

Hermeneutics of the Qur'an through an Alternate Lens: Insights through Women Representation in the Qur'an

"The perception of female otherness occurs in every field."
-Carol Tarvis

Abstract

In her magnum opus *Politics, Gender, and the Female Past* (1994), Denise Spielberg wrote that women, including those who were educated, could not script any of the literary works that were held in high esteem in the medieval era, especially that of the Islamic world. Therefore the only choice available for the Muslim women was the transmission of *Hadith*. Women have always been viewed with respect to the normalcy that men define. In this essay we shall examine how the perceptions of women act as a vehicle to inform the hermeneutics of the Qur'an, and in the process how the hermeneutical analyses of the Qur'an help in locating the position of women. Interpreting the status and role of women as drawn directly from the holy Qur'an has received sustained attention since the very initial days of writing commentaries. But it is only recently that scholars are problematizing the methodological opportunities and constraints while interpreting the Qur'an. This essay discusses two-fold interconnected questions- i) how hermeneutics is an useful tool to reassess and relocate the role of women in Qur'an; and ii) elucidate two female characters from the Qur'an as examples that illuminate our contemporary understanding of the status and roles we associate women with. It concurs with the notion that there is metaphysical violence when we promote a single idea as "the Truth" or the "correct way" when interpreting a text, and it is only just to offer admission to plurality of meanings.

Introduction

While Derrida (1997) powerfully argued that “the text is all there is”, for Ricoeur (1981), “the text is any discourse that is fixed by writing”. Text is indeed a world in itself, and interpreting it, as Heidegger said, is no less than an art. The dawn of Philosophical hermeneutics proved to be a game-changer in the discourse of interpreting texts. It brought to the fore that the understanding of a text does not begin when the text is viewed as a static and mute object. It must be acknowledged that the text is capable to communicate. The means and manner of communication varies greatly and it provides “new answers to the person who questions it and poses ever new questions to him who answers it” (Gadamer 1977: 57). For Gadamer, to interpret a text is to come to engage oneself in some sort of dialogue. There is often a contention with this regards because it is believed that a text selectively yields its meanings as per the co-determined language and mode of expressions of the interpreter. The emergence of interpretive sciences has brought critical perspective in understanding Scriptures. Gadamer (1977) stated that the implication of Holy Scriptures cannot be limited to what he termed *mens auctoris*. Texts are in fact developed upon “excess of meaning” that are concealed within the text and in the ontological genesis of it. This “excess” stems from the historicity of the context and transcends beyond the readers’ interpretations and author’s intention. For Gadamer, attempting to understand and methodically interpret a text is not a reproductive procedure, rather a simultaneous productive one because every time the text is read, it is given new meanings. He is famously quoted saying that “one understands differently if one understands at all” (Gadamer 1977: xxv).

The Qur’an is the Holy Scripture and the founding document of Islam, and is unique in its way of perceiving and capitulating worldviews. The interpretation of the Qur’an inspires the Muslim conviction and philosophical enquiry. Akhtar (2006) argues that, “the Qur’anic hermeneutics should not be simply a close domestic attention to the text aimed solely at extracting what is useful to the believers” (Akhtar 2006: 1). With this as the backcloth, this essay aims to further the idea that the hermeneutical approach to understanding the Qur’an may and should challenge the existing norms and accepted notions of abstractions and corporeal lives. Evaluating the position of women in Qur’an and its justifications manifested in the Muslim societies has been perpetually examined. The Qur’anic exegesis, like all other interpretative works is not fully objective. Wadud (1992)

prolifically flags up that the Qur'an and its commentaries were all male led and executed works- "women's voices were either excluded or were viewed by the perspectives of men" (Wadud 1992: 2). Hence, this essay, drawing heavily from the ideas and examples of Wadud makes a case for the need to hermeneutically assess the holy Qur'an to (re)define the position of women in contemporary Muslim societies, and understand how we are continually informed by the interpretive discourse of this Scripture.

