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Qur'an, Gender, and Interpretive Possibilities

Say, "If the sea were ink for [writing] the Words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord, even if we brought another [sea] like it in addition."

– Qur'an 18:109

There's no getting around it. Muslims have been struggling through an identity crisis not only as a consequence of colonialism's infiltration and corruption of Muslim complacency, but also in response to the globalization of ideas like pluralism, Western secular human rights universals, and their sheer backwardness – as recently reported through an internal study of the state of the Arab world/Middle East (read: Muslims, despite actual demographics). I entered this struggle with my own peculiar identity concerns as well, as a woman.

I concluded early in my research that one way to resolve my questions about gender was to direct myself to Islamic theology rather than Muslim social contexts or commentary, present or historical. Using the Qur'an, I proposed ideas about the Muslim woman's full human agency and dignity despite Qur'anic interpretations, juridical codes, and practices to the contrary. The irony of this ivory tower approach, however, is that it led me directly into social praxis and issues of social justice and reform in Muslim cultural contexts. In this particular matter, theory was put to the test of Muslim women's lives and the still rampant patriarchal control of not only praxis, but orthodox interpretations as well. Meanwhile, after more than fifteen years of research on the Qur'an, it has proven to me without a doubt

that patriarchal privilege still continues with increments of success in secular and Western contexts despite the lack of particular claims of religious legitimacy. So unraveling the binds of patriarchy in the context of Muslim cultures, including that religious component, will still take more time, and solutions to practices of inequality must come from multiple strategies simultaneously.

Given the odds against the success of a mere theoretical strategy of alternative interpretation of the Qur'an, Islam's primary resource, I have taken up the charge to both articulate the relationship to and the movement through the Qur'an to social justice for women and men. Despite my book, *Qur'an and Woman*, and its revolutionary contribution at the time of its formulation, the idea of alternative interpretation of the Qur'an from a female-inclusive perspective is by itself insufficient to bring about all gender reforms necessary for the multiple dimensions of Muslim men's and women's lives. This points to the need for a more radical synthesis of strategies and struggles toward the end of gender equality.

I compare this need to the movement that brought about the eradication of slavery in the global context. Muslims and Islam were catapulted into the global reconsiderations in such a way that they eventually came out as one voice among many. No distinctive Islamic voice was raised either for or against, to such an extent as to leave a significant historical mark on the movement. It mattered little if the evaluation of the treatment of particular slaves was inhumane or beneficent; the conclusion of this movement, including the ulterior motives invested in it, was the recognition that slavery itself was inhumane. Consequently, the institution is now illegal. It remains to be seen if a particular "Islamic" contribution would have been a major contender in this movement to eradicate such a practice. Yet discussions of Muslim women's full human equality seem impossible without a comprehensive intra-Islamic transformation. I continue to see the Qur'anic text as a central means for that transformation provided the hermeneutical implications are accepted to the extent that both the historical intellectual tradition and the current intellectual considerations are seen as integral to that centrality and prerequisites to actual social reforms.

GENDER JUSTICE THROUGH QUR'ANIC HERMENEUTICS AND BEYOND

Qur'anic hermeneutics from a gender perspective was a novel idea when I proposed to move toward it almost two decades ago. Now I accept the critiques of moving beyond my apologetics. In some ways, this has been a

legitimate challenge and one that I was prepared to take on as early as the first publication of *Qur'an and Woman* in 1992. In other ways, this challenge is not so much directed at my work as at my position vis-à-vis certain issues within the context of gender reforms in Muslim societies. I have been dubbed a “gender fundamentalist” – as if the name should deter me from the root source and inspiration of my efforts, the Qur'an, or away from the moral imperative to not only maintain my dedication to survive the gender *jihad* but also to insist even further that gender is a category of thought ill-respected even in the works of many reformist male Muslim intellectuals. Most are progressive and reformist on anything but class and gender. Unfortunately, the challenges to my positions in *Qur'an and Woman* have remained deconstructionist in nature, with no crucial reconstruction offered – even as lead-ins to assist me toward greater possible alternatives in my own work. In *Progressive Muslims*, Ebrahim Moosa specifies “Muslim feminists” for his critique of making “too much of a few verses of the Qur'an that suggest reciprocal rights and duties between *unequal spouses* and then hastens to suggest that the Qur'an advocates egalitarianism as a norm.”¹ No mention is made of the comprehensive mandate for female-inclusive readings not only of the text *as revealed* and now writ, but also to the fullest implications of this inclusion, philosophically and theologically. Women's readings of the Qur'an are either expected to be perfect and comprehensive, or they are inadequate. Therefore, rather than finding encouragement from others with prior privilege in engaging in textual analysis, they are castigated for their efforts at contributing, however inconclusively, to new understandings of the Qur'an. Those understandings reveal possible roads toward finding new conceptions of what it means to be *human* in a religion that has had a history of this very kind of castigation from the male elites, who were so entrenched in their own struggles for understanding the divine-human relations that that they saw their androcentric assumptions as a reflection of the totality of the divine intent. In the final analysis, this critique without recommendation only reiterates the significance of the quest of Muslim women, whether feminists or not, “to explore and develop new ways of interpretation of especially the revealed text.”²

This circular argument, with its feigned perspective as an objective critique, draws no attention to the significance of gender as a category of thought by reducing the overall agenda of Islamic feminist research and theories to “a few verses.” Meanwhile, it unabashedly reinscribes the male privilege of “generations of scholars” despite their being exclusively male

and with their specific “patriarchal norms.”³ Simultaneous with this explicit demonstration of retaining male scholarly privilege is the articulation and practice of the utility of “unequal spouses”. In effect, much of women’s domestic roles permit continued masculine privilege in public arenas shaping both intellectual and philosophical discourses. These discourses focus more exclusively on power politics, while boldly ignoring the personal as political. No insight into the reconstruction of authority rests in this reiteration because *unequal spouses* both facilitate male privilege by “standing steadfastly” by their “side.”⁴ Meanwhile, they continue masculine self-aggrandizement at the same time as they construct a public persona of being liberated. This is evident in the empty articulations combined with simultaneously rendering selected female scholars and activists as tokens for public window-dressing and by limiting other women, even their own family members, to roles which provide the glue for sustaining their image as proper family men. Therefore, women must either cater to masculine standards of evaluation as facilitators or be castigated as adversaries.

Obviously female autonomy in engaging with the entrenched practices and ideologies of male privilege cannot rely upon male progressive scholars unless these men advocate, as does Khaled Abou El Fadl, that women further pursue their own learning in order to acquire competence in greater self-reliance instead of this continued dependence upon men’s expertise for epistemological, philosophical, and ontological full agency.

I had naively believed that progressive male thinkers and activists would actually be principal catalysts in helping to transform Muslim women’s identity, but was deeply disappointed. Instead, I confronted the paradox of the double bind. Unless and until women want full agency for themselves, they will always find opportunities to be co-opted to support male authority, either in the public or the private sectors. “Men and women are not simply considered different from one another, as we speak of people differing in eye color, movie tastes or preferences for ice cream. In every domain of life, men are considered the normal human being, and women are ‘ab-normal,’ deficient because they are different from men.”⁵ Nevertheless the challenge remains an opportunity for me to reflect further on those alternatives that move toward new answers to as yet unasked questions beyond Qur’an and gender and – in a manner of speaking – beyond the literalist Qur’anic readings asserted as if they are in fact divine, rather than mundane expressions of divine Self-disclosure.⁶ I am continuing my research in the hope of satisfactorily demonstrating how the challenge to a

“gender fundamentalist” approach to the Qur’an is ultimately, still, merely a matter of interpretation and hermeneutics for the sake of egalitarian praxis, but especially in the private sphere where it remains sequestered to obscure its popularity for male exploitation.

I have always felt positively inspired by the Qur’anic worldview and this inspiration assists me in addressing these challenges and in researching the works of other scholars.⁷ This scholarly transfertilization is instrumental in helping unveil possible paths *through* the Qur’an as a consolidated utterance – or fixed text – as well as an utterance or text *in process*. One important aspect of this challenge confronts the possibility of refuting the text, to talk back, even to say “no.” What happens when the text actually states something unmeaningful from the perspective of current human developments and understandings? Two choices result: either acknowledge the statement in question as unacceptable regarding current levels of human competency and understanding, and therefore reconsider textual meaning in the light of further interpretive development; or reject it. These choices are often confused with one another. To stand up against textual particulars is therefore to be charged with heresy – an ever-present threat in the background to assuage our progress toward gender justice.

