

Gender Justice as a Way of Life

The Reading of Amina Wadud

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the gender egalitarian exegesis of the Black American scholar Amina Wadud. The first part of this chapter will address the question of interpretive method: namely, how exactly does she read scripture? Like Esack and Engineer, Wadud prioritizes the Qur'an over other Islamic texts and traditions, such as the *hadith* literature and the Islamic intellectual heritage. But whereas Esack's hermeneutic is built on *praxis*, or a dialectical interplay between action and reflection, Wadud's hermeneutic, I argue, is a more linear mode of reading, in which liberating interpretations of the text are applied to contemporary contexts of oppression. In this methodology section, I also analyse and critique her discourse on religious authority, which is influenced by Fazlur Rahman's 'double movement' theory. The chapter will then explore the relationship between Islam and gender justice. Specifically, how does Wadud (re)interpret the Qur'an in order to affirm the equality of women, to further the struggle against patriarchy? By unpacking the ways in which she expounds various aspects of scripture, from the Creation Story and depictions of the Hereafter to pressing women's issues like polygamy and female leadership, I underscore the centrality of two hermeneutical tools in her exegesis: namely, textual analysis and historical criticism, the former entailing a careful, holistic study of what exactly the Qur'an says and, just as significantly, does not say, and the latter seeking to understand the text in light of its immediate setting of revelation. While Esack and Engineer draw upon the Exodus and the Battle of

Karbala, respectively, as paradigms of struggle, Wadud fleshes out the sociopolitical implications of *tawhid* (the unity of God) and *khilafa* (human trusteeship). This chapter will conclude by unpacking the scope of her discourse on social justice. As a result of her formative experiences as a woman born into a poor, Black household, Wadud has a comprehensive approach to justice, making connections with other forms of oppression, in particular racism. Like Esack and Engineer, then, she has a keen sense of the complexity of human suffering—a layered experience that is most eloquently embodied, for Wadud, in the figure of Hagar. However, the most crucial aspect of her comprehensive approach to liberation, I argue, is the commitment to live out such progressive values in the private sphere, particularly within the family. Indeed, to stand for justice in the public sphere is meaningless, even hypocritical, unless this act is paralleled by a practice of egalitarianism in one's own home. As with the preceding chapters, I will set the context for discussion by providing some historical and biographical background. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to say a few words about terminology.

Language and its Discontents

The reader will notice that I refer to the hermeneutics of Wadud and Barlas as 'women's gender egalitarian readings' of the Qur'an. I am uncomfortable classifying these exegetes as feminists, even as Islamic feminists, because—as this and the following chapter will show—they both explicitly reject identifying as feminists, citing various reasons. These include critiques of the racial dominance of White women within feminist circles as well as feminism's secular biases. It is precisely for these reasons that Wadud, though willing to use feminist as an *adjective* to describe her work, prefers to position herself as 'pro-faith, pro-feminist'.¹ In light of her refusal to identify as feminist, it can be argued that she views the signifier 'pro-faith, pro-feminist' as an alternative to feminism rather than an alternative feminism, that is, an approach that is critical of dominant practices of feminism but nonetheless identifies as feminist. At the same time, I also find the term 'women's readings' of the Qur'an problematic. While the term effectively conveys the centrality of women's agency in the exegetical

¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 79–80.

task, producing readings based on their own experiences (as opposed to male readings about women, whether patriarchal or egalitarian), it falls into the trap of essentializing the type of readings that women produce. That is, the term 'women's readings' of the Qur'an presumes that these readings will necessarily be progressive, liberative, radical. But cannot a woman's reading—or, for that matter, a reading of any marginalized group—accept, even embrace, unequal power structures? And, if so, are these readings to be hastily dismissed as expressions of false consciousness? In other words: are they *really* women's readings? To avoid such essentialism, I have added the qualifier 'gender egalitarian' when referring to Wadud's and Barlas' work and to justice-based readings produced by women in general.

Historical Context

Islam has deep roots in American history. Though it is widely assumed that Africans who were enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic practiced traditional African religions, a significant number of them were in fact Muslims, as the areas of West Africa that had been raided for slaves had housed large Muslim communities for over 600 years.² The following autobiographical account from Omar ibn Seid (d. 1864)—a West African Muslim captured in the early 1800s and shipped to Charleston, South Carolina—is an illustrative example of the Islamic backgrounds of the African slaves:

My name is Omar ibn Seid. My birthplace was Fut Tur [that is, the Futa Tooro region, located in southern Mauritania and northern Senegal], between the two rivers. I sought knowledge under the instruction of a Sheikh called Mohammed Seid, my own brother, and Sheikh Soleiman Kembeh, and Sheikh Gabriel Abdal. I continued my studies twenty-five years, and then returned to my home where I remained six years. Then there came to our place a large army, who killed many men, and took me, and brought me to the great sea, and sold me into the hands of the Christians, who bound me and set me on board a great ship and we

² Amina Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1. Also, see Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (London: Routledge, 1997) and Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

sailed upon the great sea a month and a half, when we came to a place called Charleston in the Christian language.³

This Muslim heritage, however, would be largely wiped out with the passage of time. Indeed, it would not be until the formation of the Nation of Islam in the early twentieth century that Islam would resurface in the USA. Established by Wallace D. Fard and his disciple, Elijah Muhammad, in Detroit in the 1930s, the Nation of Islam was committed to the liberation of Blacks in a White supremacist society. The organization called for the political self-determination and economic independence of the African American community, urging their brothers and sisters to set up their own associations and businesses.⁴ Malcolm X (d. 1965), arguably the most charismatic minister of the Nation, played a crucial role in expanding the movement's following, reaching a formal membership of approximately 20,000 by the early 1960s and gaining widespread support among non-Muslim African Americans.⁵ Shortly after Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, the Nation split into two offshoot organizations. His oldest son, Warith Deen Muhammad, took over the reins of leadership, steering the movement towards mainstream Sunni Islam and renaming it as the 'World Community of Islam in the West.'⁶ Countering this ideological shift, Louis Farrakhan—an influential minister and protégé of Elijah Muhammad—re-established the Nation and its original teachings.⁷ A more significant development, however, would fundamentally change the face of Islam in America. In October 1965, a new immigration law was passed that removed the racist quotas of earlier legislations, which had largely restricted immigration to predominantly White countries.⁸ As a result, immigrants from Africa and Asia—a considerable number of whom were Muslim—poured into the USA. Yet despite this massive influx of Muslims, particularly from the Middle East and South Asia, Black Muslims continue to constitute the single largest ethnic community, comprising over 40 per cent of the American Muslim population.⁹ As shall be shown later on in

³ Omar ibn Seid, as cited in Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23–4.

⁴ Curtis, 39.

⁵ Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 95.

⁶ Ibid, 97–8.

⁷ Ibid, 98.

⁸ Curtis, 72.

⁹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 103.

the chapter, a communal rift has emerged between immigrant and Black Muslims, as reflected in separate institutional structures, community publications, and religious gatherings.¹⁰

An African American convert to Islam, Wadud has become an influential Islamic scholar and social activist, focusing her efforts on achieving gender justice within the Muslim community. Born as Mary Teasley on 25 September 1952 in Bethesda—a small town in Maryland—she grew up in a devout Christian family. Wadud's early years were marred by poverty. While she was still a child, her family was evicted from their house, as they were unable to pay the mortgage.¹¹ Rendered homeless, the family was forced to sleep in their car, later shifting to a trailer, and, eventually, relocating to Washington, DC, where Wadud's father had rented a couple of rooms in someone else's house.¹² At the age of fourteen, Wadud left her family to finish her final three years of high schooling at an all-White, public institution in Boston, living with various families.¹³ Upon completing high school, she attended the University of Pennsylvania. It was during her college years that Wadud converted to Islam, proclaiming the *shahada* (the testimony of the Muslim faith) on Thanksgiving Day, 1972. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in education, concentrating in English, and worked as a teacher for several years after college.¹⁴ She later decided to pursue graduate work in Islamic studies at the University of Michigan, writing her doctoral dissertation on portrayals of women in the Qur'an. In other words, while Esack had a hybrid education marked by both modern university schooling and traditional training in a *madrasa*, Wadud has no formal traditional background. That Barlas, whose exegesis we will explore in the next chapter, also has no traditional training is telling, suggesting that the so-called secular university has become an important institutional space in which Muslim women, who would have otherwise been excluded from the male-dominated world of the *madrasa*, can partake in Islamic scholarship. After completing her Ph.D. in Islamic studies in 1988, Wadud moved to Kuala Lumpur, where she taught for three years (1989–92) at the Department of Revealed Knowledge and Heritage at

¹⁰ McCloud, 169.

¹¹ Amina Wadud, 'On Belonging as a Muslim Woman', in *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 255.

¹² *Ibid.*, 255–6.

¹³ Wadud, Interview 2009.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the International Islamic University.¹⁵ It was here, in Malaysia, that she became a founding member of Sisters in Islam (SIS)—an organization that advocated women's rights through an Islamic framework. Acting as the movement's resident specialist in Islam, she became intimately involved with SIS and would continue to work with them well after her contract at the university expired in 1992, flying back and forth to Malaysia every year and a half.¹⁶ Following this stint at the International Islamic University, Wadud returned to the USA, taking up a post as a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, which she held until her retirement in 2008.

HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

A Qur'anic Discourse

As it is for Esack and Engineer, the Qur'an is the primary textual source in Wadud's Islamic writings. Surprisingly, the person who would become renowned for her work on the Qur'an only came across the text several months after her conversion to Islam, when she acquired a copy in March 1973.¹⁷ Once she began to read the Qur'an, however, she became instantly drawn to the book, describing her deep, spiritual attachment to it as a 'love affair'.¹⁸ Because of its undisputed status among Muslims as the Word of God, writes Wadud, the Qur'an is the most authoritative source in Islam.¹⁹ Moreover, a critical distinction needs to be made between the Qur'anic text and its exegesis—a difference that is often glossed

¹⁵ Mehran Kamrava ed., *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 201.

¹⁶ Wadud, Interview 2009. In order to avoid jeopardizing the reputation of SIS following her leading of the Friday Prayers in New York City in 2005—a highly controversial event within the mainstream Muslim community and which will be discussed at length later on in the chapter—Wadud renounced her membership with the organization in 2006.

¹⁷ Ibid. See also: Amina Wadud, 'Qur'an, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities' *Hawwa* 2:3 (2004): 316. In our interview, Wadud recounted that at the time of her conversion, the *da'wa* (Muslim proselytization) group that had given her information on Islam had, like most mainstream Muslims, failed to present any sort of hierarchy with regard to the textual sources of the faith. At the time of her conversion, then, the Qur'an was not the central source in her Islamic thinking.

¹⁸ Wadud, Interview 2009.

¹⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, ix.

over by Muslims. For while the Qur'an reflects 'the articulation of the divine will', exegesis is a thoroughly human exercise limited to the contextual baggage of the exegete,²⁰ reflecting assumptions and worldviews rooted in time, place, gender, race, and class, among other factors. While Wadud hermeneutically foregrounds the Qur'an, it is important to note that she does not approach the text as the *only* articulation of the divine will. Citing Q. 31:27, she observes that the Qur'an itself acknowledges that God cannot be reduced to a text, as if a single scripture could exhaust the infinite possibilities of divine disclosure.²¹ The verse reads:

If all the trees on the Earth were pens and the seas were ink, with seven more seas added to it, the words of God would never be exhausted, for truly God is All-Mighty, All-Wise.