Hermeneutical interpretation of the Qur'an through women's perspectives

Qur'anic hermeneutics as a discipline is gradually gaining momentum. It is admitted that "Muslim scholars throughout the centuries, have operated on the assumption that while the text is infallible, its interpreters are not" (Zimmermann 2015: 75). The Qur'an is believed to be direct revelations from the Divine, and is unmediated and untouched by historical factors, but like its sister religions, Islam too valued interpretive mediation through traditions. The mainstream schools of Islamic thought and education rejected that the interpretation of Qur'an was for all. It was for a selected privileged few. Hence, hermeneutics did not come easy to Qur'anic studies. Also, there is much contention on the front that hermeneutics is a western construct, and it does not very appositely fit with Qur'anic understanding in the "orient world" (Grech, 2014). Badran (2009) argues that western prejudices of Islam and Muslim societies are present in different guises, and that further complicates the hermeneutical undertaking of the Qur'an. The Qur'an embodies the eternal divine power that most Muslims believe is the *kalam Allah* (word of God). The hermeneutical discourse and consequence of finding meanings in Qur'anic expressions have revealed that the contents are not just theologically curated, but historically and culturally influenced (Zimmermann, 2015).

The chapter Al-Nisa, revealed at Madinah deals chiefly with the rights and duties of the Muslim women, therefore, in most commentaries and English translations, this chapter is titled 'The women'. As per Ali (2011), the Qur'an casts off the gender beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arab traditions and treats both men and women equally. Schmidt (1989) working on sexist theology argued that hearing and sometimes believing that women are inferior to men is no myth. It is established that there is conspicuous tension in understanding the

design of women's status and role in religious scriptures. There is a recurrent problem in the theological dictum that the interpretation of Qur'an may not have always been along the lines of "equality and fairness" (Behbūdī 1997: 42). This, according to Wadud, works as a backcloth of admitted understanding "not only affected the position of women in Muslim societies but also affected the interpretation of the position of women in the Qur'an" (Wadud 1999: 7). She substantiates her claims by putting forth the differential treatment and status as revealed in the creation narrative, functionality in the community, capacity of performing tasks, and the rewards promised to them in afterlife. Wadud states that these distinctions are not completely biological, and lends her ideas to Ortner's (1974) popular postulate that women is to men is what is nature to culture, which was independently echoed by Qutb (1964) when he claimed that man is man and woman is woman because of *fitrah*.

Siding with Wadud, I argue that the Qur'an is unbiased and recognises differences on anatomical basis- it is only the interpretation that consolidates the gender divide. For Badran (2009) and Grech (2014), the feminist reading of the Qur'an is imperative as it offers a scope to reassess the meanings of the *hadith*, and can happen in one of the two ways- i) traditional and ii) secular perspectives. It is the cultural interpretation and determination that this essay holds at its core. To begin with the creation narrative which outlines that the woman is made after and from the man, but Allah's *ruh* is blown into both. It views man and woman as being complementary and not inferior or superior to one another- the two are meant to be paired; thus, it is safe to assert that the creation story acknowledges the differences between the two sexes, but there are no value judgements attached. Wadud rightly points out that the Qur'an neither supports nor stereotypes any gender, yet the reading of the text demonstrates the functions a woman should be associated with (Wadud 1999: 29). This is echoed in the works of Saba Mahmood who propels that the Qur'an and the Sunnah offer general guidelines and descriptions, barely are those prescriptive in nature. It is the readers who bring their epistemological understanding with them when reading these texts (Mahmood 2005: 65).

Khattib (2017) outlined that there was noticeable deleterious effects of interpreting the Qur'an where the commentaries and medieval works put forth that innately there were clear distinctions between males and females. These analyses often assume that men embody the standard norms, thus it is men who are fully human. Women, by suggestive

insinuation, are not equals, rather are less human. These popular understandings exhort the stereotypes about both men and women, and eventually it has dire consequences on the relationship of one gender with another and on the overall social dynamisms. Further on, these stereotypes are normalised and moralised by seeking shelter in precepts in the Qur'an. As Wadud sharply flags up, "most troubling is the tendency to attribute these interpretations to the Qur'an itself rather than to the authors who hold them or people who promulgate them" (Wadud 1999: 35).