The executive director of Sisters in Islam, Zainah Anwar, once asked, “Why can’t we say we are working for gender justice from a human rights perspective” instead of our earlier claim of working from a gender-inclusive Islamic perspective? Quite honestly, I understand the frustrations. My response, however, was, “I refuse to leave the definition of Islam to the neo-conservative extremists.” I also refuse to leave the definition to the hypocrisy of progressive Muslim males who do not seek to internalize the inherent reciprocal equality as it flows to all levels of the human being and in all human interactions and actions through engaged surrender. I propose to her that we are “working in a partnership between the will of Allah, as revealed in text, and the confirmation of Allah and divine principles through human agency.” As much as this partnership confirms the primacy of the Qur’an as the *word*, one form of Allah’s Self-disclosure as an ineffable reality, it simultaneously explores the implications of revelatory experience with its inexplicable transcendent nature that must overflow into the mundane realm in order for guidance to actually lead to social justice at all times, in all practices, and in all places.

Zainah proposed a workshop organized around that theme in Malaysia, 2002. It was my first public attempt to present ideas about this divine–

human cooperation, especially as one might perceive a structure of gender relations in Islam in terms far more egalitarian than readily understood from basic reading of Qur'anic text or from the historical androcentric construction of divine principles into explicit legal codes in the discipline of jurisprudence. In one sense, anything beyond literal Qur'an can be deemed supra-text, a refutation of the text, post-text, or a way of saying "no." In another sense one might see the opportunity this allows human beings to act as Allah's agents, responsible for making the meaning of the Qur'an implemental as universal guidance and not mere history.

Personally, I have come to places where how the text says what it says is just plain inadequate or unacceptable, however much interpretation is enacted upon it. Besides, the Qur'an never overtly advocated the eradication of the institution of slavery and concubinage, but confirmed the existing practices of slavery while offering thirteen ways to free slaves, reducing the acquisition of slaves through prisoners of war, and promoting just treatment of slaves as the lesser of two evils. There are two gender examples that have always been of some concern. One of these examples I will treat only minimally here until I have sufficiently developed my research. The other example revisits verse 4:34, with its potential for abuse in the form of the perpetuation of violence against wives. I have dealt with the content of this verse and its harmful consequences in practice quite extensively by now. Thus it will become the basis of demonstrating three aspects of "textual intervention" by way of interpretation and the potential of refutation of certain explicit verses of the Qur'an. Those three are: (1) similar interpretive projects have proceeded throughout Muslim intellectual and legal history in order to explicitly restrict the abuse of the textual statement (2) we can promote the idea of saying "no" to the text; while (3) still pointing to the text to support this, as part of hermeneutics and interpretation. It is therefore neither un-Islamic nor heretical to the same extent as it might be deemed post-text in this post-revelation social, cultural, and philosophical context.

AN INQUIRY INTO THE QUR'AN AND SEXUALITY

While, on the one hand, the Qur'an seems to operate within a structure of linguistic taboo about sexuality and matters of intercourse altogether, on the other hand it promotes male sexuality in particular with three citations. (1) Polygyny, housed in the language of desire, "Marry those who please you (*maa taba lakum*) of the women: two, three or four"

(4:3). Although polygyny is permitted in the text, it is also *conditioned* upon almost unachievable terms of justice. (2) Women are designated as *harth* (tilth), or something to be cultivated or tilled: “Your women are a tilth for you to cultivate . . . as you will” (*nisa’ukum harthun lakum fa’tuw harthaku, innaa’ shi’tum*) (2:223). Whether this is a discussion of sexual position or permissible times of male sexual satisfaction, according to different jurists, it is still directed toward men and men’s sexual desires, while women and women’s sexuality remains passive. (3) The notorious virginal *huris* for men – even after they are dead, men’s pleasure should not be forsaken (52:20, 55:72, 56:22)! It’s hard to take any of these affirmations away from their explicitly male sexual predilection “Where nowhere are extolled the virtues of their earthly wives.”⁸ In fact, the Qur’anic statement about “*al-qawa’idu min al-nisa’*”, usually taken to mean post-menopausal women, includes that such women will also “not hope to marry” (*la yarjuna nikahan*) (24:60) and “can cast aside their outer garments.”

Research on human sexuality verifies that women are not only still active, capable, and willing sexual participants past menopause, they reach the peak of their sexual desire and enjoyment in their forties and fifties just as menopause most often occurs. Is this verse inaccurate about women’s sexual desires, as it seems to claim? The necessary interrogation of the term *nikah* is key to understanding this statement. Since the jurists designated the term to mean “sexual intercourse” as well as “marriage,” the difference between these two designations complicates the simple reading. Women may at one and the same time “desire sexual intercourse” while “not hoping to be *selected for* marriage,” the only legitimate Qur’anic space for intercourse outside of being a concubine. Even today, in many cultures menopausal women and post-menopausal women are not considered the best choice for marriage.

There were several reasons why I have not addressed such glitches in my earlier works. First, I recognize that the Qur’an addressed its primary audience within the context of revelation’s social, historical, and cultural circumstances and, as Fazlur Rahman describes it, “through the mind of the Prophet.” These necessarily affected its linguistic construction and even its searches for meaning.⁹ It had to have *contextual* meaning or it would fail at its stated method of being “plain Arabic” (16:3). This is acknowledged within Qur’anic interpretive sciences and part of the prerequisite knowledge for understanding text. Some verses are ‘*amm* (general) and some are *khass* (specific). Whether “general” and “universal” are one and the same is a subject requiring even more extensive interpretive consideration. Because

“general” can be relative to the general context of its revelation, there is space to re-examine those verses considered ‘*amm* against general contexts outside seventh-century Arabia.

I am influenced by the Qur’an’s claim to offer universal guidance for *insan* (humankind) to conclude that even some verses classified as general are relative to the revelatory context. That context, seventh-century Arabia, was not only thoroughly patriarchal, it was relatively isolated from most of the rest of the world, as well as mostly obsolete to our current realities. Unless these verses are rigorously examined vis-à-vis their context, the universal meanings could be lost by their modes of articulation. The general understanding of family at the time of revelation, as I discussed at length elsewhere in this book,¹⁰ is not universal because family is a social institution and subject to change relative to social development. The question of universal was not fundamental to early exegetical works, hence the use of the word “general” rather than something equivalent to universal, which was not yet a concept in human philosophical thinking, due in part to the role of particularities in constructing meaning and understanding. If something was generally understood, it could be totally irrelevant to other societies; as the idea of “global pluralism” did not exist, “general” was limited to the immediate space and time of the revelation.

Still, Muslim scholars and laity believed in the universal intent of Qur’anic guidance, even when certain times and places had exclusive perspectives on universal relative to the general understandings in context. Thus universal, at the time of revelation, was not globally comprehensive. Indeed, the Qur’anic categories of human belief systems were focused on those prevalent and known in seventh-century Arabia, inclusive of *ahl al-kitab* (people of the book), or members of the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There were also *mushrikun* (polytheists), at that time, but polytheism in Qur’anic discourse did not include any direct references to Hindu or African traditional religious polytheism, which have both the concept of numerous gods and the concept of the sacred as Ultimate. These sacred traditions relied upon this Ultimate sacred nature as facilitated by enactments or articulation of other “gods” to redefine multiple theophonic attributes while still adhering to their intrinsically unified – i.e. *tawhidic* – nature with regard to the sacred as universal.