Indeed, the Qur'an's very revelation in the Arabic language, Wadud points out, is testament to the contextually conditioned nature of the text, as it addresses a specific historical community. The Qur'an even professes its own rootedness in a particular setting, stating that it was revealed in 'plain Arabic' (Q. 26:195), thereby underscoring its intention of communicating to the seventh-century Arabs in their own tongue.²² In other words, at precisely the same time that the Qur'an, as the living Word of God, is a transcendent text, or one that can speak to multiple contexts, to generations of Muslims in different times and places, it is also a historical text, and therefore cannot possibly encapsulate all of God's speech. And the crucial source that stands next to the Qur'an, further articulating the divine will to the believer, is one's *context*: that is, one's own reality and lived experience. As Wadud put it in our interview:

we're locking Allah into a time capsule, and by that imprisonment we are making Allah obsolete. I really don't think that Allah is limited to the Qur'an. I think there is some self-disclosure in the Qur'an that Allah does self-disclose, but not in isolation to the rest of the reality that Allah has given us. Our own bodies, our environment, we have so many *ayat* [literally, signs] and if we don't have the ability to put them

²⁰ Amina Wadud, 'Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women', in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 11.

²¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 212.

²² Ibid. While I have used Wadud's translation, the Arabic phrase—'*arabiyyin mubin*'—can also be rendered as 'clear Arabic'.

together then we are going to actually destroy the gift that the Qur'an is to us.²³

In her emphasis on understanding the divine will through both the *word* and the *world*, encountering God through these twin revelations, Wadud's hermeneutic parallels that of liberation theology, which approaches lived experience, in particular the experience of oppression, as a text that is to be read alongside scripture.²⁴ I use the word 'parallel' here because, while Esack explicitly draws upon the hermeneutics of liberation theology when emphasizing the significance of one's context, Wadud does not situate herself within this literature, thus arriving at her understanding independently.

The *hadith* literature is the second most important textual source in her Islamic discourse. While she underscores the Qur'an's unique place in Islamic theology as the Word of God, she clarifies that her interest in scripture is also a disciplinary one, reflecting her choice to specialize in the study of the Qur'an.²⁵ Her hermeneutical emphasis on the Qur'an, then, should not be read as a categorical dismissal of other Islamic texts. In fact, Wadud considers the *sunna* to be one of 'the two primary sources' of Islam, alongside the Qur'an.²⁶ That being said, the *sunna* is not on a par with the Qur'an, for the value of the *sunna* (and, by extension, the *hadith* literature) lies in its ability to capture and flesh out wider Qur'anic principles. Indeed, she describes the *sunna* as the 'living embodiment' of the Qur'an,²⁷ thereby connecting the two and conferring legitimacy on the former vis-à-vis the latter. Wadud does not hesitate to include *hadith* reports that uphold Qur'anic values like compassion and justice. For instance, when discussing gender relations in the household, she cites the prophetic saying 'The best of you is he who is best to his family',²⁸ and, whilst calling for a culture of egalitarianism and reciprocity amongst Muslims, refers to the following report: 'One of you does not believe until he/she loves for the other what is loved for oneself.'²⁹ But just like Esack and Engineer, Wadud is sceptical of the

²³ Wadud, Interview 2009. ²⁴ Rowland, 8.

²⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xvii.

²⁶ Wadud, 'Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women', 4.

²⁷ Ibid. ²⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 91.

²⁹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 29. After citing this report, Wadud adds that while the original Arabic presumes a male subject—'one of you does not believe until he loves for his brother'—her translation, in order to be gender inclusive, incorporates both male and female subjects. See fn. 23 in *ibid*, 265–6. This specific report can be found in the celebrated *hadith* collection of Imam al-Nawawi (d. 1277). See *Hadith*

veracity of the *hadith* literature, even those reports that are considered *sahih* (authentic).³⁰ And it is precisely because of the disputed authenticity of the *hadith* that she is able to engage this corpus in a highly selective manner, drawing inspiration from those reports that affirm Qur'anic values while not feeling bound by problematic reports that violate such principles.³¹ For example, a significant number of misogynistic *hadith* reports, Wadud noted during our interview, can be traced back to one individual: namely, the companion Abu Hurayra (d. 681).³² This raises the larger, hermeneutical question, then, as to whether such reports are a genuine reflection of the Prophet himself or of the people who surrounded him. This is an especially salient question given that Abu Hurayra, as the Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi has pointed out, fulfilled the rather unlikely task of recounting roughly 5,300 prophetic reports—far more than any other *hadith* narrator—whilst being in the company of the Prophet for only three years.³³

Unlike the Qur'an and the *hadith* literature, Wadud does not consider the *shari'a* to be a primary source of the faith. A major problem that she has with the inherited, intellectual tradition, of which the *shari'a* is part and parcel, is that it has overshadowed the Qur'an, with Muslims equating these later, human-made texts with the Word of God.³⁴ As shall be shown in the next chapter on Barlas, this conflation of the texts is a key critique that gender egalitarian female exegetes have levelled against traditional Islamic thought. Furthermore, Wadud continues, because men have almost single-handedly produced the *shari'a*, women have been reduced to mere, material objects. For instance, in Pakistan's rape laws, which are based on the *shari'a*, the crime is actually treated as an act of theft, as rape is understood as stealing another man's private property—that is, access to the sexual organs of his wife—rather than a brutal act of violence against the woman.³⁵ Yet despite Wadud's deep-seated grievances with the *shari'a*,

#13 in Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *The Complete Forty Hadith of Imam al-Nawawi*, translated by Abdassamad Clarke (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2009), 66.

³⁰ Within the *hadith* sciences, scholars have established a scale of ratings to gauge the authenticity of various reports, such as *da'if* (weak), *hasan* (good), and *sahih* (authentic).

³¹ Wadud, Interview 2009. ³² Ibid.

³³ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 80.

³⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xx–xxi.

³⁵ Amina Wadud, 'Aisha's Legacy: The Struggle for Women's Rights within Islam', in *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity: A Reader*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 203.

she argues that it is still necessary to engage this body of literature. When I asked her why she did not simply dismiss secondary source traditions like the *shari'a* altogether, she replied:

I engage them because religion is a human construct and the Islamic religion consists of all the sources that we have legitimated as representing what it means to be Muslim: Qur'an, *sunna*, *hadith*, *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence]. And I engage *shari'a* because within the history of our tradition we have developed it, codified it, lived by it, and now we are being slapped in the face by people who think we can sort of like slap it back onto the modern nation-state. So I engage it as part of the reality of the history of Muslims. Islam is nothing if not lived by people and those people would be Muslims.³⁶

Wadud's engagement with the *shari'a*, then, is a thoroughly pragmatic one. Because the legal tradition has been an important part of Muslim history and continues to exercise considerable influence on the lives of Muslims today, especially women, Islamic reformists have no choice but to tackle the *shari'a*. There are two principal tasks, moreover, within this reformist project: firstly, to rewrite an essentially medieval tradition in the light of lived realities, thereby creating a system of law that is applicable to the present time (*fiqh al-waqi'a*); and, secondly, to ground this new judicial system firmly on broader Qur'anic principles of social justice and moral conduct.³⁷ This is a dual critique of Islamic law that, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is shared by Engineer. In other words, for Wadud the underlying 'ethical foundation' of the *shari'a* needs to be forcefully foregrounded and, if women's rights are to be taken seriously, gender, as a category of thought, has to be integrated within Islamic ethical theory.³⁸

An Exegesis for the Present (and who has the authority to do it)

Making Islam relevant to the contemporary world is a prime objective of Wadud's scholarship. As she put it in her pioneering work, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999):

despite fourteen centuries of existence, the Qur'an must be kept alive. Otherwise, it will suffer the fate of other 'dead texts' and defeat its stated purpose: to guide humankind—unconstrained by time and place.³⁹

³⁶ Wadud, Interview 2009.

³⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 205.

³⁸ Ibid, 48.

³⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xxiii.

But how exactly can the Qur'an become alive, escaping the fate of other 'dead texts' and addressing the complex realities of the present? In answering this pressing, hermeneutical question, Wadud draws upon Rahman's double movement theory. As discussed earlier in this book, Rahman's proposed methodology of interpreting the Qur'an consisted of two movements. The first movement entailed an in-depth study of the immediate setting of revelation in seventh-century Arabia, examining how the Qur'an spoke to this specific context. Broader ethical principles would then be 'distilled' from this classical setting.⁴⁰ While the first movement focussed primarily on the past, moving from the particular to the universal, the second movement concerned itself with the present, applying these timeless principles to a radically different set of historical circumstances. And just as an in-depth examination of the classical context was necessary to arrive at wider Qur'anic principles, the contemporary context, too, required careful study in order to translate faithfully these universal principles (back) into concrete realities.⁴¹ Like Esack and Engineer, Wadud's exegesis is thus marked by a deep desire to move beyond the literal letter of the text, seeking to uncover its underlying *spirit*, as embodied in such principles as 'justice, equity, harmony, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and development.'⁴² Furthermore, she notes, this scholarly project of discerning the socio-moral objectives of the Qur'an can be facilitated further by a linguistic study of the text, exploring its grammatical composition.⁴³ This commitment to interpreting the faith through the prism of the present, then, enables Islam to transform from a static religion, bound to the historical constraints of seventh-century Arabia and one that is to be blindly imitated, into a 'dynamic process',⁴⁴ wherein the Qur'an's wider, ethical principles must be continuously understood and re-understood by each people, as they apply these principles in light of their own lived experiences and contextual realities.

Wadud's adoption of the double movement theory is problematic, however, in terms of religious authority. To be sure, she is critical of interpretive hierarchy, calling for a 'shared privilege' in which Qur'anic exegesis is a truly gender inclusive enterprise, welcoming

⁴⁰ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid, 7.

⁴² Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 3.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Wadud, 'Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women', 10.

the insights and experiences of both women and men.⁴⁵ Indeed, the very fact that Wadud is a female commentator puts her at odds with clerical Islam, as the *‘ulama* have historically been, and continue to be, men.⁴⁶ In a 2012 keynote address—entitled ‘The Authority of Experience’—at a conference on Muslim women and sacred authority at Boston University, she fleshed out her ideas on what is authoritative.⁴⁷ Challenging the traditionalist assumption that authority is based on the accumulated knowledge of Islamic texts alone (‘received knowledge’), Wadud calls for a broader understanding of knowledge that, in turn, will lead to new understandings of authority derived from this knowledge.⁴⁸ Specifically, women’s lived experiences—as ‘represented by the ones who have the experiences, namely women’—ought to be considered an authoritative form of knowledge, and therefore Islamic scholars (including not only men but also women who have begun to reinterpret the faith) must consult specialists in women’s issues, such as social workers and psychologists.⁴⁹ Essentially, what is needed is a cooperative relationship between Muslim thinkers and ‘lay’ Muslims,⁵⁰ for in order to command authority, knowledge of Islamic texts is necessary but insufficient. Wadud’s critique of religious authority, moreover, is not confined to gender. According to her, every Muslim has the right to interpret the texts and, in so doing, to partake in defining Islam—an egalitarian interpretive practice that will only be possible when Muslims

⁴⁵ Amina Wadud, ‘Towards a Qur’anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice: Race, Class and Gender’, *Journal of Law and Religion* 12 (1995–6): 49.

