

Reflections on (Reading) the Qur'an  
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Asma Barlas  
Professor Emerita, Ithaca College, New York  
<https://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/abarlas>

Asalam alaikum dear colleagues. Thank you, Dr. Shivapoor, for inviting me to speak about my reading of the Qur'an, and Dr. Moballegh, for translating my comments. I've kept it to about 25 minutes so we can have more time for Q&A.

To start, I come to the Qur'an not as an expert but as God's subject who desires to know the God she worships. So, I have a God-centered approach to Islam. I am also a Qur'an-first Muslim who believes God's word cannot contradict the nature of God's being, as described in the Qur'an. Finally, and for that reason, I read the Qur'an as an antipatriarchal text rather than as advocating male supremacy over women.

This is in contrast to Islamic knowledge that renders God male and also injects sex/gender biases into God's word by claiming that "He" favors men and has made them women's guardians and even *majazi khuda*. As such, I'll start by sharing how and why I came to read the Qur'an differently before talking about the reading itself.

### Background

I was born in Pakistan and educated in Catholic convents and a Christian college, like my parents, who grew up in India during British colonial rule. We spoke English as our first language at home, had a Eurocentric view of the world, and knew nothing about Islamic/ Muslim theology, history, or philosophy.

Starting at 11, I was taught to read the Qur'an in Arabic by maulvis at home. But none of them knew Arabic, although they commented profusely, and falsely, on the text, as I discovered when I started reading English translations in my teens. To my surprise, the Qur'an wasn't primarily about hell-fire and male privilege but about God, belief and disbelief, right and wrong conduct, parables of all sorts, allusions to the wonders of creation, and the certainty of resurrection. Even more astonishingly, God hadn't made Hawa from Adam's rib to serve him, but had created men and women from the

same *nafs*, made *both khalifa* on earth and tasked them to be each others' *awylia* or caretakers. The Qur'an also spoke of love, *sukun* and mutuality between spouses whom it called each other's garments.

Yes, there was a solitary reference to husbands as their wives' *qawwamun* (translated as guardians), and, seemingly, the permission to hit disobedient wives, which seemed odd since the Qur'an also tells husbands to deal kindly with wives who are their enemies. At the time, though, I didn't think much of this or of the fact that the Qur'an calls God He/Him while affirming that God is unlike *all else* in creation and forbidding us to use comparisons for God.

But over the years, the more I learned about God, the more uncomfortable I became with such tensions since they put God and God's word in opposition. It was this concern that eventually led me to study Qur'anic history and hermeneutics and the modes of knowledge- creation in Muslim societies.

Along the way, I learned about the importance of distinguishing between the historical and the normative in the Qur'an (Rahman, 1965) as well as between religion and our knowledge of it (Soroush). I also discovered that those who had called Islam a "patriarchy that has God on its side" (Sabbah) had never defined patriarchy itself.

But, most importantly I realized that, while Muslims read the Qur'an *as* God's word, they do not read it in light *of* God's self-disclosure (how God describes God in the Qur'an). That is, they delink divine ontology and discourse. Otherwise, they would hesitate to present men as women's earthly overlords, a representation that, I will argue shortly, amounts to a derogation of God and constitutes *shirk*.

### *Believing Women*

In my own book, then, I take Qur'anic declarations about God as a hermeneutical framework for interpreting it in addition to relying on some interpretive criteria the Qur'an itself mentions.

I also apply a twofold definition of patriarchy to the Quran: as the historical tradition of rule by the father / husband over wives and children that draws on representations of God as male, and also as a secular politics of differentiation that maps gender onto

biological sex. This mapping has the effect of rendering men and women not just different but also unequal. In other words, religious patriarchies ascribe male supremacy to God while secular ones attribute it to nature and culture.

Drawing on these definitions and the Qur'an's account of God attributes, in particular, imitability, unity, and justice, I then illustrate that the Qur'an can be read as and is in fact an antipatriarchal text. To take God's attributes first.

Divine inimitability means that God is minimally beyond sex/gender since God is unlike all creation. Yet, Islamic theology, tafsir and the hadith render God male by collapsing the signifier and the signified (*language about God with God*). However, the Qur'an's use of Arabic pronouns is a limitation of Arabic, not a reflection on God.

And if God is not male, there can be no literal or symbolic continuum between God and men or between God's authority over humans and men's authority over women, as religious knowledge maintains.