There were also idol worshipers present in the context of the Qur’anic revelation, who are conflated with the *mushrikun*, because of their multiplicity. There were no animists, believers in the sacred manifestations throughout creation, as in many indigenous religious traditions, like

native African, Australian, and North and South American pre- and post-Qur'anic traditions. These are not directly spoken to in the Qur'an. Furthermore, all forms of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, with unembodied or non-personified concepts of the sacred, were excluded from Qur'anic discussions of faith or religion, despite their existence prior to the seventh century in other parts of the globe. Popular Muslim thinking does not interrogate the subtle relationships between the idea of a universal divine essence, the concept of the sacred, and the various manifestations of these already recognized and practiced in other parts of the world, while the general context of Arabia and its surrounding areas are taken as the comprehensive arena for considerations of the meaning of the divine. Instead of coming away from the universal intents of the Qur'an against its general audience at one time and place, the global realities of divine-human relations are often reduced to some simple aspect of the Qur'anic contextual discussion – if not totally ignored. Consequently, the *shari'ah* prohibits intermarriage between Muslims and members of these world faiths, and acknowledges the Qur'anic concept of female subjugation within marriage to permit men to marry *ahl al-kitabi* women.

Nevertheless, I continue to believe in the Qur'an's universal intent while armed with comparative religious studies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Each measure of human understanding of the totality of the divine nature is more like a window, through which a person or a community can have a view of the totality. I cannot defend the notion that the window itself represents the total sacred potential. It is a framework or a viewpoint, limited to the ones who look through it. Therefore, *'amm* verses are not the same as universal. What I consider universal in the Qur'anic statements can only be understood in light of the transcendent. Transcendence does not adhere to mundane limits. In fact, its definition is best articulated in negative theological terms, by stating or focusing on what the sacred or the divine is *not*. "Allah is one" compares to an unlimited possible articulation of what Allah, or Its "one-ness," is not. It is not multiple gods, idols, and literal prescriptions to its manifestations throughout creation, especially in nature. The multiplicity of human responses to the idea of the sacred or the ultimate have been and continue to be expressed in terms relative to all these negated qualities despite their apparent correlations.

Put another way, if Allah has ninety-nine names, characteristics, or *sifat* (attributes), then focusing on any particular one of these is neither separate from Allah's *tawhidic* totality nor the same as Allah's comprehensive reality

which embraces all ninety-nine without mutual contradiction. This is one reason why both the *jamal* (feminine attributes of Allah) and the *jalal* (masculine attributes) are related integrally to the totality of Allah. To accept Allah's mercy requires acceptance of Allah's wrath. To focus on that mercy is not a negation of the wrath, it is a human predilection influenced by very mundane, and not transcendent, universal or ultimate potentialities. Thus the second reason for my responses to seeming glitches or even contradictions in even the Qur'an's '*amm* (general utterances) was their historical necessity in a particular time and location while the comprehension of the transcendent reality of the divine cannot be discussed in the boundaries of any human language as a symbolic meaning-making system. "Language is intrinsically unfitted to discuss the supernatural literally." Words about God and the Unseen "must be used analogically because these matters 'transcend all symbol-systems'."¹¹ Therefore, I have never been locked into a literal meaning of Qur'anic text when I explore the Qur'anic intent of universal guidance. This frees human agency to grapple throughout all points in history with what is actually stated in the Qur'an and to observe the deficiencies of all statements in language over meaning, let alone divine potentiality.

As to the matter of Qur'anic *khass* (specific statements), I consider it direct and simple; for example, when the Qur'an addresses the people of Madinah and the wives of the Prophet Muhammad are prohibited from remarrying after his death (33:53). This statement's restricted application to these particular women has no general, let alone universal, intent. One cannot derive any meaning from it to be applied outside the *khass* of its utterance. *Only* the wives of the Prophet, now fourteen hundred years deceased, have any relationship to the verse, although it is a literal part of this universal text of guidance. In fact, to derive general, let alone universal, intent from such a statement would so obviously misread the statement that it would violate the Qur'an. It is the overt and obvious nature and utterance of this statement with its extremely limited terms of application that should easily alert all readers of the text that the Qur'an does indeed *have* a specific context, and also that the Qur'anic text *was* responsive to that context.

I was not deterred by these nuances. I moved beyond its particular linguistic confirmations and limitations *in* context and looked through it as a window toward the transcendent – toward its potential, as if the words were *ayat* (signs), that point beyond themselves to ultimate meanings for transformation. It requires readers of these signs to invest their human agency, as free-willed and rational beings – in aspiring to surrender to the

divine will. Such agents investigate the relationship between Qur'anic statements and their potential trajectories to point all humankind to divine guidance rather than to literal application of verse after verse, to extremely confined or limited implementations as in the seventh-century Arabian context, as if these could fulfill universal guidance.

After all, Qur'anic interpretation is about the human search for the meaning of God. It is not just in our most fundamental belief in the Qur'an as the word of Allah, or God's Self-disclosure, but in the sense that Allah is and always was and therefore cannot be contained or constrained by text – let alone by the search for meanings of that text by any human being, with all his or her flaws and inadequacies. The Qur'an is, as it were, a window to look *through*, a doorway with a threshold one must pass *over* toward the infinite possibilities that point humanity toward a continuum of spiritual and social development. I could never allow its substance to succumb to the patriarchal audience of its time, nor to the scope of its readership – then or now. I accept that even my own reading is dwarfed by my context in history as well as by human incompetence and lack of understanding. This acceptance frees me from defending any understanding I develop or meaning I find as the *only* right understanding. This leads my understanding to unlimited change as I grow and encounter both the whole of Allah's creation, the whole of the book, and the whole scope of human meaning-making under sacred guidance. I am not afraid of my efforts to understand the text, to act upon my understanding, and to share each stage of development in that understanding as part of the human love, belief, and surrender to the Author of the text, however I might encounter Allah from one moment to the next. The substance of the Qur'an cannot be constrained by its particular utterances, let alone by the narrowness of its readers. Indeed, as Ali ibn Abi Talib asserted in the famous dispute with the Khawarij (extremists), "The Qur'an is written in straight lines between two covers. It does not speak by itself. It needs interpreters, and the interpreters are human beings."¹² As Muslims we have always been, and always will be, only human. With our human development of postmodernist and deconstructionist disciplines of meaning, we accept the fact that we are potentially guided by the text, even if not limited to its particular utterances.

The text is silent. It needs interpretation, and has always historically and currently been subjected to interpretation. We make it speak for us by asking of it. If we are narrow, we will get a narrow response or answer. If we are open, it will open us to even greater possibilities. Contexts make

particular interpretations dominant and others inadequate. We are subjects of our own history in the making, as well as to the historical past upon which we rest, knowingly or unknowingly. “Human nature [is] created historically through a dialectic between human biology and the physical environment. This interrelation is mediated by human labor or praxis. The specific form of praxis dominant within a given society creates the distinctive physical and psychological human types characteristic of that society.”¹³ Therefore, even our capacity to conceive of any kind of God is prefaced upon our individual as well as civilizational context and the conceptual constructs at our disposal. As civilizations develop so does the human capacity to understand both its own nature and the nature of God.

The revelation of God is unfortunately also constrained by the minds of the men and women for whom it was revealed. When we do perceive of the Ultimate in Its infinitude, for whatever glimpses or theophonic awakenings we might experience, we are left to integrate them into our own identity as it may yield to and yet be limited within our specific contexts. Then it’s back to the drawing board, to chisel out other less finite possibilities. I do not say that God is in Herself constrained by us. However, our conceptions of God are at best what the Hindu yogi recognizes as the sixth *chakrah*, the place of our “notions of God.” We cannot linger everlastingly at the seventh *chakrah*, or the crown, the place of “God beyond all names and forms,” except for the twinkling of an eye. Or else we be gods ourselves, and though ultimately there is truth in that, our corporeal forms will only allow us intoxicated glimpses of this Reality. Afterwards we are tumbled back in a hangover of separation, yearning, and despair. Our earthly form confines us, and all that is left to us in the wake of that moment of epiphany is a deep sense of alienation.

VERSE 4:34 AND IMPLICATIONS OF LITERAL APPLICATION OF *HUDUD* ORDINANCES

I have used the Qur’an’s contextual patriarchal circumstances with predominant focus on male experiences, including male sexuality, to begin my research on the complexity of uncovering meaning from the Qur’anic text as well as for implementing the Qur’anic intent for universal guidance. While Muslims accept the Qur’an as universal guidance, the predominant method for achieving that universal in the mundane context has resulted overwhelmingly in the practice of literally applying specific utterances. In

Qur'an and Woman, I considered this to have potential contradictions to the spirit of the Qur'an. This reference to the word "spirit" I had concluded from studying Fazlur Rahman's work in conjunction with my research and experience with gender and transcendence. But the ambiguity of the word also required elaboration.