⁴⁶ To be precise, this gender imbalance is most acute in the fields of jurisprudence and exegesis. However, in other spheres, in particular Sufism, women have made historical inroads, even acquiring influential and lasting leadership roles. The following text by the Persian Sufi scholar Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1021), for example, provides biographical sketches of eighty women in the classical period who became leading teachers and guides in the Islamic mystical tradition: Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, *Early Pious Women: Dhikr an-niswā al-muta‘abbidat as-sufiyyat*, edited and translated from the Riyadh manuscript with introduction and notes by Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1999).

⁴⁷ Amina Wadud, ‘The Authority of Experience’ (keynote address at the conference ‘Muslim Women and the Challenge of Authority’, Boston University, Boston, 31 March 2012). I am grateful to Wadud for sharing a copy of the speech with me.

⁴⁸ Ibid. ⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Amina Wadud, ‘Beyond Interpretation’, in *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, Khaled Abou El Fadl with Joshua Cohen and Ian Lague eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 59–60.

come to respect and value the inherent ability of each believer to make a contribution to Islamic thought.⁵¹

Yet Wadud's otherwise inclusive discourse towards religious authority is at variance with her adoption of the double movement theory as a mode of Qur'anic exegesis. In order to get a sense of the elitism of this interpretive method, it is worthwhile providing here Rahman's own description. Referring to the first movement, which centres on the classical period, he writes:

one must understand the import or meaning of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it [the Qur'an] was the answer. Of course, before coming to the study of specific texts in light of specific situations, a general study of the macrosituation in terms of society, religion, customs, and institutions, indeed, of life as a whole in Arabia on the eve of Islam and particularly in and around Mecca—not excluding the Perso-Byzantine Wars—will have to be made.⁵²

Clearly, such a scholarly undertaking is one in which very few Muslims can participate. Furthermore, while the second movement is relatively more inclusive, entailing a comprehensive study of contemporary circumstances and thus requiring Muslim expertise in all fields of knowledge—recalling Wadud's emphasis on specialists in women's issues—this movement, too, is hierarchal. The discourse of the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan, who has also espoused the double movement theory, is a compelling case in point. Inspired by Rahman's method, Ramadan—as noted in the second chapter—has differentiated between two types of scholars who need to work together in order to see the second movement through: namely, 'text scholars' (*'ulama an-nusus*), or specialists in Islamic sciences like jurisprudence, and 'context scholars' (*'ulama al-waqi'*), or experts in contemporary fields of knowledge, such as the natural sciences.⁵³ Upon making this distinction, however, Ramadan hastily qualifies that 'the fundamentals of belief (*'aqidah*) and worship (*'ibadat*) obviously remain the prerogative of the *fuqaha*,'⁵⁴ or Islamic jurists. The problem with the second movement, then, is that it is not only classist, excluding poor, non-skilled Muslim labourers who do not

⁵¹ Wadud, Interview 2009.

⁵² Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.

⁵³ Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 121.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

boast expertise in a specific field,⁵⁵ but, even in terms of those who are skilled, it is squarely functional: Muslims who are not religious scholars are welcomed to contribute vis-à-vis their expertise in their respective professions, whether that be in social work, economics, or healthcare, but not as believers who could actually make a lasting, theological contribution to Islamic thought. The elitism of the double movement theory, therefore, stands in contrast to the radical inclusivity of liberation theology, in which religious authority and interpretive insight is derived not from acquired knowledge but rather through everyday experiences of marginalization and suffering, making ‘*theologians* out of all God’s people’.⁵⁶

Let me further illustrate my critique of Rahman’s double movement theory by discussing a rather different approach to women’s authority and Qur’anic exegesis. In an illuminating article—‘A *Tafsir* of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Community’ (2007)—the Islamic scholar Sa’diyya Shaikh conducts in-depth interviews with eight battered Muslim women in Cape Town to discern how they have ethically wrestled with the Qur’an in light of their own experiences of physical abuse by their (ex)husbands. That is, how do ordinary Muslim women ‘engage, interpret, contest, and redefine dominant understandings of Islam’⁵⁷ through realities of pain and suffering—an experiential hermeneutic that Shaikh terms an ‘embodied *tafsir*’ or a ‘*tafsir* through praxis’.⁵⁸ Her research demonstrates that, despite being untrained in the Qur’an or interpretative methods, these women challenged patriarchal understandings of Islam, foregrounding their deep-seated belief that God is a just deity and, therefore, cannot condone domestic violence.⁵⁹ The just nature of God, in turn, requires that human relationships be just, and transgressors will be held accountable to God.⁶⁰ In other words, theological arguments drawn from experience—as opposed to *textual* arguments drawn from experience, which still require some degree of scholarly

⁵⁵ It should be noted that Wadud has a more nuanced approach to expertise than Ramadan, as she includes ‘activists’ alongside professionals like psychologists. See Wadud, ‘The Authority of Experience’.

⁵⁶ Rowland, 11. My italics.

⁵⁷ Sa’diyya Shaikh, ‘A *Tafsir* of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Community’, in *Violence Against Women in Contemporary World Religions: Roots and Cures*, eds. Daniel Maguire and Sa’diyya Shaikh (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 70.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 75.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 79.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

immersion—shaped these women's understanding of Qur'anic ethics. My purpose in highlighting this study is not to suggest that textual scholarship is not important. It is extremely important, and Shaikh herself has written extensively on gender and premodern Islamic texts, especially the mystical tradition.⁶¹ Rather, I point to this article because it takes as authoritative not only the experiences of the oppressed, of how they endure and resist injustices on a daily basis, but also the profound religious insights that emerge from these experiences and which do not require knowledge of religious texts.

Between *Praxis* and Application

Action is a central aspect of Wadud's Qur'anic hermeneutic, for liberating ideas can only truly be liberating if they are translated into concrete realities. As she puts it:

theory alone is insufficient to bring an end to patriarchy and gender asymmetry. There is a crucial interplay between belief in certain ideas and the practical implementation of gender justice in the context of present global circumstances.⁶²

The pursuit of knowledge, then, is not some pristine, scholarly endeavour detached from the rest of the world, but rather one in which new insights are used to create a new world built on social justice. Wadud refers to this wedding of theological study and transformative struggle, whether that struggle takes place in the university classroom or in community affairs, as 'spiritual activism'.⁶³ Indeed, the twinning of study and struggle—a liberating practice that has also been termed 'scholarship activism'—is a significant contribution that gender egalitarian female interpreters have made to contemporary Islamic thought, challenging patriarchy within the Muslim

⁶¹ See Sa'diyya Shaikh, 'Exegetical Violence: *Nushuz* in Qur'anic Gender Ideology', *Journal for Islamic Studies* 17 (1997): 49–73; 'In Search of *al-Insan*: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77:4 (2009): 781–822; 'Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadith: A Feminist Approach', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15 (2004): 99–108; and *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁶² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 42.

⁶³ Amina Wadud, 'Teaching Afrocentric Islam in the White Christian South', in *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils*, ed. Lois Benjamin (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 142.

community through their research on Islam.⁶⁴ While this accent on the practical implementation of one's research may seem novel in the context of the academy, it is important to note that this is actually a recognized form of scholarship. In his now classic study—*Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990)—Ernest Boyer challenges the reduction of scholarship to research and publication alone, or what he calls 'the scholarship of discovery'.⁶⁵ He outlines three additional interrelated paradigms that are equally significant: namely, drawing critical linkages between disciplines and, in so doing, making one's research accessible to non-specialists ('the scholarship of integration'); implementing one's research to address societal needs and problems, thereby serving the larger community ('the scholarship of application'); and transforming—not simply *transmitting*—one's research through the process of teaching (hence, 'the scholarship of teaching').⁶⁶

Wadud's encounter with SIS played a formative role in her discourse on action, allowing her to see how purely theoretical concepts could be translated into practical reforms. In our interview, she described the impact of SIS on her thinking as follows:

I didn't realize until after those three years of being in Malaysia that all the work I had done, which was basically theory, had very pragmatic application. So if I were to say there was a turning point, it would be between 1989 and 1992, working with Sisters in Islam . . . I think the result of reading for gender in the Qur'an is social justice, and that's what happened with the Sisters. The results of my research computed into strategic, meaningful, practical changes in terms of lived reality.⁶⁷

The Malaysian experience shaped Wadud's Islamic discourse, then, by shifting it from the 'devotional act'⁶⁸ of an individual—that of a Muslim woman reading the Qur'an through the lens of gender justice—to a collective act that is explicitly political, coming together with likeminded Muslim women and using the results of this research to address everyday problems faced by women. As SIS organized one outreach activity after another, from public lectures and open forums to the publication of newspaper editorials and pamphlets on pressing

⁶⁴ Gisela Webb ed., *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), xi.

⁶⁵ Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (San Francisco: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning, 1990), 17.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 18–24.

⁶⁷ Wadud, Interview 2009.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

issues like domestic violence and the equality of men and women in Islam,⁶⁹ Wadud witnessed the myriad ways in which an idea, through action, could transform a society. That being said, at the same time as SIS showed Wadud the political potential of scholarship, she also had a tremendous impact on the movement's thinking. Before her arrival on the Malaysian scene, SIS had little interest in the Qur'an and focussed far more on questions of *shari'a*. By the time Wadud left Malaysia in 1992, the organization's discourse had squarely shifted from secondary sources to the scriptural source of Islam, foregrounding the Qur'an and using this text as a tool to fight for Muslim women's rights.⁷⁰

It is in Wadud's accent on action, moreover, that a critical difference emerges between her hermeneutic and that of Esack, for while Esack's is a hermeneutic of *praxis*, Wadud's is a hermeneutic of *application*. According to Wadud, actions are 'a necessary extension of faith.'⁷¹ Her liberating exegesis is marked by a generally linear mode of reading, in which radical reinterpretations of the text are practically applied to real world contexts. To be sure, she clarifies that there cannot be one universal model of implementation, since any effective implementation 'reflects time, place, gender, level of knowledge, circumstances of history and culture'.⁷² But what about the reverse direction? Can the insights and perspectives gained through action not lead to a renewed, reinvigorated reflection? The largely unidirectional character of Wadud's exegesis stands in contrast to that of Esack. As was shown in the second chapter, according to Esack a liberating exegesis is based on *praxis*, or the idea that religious reflection ought to take shape in the very midst of struggle. As a result, not only does reflection lead to action but this action, too, has a constitutive effect, creating new insights and revelations into the text.⁷³ To put it simply: while Wadud's exegesis is more linear, Esack's

⁶⁹ Amina Wadud, 'Sisters in Islam: Effective against all Odds', in *Silent Voices*, eds. Doug A. Newsom and Bob J. Carrell (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 123–4. For the pamphlet publications, see: Sisters in Islam, *Are Women and Men Equal before God?* (Kuala Lumpur: Sisters in Islam, 1991) and *Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat their Wives?* (Kuala Lumpur: Sisters in Islam, 1991).

⁷⁰ Wadud, 'Sisters in Islam', 120.

⁷¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 98.

⁷² Amina Wadud, 'What's Interpretation Got to Do With It: The Relationship between Theory and Practice in Islamic Gender Reform', in *Islamic Family Law and Justice for Muslim Women*, ed. Hjh Nik Noriani Nik Badlishah (Kuala Lumpur: Sisters in Islam, 2003), 93.