Second, the concept of *tawhid*, or God's unity, affirms that God is the one and only sovereign over all creation. Hence, claiming sovereignty over others is *shirk*, a trespass against God, who promises not to forgive it. This is why depicting men as rulers over women or claiming that by serving men, women are serving God, is *shirk*.

A third divine attribute that I read as countering theories of male dominance is that God is just since God doesn't do *zulm*, the meaning of *zulm* in the Qur'an being to act in "such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach upon the right of some other person" (Izutsu, 1959: 152). If God's justice is self-circumscribed in this way, it follows that the Qur'an also cannot then condone *zulm*.

Yet, patriarchies are *based* in transgressing against women's rights while the Muslim version has Islamized *zulm* to women by drawing on a handful of words and lines in the Qur'an to support male-privilege (I will consider some of these later on).

Here, I will note that, while we take the meanings of these lines/ words to be fixed, the Qur'an is polysemic and what we understand it to be saying depends on who reads it, how and in what contexts since there's a relationship between method and meaning.

E.g., Muslims almost universally take 4:34 as allowing husbands to beat their wives because they translate *idriboo* as hit/ strike. Yet, the word has several other meanings, as scholars have noted. Thus, Laleh Bakhtiar (2009) translates it as leave, which aligns with the rest of the Qur'an's teachings that *don't* sanction violence against wives.

Additionally, one can contextualize verses like 4:34 by distinguishing between the universal, or normative, and the particular, or, historical in the Qur'an. By universal I mean foundational verses that aren't time and culture specific like those that affirm the ontic equality of men and women and the principles of mutual recognition and care between them.

By particular I mean verses that are addressed to institutions and practices that no longer exist. Of course, such verses also convey certain principles (Rahman) but some principles are *also* time and culture specific.

However, most Muslims, including feminist critics, reject such standard hermeneutical strategies. Instead, they take classical tafsir to be the Qur'an's only possible/authentic/binding interpretation even though it injects ontic male privilege into the Qur'an and treats a 7<sup>th</sup> tribal Arab patriarchy as being divinely ordained.

But, if we go by the definitions I've proposed, the Qur'an doesn't support either religious or secular patriarchy. First, God in the Qur'an isn't male or father; in fact, God *explicitly rejects* being called father (being patriarchalized). Nor does the Qur'an advocate rule by fathers/ husbands over women and, indeed, criticizes those who follow the "ways of their fathers," which is the hallmark of this type of rule.

Second, the Qur'an doesn't map gender onto sex, like secular patriarchies. So, when it refers to men and women, it doesn't say that biological males have x gender traits and biological females have y. In short, there is no concept of gendered woman or man in the Qur'an (wadud, 1999). As such, I treat the gender hierarchy we see in some verses as reflecting the historical realities of the 7<sup>th</sup> rather than as a template for eternity.

### The Qur'an's auto-hermeneutics

Finally, I arrive at my reading by adopting some of the Qur'an's own interpretive criteria, such as, reading it as a whole, contextually, and for its best meanings. The

passages I am going to quote now are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation (1988).

The Qur'an's support for textual holism emerges from God's warning to those "who divided (Scripture into arbitrary parts)" and made the "Qur'an Into shreds" (15:89-93). In a reference to the precepts God gives to the prophet Moses, God also condemns those who make "it into (Separate) sheets for show, While ye conceal much (Of its contents)" (6:91). Finally, the Qur'an praises those who say "We believe In the Book; the whole of it" is from" God (3:7).

Though Muslims resist contextualizing certain verses, the Qur'an gestures to what Cragg (1994) has called the "periodic and contextual nature" of some of its contents. I believe one way to contextualize this content is by differentiating between the historically contingent and the normative along the lines I've just suggested.

Finally, the Qur'an refers to its own polysemy by praising "Those who listen To the Word And follow the best in it" (39: 18). Likewise, God tells the prophet Moses to "enjoin thy people to hold fast By the best in the precepts." (7:145). Thus the Qur'an itself puts the onus on us to seek the best in it. This is why I think of reading it as a self-conscious practice that allows Muslims to keep exploring the horizon of ethical possibilities inherent in it through the ages.

### Male-privileging verses

Deplorably, though, after 14 centuries, Muslim patriarchies are still recycling medieval ideas about male authority on the basis of less than five or so verses and lines in the Qur'an. To put these in context, its first audience *was* a tribal Arab patriarchy in which men *did* have power and authority over women. As such, for it to have dealt with this authority isn't the same as having mandated it forever since an omniscient Creator would certainly have *known* that 7<sup>th</sup> social structures would pass away.