The existence of so many exegetical works (*tafasir*) indicates that, with regard to the Qur'an, the interpretation process has existed and will probably continue to exist, in a variety of forms. It is essential that the adaptive nature of interpretation, from individual to individual and from time and place to time and place, should continue unabated until the end of time – on the one hand because it is natural and on the other hand, *because only through such continued interpretation can the wisdom of the Qur'an be effectively implemented. This implementation will be specific to the varying experiences of human civilization.*

No interpretation is definitive. I have attempted here to render a reasonable plausible interpretation to some difficult matters. The basis for this plausibility is the significance I draw from the text with regard to the modern woman: the significance of her life style to her concerns and interactions in her context.

I believe the Qur'an adapts to the context of the modern woman as smoothly as it adapted to the original Muslim community fourteen centuries ago. This adaptation can be demonstrated if the text is interpreted with her in mind, thus indicating the universality of the text. Any interpretations, which narrowly apply the Qur'anic guidelines only to literal mimics of the original community, do an injustice to the text [now and in the future]. No community will ever be exactly like another. Therefore no community can be a duplicate of that original community. The Qur'an never states that as the goal. Rather *the goal has been to emulate certain key principles of human development: justice, equity, harmony, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness and development. Where these general characteristics exist, whether in the first Muslim community or in the present or future communities, the goal of the Qur'an for society [and piety] has been reached.*¹⁴

(emphasis and additions mine)

Besides the imbalanced expression of human sexuality in terms most specific to masculine, heterosexual dominance, the second place of dissatisfaction when grappling with textual inadequacies is verse 34, *surat-al-nisa*'.¹⁵

Men are [*qawwamuna 'ala*] women, [on the basis] of what Allah has

[preferred] (*faddala*) some of them over others, [and on the basis] of what they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are [*qanitat*], guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those (women) from whom you fear [*nushuz*], admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them.¹⁶

There is no getting around this one, even though I have tried through different methods for two decades. I simply do not and cannot condone permission for a man to “scourge” or apply *any kind* of blow to a woman. Because of the extensive time I have examined this verse, it is the best place for me to demonstrate the diverse interpretive and implementive possibilities as they have been applied through some historical examples and conditions, including my own attempts at interpretative manipulations. This leads me to clarify how I have finally come to say “no” outright to the literal implementation of this passage. This also has implications in implementing the *hudud* (penal code) ordinances. This verse, and the literal implementation of *hudud*, both imply an ethical standard of human actions that are archaic and barbaric at this time in history. They are unjust in the ways that human beings have come to experience and understand justice, and hence unacceptable to universal notions of human dignity.

I have had what Khaled Abou El-Fadl calls a “conscientious pause” regarding the application of the *hudud* ordinances and the verse on wife beating.

Every adult Muslim, man or woman, is obligated to understand and implement the *Shari‘ah*. Accountability is personal and individual, and *no single person or institution may or can represent the Divine Will*. Hence the individual is directly responsible for seeking and learning the way of God – the *shari‘ah* . . . or the truth.

Truth here relates to the object or purpose of the Divine Will. God, it is argued, does not seek an objective or singular truth, God wishes human beings to search and seek for the Divine Will. Truth adheres to search – the search itself is ultimate truth. Consequently, correctness is measured according to the sincerity of the individual’s search.

The mark of the search for the Divine Will is the dalil (pl. adillah). A dalil is the indicator, pointer mark or evidence of the Divine Will. God, for the purpose of edification, and in order to test human beings, and as a sign of His mercy and compassion, demanded that human beings exert an

*effort in seeking the evidence of His Will (badhl al-juhd fi talab al-dalil or talab al-'ilm).*¹⁷ (emphasis mine)

Then he elaborates further on those things that might “require a conscientious pause.” If by the standards of age and place, or the standards of human moral development, traditions lead to *wakhdh al-damir* (the unsettling or disturbing of the conscience), the least a Muslim can do is to pause to reflect about the place and the implications of these traditions. “Can I, consistently with my faith and understanding of God and God’s message, believe that God . . . is primarily responsible for this . . . or that such and such can be true?” “Everyone . . . is functioning in the realm of the possible and probable while struggling with indicators (pl. *adillah*, sing. *dalil*). To claim full or perfect knowledge of God’s will is to challenge the singularity and uniqueness of the Divine perfection.”¹⁸

However, if all determinations take account of the indicators and evidence, what do we make of morality, or a basic sense of right and wrong? Is all right and wrong only derived from the divine text and nothing but the text? The text is not the only representative of the divine.

A person develops knowledge of God, *not through textual indicators alone*, but through a complex matrix of relationships that are collateral to the text. A person develops a direct relationship perhaps through prayer and supplication, and might develop an understanding of the Creator by reflecting upon creation, or might observe the work of God and Satan through reflecting upon history. These various avenues to the knowledge of God exist apart from the indicators of the text, but they work in conjunction with the text to formulate a conviction about the nature and normativities of the divine. Although the text plays a role in forming these convictions one cannot exclude the possibility that the conviction which has been formulated might come into friction with certain determinations of the text. A person can read a text that seems to go against everything that he or she believes about God and will feel a sense of incredulous disbelief, and might even exclaim, “This cannot be from God, the God that I know!”¹⁹

When such frictions occur between textual utterances and collateral evidences, one must assert a “diligent and comprehensive”²⁰ investigation of the text. I elaborate this through my investigation of verse 4:34 including a historical consideration of the possible means for both understanding and implementing the particular text toward fulfillment of the principles

or “spirit” of the whole of the text. There are four stages of this historical development.

STAGES IN TEXTUAL INTERPRETIVE DEVELOPMENT

One might say that the first stage of textual interpretive development would be at the time and in the context of its revelation. The simple response to this statement of authorization for a husband to strike his wife seems to be, *yes*. Despite this simple response, however, we also know that the Prophet’s response to this revelation was, “I wanted one thing and Allah wanted something else.” He *never* implemented this text in his life. He never struck a woman or beat a slave. It would be easy to say that the reason for this is that every one of his marriages were without incident. After all, these were the “Mothers of the Faith,” exemplary companions to the time of revelation. On the contrary, the Qur’anic *khass* descriptions of more than one conflict between the Prophet and one or more of his wives confirm this was not so. Not only did the Prophet retain severe doubts about the sexual fidelity of his wife ‘A’ishah when rumors were implying the contrary, but also those doubts were not alleviated by any direct exchange between him and ‘A’ishah. These doubts persisted until a *khass* verse testifying to her innocence was revealed. This passage goes on to provide an *‘amm*, commandment to avoid slander and rumors, and even instates a *hadd* punishment for those guilty of speaking such rumors without corroborating their suspicions with reliable eye-witnesses or other evidence (24:4–25).

The Qur’an also elaborates on another occasion, when the Prophet vowed a month-long seclusion from all his wives after they schemed against him over something he had done with which they were displeased. The *khass* revelation even went so far as to offer to replace all his wives (66:3–5). This month-long separation can be viewed as a demonstration of the second solution recommended in 4:34, to “remain in beds apart.”²¹ If the Prophet remains the best exemplary of Qur’anic meaning, then he should have moved from the separation to beating his wives. The Qur’an instead speaks of the possibility of divorce (66:4), and the Prophet demonstrates the additional condition of interpretation and application, self-reflection.

The second stage of interpretive development is demonstrated continually and in diverse ways during the two or three centuries following the revelation as *fiqh* developed and provided other interpretive responses. It was a practical *intervention* between literal textual application and *conditional*

application. Most significant of this intervention is that *fiqh* restricts such a “stroke” to “*ghayr mubah*” (without harm). Furthermore, *fiqh* interprets the blow as only “*ramsiyun*” (symbolic). This confirms a textual understanding against the use of it for unabashed spousal abuse or domestic violence. The jurists seem to be arguing within their existing sociological context and asserting an understanding of textual intent – perhaps also based on the precedent of the prophetic example. This is nevertheless *an intervention opposing literal application*. It could be seen as proposing “yes,” “but” with conditions. It is no reductionism to believe that the conditions also stem from interpreting the Qur’an on the basis of the Qur’an, with “justice” the overarching concern for human interaction of *mu’amalat*.