⁷³ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 13.

is more dialectical, characterized by a continuous interplay between action and reflection.⁷⁴ It is precisely because liberation theology, as a theology of *praxis*, is forged in the heat of struggle that it makes no claim to objectivity, neutrality, and the truth. Rather, it reclaims the value of subjectivity, privileging the experiences, the perspectives, the truths of the oppressed. Yet Wadud's generally linear hermeneutic, based on extracting broader principles from the Qur'anic text (theory) and then pragmatically implementing these principles in the present (practice), subscribes, at least to some extent, to notions of objectivity.⁷⁵ For example, in *Qur'an and Woman* she differentiates between reading and exegesis, arguing that while reading is a subjective enterprise, conditioned by 'the attitudes, experiences, memory, and perspectives on language of each reader', exegesis is a different creature, attaining a measure of objectivity by employing hermeneutical methods.⁷⁶ As the next chapter will show, Barlas criticizes Wadud's distinction between reading and exegesis, pointing out that it is impossible to split these two language acts into separate, hermetically sealed categories, as any textual engagement is inescapably shaped by the contextual baggage of the reader.⁷⁷

QUR'AN AND GENDER JUSTICE

Women Reading as Women

The entry of women into the field of exegesis—a discipline that has historically been, and that continues to be, dominated by men—is the

⁷⁴ Indeed, in reality linear readings are a hermeneutical impossibility, for one does not simply pick up a text, read it once, and then spend the rest of one's life *implementing* its teachings. Rather, there is a constant, even if unintentional, dialectic between the text and life. I am grateful to Christopher Rowland for this insight. All readings, therefore, are necessarily dialectical, and what differentiates Esack's hermeneutic (and that of liberation theology as a whole) is that he consciously foregrounds this cyclical aspect of interpretation.

⁷⁵ As discussed in the second chapter, this is a key problem that Esack has with Rahman's double movement theory, arguing that the very idea of extracting perennial principles from the text is premised on objectivist notions of discovering and accessing the real truth, and thus failing to consider crucial questions of reader subjectivity, interpretive pluralism, and who gets to define truth. See *ibid*, 68.

⁷⁶ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 94.

⁷⁷ Barlas, 'Believing Women' in Islam, 118.

first, critical step in moving towards a truly gender inclusive approach to the text. This is a seminal point that resurfaces time and again in Wadud's writings. An inevitable consequence of the monopoly that men have exercised in interpreting Islamic texts, she observes, is that God has been reduced to the limitations of male experiences and understandings.⁷⁸ Drawing upon wider feminist critiques of patriarchy, she argues that just as God has been restricted to the experiences of men so, too, has the normative human being.⁷⁹ That is, humankind and human experience have become little more than synonyms for mankind and male experience. It is crucial, therefore, that women become producers of Islamic knowledge, challenging its androcentrism by bringing their own experiences, subjectivities, and insights to the interpretive task. The Islamic scholar Hibba Abugideiri succinctly sums up the significance of Wadud's argument:

It is not enough for modern Qur'anic commentators to simply 'add women and stir,' or integrate the subject of woman into the interpretive process while ignoring her agency. Wadud shows that a hermeneutical approach to interpreting woman in the Qur'an must include women as active agents.⁸⁰

Gender egalitarian exegesis is thus not about male commentators now writing on the timely topic of women in Islam, thereby reducing women to objects that are to be reflected upon, but rather about women becoming the subjects of the interpretive process, approaching the text *as* women. And it is precisely when Muslim women read the Qur'an unfettered by layers of patriarchal commentary, Wadud argues, that they will find a compassionate and liberating scripture that speaks to their suffering and marginalization.⁸¹ What follows is a thematic survey and analysis of Wadud's own empowering encounter with the Qur'an.

The Origins of Humankind

Wadud commences her exegesis by revisiting the Creation Story. Due to a lack of detailed discussion in the Qur'an with regard to the

⁷⁸ Wadud, 'Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice', 48.

⁷⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, ix.

⁸⁰ Hibba Abugideiri, 'Hagar: A Historical Model for "Gender Jihad"', in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 92.

⁸¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xxi–xxii.

creation of Adam and Eve, she notes, early commentators drew extensively upon biblical accounts.⁸² As a result, the distinctly biblical notion of Eve as being created from Adam's rib became mainstreamed in Islamic thought. The precise passage, found in the Book of Genesis, reads:

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'⁸³ (Genesis 2:21–3)

Women's gender egalitarian readings have shown how the *hadith* literature, which was heavily influenced by biblical lore, acted as an important literary medium through which such ideas entered Qur'anic exegesis, for it was common practice for exegetes to refer to *hadith* reports while interpreting the text. The Pakistani scholar Riffat Hassan gives the following *hadith* report, narrated by the controversial companion Abu Hurayra, as an example of the striking convergence between the *hadith* and the Bible on the origins of woman:

Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so if you should try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat women nicely.⁸⁴

It is important to note, moreover, that Qur'anic commentators were well aware that such *hadith* reports drew upon biblical accounts. For instance, the great exegete Abu Ja'far al-Tabari (d. 923) openly acknowledged in his *hadith*-based commentary of the Qur'an that such accounts had been 'learned from the people of the Torah', adding that 'God knows best' (*wallahu 'a'lam*) regarding the reliability of these accounts.⁸⁵

⁸² Ibid, 20.

⁸³ In this book, all translations of biblical passages have been taken from *Holy Bible: English Standard Version, Anglicized Edition* (London: Collins, 2007).

⁸⁴ As cited in Hassan, 'An Islamic Perspective', in *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, ed. Jeanne Becher (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 102.

⁸⁵ Abu Ja'far al-Tabari, as cited in Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28. It is

After pointing out the lack of any Qur'anic basis behind this idea of woman as being created from man's rib—that is, highlighting what the text does *not* say—Wadud discusses the Qur'an's portrayal of the origins of humankind. Paralleling the earlier work of Hassan,⁸⁶ she underlines that in the Qur'an woman and man were created from a 'single soul'. The verse reads:

O humankind, be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you from a single soul (*nafsin wahidatin*), and from it created its mate (*zawjaha*), and from the two of them dispersed men and women in multitudes.⁸⁷ (Q. 4:1)

There is clearly no mention here of woman being created from the flesh, or even soul, of man. In fact, in a strictly grammatical sense, notes Wadud, the feminine was created first and it is the masculine that is derived, for the Arabic word for soul (*nafs*) is a feminine noun while that of mate (*zawj*) is a masculine one.⁸⁸ But conceptually speaking, she clarifies, this verse moves beyond gender distinctions,⁸⁹ thereby establishing the ontological equality of women and men. Reflecting upon this verse, as well as others like Q. 51:49—'And of all things We have created pairs (*zawjayn*), perhaps you will then reflect'—she concludes that *duality* is a defining feature of the creation,⁹⁰ with each partner existing in a symbiotic relationship of harmony with the other.

In addition to rereading the Creation Story, Wadud critically analyses the Events of the Garden. Just as Qur'anic commentators were deeply influenced by biblical accounts (or what are referred to as the *isra'iliyat* literature in Islamic scholarship) when it came to explaining the origins of humankind so, too, were they informed by this earlier literature while interpreting Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve. According to the Old Testament, Satan first whispered into

interesting to note here that the Arabic name used by Muslims to refer to Eve—*Hawwa'*—is also drawn from the *hadith* literature and not found anywhere in the Qur'an. Indeed, as the following *hadith* excerpt from Tabari's commentary shows, the name *Hawwa'* is itself based on the entrenched idea of woman as being created from man's rib: 'The angels said: Why was she named *Hawwa'*? He [Adam] said: Because she was created from a living (*hayy*) thing.' See *ibid*, 29.

⁸⁶ Hassan, 'An Islamic Perspective', 98.

⁸⁷ The origins of humankind are also described, as Wadud notes, in Q. 7:189, 6:98, and 39:6.

⁸⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 19–20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*. ⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 20–1.

the ear of Eve, who then, enticed by his words, approached Adam. The biblical account, found in Genesis 3:1–7, reads:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?”’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will surely not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Indeed, by the time of al-Tabari in the tenth century, the majority of Muslim scholars believed that it was through the inherent weakness of Eve that Satan was successfully able to tempt Adam.⁹¹ In stark contrast to the biblical account, Wadud points out that the Qur’an does not blame the woman, as it uses the Arabic dual form when describing Satan’s temptation.⁹² Q. 7:20–2 is a compelling case in point:

But Satan whispered to both of them, in order to reveal their hidden parts of which they were not aware (till then), and said: ‘Your Sustainer has forbidden you to go near this tree lest you become angels or immortal.’ Then he swore to both of them an oath: ‘I am your sincere friend;’ And led them both (to the tree) by deceit. When they both tasted the tree their disgrace became exposed to them, and they patched the leaves of the Garden to hide it. And the Sustainer said to both of them: ‘Did I not forbid you this tree and tell you that Satan is your open enemy?’

It is important to note here that Wadud is not the first Muslim scholar to offer such a gender-sensitive reading of this fateful event. Hassan has also underlined the Qur’an’s usage of the Arabic dual form, thereby showing that what transpired in the Garden was a collective act of disobedience in which Adam and Eve were equally responsible.⁹³

⁹¹ Stowasser, 29.

⁹² Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 25.

⁹³ Hassan, ‘An Islamic Perspective’, 104.

Furthermore, not only is the woman never singled out in the Qur'an's treatment of the narrative, but, Wadud observes (paralleling Hassan again),⁹⁴ in the sole exception to the text's usage of the Arabic dual form it is the pronoun 'him' that is employed.⁹⁵ The passage, which we have already discussed in the preceding chapter on Engineer who reinterpreted it through the lens of economic justice, reads:

Certainly We had enjoined Adam earlier; but he forgot, and We did not find resoluteness in him. When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate before Adam,' they prostrated, except Iblis [Satan]: he refused. We said, 'O Adam! This is indeed an enemy of yours and your mate's. So do not let him expel you from Paradise, or you will be miserable. Indeed you will neither be hungry in it nor naked. Indeed you will neither be thirsty in it nor suffer from the sun.' Then Satan tempted him [*fawaswasa ilayhi al-shaytanu*]. He said, 'O Adam! Shall I show you the tree of immortality, and an imperishable kingdom?' So they both ate of it, and their nakedness became exposed to them, and they began to stitch over themselves with the leaves of paradise. Adam disobeyed his Sustainer, and went amiss. (Q. 20:115–21)

Yet how can this account that clearly blames Adam—"Then Satan tempted him"—be reconciled with other Qur'anic verses that use the dual form exclusively? Wadud explains this inconsistency by placing this passage in its wider, textual context. In particular, she looks at the verse that immediately precedes it (Q. 20:114), which reads: 'So exalted is God, the True Sovereign. Do not hasten [O Muhammad] with the Qur'an before its revelation is completed to you, and say, "My Sustainer! Increase me in knowledge."' Fearing that he would forget the Qur'anic revelations relayed to him by Gabriel, Prophet Muhammad was hastily repeating the revelations in order to memorize them. A prime function of this specific retelling of the Garden story, comments Wadud, is thus to illustrate to the Prophet that it is Satan who instils forgetfulness in humankind, as exemplified by Adam forgetting to stay away from the forbidden tree.⁹⁶ The implication being made here is that the Prophet need not worry about forgetting the revelations, for God will ensure that the Prophet memorizes the entire scripture.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 25.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ This interpretive conclusion is corroborated further by Q. 75:16–19, which reassures the Prophet that, through divine assistance, he will indeed be able to memorize the Word correctly.

