as men do within patriarchal systems, Islamic feminists tend to acknowledge "womanhood" as a "God-given" characteristic, which can be problematic to their claim of sexism-free interpretation of the texts.⁷⁹ In addition, some Muslim

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Qur'an* [website for the book *The Sublime Qur'an*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar], 2008, available from <http://www.sublimequran.org>, accessed on May 12, 2011.

⁷⁷ *The Sublime Qur'an*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2007).

⁷⁸ Scott, 75.

⁷⁹ Franks, 201.

scholars have criticized feminist exegesis by pointing out that any changes to Islamic practice (such as prayer) are considered an innovation (*bid'a*) and, therefore, not allowed in Islamic theology.⁸⁰ Consequently, although Islam was born as a progressive religion, some scholars aim to keep its theology and liturgy untouched.

Nevertheless, one of the major challenges that feminist scholarship faces is its own methodologies, interpretations, and exegeses since these might seem apologetic or “not Islamic” at times. For example, in her second book *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadud seems to reassess her interpretation of verse 4:34, and recognizes that her previous reading of the verse was based on her ideal Islam.⁸¹ Thus, Scott explains that Wadud has decided to oppose the text in this matter by acknowledging that although she has been trying to reinterpret the verse for years, she cannot accept the fact that Qur'an, in some way, condones striking a woman.⁸² Moreover, approaches to practice such as those encouraged by Nomani tend to have a negative impact on Muslim communities, and particularly on women who do not identify themselves with these “radical” pursuits. Hence, the question that is left to ask is whether or not Islamic Feminism provides space and options for all Muslim women. It can be argued that, in order to appeal to women and endorse a feminist discourse, Islamic feminists should continue to work within the framework of traditional Islamic discourses and challenge them through commonly used Islamic methods, such as *ijtihad* before moving towards more “radical” pursuits. Furthermore, Islamic Feminism should avoid the exclusion of different exegeses by encouraging pluralism, in order to successfully appeal to the different female and male experiences that exist within Muslim communities.

⁸⁰ Manneke Budiman, “Treading the Path of the Shari’ah: Indonesian Feminism at the Crossroads of Western Modernity and Islamism,” *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 1, (2008): 84.

⁸¹ Scott, 75.

⁸² *Ibid*, 76.

Conversely, regardless of the criticisms, Islamic Feminism has attempted to promote an alternative discourse to liberate women and men from Islamist fundamentalist perspectives and patriarchal accounts. Therefore, many Muslim feminist scholars remain firm in their discourse of justice and gender equality in the Qur'an. According to Leo, Wadud truly 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 modern times.⁸³

Furthermore, it cannot be said that Islamic Feminism has not contributed to contemporary Islamic theology and liturgy. For instance, in spite of the criticisms against Wadud's role as *imama*, she has been taken as an example by some progressive Muslims, such as the Muslims for Progressive Values organization, which has included a section defending women's right to lead mixed-congregation prayers on its website.⁸⁴ Also, as Nomani mentions, feminist activism has opened many doors for women because in recent years many changes have occurred. For example, the Islamic Society of North American elected a woman as president for the first time in 2006, and some Islamic countries like Morocco have started training women⁸⁵ as Islamic clerics⁸⁶ in order to contest religious extremism in the region⁸⁷ and promote a moderate version of Islam.⁸⁸ Most importantly, Islamic feminism has opened space for the problematization of women's status in contemporary Islam and the lack of female-based accounts within the spectrum of Islamic exegesis and interpretation of the sacred texts. Finally, many Islamic

⁸³ Leo, 138.

⁸⁴ Muslims for Progressive Values, "Women as Imams," *Muslims for Progressive Values*, October 25, 2009, available at http://www.mpvusa.org/uploads/WomenasImams_doc.pdf, accessed on June 20, 2011.

⁸⁵ It must be noted that these women are not *Imamas*. They are called *mourchidat* since they will be trained in a number of Islamic sciences but will not be able to lead prayers.

⁸⁶ Sally Williams, "Mourchidat - Morocco's female Muslim clerics," *The Telegraph*, April 26, 2008, available from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3672924/Mourchidat-Moroccos-female-Muslim-clerics.html>, accessed March 28, 2011.

⁸⁷ Asra Q. Nomani, Telephone interview by the author.

⁸⁸ Williams, 1.

feminists see their struggles as part of something greater. For example, when asked why she remains within Islam if the challenges are so strong, Asra Nomani 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.”⁸⁹

Conclusion

In sum, Islamic Feminism has its origins in Muslim women’s desires to challenge patriarchal interpretations and acknowledge their womanhood as a God-given characteristic. As a result, Islamic feminists have engaged in a re-interpretative process through the use of traditional Islamic sources and *ijtihad* to find women-friendly and patriarchy-free interpretations of the sacred texts. Among Islamic feminists there are various women that have contributed to liturgy and theology in Islam. For instance, while some women, like Asra Nomani, have focused on political activism, Amina Wadud, Laleh Bakhtiar and others have engaged in both theological and liturgical reinterpretation. Like them, many Muslim women have resisted patriarchal interpretations, and have found common ground in the Qur’an to protect women’s rights in Islam. Furthermore, this movement has acknowledged and approached women’s necessity to engage with their religion and their Muslim identity in order to bring change to women’s status in Islam and to preserve the progressive spirit of Islam through the transformative possibilities that *ijtihad* offers.

⁸⁹ Asra Q. Nomani, Telephone interview by the author.

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