In *Qur’an and Woman*, I intentionally worked on a third potential stage of development inspired by reading in my own context. Multiple meanings can be deduced from the various uses and definitions for the word *daraba* (translated on p. 200 as “scourge”) as in the Qur’an and elsewhere. This wide spectrum of linguistic nuances, and the extensive lists of definitions supplied by the Arabic dictionary and lexicon *Lisan al-Arab*, indicate that there could be much more to meet the eye and subsequently apply in trying to understand this verse. It was plain to see how this multiplicity allows room to manipulate multiple meanings to determine multiple possibilities for application. I concluded with an alternative interpretation that the Qur’an meant to restrict unbridled violence. This intervention utilizes the linguistic space for manipulating meaning and promotes a “*perhaps not*” possibility. Perhaps the Qur’an did *not* intend to emphasize the narrowest reading, since violence against the innocent and oppressed is strongly discouraged elsewhere in the text. Perhaps the seventh-century application of this countered the practices of abuse and violence towards women, but twenty-first-century standards have shown us other possibilities as well as the clear negative consequences of violence in the family for all members: the abused, the abuser, and the witnessing members.

The last stage I consider here in the context of our current knowledge and explicit data regarding domestic violence takes into consideration information gathered from research on, and women’s experiences with, abuse – that is, using the “various avenues to the knowledge of God [that] exist apart from the indicators of the text.”²² Here I argue against any notion that it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife. Any kind of a blow, or any intention to apply the verse in that manner, violates other principles of the text itself – most notably “justice” and human dignity, as Allah has led humankind to understand today.

Therefore the application of the verse as permission for a man to strike his wife must be rejected. To say “no” to this verse now simply exemplifies the process or trajectory throughout the history of textual interpretation and application. From the cultural context of the text, with the precedent of the Prophet – against such a practice – through the restriction of *fiqh* conditions, and the manipulation of interpretive multiplicity, we finally arrive at a place where we *acknowledge that we intervene* with the text. The next step is to admit that we are continuing the process of intervention between text and meaning, as believers in Allah and in revelation. It provides a means to reject literal application of this text and certain other textual particulars altogether.

What I am proposing is that the collective community has always manipulated the text in concert with civilizational, or, better still, human development. We must now simply acknowledge that it has always been done and accept the responsibility of agency in doing so openly and in consultation with the community. Since we live in the time when at least the conceptualization of women’s complete human agency and equality between women and men is conceivable, then we must dance the delicate dance between text and agency to assert a movement of complete gender justice. I have already argued significantly that the text *can* be interpreted with egalitarianism in mind; I now propose one step that some consider as beyond even that. *We are the makers of textual meaning*. The results of our meaning-making is the reality we establish from those meanings to human experiences and social justice. We need to make the text mean more for women’s full human dignity than it has been conceived to do or applied toward at any other time in Muslim history. Our motivation to do so, however, is fully within the framework of Islam as a meaning-making system of social justice with the text as the *dalil*, the primary indicator of that meaning, while acknowledging that no one text can ever completely disclose the full nature of Allah and therefore be the complete and exclusive articulation of it.

As believers in the faith tradition of Islam, *we cannot rewrite the Qur’an*. As a historical record of the words revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad, those words are unchangeable. In addition, those words have always been subject to multiple meanings and to various interpretations. The goal of interpretation is to unveil the meanings that reflect the spirit of the very idea that Allah, the Ultimate, Who is ultimately unknowable, intends for human agents to *apply*. They must be able to unveil these meanings in a manner most reflective of the principles of the message.

The jurists, the poets, the Sufis, the dialecticians, the philosophers, and the linguists, women and men, *all* took part in interrogating textual meanings to build a global community of balance or equilibrium – a just society.

We can rewrite the law, the *shari'ah*, through *fiqh*. In fact, we must rewrite the law. The *fiqh* of earlier times, just like that of our time, only has meaning as *fiqh al-waqi'ah*, the *fiqh* of lived reality, that assists in establishing codes of conduct to facilitate the achievement of a just and moral social order as mandated by Qur'anic principles. At the time of revelation, gender was not a category of thought, examined in light of diverse, relative living realities. The absence of such a category of thought was not sexist at the time of revelation, but it is palpably so today. Whatever sexism might be found in the words of the immutable Qur'an is a reflection of the historical context of Qur'anic revelation. Today, sexism is rejected in all its expressions of asymmetrical theories and practices where men are privileged to the detriment of women by deterring them from reaching their fullest potential as divinely assigned full human agents. By rewriting the legal codes, through distinguishing their sexist assumptions, we can achieve an Islamic reality more meaningfully reflecting Qur'anic principles in a harmonious equilibrium.

Just as there are medical ethics, where we must rely upon specialists in other areas, in this case we have particular specialists in social and psychological fields of human knowledge, to help augment our continued journey to where the Qur'an can potentially lead us. Clearly, we were able to stop practicing the institution of slavery and never charged ourselves with violating the text. Even the most conservative of Muslim fundamentalists do not argue for a return to the Qur'anic position of accepting slavery under the seventh-century practice. What more impetus to correct gender imbalance could there be than the Qur'an's own tenacious insistence on dealing with the issues in a most despicable and despised context of pre-Islamic patriarchy? There are more verses in the Qur'an regarding the full human dignity of women than any other social issues. Surely the Qur'anic trajectory as universal guidance should not be made into retrograde patriarchal standards and practices.

Ultimately, we can exercise the continued progression of human agency and rewrite the basic paradigmatic core of what can be considered Islamic ethics by a multiplicity of means now available to human understanding about what it means to acquire, practice, and assert how we live as ethical beings and moral agents of the divine will. Gender, as a category of thought, is one of the most significant aspects of this development of human understanding and is essential to raising the level of an Islamic ethos to more

closely resemble the universal intent of the divine message as contextually disclosed in the revelation of the Qur'an.

ON LINGUISTICS AND A HERMENEUTICS OF GENDER JUSTICE

Instead of trying to change the immutable words, we grapple with and challenge the inherent sexist biases of the historicity of words. As agents we surmise what are particulars and what are universals to establish general mechanisms for achieving the fullest justice of our time. Muslim scholars help point us toward the theoretical foundations of that justice. Legal scholars must represent the people's need for full justice, unhampered by its relative reflections during past historical movements but rather inspired by their relative potential, and consolidate these with today's historical realities, without narrow authoritative intolerance, so that we can lead toward the many possible futures of Islam, when surely new circumstances will require freedom in achieving the continuity of the interrogative process toward the goal of a just social order.

While researching and compiling *Qur'an and Woman*, as an agent, African-American, woman, believer, transitioner, and thinker, I occupied a place of extreme anonymity. This allowed me a freedom to examine our tradition through my mind and my heart. I have lost that freedom since the ideas made a public debut. On the one hand, this has forced me to broaden my research perspective of what "Islam" can be, and what it means to me, through various areas of study like progressive Islam, feminism, and postmodernism, Third World and Western political theory and politics, liberation theologies, the new globalization, and of course, through experiences. On the other hand, I have lost the protected insulation around my heart and mind that I possessed when I was free to focus solely upon how an open heart moves toward understanding the divine through text. Now that I know more, my heart is burdened more. I am painfully aware of the need to manage multiple audiences, as the Prophet advised, by "speaking to the people in the way they understand." This is the challenge I must meet, and I can no longer work solely from or for my own spiritual inspiration, but must acknowledge the complexities of the entire Muslim world, including those who have a predilection for divergent opinions, let alone those who are violent against the innocent.