The Justice of Divine Judgement

Wadud also explores the Qur'an's apocalyptic depictions of the world to come. While she challenges classical and medieval commentators on the origins of humankind and the events of the Garden, she actually affirms their readings when it comes to the Day of Judgement, observing that there is 'an unusual consensus among the commentators with regard to the absence of male/female distinctions in the Qur'anic accounts of Judgement and recompense'.⁹⁸ This is a telling example of how her criticism of the exegetical tradition is hardly a sweeping one, categorically dismissing all prior reflections on the Qur'an, but rather a nuanced critique, problematizing those interpretations that undermine the full humanity of women. As Wadud notes, because the Qur'anic text is so explicit that equal recompense will be given to men and women—such as Q. 3:195: 'Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. You proceed one from another'⁹⁹—it is, in fact, quite difficult to privilege men over women when discussing the Day of Judgement.¹⁰⁰ Significantly, the key term that the Qur'an uses with reference to death and the Hereafter, she points out, is that of the gender-neutral soul (*nafs*), which will be brought before its Creator to stand judgement, thereby transcending the sexual distinctions associated with the human body.¹⁰¹ She cites Q. 21:47, among others,¹⁰² to illustrate the text's emphasis on the soul when describing the world to come. The verse reads:

We shall fix the scales of justice on the Day of Resurrection, and no soul will be wronged in the least; and even if it were equal to the weight of a mustard seed, We shall take it (into account). We suffice as reckoners.

So not only does the Final Day reflect the absolute justice of God, who will take every action into account 'even if it were equal to the weight of a mustard seed', but by focussing on the soul over the body, this verse also implicitly underscores this deity's refusal to differentiate between men and women, elevating the former over the latter.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 51.

⁹⁹ Q. 40:40 is another example of how divine justice will be meted out equally to the sexes on the Day of Judgement, explicitly mentioning women alongside men.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 46.

¹⁰² These include Q. 3:185–6, 39:42, and 81:1–7.

Like Esack and Engineer, a deep-seated conviction in the inherent justice of the Creator lies at the heart of Wadud's Islamic discourse. Citing verses like Q. 10:44—'Surely God does not wrong anyone; they wrong themselves'—she argues that God does not commit acts of injustice, but rather it is humankind who perpetrates oppression.¹⁰³ In fact, her very choice of 'Wadud'—one of the ninety-nine names of God and which she defines as 'the Loving God of Justice'¹⁰⁴—as a family name upon converting to Islam reflects her abiding belief in God's endless compassion and commitment to justice. And it is precisely because God is just, concludes Wadud, that divine judgement is based solely on *taqwa* (literally, piety), denoting one's level of God-consciousness and how this spiritual consciousness, in turn, translates into ethical action.¹⁰⁵ Referring to Q. 49:13, she writes that *taqwa* is the chief criterion that differentiates one human being from another.¹⁰⁶ This verse, which has become a seminal passage in women's gender egalitarian readings of Islamic texts, is provided below:

O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God are the most pious among you. Indeed, God is all-Knowing, all-Aware.

Furthermore, God alone has the ability to gauge one's level of *taqwa* and thus to render judgement, cautions Wadud, and not other human beings.¹⁰⁷ Given the centrality of *taqwa* in the Qur'an, her usage of this concept as an organizing principle of gender-just exegesis is a persuasive interpretive move. Indeed, Rahman, in his pioneering study of the text, entitled *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (1980), noted that *taqwa* is arguably the single most important term in the entire scripture.¹⁰⁸ In her emphasis on *taqwa*, Wadud shares common

¹⁰³ Wadud, 'Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice', 46. She also cites Q. 9:70, 29:40, and 30:9.

¹⁰⁴ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 2. The famous ninety-nine names of God can be found in the Qur'an and denote various divine attributes, such as *al-Rahim* (the Compassionate), *al-Ghafur* (the Forgiving), and *al-Malik* (the King). The name *al-Wadud*, conventionally defined as the Loving, appears twice in the text (Q. 11:90, 85:14).

¹⁰⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 36–7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 185.

¹⁰⁸ Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 28–9. The first edition of this book was published in 1980.

ground with Esack who, as already seen in the second chapter, also uses *taqwa*—which he defines as ‘integrity and awareness in relation to the presence of God’—as a hermeneutical key in his liberationist exegesis.¹⁰⁹

The Final Abodes

After reading Qur’anic depictions of the Day of Judgement through the eyes of gender justice, Wadud moves on to the two, final destinations of humankind: namely, Heaven and Hell. Like the Final Day, she comments, portrayals of Hell in the Qur’an are remarkably gender neutral, as it is described in very general terms as being a place of severe punishment and utter despair.¹¹⁰ As a result, her hermeneutical engagement with Hell is minimal. While Wadud does not compare the Qur’an’s portrayal of Hell with other Islamic texts—an understandable omission given her express disciplinary interest in scripture—it is important to note that the Qur’an’s gender-neutral discourse on Hell is at loggerheads with the *hadith* literature, in which descriptions of divine punishment are acutely gendered. The following prophetic report, found in the *hadith* collection of Sahih Bukhari, relates the story of Prophet Muhammad having a vision of Hell and seeing that it was filled mostly with women:

The Prophet said: ‘Hell was revealed to me, and I perceived that the majority of its occupants are women who are ungrateful.’ He was asked: ‘Are they ungrateful to God?’ ‘They are ungrateful to their husbands,’ he replied. ‘And they are ungrateful for any kindness shown them and if you have been kind to any one of them for a time and then she sees something that she does not like in you, she will then say, “I have never received anything from you!”’¹¹¹

The authenticity of such *hadith* reports are, of course, hotly disputed amongst Muslims, and female scholars have problematized the reliability of numerous, misogynistic *hadith* reports. The Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi, for example, has shown how the

¹⁰⁹ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 82–3.

¹¹⁰ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 52.

¹¹¹ Nicholas Awde ed., *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qur’an and Hadiths* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2005), 36.

companion Abu Hurayra—a key transmitter of anti-women *hadith* reports and who was introduced earlier on in this chapter—was considered a highly unreliable source by the first Muslims, in particular Ayesha, a wife of the Prophet.¹¹²

In her treatment of the final abodes, Wadud directs far more attention to Heaven, which, unlike Hell, is portrayed in scripture in starkly gendered terms. She commences her analysis by arguing that, because the Qur'an was revealed in a specific historical context, we need to make sense of its depictions of heavenly pleasure in light of this time and place. For instance, the recurring description of Paradise as a place of 'gardens with rivers flowing beneath' should not be taken literally, as such a portrayal is much more meaningful, as Wadud puts it, for 'someone living in an arid desert environment than, perhaps, for someone living in the tropics of Malaysia.'¹¹³ What is necessary, then, is to extract the underlying message embedded within this metaphorical language: essentially, that Paradise is a place of unbound pleasure and eternal comfort. In a similar vein, descriptions of sexual pleasure, too, need to be interpreted through the framework of historical criticism. The *huri*, referring to an erotic, light-skinned virgin woman with a vigorous sex-drive, has become a pervasive image of Paradise amongst Muslim men and is mentioned four times in the text,¹¹⁴ specifically in Q. 44:54, 52:20, 55:70–6, and 56:17–24. But this portrayal of the *huri*, argues Wadud, should not be taken literally. Rather, it ought to be read in terms of the prevailing understandings of beauty at the time:

The specific depiction here of the companions of Paradise demonstrates the Qur'an's familiarity with the dreams and desires of those Arabs. The Qur'an offers the *huri* as an incentive to aspire after truth. It is impossible to believe that the Qur'an intends white women with large eyes to represent a single universal description of beauty for all humankind.¹¹⁵

More significantly, she observes, references to the *huri* only appear in the Meccan chapters,¹¹⁶ or those chapters that were revealed in the earliest days of Islam before the Muslims fled to Medina (622) in order to escape persecution. There was a direct, hermeneutical link, therefore, between the androcentric sexuality of the Meccan chapters

¹¹² Mernissi, 78.

¹¹³ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 52.

¹¹⁴ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 164.

¹¹⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 55.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 54–5.

and the dire state of gender relations in Meccan society, which was overwhelmingly patriarchal.¹¹⁷ However, with the creation of a new society in Medina marked by relatively more egalitarian relations between women and men, continues Wadud, the Qur'an made a critical shift in its portrayals of pleasure in the Hereafter, abandoning the term *huri* altogether and adopting the gender-neutral *azwaj* (the plural of *zawj*, meaning partner or spouse).¹¹⁸ She gives the following Medinan verse by way of example:

Say: 'Shall I tell you of (things) even better (than the pleasures of this world)? With the Sustainer are gardens with rivers flowing beneath for those who keep from evil and follow the straight path, where they will remain forever with purified spouses (*azwajun mutahharatun*) and blessings of God.'¹¹⁹ (Q. 3:15)

Countering patriarchal readings of this verse, in particular the interpretation that *azwaj* (spouses) refers to the pleasures of polygamy awaiting righteous men, Wadud underscores the grammatical fact that the usage of the plural *azwaj* here corresponds to the plural noun that precedes it—'those who keep from evil'—and, therefore, hardly constitutes textual proof of polygamy in Paradise.¹²⁰ To put it another way: just as the beginning of humankind's journey, in which man and woman were created from a single soul, was marked by a relationship of *duality*, so too will its end, when the righteous believer will be paired with her/his companion.

Polygamy, Veiling, and Seclusion

Indeed, by using hermeneutical tools like textual analysis and historical criticism, Wadud is able to make a convincing case against polygamous readings of the Qur'an. Most Muslims believe that polygamy—or, to be more precise: polygyny, in which only men

¹¹⁷ Ibid. ¹¹⁸ Ibid, 55.

¹¹⁹ Wadud also cites a number of other passages, such as Q. 2:25, 4:57, and 36:54–6. Though this does not problematize Wadud's argument of a general shift from the Qur'anic usage of *huri* to *azwaj* with the Muslim migration to Medina, especially given the number of Medinan verses that corroborate this claim, it is worthwhile noting that the chapter in which the last citation is listed here—*Surat Yasin* (Chapter 36)—was actually revealed in the Meccan period.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 57.

have more than one partner¹²¹—is upheld in Islam, arguing that the Qur'an allows men to take up to four wives. Challenging this argument, Wadud writes that we need to examine the exact wording of the Qur'anic text with regard to this practice. The polygamy verse, in its entirety, reads:

If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans, then marry women that you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with them, then only one, or what your right hands possess. That makes it likelier that you will not be unjust. (Q. 4:3)

Far from being an open license for polygamy, she comments, this passage deals with a specific social crisis that emerged in the early Muslim community, in particular that of the unjust treatment of orphans—a historical context evidenced further by the Qur'anic verse immediately preceding this one, which warns male guardians of orphans not to mismanage their wealth and mix it with their own.¹²² The verse reads:

Give the orphans their property, and do not replace the good with the bad, and do not eat up their property (by mingling it) with your own property, for that is indeed a grievous crime. (Q. 4:2)

A practical solution that the Qur'an put forth, then, to counter such exploitation was that of marriage to female orphans who had come of age,¹²³ thereby protecting them through the legal responsibilities that came packaged with the institution of marriage. Yet what historical circumstances led to this mismanagement of orphans' wealth? While Wadud does not engage this question, the Islamic historian Amira Sonbol has pointed out that the Chapter of Women (*Surat al-Nisa'*)—the Qur'anic chapter in which Q. 4:3 is located—was revealed shortly after the Muslim defeat at the Battle of Uhud (625),¹²⁴ and this explains the large number of orphans and widows.