The Qur'an provides an intriguing workshop of instances that help us to examine and understand the hermeneutical approach from the perspective of women. As proposed by Fazlur Rahman, the interpretative process should be diachronic in nature- it should take into account the stances the verses were written in, and its present implications (Rahman 1982: 6). For Rahman and subsequently Wadud, a good point of departure to locate and analyse the position of women, is to analyse the manner in which women characters were introduced and their roles they played in the Qur'an. Wadud clarifies that studying women characters of the medieval times has the potential to reveal much about the present too; and if we are unable to do so, it is because we fail to understand the present situation or to assess the Qur'an correctly. An interesting aspect of Qur'an is that besides, Mary, no woman is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. The style of introducing the women is mostly in relation to men- one's wife, one's sister or one's mother. Wadud called this "possessive construction". The Surat-al-Tahrim is popularly cited for talking of women as role models (66: 10-12). While indeed there are ample examples to showcase the neutral reference to women, or women as key persons in the community, the interpretations often propagated prejudices perceptions. Al-Zamakhshari postulated that Allah prefers men in terms of 'intelligence, physical constitution, determination and physical strength' (Wadud 1999: 35). Al-Aqqad in his commentary of the Qur'an titled *The Genius of Mohammed* intermittently wrote that men deserved preference over women. Stowasser (1996) in her analytical studies referred to al-Aqqad as misogynist, and argued that the blueprint of the Qur'an was made accessible and interpreted by men, and they decided the "correct order" for women to follow in the family and in the society.

We shall now briefly discuss Mary, the mother of Moses and Bilqis, the Queen of Sheeba to hermeneutically understand the characteristics we often equate with Muslim women.

i) Mother of Moses

"But when she delivered her, she said, "My Lord, I have delivered a female." And Allah was most knowing of what she delivered, "And the male is not like the female. And I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for her in You and [for] her descendants from Satan, the expelled [from the mercy of Allah]." (Surah Al-Imran: 35)

Mary is mentioned 34 times in the Qur'an, and the Surah 19 engages well with her characteristics and duties. Several exegeses on Mary lucidly focus on the care-giving attribute of a woman, and highlights how her desires are shadowed by the needs of her child (28: 7). Her foremost duty is to "suckle the baby" (Wadud 1999: 38). The fact that Mary is the only female character categorically named, and the only time a man is known by a woman (Jesus is the son of Mary), makes her position unique and special. The support Mary receives from the Qur'an during the dilemma to have a baby by the divine decree and not biologically, and later during her labour pains attests to the belief that Allah is sympathetic to her emotions (19: 20-23). Though Mary's virtue cannot be defined and limited to a single gender, the term used for her to refer to pious was grammatically masculine. Wadud (1999) problematized this and argued that these cues catalyse the idea that men are the true *qanitin* or devotees (66: 12), and diminishes the scope of spiritual powers of women. Roded (2008) suggests that while the Qur'an does not outline, this example is used to seclude Muslim women in familial roles, and are discouraged to partake in public life.

ii) Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba

"Indeed there was for Saba' (Sheba) a sign in their dwelling place, - two gardens on the right hand and on the left (and it was said to them) "Eat of the provision of your Lord, and be grateful to Him, a fair land and an OftForgiving Lord." (34: 15)

While the case of Mary is ideal to study the aspects of trade-off between private-public life, and the responsibilities of women as the nurturer, Bilqis brings to light the hardships women face in the domain of public life and leadership. The Qur'an holds no preferential treatment towards any specific gender and their leadership skills, yet most Muslims believe that leadership roles are improper for women (Ahmed, 1992). The verse 27: 24 outlines how the people admire the Sun instead of Allah and the enthroned queen.