Without the luxury of solitary heartfelt inspiration, I am responsible for engaging in discussions of interpretive possibilities and making comparative

analysis about the Qur'an's centrality as a prerequisite to all intellectual discourse, and yet still as one indisputable core of spiritual realization. As the primacy of the underlying spiritual inspiration of the Qur'an is almost wholly lost in textual analysis, my initial discussion was more at liberty to highlight that aspect, like a river running beneath the intense layers of liberal and progressive thinking about language, context, and hermeneutics. Allah is, has always been, and will always be, present. Allah has endeavored to inform free-willed moral agents of Her presence through many *ayat* – in the text and everywhere in the universe. Revelation can be seen as an *ayah* of crisis intervention as well as *dhikr* (a reminder) and a *furqan* (proof) of Allah's continual presence, continual creation, and/or continual Self-disclosure. For language-dependent human minds, revelation is the ultimate sign of Allah's presence or Self-disclosure to guide human hearts in the surrender to Its divine will. Through extensive analysis of the text, we have learned how language is a most unique gift to humankind, imbued with immeasurable power and potential, while paradoxically one of the most fallible. In human language, we can lie. What is more, we can become trapped in our own lies through denial or blatant hypocrisy. When the Qur'an says, "Why do you say that which you do not do? It is a grievous injustice to say that which you do not do" (61:2), humans can stand forward to speak on the very issues of human well-being that they privately violate. As long as the truth of our actions is kept secret from our public personae then we can wear this false persona as easily as we can violate truth through our private actions. I want to mean what I say, and say what I mean. Even more, I want to be the Muslim I aspire to be as best as I understand and attempt to articulate in the context of the human language facility.

Yet this language facility is also applied to understanding the transcendent nature of the divine. *Within* the paradox of multiple meanings of the language medium, to say nothing of the direct lie, there can be huge gaps rather than mutual understanding between Muslims as one group among many recipients of revelation. God's disclosure through text in the fallible human language medium can never completely disclose That Which is also disclosed through countless other mediums, signs, or *ayat*. Complete disclosure can never be contained by any means, least of all the heavily flawed means of human linguistic communication.

This has already been addressed by the dispute between the Mu'tazilites and the Asha'rites as to whether the Qur'an is *eternal* with God or *created*. There are other questions to ponder. Is Allah multi-lingual, so that She can reveal in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, or is Allah

meta-lingual, not constricted by any language? Every language is a constraint on complete divine Self-disclosure. Is Arabic preferable, divine, or just the most convenient tool to use with an Arab prophet? Is the divine message limited to (or by) words – of any language? Do Muslims truly recognize the presence of Allah in words, or deem themselves gods by enforcing their understandings and misunderstandings of those words? Is recognition of the presence of Allah limited to reading the words of the Qur'an? Since the majority of Muslims are non-Arabic speaking can they know the presence of Allah?

I have heard the recitation from many a *hafiz* (Qur'anic memorizer) who cannot render comprehensible phraseology in their recitation, but instead only parrot the sounds they learned by rote memorization, and it sounds like gibberish, not meaningful communication. Meanwhile, a *hafiz* who has specifically learned the Qur'anic linguistic worldview can bring tears to the eyes of a comprehending listener. Is Allah's presence so limited? No. Allah's presence is everywhere as He continues to create and recreate at every second sustaining the universe in the bosom of His love. And like the infant child *knows* he or she is loved in the arms of the mother or the father, so the believer knows the presence of Allah, before, during, after, and without reading the Qur'an. In other words, whatever "the word of God" means, the Qur'an is not God. Words are fallible. Hence Muslims can and have used it for justice and as well as for despicable violence. It is "Muslims" in response to their own hearts and minds in interaction with the words that determine the results. The Qur'an is the source; people are the resource. That is why I stress not only the significance of interpretation, but also the relationship of interpretation and actions.

THE SUN NEITHER RISES NOR SETS

When we read the words "*gharabat ash-shams*" in the Qur'an, literally, "the sun wests," sun is the grammatical actor, the subject of the sentence. The basic sentence structure requires a subject and a predicate. The predicate is the grammatical act, indicated by a verb. The action of the subject in a sentence is articulated as a particular verb. Here, the sentence contains a verb that does not exist in English, "*gharaba*." Etymologically this verb can be traced to the word *gharb*, which means *west*. The Arabic sentence in the Qur'an depicts the place of the sun at the end of the day – in the west. But it cannot be literally translated into English as "the sun wests (itself)." To "west" itself, as this sentence states, despite the absence of an

English verb equivalent to “west,” makes the sun as the subject/actor, and *west* as the verb or action.

In another sense, this sentence might be describing a movement somewhere in the universe, which results in the location of the sun’s evening appearance in the west. From the perspective of earthly creatures the sun appears in the west. With no English equivalent for the verb “west,” translators use the idiomatic English equivalent, “The sun sets.” The English sentence has subject and verb as well. In it, “the sun” is subject and “set” is verb. Whereas it is insignificant in the Arabic sentence whether the verb here implies that the sun, a star in the universe, actually moves itself, vis-à-vis the earth, to the west, the action of the English sentence is very significant. The results of the Arabic sentence is that the subject, “sun,” is connected to its location in the west, as indicated by the verb. It is a logical and scientifically accurate statement, whether we know or not from the verb how the action of “westing” is achieved. Some movement of the sun could achieve it, or some other movement, like the earth turning on its axis could achieve it. The result, however, is that the sun is west with respect to human perceptions on the earth.

Unfortunately, the absence of a verb “to west” in English requires the translator to reduce the sentence to the only semantic English equivalent, literally “the sun sets.” We accept this translation based on the absence of a verb “to west” in the English language. We stick to the translation, “the sun sets,” with the implication that the sun performs the act of setting, even though the sun actually makes no motion. The earth moves on its axis until the sun appears in the west. Our English sentence reflects the time when human knowledge actually thought the earth was the center of the universe and the sun’s appearance in the west meant that it was the sun itself that had moved west resulting in sunset. But the sun does not set. No English statement exists to reflect the reality about the workings of the earth in relation to the sun. “The sun sets” only expresses the limitations in prior human knowledge as well as in the resulting articulation *in language* to the limitations of human perspective historically. Oddly, this linguistic limitation persists until now, despite our subsequent development in scientific knowledge, which has taught us that the actor is really the earth. So still today, we say “the sun sets,” making no reference to the sun’s persistent location vis-à-vis the movement or action of the earth.

Although a word equivalent to “set” exists in Arabic (*nazala*, to descend), and actually occurs numerous times in the Qur’an, it is a technical term of special semantic implication and most frequently refers to the

action of divine revelation. With it are other implications: that the source of revelation, which Muslims say is Allah, is above, and that the recipient of the revelation, the Prophet Muhammad, was below, in a descending direction from Allah. Yet above and below are also potentially metaphoric, as I explained in the *tawhidic* paradigm. Coincidentally, the same metaphysical direction, whether directly to the Prophet's heart, mind, soul, being, or via the archangel Jibril (Gabriel), "*ruh al-amin*" (the faithful spirit), a physical direction is also implied. The source is above; the receiver is below. Thus, when we say that the Qur'an was revealed "through the mind of the Prophet," the combination of Allah's transcendence as source of the message, onto or into the Prophet, a mundane human being selected for the receipt of revelation, we rely upon mundane or human language alone. We can only conclude that we do not and cannot know if the Qur'an was created or eternal with Allah, since we cannot know how it can actually be both at the same time. We do not, however, have the language to express this transcendent simultaneity.

I might note in passing other references to *nazala* or *anzala* used with a metaphysical downward movement, as it is principally used to describe revelation. For example, actions, like peace descending to the hearts of frightened soldiers are mentioned in the Qur'an. There are other physical actions of descent, or going down, that the Qur'an mentions when describing actions from this world – notably rain descends to earth from the sky above. But there is no term for a downward movement of the sun in the Qur'an. It never says "the sun *sets*," or "the sun goes down." The semantic "westing" of the sun is more scientifically accurate, and no attempts are made to show corollary between the downward movement of the sun vis-à-vis the earth, despite the limitation of human knowledge and the present limitation in the English human linguistic formulation.

Conversely, the Arabic grammatical construction for sunrise has the same limitation as the English. This complex nuance discloses more emphatically my point. For example, in *surat-al-Kahf* (18), the Qur'an actually uses the verb *tala'a*, to rise, with reference to the sun. For example at 18:17 and 18:90, *tala'a* is used as verb attached to sun as subject. In addition, *matla'i*, the passive participle of the verb, is also used with reference to the sun. However, the verb *tala'a*, placed as a direct action of the sun, in this case "*tala'at ash-shams*," means the sun ascended, or the sun rose. The English grammatical construct, "the sun rises," articulates the phenomenon in the same way. Again, from the perspective of an earthly inhabitant, the sun does *appear* to rise, but sound or correct scientific knowledge of the

universe has proven otherwise. It is the earth that acts vis-à-vis the sun, by turning on its axis, until the sun appears in the east.