¹²¹ Whereas polygamy, strictly speaking, is a gender neutral term referring to either a man or woman having multiple partners, in reality most polygamous relationships have been based on the patriarchal practice of polygyny, in which only men have multiple partners. Polyandry, which is much rarer but not without historical precedent, refers to women having multiple partners.

¹²² Ibid, 83. ¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Amira E. Sonbol, 'Rethinking Women and Islam', in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 133. Here, Sonbol cites the Qur'anic translator Yusuf Ali and his introductory notes for *Surat al-Nisa'*.

In addition to pointing out that Q. 4:3 speaks to a particular context, Wadud underscores a key condition that Q. 4:3 lays down for polygamous relationships: specifically, that such an arrangement is only possible *if* the husband is able to deal justly with all his wives.¹²⁵ The Qur'an reiterates the centrality of just conduct, observes Wadud, in a later verse in the same chapter, which reads: 'You will not be able to treat your wives with justice' (Q. 4:129)—a statement that has led numerous commentators to conclude that monogamy is, in fact, the preferred form of marriage.¹²⁶ And it is precisely because the text has this overwhelming emphasis on justice that the absence of this condition in the lived experiences of women in polygamous relationships today ought to constitute sufficient grounds for the abolition of this practice. As Wadud put it in our interview:

Now what we need are specialists in social work who can provide evidence of the full effects of polygamy and they are, you know, interviewing children, men and women . . . and they are showing, this is the result. So if the Qur'an uses the term justice three times in the verse on polygamy, and then you show that obviously there is a travesty of justice in the experience, whatever it was that the Qur'an intended and however it may have been practiced at the time of the Prophet, what we are seeing now is the injustice of it.¹²⁷

Furthermore, she continues, contemporary Muslims have rightly criticized and abandoned the practice of slavery—an institution that is never explicitly prohibited in the Qur'an, though the text does emphasize the just treatment of slaves and their freeing as a form of atonement for specific sins.¹²⁸ So if today Muslims, without much hesitation, are able to condemn slavery on the basis of it being an affront to human dignity and without any Qur'anic mandate,¹²⁹ then why not oppressive practices against women like polygamy?

¹²⁵ Asma Barlas, 'Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: Women Rereading Sacred Texts', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Faruqi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115.

¹²⁶ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 83.

¹²⁷ Wadud, Interview 2009.

¹²⁸ Wadud, 'Alternative Qur'anic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women', 14–15.

¹²⁹ For the history of slavery in the Muslim world and its long road towards abolition, see, among others: Alan G.B. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery in the History of Black Muslim Africa* (London: Hurst and Company, 2001) and William G. Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Wadud also uses the Qur'an to critique such established Muslim practices as veiling and female seclusion. While she has chosen to observe the headscarf, she clarifies that she does 'not consider it a religious obligation, nor ascribe to it any religious value per se.'¹³⁰ In fact, it was not questions of religion but rather race—specifically, as a Black woman living in a White supremacist society—that compelled her to don the veil, even *before* her conversion to the Muslim faith. To put it in her own words:

The actual impetus behind my dress was in contradistinction to the experiences of African slave women who were stripped of their garments of piety before the lecherous eyes of slave auctioneers and masters. In fact, I covered my hair and wore long dresses before I accepted Islam.¹³¹

Citing Q. 7:26—'the best dress is the dress of *taqwa* [piety]'—Wadud argues that modesty cannot be reduced to mere physical attire, subject to the approval or disapproval of men and male-dominated communities, but rather is an ethical principle embodied in one's relations with others.¹³² Indeed, such social practices as veiling and female seclusion were introduced into the early Muslim community, as the historian Leila Ahmed has shown in her pioneering study *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), by Sassanian society, which was heavily segregated, as well as Christian communities in the Mediterranean and Middle East.¹³³ In addition to foregrounding the Qur'anic text's emphasis on modesty as a principle, Wadud highlights this historicity of the veil—that is, its emergence in a particular context in Muslim history—and how it initially symbolized protection, worn by women of wealth and power.¹³⁴ With regard to female seclusion, Q. 33:33 has become a popular passage amongst conservative men who believe that women should not leave their homes. The verse, written in the Arabic feminine plural, reads:

Stay in your houses and do not deck yourselves with wanton display (*tabarruj*) as in the former Days of Ignorance. Maintain the prayer and pay the mandatory almsgiving, and obey God and His Apostle.

¹³⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 176.

¹³¹ Wadud, 'Teaching Afrocentric Islam in the White Christian South', 140.

¹³² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 219.

¹³³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

¹³⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 9–10.

Wadud tackles this tricky verse with two, principal hermeneutical moves. Firstly, she places it within its wider textual context, citing it along with the verse that immediately precedes it (Q. 33:32),¹³⁵ which begins with the phrase, ‘O wives of the Prophet’, thereby clarifying that a specific group of people is being addressed. But even if women happen to be the immediate audience, she continues, why should this verse only be applicable to women? Can women not be used to illustrate larger lessons for the community? Far from being a categorical command to remain in the home, Wadud argues that there is a larger ethical principle underlying this verse and one that is equally applicable to men and women: namely, to observe modesty and humility by staying away from ‘wanton display’ (*tabarruj*) and ostentatious behaviour in front of others, as practiced in ‘the former Days of Ignorance’, referring to pre-Islamic Arabia.¹³⁶

The Family: Then and Now

Wadud wrestles with problematic verses elevating men by highlighting the historical attitudes held towards the family at the time of revelation—a reality that inevitably shaped the text’s discourse. The first part of Q. 4:34 is a passage commonly cited to *prove* God’s preference for men over women. It reads: ‘Men are the guardians (*qawwamun*) of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth.’ Reflecting on this verse, she notes that a critical connection is being made here between privilege—that is, men’s role as guardians—on the one hand, and responsibility, or the financial provision for women’s needs, on the other.¹³⁷ Addressing a specific historical context, this verse presupposes, indeed is conditional upon, a specific type of familial arrangement: namely, one in which the husband earns, spending out of his wealth, and the wife stays at home. With regard to ‘the advantage God has granted some of them over others’, Wadud argues that this statement—rather than being a categorical expression of male preference—refers to the fact that men are given twice the share of inheritance (Q. 4:11).¹³⁸ And this preference in

¹³⁵ Ibid, 97–8.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 70–1.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 70. The verse is incorrectly cited in Wadud’s work as Q. 4:7. She adds that the phrase in Q. 4:34—‘some of them over others’ (*ba’dahum ‘ala ba’din*)—

inheritance, she continues, is precisely due to the solemn financial responsibility that lay solely upon men's shoulders in that time.¹³⁹ But what if the present time is radically different, in which large numbers of Muslim women have become breadwinners alongside men or even the sole breadwinners? This question is particularly acute in the African American context. As Wadud points out, slavery 'precluded the idea of [Black] men serving as protectors and maintainers' and, due to enduring racism within American society, even after the abolition of slavery Black women—viewed as being less threatening than Black men—were more likely to gain employment, however poorly paid, becoming the providers of the family.¹⁴⁰ Because Q. 4:34 squarely bases men's authority on the assumption that they are the primary providers of the family, gender egalitarian female readers have argued that in a new context wherein both spouses are economically productive (including, of course, arrangements in which the wife is the sole earner) the husband would cease to function as guardian.¹⁴¹ Passages like Q. 4:11 and 4:34, then, need to be interpreted in light of contemporary circumstances, in which understandings of the family have shifted significantly.

Furthermore, the fact that the Qur'an speaks to the sensibilities of a given society does not mean that it endorses such social norms, upholding them as timeless models that are to be emulated by subsequent generations of Muslims. As Wadud puts it:

The Qur'an does not attempt to annihilate the differences between men and women or to erase the significance of functional gender distinctions which help every society to run smoothly and fulfil its needs . . . However, the Qur'an does not propose or support a singular role or a single definition of a set of roles, exclusively, for each gender across every culture . . . Such a specification would be an imposition that would reduce the Qur'an from a universal text to a culturally specific text.¹⁴²

This is not to imply, however, that everything about gender dynamics in seventh-century Arabia was problematic and to assume, rather

complicates this (conditional) preference even further, since some men, rather than *all* men, are advantaged over 'others', including men and women. See *ibid.*, 71.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Amina Wadud, 'The Ethics of *Tawhid* over the Ethics of *Qiwamah*', in *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*, eds. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mulki Al-Sharmani, and Jana Rummingier (London: Oneworld, 2015), 258–9.

¹⁴¹ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 119.

¹⁴² Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 8–9.

arrogantly, that we in the twenty-first century have finally gotten it *right*. On the contrary, there are aspects of family relations in the classical period that can be reclaimed by Muslim progressives in their struggle for social justice. In an illuminating discussion on mothering, Wadud points out that at the time of the Prophet, delivery and nursing were seen as completely unrelated tasks, for the mother was understood simply as being the one who gave birth, while it was the responsibility of the father's tribe to nurture and raise the child.¹⁴³ This is why, Wadud observes, in the prophetic biographical sources there is no negative stigma associated with Amina, the biological mother of Muhammad, despite the fact that she sent him off to live with a wet-nurse, Halima, shortly after his birth.¹⁴⁴ In other words, in the world of the first Muslims, a societal distinction was drawn between bearing and rearing—a very different approach to motherhood that is at odds with understandings of the term today, in which the two acts are conflated. By using the formative Islamic period to historicize the role of mother, Wadud undermines any essentialist claims about motherhood—that there is something *natural* about this social function—and which are invariably invoked to legitimate, and thus to ignore, the burdens of care that mothers in general and single mothers in particular are expected to endure, as well as to exempt men from responsibility for familial care and housework.¹⁴⁵

Saying No to (the Literal Letter of) the Text

But unlike Engineer, Wadud's liberationist exegesis is not an apologetic one, acknowledging certain problems with the literal wordings of the text. As discussed in the previous chapter, Engineer simplistically portrays the Qur'an as a 'charter of rights for women',¹⁴⁶ upholding complete gender parity. Indeed, he even goes so far as to claim that the Qur'an is 'the first revealed book that accords equal rights to women.'¹⁴⁷ While Wadud interprets the text through the eyes of justice, she is wary of falling into this apologetic trap. Her reading of Q. 4:34—the first part of which was discussed in the preceding

¹⁴³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 127–8.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 128.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 128–9.

¹⁴⁶ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, 33.

¹⁴⁷ Engineer, *Islam: Misgivings and History*, 98.

section—is an illustrative example of her refusal to explain away overtly problematic passages. The entire verse reads:

Men are the guardians of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient,¹⁴⁸ safeguarding what is unseen of what God has enjoined them to guard. As for those wives whose misconduct you fear, (first) advise them, and (if ineffective) keep away from them in the bed, and (as a last resort) beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course (of action) against them. Indeed, God is all-Exalted, all-Great.