Moreover, the very verses Muslims read as *advocating* men's authority over women severely *limited* its nature and scope even in the 7<sup>th</sup>. To give some obvious examples.

The Qur'an's stance on divorce radically altered customary practices in the 7<sup>th</sup> by *forbidding* an existing form of divorce on a wife's appeal; *forbidding* men to keep divorcing the same wife or expelling her from their home during a divorce and

*discouraging* men from divorcing their wives just because they had gotten tired of them. In addition, even in the C7<sup>th</sup> the Qur'an gave wives the right to initiate a divorce, including from husbands whose *nushuz* they feared, a word that is translated as a wife's disobedience to her husband but never a husband's to his wife.

Remarkably if a husband accused his wife of adultery on his own witness, the Qur'an gave her the right to refute his charge on *hers* and, if she did, there the matter ended. Yet, some Muslim men kill women for much less and we only get to hear that two women's testimonies equals that of one man.

In the same vein, while 4:34 is now taken by many men as a license to beat any woman for any reason, in the C7<sup>th</sup> it acted as a *restriction* on a husband's violence by making it a *potential* measure of last resort in a very specific situation. That is, if we believe the root of *idriboo* is monosemic (it has only one meaning).

But even if we read it as hit or strike, the Qur'an doesn't frame it as a mandatory or obligatory command, let alone as a right. Rather, it is couched as one *possibility* out of many and here I will also note that the Qur'an doesn't *compel* a wife to remain with an abusive husband.

In addition, the Qur'an *forbade* men to marry women they could in pre-Islamic times or to inherit women against their wills and it limited polygyny while also making it conditional on the well-being of orphans. Yet, many Muslim rulers kept huge harems and most Muslims think polygyny caters to men's sexual desires and is their right.

However, such provisions are better understood as being addressed to existing social conditions and roles than as being inalienable rights. And, where rights do exist in the Qur'an, the Qur'an doesn't link them to gender since it doesn't have a view of gender.

To the contrary, its teachings that we all originate in a single *nafs*, are God's *khalifa* and each other's *awliya* open up the possibility of *equality* between men and women. Yet, Muslim patriarchies ignore or ridicule such verses by saying that women may be equal to men before God but they aren't so in men's eyes, which sounds like Iblisian arrogance to me since it elevates men over God.

As evidence of inequality, Muslims mention the Qur'an's different treatment of men

and women with regard to some issues but this is problematic since the Qur'an also treats *men* differently with respect to, say, the distribution of resources. However, this doesn't make the men ontologically unequal.

Besides, treating people differently doesn't *necessarily* mean treating them unequally and nor does treating people identically *always* mean treating them equally. Lastly, since social roles have changed, we can historicize verses that deal with such roles, just as Muslims have done with the verses on slavery, which is now illegal.

Even if it wasn't, for God to have instructed men who had slaves to treat them well or free them or marry them doesn't amount to having *mandated* slavery. Similarly, just because the Qur'an deals with the Arab patriarchy at the time of its revelation doesn't mean God has mandated patriarchy.

I'm nearing the end of my time and want to share that in over 20 years of giving such talks, I've met less than half a dozen Muslims who had read the Qur'an cover to cover. But at almost every event, this didn't keep a few of them from trying to shut me up, in the name of Islam, because they didn't like what they were hearing.

Yet, without reading the Qur'an one cannot know God; a God who, among other things, is beyond our perceptions but closer to us than our jugular veins; who doesn't transgress against our rights, forbids compulsion and intermediation in religion, and is just and loving and patient but also severe in retribution, though forgiveness and mercy precede God's justice and wrath.

This God urges all believers to try and decipher God's signs that are both within ourselves and on the horizon irrespective of our sex/ gender or the limitations of our *aql* and *ilm*, intellect and rationality and knowledge. But, strange to say, this God has never been visible in the practice of Islam, or even in interpretations of God's own word.

So, here is where I am in my journey with the Qur'an, which speaks of the "Illiterates, who know not the Book, but (see therein their own) desires. And, they do nothing but conjecture" (2:78). Of course, I could be among those illiterates as well, so I ask for God's mercy for what I've said, shouldn't have said, or failed to say, about the Book.