Although the Qur'an talks about both the east and the west, locations relative to human perceptions on the earth, its language does not strictly adhere to the scientific reality that the sun's appearance in the east only results from earthly movement. It refers to the movement of the sun as "rising," although physically it neither rises nor sets. From the perspective of an earthly inhabitant, the sun does appear to rise, but through sound or correct knowledge of the workings of the universe, we know otherwise. It is the earth that acts, by turning on its axis, and gives the sun its appearance in the east and the west. But the sun neither rises nor sets. Regarding sunrise, the Arabic phrase is fossilized like the English phrase. Both accurately reflect a perception of reality from the perspective of human experience and the epistemology of human language. This in turn leaves an effect on the human mind. Neither phrase expresses what actually occurs in nature. Although the Qur'anic phrase "the sun wests (itself)," which is technically closer to the physical reality, exists without the "sun set" equivalent to the English, it is ambivalent in the Arabic whether the sun achieves its "position" in the west by its own movement or the movement of the earth. It is through the absence of a scientifically accurate articulation that such linguistic inadequacy occurs. This points us toward an elementary exploration of the primary function of human language. Language is a meaning-making facility only relative to human perception.

Sunrise and sunset are so standard in English, with at least one of them standard in Arabic as well, that we no longer question the imprecision of their articulation. On other occasions, the development of human scientific knowledge was so radical that the language used to articulate it had to be altered. For example, the relationship of the sperm as the agent of human procreation and the egg as a passive recipient: we now know the female egg is the actual seed which begins cell division when penetrated by the male sperm for ultimately achieving a complete, new, and unique human being. Other linguistic and semantic derivations easily cross the threshold from the strict technical circumstances in which they were constructed into everyday English parlance. One of my favorites is the statement "on par." It infiltrated mainstream English while only a small minority of golf players existed. Indeed, I even "understood" the meaning of this term twenty years before I even knew its origins in golf.

Revelation and, in our particular discussion, the Qur'an, is accepted as "the direct words of Allah" to the Prophet Muhammad. For simplicity's

sake, let us begin with Allah's omniscience. The Creator of the Universe knows and has always known the actual reality of movement of the matter in the universe. When human scientists discovered and confirmed the evidence that it was the earth's rotation causing what appears as "easting"/"rising" and "westing"/"setting" of the sun, they exposed evidence of a reality that had already existed, and was therefore already known by Allah, but new to humankind. Before human research provided evidence to verify that previously existing reality, human language had formulated grammatically sensible articulations to express what they perceived. Ironically, the English phrases "the sun rises" and "the sun sets" have not been adjusted to reflect these newly recognized realities.

This investigating into seeming linguistic discrepancies between Qur'anic language and scientific fact directs us to a necessary encounter with the createdness of revelation, the linguistic means of divine disclosure. Although the divine is not created, the only means for humans to receive a revelation in "clear Arabic" was for the Qur'an to utilize the linguistic constraints of Arabic as it strove to express the full nature of the divine. But it did not merely give meaning relative to human linguistic competency, it also guided humanity toward new meanings relative to human experiences, experiments, and perceptions yet still containing numerous pointers beyond the moment and circumstance of revelation, to help us as we develop and make new discoveries of reality. The most immediate task for a self-described text of "plain Arabic" (26:190) was in fact the imperative of the Qur'an to adapt the language of revelation to be plain or clear at the time of its revelation.²² It did not and, as it says directly, could not exhaust the knowledge of Allah through language alone. "If all the trees on earth were pens, and the seas [were] ink, with seven [more] yet added to it, the words of Allah would never be exhausted: for verily Allah is all might, wise" (31:27).

Simultaneously, the Qur'an must speak the Truth as it intended universal guidance. This only leaves open the idea that one feature of universality is its eternal reality. In this way I have said "the Qur'an is constrained" not only by language, but also in particular by the Arabic language, especially in its seventh-century context.²⁴ To achieve this dual purpose – contextual clarity and eternal or universal guidance – the Qur'an has necessarily left clues that allow the explicit Qur'anic linguistic compliance with human reasoning, while challenging the limitations of the reasoning present in an inevitable preparation for newly verified historical and scientific developments in human civilization. I have referred to this as a Qur'anic trajectory, pointing us to higher moral practices even if not fully

articulating these because of the context.²⁴ The whole of the Qur'an as guidance points toward the directions of moral excellence and ethical propriety. These are not static through time, place, and circumstance, but are relative and continue to require alterations in order to serve the highest values and principles.

The term *ayah* provides another clue to this reasoning. An *ayah* is a sign, a pointer, or an indicator. It points humans toward a certain direction. That pointer is a guide, but only inasmuch as it continues to be followed. The Qur'an uses this word often. It reveals that certain circumstances, certain people, certain discussions, and certain occasions are signs guiding or pointing to understanding or comprehension of the Truth. As it said, it also proclaims itself as universal guidance (2:2), pointing all who have moral consciousness in the direction of an ethical basis for living. But ethics inevitably develops, transformed by the constant makeover of human knowledge, experience, and change. If all there is to the Qur'an was its grappling with human linguistic competency in seventh-century Arabia, we should not only all still ride around the desert on camels and live without air-conditioning, we should also still enslave other human beings, accept silence as a woman's agreement, and think that the sun moves around the earth each day until it rises in the east and sets in the west, while the earth stands still as the center of the universe.

The moral, technological, economic, social, and ecological context at the time of revelation, including its linguistic utterances, was necessarily constrained by the limits of that context. The expansive and eternal intent of universal guidance toward right actions, as known to an omniscient divine, whose Self-disclosure as revealed in seventh-century Arabia, was not properly rendered but was particularized within the parameters of the social-cultural, moral, legal, and linguistic constraints of that context. If one truly believes in the eternity of the divine, then one cannot accept that Allah begins or ends with the particulars of Qur'anic utterances. Indeed, philosophically, limiting Allah to the utterances of the Qur'an, a specific text, would also limit Allah to seventh-century Arabia. The extent to which Allah's particular textual exposure is equated with Allah's totality in Its transcendent and unknowable reality is the same extent to which some think that Qur'anic patriarchy reflects Allah, rather than that context. One scholar expressed the idea that the god of the Qur'an *is* patriarchal, reducing Allah to the patriarchal contextual articulation and nothing else. That is a kind of *shirk* (violation of *tauhid*). It holds the seventh-century Arabian conceptual framework of Allah, and the epistemological

constraints of that context as equal to Allah. Such thinking, which concretizes Allah to the limitation and literalism of the Qur'an's revelatory context, parallels the Christian discourse that literally takes the notion of God's incarnation as the body of Christ.

Therefore, it would appear that the limits of linguistic epistemology, formed as a reflection of the human mind and in correspondence to human experience, is incorrect vis-à-vis astronomical science. Allah's knowledge could not be adequately or accurately expressed in the existing Arabic epistemology. This process of adjustment of truth, fact, or Allah's knowledge to the contingencies of human language is a hint at the formidable task of revelation in the human language medium. Human language limits Allah's Self-disclosure. If revelation through text must be in human language, in order for humans to even begin to understand it, then revelation cannot be divine or Ultimate. This is distinguished from the idea that revelation is from a divine source; rather, it indicates how the source availed itself of the limitation of human language to point toward the ultimate direction for human moral development, otherwise known as guidance.

Furthermore, the Qur'anic revelation constantly hints at and opens up to new meanings. The extent to which these hints were possible to more fully achieve or be understood is directly proportionate to the facility of perceptions in the human being, and to the potential they have to extend their perceptions by indicators both in language and elsewhere, which lead toward such meanings, despite the limits by, or constraints of, structural coherence in the existing language used for the revelation.