In line with her hermeneutical emphasis on historical contextualization, Wadud argues that this verse, referring to beating as a last resort, ought to be understood as a 'severe restriction' on violence against women, as the biographies of the Companions and the pre-existing custom of female infanticide—a practice severely condemned in the Qur'an—suggest that violence against women was widespread in seventh-century Arabia.¹⁴⁹ This reading draws upon Wadud's belief in 'Qur'anic trajectories', or the idea that the text set into motion a 'radical momentum towards continual reforms in gender relations', challenging patriarchy to the extent that it could within the restricted circumstances of seventh-century Arabian society.¹⁵⁰ If this line of trajectory is faithfully followed, then, a restriction of an oppressive act in *that* time could cogently be read as a prohibition of that very act in *our* time. But despite forwarding this initial argument in *Qur'an and Woman*—that violence against women is presented as a last resort—Wadud retains deep reservations about this verse:

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 strike to a woman . . . This leads me to clarify how I have finally come to say 'no' outright to the literal implementation of this passage.¹⁵¹

In other words, just as approaches to the family have dramatically changed since the time of the first Muslims so, too, have our

¹⁴⁸ Since my specific interest here is in Wadud's treatment of the last part of Q. 4:34, I have provided a discussion of how she and Barlas approach women's obedience in Q. 4:34 in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 76.

¹⁵⁰ Wadud, 'Qur'an, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities', 334.

¹⁵¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 200.

understandings of social justice and sexual ethics, especially in terms of acknowledging the evils of domestic abuse.¹⁵² Wadud's exegesis is thus closer to that of Esack who, as was shown in the second chapter, is critical of apologia, pointing out that men are the primary audience of the Qur'an.¹⁵³ Wadud also acknowledges the text's androcentrism. For instance, referring to Q. 2:223—'Your women are a tillage (*harth*) for you, so come to your tillage whenever you like'—she concedes that the Qur'an speaks to male desire, affirming the sexuality of men while treating women's sexuality as passive.¹⁵⁴ Paralleling Esack's emphasis on the egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an over its literal wording,¹⁵⁵ Wadud grapples with passages like Q. 4:34 by prioritizing the text's principles over its particulars, arguing that a literal reading of this verse violates wider Qur'anic commitments to 'justice' and 'human dignity'—the understandings of which have radically changed since late antiquity.¹⁵⁶ In so doing, she is able to say 'no' to the contextually bound letter of the Qur'an while, at the same time, upholding its underlying spirit.

On Gender Mainstreaming and Male Solidarity

An important component of Wadud's Qur'anic exegesis is gender mainstreaming: that is, approaching female figures discussed in the text as paradigms of piety for *all* Muslims, men and women. As Muslim progressives have noted, a pressing problem in Muslim women's leadership is not that it does not exist, but rather that it is largely restricted to women's issues and thus the leadership of other women.¹⁵⁷ The confinement of female participation to women's committees in the mosque, as opposed to wider leadership roles concerning the whole community, is an everyday example that immediately comes to mind. Yet the Qur'an, Wadud interjects, discusses a

¹⁵² Ibid, 203. For an exhaustive study of the interpretive history of Q. 4:34, encompassing both the classical and contemporary periods, see Ayesha S. Chaudry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law and the Muslim Discourse on Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵³ Esack, 'Islam and Gender Justice', 195.

¹⁵⁴ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 193.

¹⁵⁵ Esack, 'Islam and Gender Justice', 203.

¹⁵⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 203.

¹⁵⁷ Abugideiri, 89.

number of female figures in starkly universal terms. Q. 66:10–12 is a compelling case in point:

God draws an example for those who are faithless (*lilladhina kafaru*): the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of our righteous servants, yet they betrayed them, and even they [Noah and Lot] could not avail them in the least against God, and it was said to them: 'Enter the Fire, along with the incomers.' God draws another example for those who have faith (*lilladhina amanu*): the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Sustainer! Build me a home near You in Paradise, and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds, and save me from a wicked people.' And Mary, daughter of Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our spirit. She confirmed the words of her Sustainer and His Books, and she was one of the obedient ones (*qanitin*).

Highlighting the Arabic usage of the masculine plural, which grammatically includes both men and women, as opposed to the feminine plural, which denotes only women, Wadud comments that this passage is usually interpreted as being applicable to women alone—a problematic reading given that the above wording is gender neutral, referring to 'those who are faithless', 'those who have faith', and 'the obedient ones'.¹⁵⁸ These women, therefore, are being used as parables for both men and women to reflect upon. Whereas figures like the wife of Pharaoh and Mary are presented as paradigms of spiritual leadership, the Qur'an also speaks of a woman who embodied the qualities of political leadership. Like Engineer,¹⁵⁹ Wadud points out that the Qur'an not only praises the personality of the Queen of Sheba, singling out her political wisdom and diplomatic skill (Q. 27:29–35),¹⁶⁰ but that she is also the only ruler, other than the prophets, who is portrayed in a favourable light.¹⁶¹ Yet despite the text's celebration of this sovereign, she has curiously not become a paradigmatic figure in Islamic political thought. As the Qur'anic scholar Barbara Stowasser has shown, classical and medieval commentators, while ascribing various legendary tales to the Queen, showed little interest in fleshing out wider lessons from her example, examining how the queen's astute leadership skills could contribute

¹⁵⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 33–4.

¹⁵⁹ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, 17.

¹⁶⁰ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 40–1. ¹⁶¹ Ibid, 89.

to Muslim thinking,¹⁶² such as in the field of political theory. Indeed, in direct contradistinction to the Qur'an's positive portrayal of the Queen, as well as the fact that the text never presents men as natural leaders,¹⁶³ many Muslim men continue to approach leadership—political, social, religious, or otherwise—as a male prerogative, dismissing women as being inherently incompetent for the task of leadership.¹⁶⁴

Women's leadership in ritual worship is a crucial aspect of gender mainstreaming. The struggle for gender justice, or what Wadud calls the 'gender jihad', is therefore a thoroughly comprehensive struggle, calling for the full and equal participation of women in every aspect of Muslim life.¹⁶⁵ While Wadud has popularized the term gender jihad, especially through the publication of her second book—*Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (2006)—the origins of this phrase can be traced back, as she herself notes, to radical Muslim discourse in Apartheid South Africa. Here, the term was first used by Imam Rashied Omar,¹⁶⁶ the spiritual guide of the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, and Esack, who actually has a section titled 'The Gender Jihad' in his book on Islamic liberation theology, published in 1997.¹⁶⁷ In fact, the first time that Wadud seriously considered the idea of a woman delivering the Friday sermon (*khutba*) and leading the prayers was whilst undertaking a speaking tour in South Africa in 1994, in which audience members asked her

¹⁶² Stowasser, 65.

¹⁶³ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 89.

¹⁶⁴ In the previous chapter on Engineer it was shown that the *hadith* literature has been used to justify women's exclusion from leadership roles.

¹⁶⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 10. As noted earlier, although the Arabic word *jihad* is commonly understood as holy war, it literally means to struggle or to exert effort and, therefore, includes all forms of strivings: individual or communal, peaceful or militant, expressly political or 'purely' spiritual.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 264. Omar (b. 1959) is a well-known progressive Muslim figure in South Africa. Like Esack, he has a traditional Islamic education—studying in South Africa, Pakistan, Sudan, and Malaysia—as well as a 'secular' academic one. Omar received his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of Cape Town and is currently Research Scholar of Islamic Studies and Peacebuilding at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in the USA. He spends two-thirds of the year in Cape Town serving as the coordinating *imam* of the Claremont Main Road Mosque. See Rashied Omar, faculty website, available at: <http://kroc.nd.edu/facultystaff/Faculty/rashied-omar>, accessed 13 August 2016.

¹⁶⁷ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 239. An earlier reference by Esack to 'Gender Jihad', describing the 1994 Friday sermon in South Africa (which will be discussed next), can be found in Farid Esack, "Between Mandela and Man Dalla, Kafirs and Kaffirs: Post Modernist Islamic Reflections in a Post Apartheid South Africa," *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 2:3 (1995): 25.

about the possibility of women's leadership in ritual worship.¹⁶⁸ As it turned out, she delivered the Friday sermon during that very tour, speaking at the Claremont Main Road Mosque on the timely subject of Muslim women and 'engaged surrender', or the act of wilfully submitting to God through personal and social struggle.¹⁶⁹ As Esack recounts, despite the fact that the prayer organizers (of whom he was one) had diplomatically advertised Wadud's sermon as a 'pre-sermon lecture', this initiative was met with intense hostility by mainstream South African Muslims, who marched on the mosque in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to shut down the programme.¹⁷⁰ This impassioned condemnation of woman-led prayer, spearheaded by conservative men, became internationalized in 2005 when Wadud led the Friday Prayer in New York City, speaking on the Unity of God and the nature of divine disclosure.¹⁷¹ Traditional Islamic scholars from around the world vehemently voiced their disapproval, contending that a female prayer leader would only distract the male worshippers sexually, hampering their ability to concentrate.¹⁷²

But despite all these heated responses to woman-led prayers, a significant number of which were personal attacks levelled against Wadud's character, what bothered her the most was the problematic attitude of progressive Muslim men who supported her leadership of the prayers. For far more attention was being paid, she laments, to the wonderful fact that a woman was finally giving the sermon (the form) rather than what that human being was actually saying at the pulpit (the substance).¹⁷³ Reflecting on the South African sermon, Wadud recounts that she was informed that she would speak less than an hour before the prayer and that flyers, as she would later find out, had been circulated before her arrival in Cape Town.¹⁷⁴ The substantive message of the lecture, then, was clearly not a priority for the organizers. She sums up her grievances as follows:

the planners were thinking and acting like men in exclusion of women's full humanity, while yet pretending to employ a woman as an agent of gender transformation. They were thinking *for* the woman, rendering

¹⁶⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 166.

¹⁶⁹ For the full text of the Cape Town sermon, see *ibid*, 158–62.

¹⁷⁰ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 246.

¹⁷¹ For the full text of the New York City sermon, see Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 249–52.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 222.

¹⁷³ Wadud, Interview 2009.

¹⁷⁴ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 167–8.

her a mere object of their privileged agency. How can a woman be a full and equal human being when the details of her public role are orchestrated without her consultation? . . . informing me at the last minute also indicates that very little value was attributed to the content of my actual *khutba* [sermon]. This event was about form.¹⁷⁵

In other words, in order for women to become meaningful leaders in ritual worship—rather than simply being tokens pushed to the fore by progressive men—not only must the substance of their religious discourses be taken as seriously as the form (or the fact that a female is delivering the sermon and leading the prayer) but women themselves need to play the chief role in planning and executing these gender-inclusive activities.¹⁷⁶

This brings us to the complex question of male solidarity: that is, how can progressive men stand alongside women and partake in the struggle against patriarchy? When I posed this question to Wadud in our interview, she responded:

The thing is that women have to be able to speak for themselves, even if they don't speak sufficiently at first. I mean they have to. So what happens? What's the role of men? The role of men is to inform themselves and then to advocate on behalf of gender justice with *other men*. That's the biggest role that they can do. . . . If men are together and other men make condescending statements about women, that's what men can do. But it's not that you speak for women.¹⁷⁷ [My italics]

So in order to avoid (mis)representing women and reproducing gender inequality in the very struggle against patriarchy—such as that of progressive men speaking over the voices of women, whether these women are progressive, conservative, or otherwise—men need to combat gender asymmetry within specifically male spaces. In forwarding this argument, Wadud draws upon the ideas of the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 172. It is perhaps precisely because of the effective silencing of her voice at, ironically, the very moment that she spoke that Wadud includes the full texts of the South African and New York City sermons in her second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*.