Though the Qur'anic narratives present her as chosen, sagacious, and gracious one (27:23), her character never surfaces beyond that, because men continue to secure the status of *qawwam* over women (4:34). No verses particularly mention her as a ruler or her ruling skills. Yusuf Ali in his commentary wrote that the episode of Sheba in the Qur'an testifies that this is not disapproved by Islam. But certainly, there seem no verses in support of encouraging women to take up this role- a sharp contrast with the description of the role taken by Mary which is convincingly exhorting in nature. Following Solomon's *karim* letter (27: 29), it is seen that Sheba resolves to seek advice on all affairs, and without which, the empire proceedings would not be advanced (27: 32).

Conclusions

Qur'an is the holy book of the fastest growing religion in the world, and is one of the most widely translated and read books across the globe. It goes without saying that it is the founding stone of not just the Islam tradition, but also is an imperative part instrumental in influencing the world history and geo-politics. Re-reading it from diverse perspectives will only offer novel avenues to comprehensively understand not just the Muslim community, but it can educate us about an array of social realities. Muslims today are facing the challenge of several vice "isms" being associated with their community worldwide, and the claims that the media houses and sometimes research make that those "isms" are not accidental. With rampant questions on the hijab (veil) and women's rights and choices, the Muslim women face double the challenge. With the wave of feminism in Philosophy and Social Sciences, there has been an urge to revisit interpretations of holy texts in order to provide an alternative understanding. This alternate understanding may or may not be the correct deduction, but it certainly provides a scope for corrective examination of the texts with a gender sensitive and inclusive perspective. Like Stowasser (1996) suggested, the problem is less that the interpretations of the Qur'an are mediated by men; the core issue is that very few interpretive works bear in mind the issues of representation. My objective in this essay was neither to argue how hermeneutics of the Qur'an impacts our post-modern understanding of Muslim women, nor to highlight the need of interpreting the Qur'an from a feminist perspective. Rather, my attempt was to neatly point out the possibilities and potentials of the aforementioned.

References

Books and articles-

- Ahmed, L. (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam*. London: Yale University Press.
- Akhtar, S. (2006). *The Quran and the secular mind: A philosophy of Islam*. Routledge.
- Badran, M. (2013). *Feminism in Islam: Secular and religious convergences*. Oneworld Publications.
- Behbūdī, M. B. (1997). *The Quran: a new interpretation*. Psychology Press.
- Derrida, J. (1997). *Deconstruction in a nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida* (No. 1). Fordham Univ Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1977). The universality of hermeneutic problems. *PAMIETNIK LITERACKI*, 68(4), 309-319.
- Grech, M. (2014). Feminism in Islam?. *Implicit Religion*, 17(3), 349-359.
- Khattib, A, M. (2017) *The status of women in Islam: Is women equal to man or not?* Blackwell Publisher.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). Politics of piety. *The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*.
- Ortner, S. B., (1974). Woman, culture, and society. *Woman, culture and society*.
- Quṭb, S. (1964). *Islam and universal peace*. American Trust Publications.
- Rahman, F. (1982). The status of women in Islam: a modernist interpretation. *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, edited by Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault. Delhi: Chanakya Publications. Pgs, 285-310.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Cambridge university press.
- Roded, R. (2008) *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A reader*. London: I. B. Tauris Publisher.
- Schmidt, A. J. (1989). *Veiled and silenced: How culture shaped sexist theology*. Mercer University Press.
- Stowasser, B. F. (1996). *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*. Oxford University Press.
- Wadud, A. (1992). *Quran and women*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Zimmermann, J. (2015). *Hermeneutics: A very short introduction*. OUP Oxford.

Encyclopaedia-

The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Islam and Women (Editor-in-chief: Natana J. DeLong-Bas, Editorial board member: Asma Afsaruddin, Hibba Abugideiri, Heba Ezzat, and Series edited by John L. Esposito)

Oxford Islamic Studies Online (editor John L. Esposito) (Oxford)

Encyclopaedia of Islam (editors P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs et. al.). (Brill)

Commentaries on the Qu'ran by-

Al-Aqqad

Al-Zamakhshari

Yusuf Ali