I return to my particular interest in the patriarchal implications of text and language as a representation of the limiting constructs of semantics, despite Qur'anic attempts to both work within the seventh-century limitations and to reach beyond them. In this case, the mind of the Prophet acts as a filter through which divine disclosure takes place. Just as "Islam" reminds us that the Prophet was an ordinary, albeit exceptional, human being, he was also an ordinary, albeit exceptional, male. He was also an inhabitant of seventh-century Arabia, chosen as the context of this revelation because of the absence of the message of truth. The aberrations of behavior, etiquette, and thought in that context were chastised in no uncertain terms by Qur'anic revelation itself. The arrogance, misogyny, and unfair business practices, along with the misguided political forms, were all reprimanded. It cannot be accidental that more Qur'anic passages about social justice are directly related to the treatment of females in that society. It was obviously one of the areas most in need of reform from corruption and abuse.

I am reminded of the extensive attention given to women's social, moral, spiritual, economic, political, and intellectual potential, while the social context of seventh-century Arabia was still prone to certain practices of gross gender inequity. Despite the tedious amount of attention given to gender and to the reform of social praxis, the most prevalent ideas of that time form only the starting place from which to begin the movement toward fulfilling the eternal nature of guidance which the Qur'an points humanity toward. I consider it integral to Qur'anic intent to continue to reform. Not only does the Qur'an squarely address patriarchal privileges, it repeatedly implies, suggests, and commands change.

The Qur'an constantly made special address to those in whose hands rested the power and privilege to establish social justice, albeit with varying degrees of success and failure, even during the process of revelation all the way up to the Prophet's death. They are the ones held accountable and the ones with the greatest responsibility to change. There is less utility in addressing the weak and oppressed elements of the community about their autonomy and dignity except as part of the whole of community. This aspect of the Qur'an forms the core of its ethical framework. If justice is the dispensation of the strong granted toward the weak, then the Qur'anic address is a proper assessment of the foremost means for where change needs to take place. While it was just as easy to address the oppressed, rendering them principal actors in their own liberation, it was certainly the more privileged and powerful who held the greatest responsibility. Such focus on the oppressed as the central actors in a movement to end oppression has only been well articulated and advocated in the last few centuries, helping to reveal the wisdom behind liberation theologies and recent grass-roots movements against oppression. However, in both the direct Qur'anic address to the privileged and the more subtle and yet pervasive address to all humankind, oppressed and oppressors, I see divine wisdom. The less disruptive option for social reform calls those with the most extensive access to rights and privileges to grant greater rights to the less privileged, to establish full human equality, and then to articulate this within the fundamental attributes of faith or belief. As with the previously cited *hadith* of the Prophet, "One of you does not believe until/unless he or she loves the other what is loved for self."

So the Qur'an addresses the men more than the women and deliberately reprimands the men more than the women, and expects obedience from men and women with regard to its commands. Instead of affording themselves the opportunity to become true servants and agents of Allah's will,

Muslim men throughout history have lavished more attention on the language directed toward them than upon attaining the goals of justice directly commanded of them. It was not until women, in the modern era, began the task of publicly indicating the Qur'anic pointers that men were so careless or flippant about – rather than agents toward – that this tendency, which had prevailed for over a millennium, was blatantly exposed. Since the significance of gender as a philosophical and epistemological category of thought has only become pronounced in modernity, it is really no surprise that gender implications of all fields of Islamic intellectual thinking has overlooked this. To persist along the lines of its continual negation by insisting that women continue to surrender the reformation and re-examination of Islam's paradigmatic foundations through its primary sources to male elites is to demonstrate willful denial of the eternal divine potential in justice.

- 30 *The Call*, August and September 1994.
- 31 This question will be answered in chapter 7, “Stories from the Trenches,” where I give a brief discussion on the March 18 congregational prayer in New York City in 2005.
- 32 Esack, *Qur’an, Pluralism and Liberation*, p. 247.
- 33 It is also worth noting that Esack is the founder of Positive Muslims, an organization that addresses H.I.V./A.I.D.S. and Muslims directly.
- 34 At the Second Muslim Leaders’ Consultation on H.I.V./A.I.D.S. in Malaysia in 2002, I learned that Sitty Dhiffy had died from A.I.D.S. I discuss gender and the H.I.V./A.I.D.S. issue at greater length in chapter 7, “Stories from the Trenches.”
- 35 As discussed at length in chapter 1, “What’s in a Name?”
- 36 Discussed in full in chapter 7.
- 37 Notably, Chandra Muzaffer and Hasan Hanafi.
- 38 I once attended an ‘Id al-Adha celebration where the *khutbah* focused on what type of man Abraham must have been to circumcise himself without anesthesia, to demonstrate his obedience to Allah. Such a reference cannot have the same meaning for women as it must have for circumcised men. Clearly, exclusive male experiences are deemed the highest. In addition, although the sacrifice of the son is part of this occasion, we are rarely reminded of Hajar, the mother, who was abandoned in the desert by that very same man. See chapter 4, “A New Hajar Paradigm: Motherhood and Family.”
- 39 Martha Minnow, *Not only for Myself: Identity, Politics and the Law* (New York: New Press, 1997).
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 41 This may be one explanation why so many modern writers point to *hadith* collections and *sirah* literature that includes women in acts of war; as if the particular violent form of heroism is the litmus test for full humanity!
- 42 Ali Shariati, “The World-View of Tauhid,” in *On the Sociology of Islam* (Berkeley: Mirzan Press, 1979).

Notes to Chapter 6

- 1 Ebrahim Moosa, “The Debt and Burden of Critical Islam,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), p. 125.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 4 Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali & the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), Acknowledgements, p. xi.
- 5 Carol Tarvis, *The Mismeasure of Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 17.
- 6 Especially useful in my research in this are two works, that of Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001) and Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988).
- 7 Fatmah Sabbah, *Women in the Muslim Unconscious*, trans. from the French, *La femme dans l’inconscient musulman* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984).
- 8 As explained in details about linguistic construction in Chapter 1, “What’s in a Name?”
- 9 See chapter 4, “A New Hajar Paradigm: Motherhood and Family.”
- 10 Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Per-*

spective (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 15–16; inclusive of Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), footnote, p. 14.

- 11 As cited by Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, p. 24.
- 12 Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, p. 125.
- 13 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, pp. 94–95.
- 14 Ibid., p. 70.
- 15 Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, p. 33.
- 16 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, p. 70.
- 17 Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, p. 213.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 93–94. See also Mary Daly and conceptions of God and patriarchy; *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985).
- 19 Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, p. 213.
- 20 In *Qur'an and Woman*, I have already argued that the Qur'an proposes three recommendations in response to marital disruption, which should be applied in the order in which they were articulated. Unless each method has been fully exhausted, the next cannot be applied. The first recommendation in verse 4:34 is mutual consultation between husband and wife. Another verse suggests more extensive consultation with others (members of the extended family, or professional counselors as arbitrators). The second suggestion is a separation between the marital partners. I assert that the fullest application of such a separation could suggest the permanent separation of divorce. These two would prevent any access to the third, *daraba*. The Qur'an gives evidence of the extended separation through a prophetic example. In reality, men and women who respond violently to a disruption with their spouse, or any other member of the family, do so as their primary response. This abuse is not a reflection of the Qur'an, no matter how many post-event justifications abusers try to associate with the text.
- 21 Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, p. 93.
- 22 Furthermore the Qur'an exhorts, "*fa hal 'ala al-rasul ila balaghan mubin*" (So is it [the responsibility, capacity] on the Prophet [to report anything] except rhetorical clarity?) (16:35).
- 23 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, pp. xii–xv, 3–9.
- 24 Ibid., pp. 81–91, 100–104.

Notes to Chapter 7

- 1 Amina Wadud, "Preface," in *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. xviii–ix.
- 2 In 1992, Merryl Wyn Davies, an intellectual Muslim commentator, and I coined this sixth pillar designation of *hijab*, as it is constantly discussed, despite its relative unimportance compared to the principles of Islam.
- 3 In addressing the issue of sexuality and Islamic history and practice later in this chapter, I will provide further elaboration not appropriate at this point in the discussion. In addition, the reduction of women to their sexuality will be addressed further vis-à-vis the issue of women as *imams*.
- 4 See chapter 5, "Public Ritual Leadership and Gender Inclusiveness," for details particular to that event.
- 5 I have already provided the details of my authentic surrender to the call of Islam in the Introduction. The most significant impetus for my surrender was reading the Qur'an, which the brothers who gave me the *shahadah* never even mentioned.
- 6 See Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Women: From Termagant to*