¹⁷⁶ For a critical feminist perspective on woman-led prayer in Islam, arguing that simply placing women at the helm of a hierarchal and exclusionary liturgical structure is insufficient, especially in terms of fostering inclusivity and community, see: Shadaab Rahemtulla, 'Toward a Genuine Congregation: The Form of the Muslim Friday Prayer, Revisited', in *Only One is Holy: Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Cláudio Carvalhaes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁷⁷ Wadud, Interview 2009.

Black American revolutionary Malcolm X and his stance on White solidarity,¹⁷⁸ summed up in his famous autobiography as follows:

What *can* a sincere white person do? When I say that here now, it makes me think about that [White] little co-ed [college student] I told you about, the one who flew from her New England college down to New York and came up to me in the Nation of Islam's restaurant in Harlem [asking how can a White person contribute to the struggle against racism?], and I told her that there was 'nothing' she could do. I regret that I told her that. . . . The first thing I tell them [White people] is that at least where my own particular Black nationalist organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, is concerned, they can't *join* us. . . . Where the really sincere white people have got to do their 'proving' of themselves is not among the black *victims*, but out on the battle lines of where America's racism really *is*—and that's in their own home communities. American racism is among their own fellow whites. That's where the sincere whites who really mean to accomplish something have got to work.¹⁷⁹

Wadud's discourse on gender segregation, then, is a nuanced one. Whereas earlier on this chapter showed how she used the Qur'an to critique forced female seclusion, here she embraces segregation as not only a strategy to pre-empt the formation of patriarchal hierarchies that typify mixed gender spaces, but also as a means of enabling women to meet and work with other women, exchanging one another's experiences and struggles.¹⁸⁰ This is not to suggest, however, that she is dismissive of the commitments of progressive men. In fact, Wadud attributes the origins of her decades-long work on Islam and gender justice to the inspirational figure of her late father: a poor,

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin, 2001), 494–5.

¹⁸⁰ Wadud, Interview 2009. Although Wadud does not explicitly situate herself within a wider theoretical discourse here, it is important to note that separatism has a long history in feminist thought, particularly as a political strategy, as a short-term move in order for women to empower themselves collectively before re-entering patriarchal, gender-mixed spaces. On feminist separatism, see Dana R. Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) and Marilyn Frye, 'Some Reflections on Separatism and Power', in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana T. Meyers (London: Routledge, 1997). As the above quotation from Malcolm X suggests, separatism as a tool of empowerment also has deep roots in African American intellectual and social history. For an excellent, though admittedly dated, reference work on this body of literature, see Betty C. Jenkins and Susan Phillis, *Black Separatism: A Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976).

Black Methodist minister who, despite overwhelming odds, strove tirelessly to provide for his family.¹⁸¹ Moreover, it is important to note that while she sharply criticizes the gender dynamics of the South African sermon, she also salutes the courage of the male organizers, acknowledging that this event would not have been possible without their support.¹⁸² Rather, the point that Wadud is driving home here is that social struggle requires the self-representation of the oppressed and because women alone are the owners of their experiences—lived realities that can only be understood and explained by women—it is paramount that they speak for themselves.¹⁸³

Paradigms of Struggle: Tawhid and Khilafa

The conceptualization and development of theological paradigms that address women's suffering is an integral component of such self-representation. While Esack and Engineer focus on the Exodus and the Battle of Karbala, respectively, as hermeneutical models of liberation, Wadud reflects upon the Qur'anic concept of *tawhid*: the centrepiece of Islamic theology, referring to the absolute Oneness and Unity of God. Echoing Shari'ati, whose liberating exegesis of *tawhid* was discussed earlier in this book, Wadud argues that *tawhid* is not simply faith in a single, undivided deity, but also an ethical commitment to translating this monotheistic belief into the mundane realm, creating a single, undivided society. To quote her words:

As an ethical term, *tawhid* relates to relationships and developments within the social and political realm, emphasizing the unity of all human creatures beneath one Creator. If experienced as a reality in everyday Islamic terms, humanity would be a single global community without distinction for reasons of race, class, gender, religious tradition, national origin, sexual orientation or other arbitrary, voluntary, and involuntary aspects of human distinction. Their only distinction would be on the basis of *taqwa*.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 4.

¹⁸² Ibid, 179.

¹⁸³ Wadud, 'Sisters in Islam', 131.

¹⁸⁴ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 28. While this text was published in 2006, it is worthwhile noting that an earlier articulation of *tawhid* as a socially liberating paradigm can be found in Amina Wadud, "An Islamic Perspective on Civil Rights Issues," in *Religion, Race, and Justice in a Changing America*, eds. Gary Orfield and Holly Lebowitz (New York: Century Foundation Press, 1999), 155–6.

The unity of God, then, has direct sociopolitical, economic, and gendered implications. To put it another way: divine unity is more than a state, a stable noun but also a dynamic verb with lasting social effects, for God is not only 'united', but '*unites* all things'.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, in this radically revamped society built on the unity of the creation, one's worth is not determined by socioeconomic standing, gender affiliation, or racial identity, but rather solely by *taqwa* (piety). Yet although the unity of God is a divine characteristic that Muslims ought to emulate, this deity is also, at the same time, utterly unique. Citing Q. 42:11—'Nothing is like Him'—Wadud juxtaposes this *singularity* of the Creator with the *duality* of the creation (discussed earlier in this chapter), arguing that God is beyond any partner and thus forever unpaired: One.¹⁸⁶ And it is precisely when men seek to pair themselves and their experiences with God, such as by portraying God as a male being exhibiting masculine qualities, that the tenet of *tawhid* is effectively violated.¹⁸⁷ It is difficult to overemphasize the centrality of *tawhid* in Wadud's Islamic discourse. In fact, she even describes the interpretive method of her gendered exegesis—that is, of reading the Qur'an as a coherent whole, extracting wider principles from the text—through this very language of divine unity, calling her holistic approach a 'hermeneutics of *tawhid*'.¹⁸⁸ So the unity of God is reflected, too, in the unity of the Word. Thus, Muslims throughout the world, from Iran to South Africa to America, have drawn upon *tawhid* in multiple contexts of oppression.¹⁸⁹ But in terms of its

¹⁸⁵ Amina Wadud, 'Foreword: Engaging *Tawhid* in Islams and Feminisms', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10:4 (2008): 437. My italics.

¹⁸⁶ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 25–6; Wadud, 'The Ethics of *Tawhid* over the Ethics of *Qiwamah*', 266.

¹⁸⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 81.

¹⁸⁸ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xii.

¹⁸⁹ It is interesting to note that Malcolm X also saw society through the prism of *tawhid*. In 1964, he undertook his famous pilgrimage to Mecca. Deeply moved by the camaraderie shared between Muslims of different racial backgrounds, Malcolm began to make links between the political implications of *tawhid* and his own struggle against White racism. Consider the following excerpts from his autobiography: 'All ate as One, and slept as One. Everything about the pilgrimage atmosphere accented the Oneness of Man under One God'; 'I could see from this [pilgrimage experience], that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept *in reality* the Oneness of Man—and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their "differences" in color'; 'About twenty of us Muslims who had finished the Hajj were sitting in a huge tent on Mount Arafat. As a Muslim from America, I was the center of attention . . . They asked me what about the Hajj had impressed me the most . . . I said, "The *brotherhood*! The people of all races,

systematic, scholarly exposition, gender activists have been at the forefront of this hermeneutical project. Like Wadud, Barlas, as will be seen in the next chapter, has reflected extensively upon this key Islamic tenet. Paralleling Wadud's critique of mainstream, masculine projections of the divine, Barlas argues that because God's 'sovereignty' is indivisible and thus God's domain alone, attempts by men to impinge on this sovereignty, such as by acting as mediators between the divine and the rest of humanity, undermines *tawhid*.¹⁹⁰

In addition to Islamic monotheism, Wadud also reinterprets the Islamic concept of *khilafa*, or trusteeship. Whereas Engineer's interest in the Battle of Karbala reflects his religious background as a Shi'a Muslim, her hermeneutical emphasis on *khilafa* (though not necessarily as a conscious move) speaks to her own sectarian affiliation as a Sunni Muslim. Historically understood as caliphate, *khilafa* became an enduring Sunni institution of political leadership following the Prophet's death. Referring to Q. 2:30, she brings this term back to its scriptural origins.¹⁹¹ The verse, alluding to a primordial time before humankind's creation, reads:

When your Sustainer said to the angels, 'Indeed, I am going to create a trustee (*khalifatun*) on the earth,' they said, 'Will You set in it one who will create corruption, and shed blood, while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your sanctity?' He said, 'Indeed, I know what you do not know.'

The purpose of humanity, Wadud concludes, is thus to function as a trustee, a vicegerent of the Creator on the Earth.¹⁹² This duty is first and foremost an ethical one, in which the trustee—or, to use another definition that she forwards, 'moral agent'¹⁹³—has the solemn responsibility to uphold divine justice,¹⁹⁴ to ensure that the unity of God, with all its sociopolitical ramifications, remains intact. She further argues that in the context of the contemporary world, characterized by the emergence of the nation-state as the hegemonic form of societal organization, a parallel can be drawn between *khilafa* and

colors, from all over the world coming together as *one!* It has proved to me the power of the One God.'" See Malcolm X and Haley, 443; 455; and 452, respectively.

¹⁹⁰ Barlas, 'Believing Women' in Islam, 13–14.

¹⁹¹ This verse on *khilafa* is incorrectly cited as Q. 2:38 in Wadud, 'Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice', 48.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 33.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 35.

an active, engaged citizenship.¹⁹⁵ In order to carry out one's role as moral agent, therefore, one needs, as a citizen, to make use of all the resources and avenues that civil society has to offer.¹⁹⁶ Citing Q. 33:72, Wadud points out that humankind wilfully accepted this role as trustee, thereby entering into a sacred covenant with their Creator.¹⁹⁷ The verse reads:

Indeed, We presented the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were apprehensive of it; but the human being undertook it. Indeed, he has been an oppressor and ignorant.

Yet humankind has not only failed to live up to its role as trustee by spreading suffering on the Earth, but also by hampering the ability of fellow human beings to fulfil this divinely sanctioned purpose, such as when men silence women's voices by claiming that women's voices are taboo (*'awra*), and thus not to be heard.¹⁹⁸ In emphasizing humankind's role as *khalifa*, Wadud echoes the earlier exegetical work of Hassan, who has shown that biblical concepts like the Fall and original sin—and, by extension, the idea of being redeemed and saved—are non-existent in the Qur'an, as the Earth was understood right from the very beginning as being the principal abode in which the human being, as trustee of God, would dwell.¹⁹⁹

JUSTICE FOR ALL

Liberation for Whom?

While the struggle for gender justice clearly lies at the core of Wadud's liberationist discourse, she acknowledges the complexity of human suffering, calling for a comprehensive approach to justice. Because women are marginalized, if not excluded altogether, from most articulations of social justice and of what constitutes a normative, egalitarian order,²⁰⁰ she is acutely aware of the importance of

¹⁹⁵ Amina Wadud, 'Citizenship and Faith', in *Women and Citizenship*, ed. Marilyn Friedman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 170.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 186–7.

¹⁹⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 35.

¹⁹⁸ Barlas, 'Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an', 105.

¹⁹⁹ Hassan, 'An Islamic Perspective', 106–7.

²⁰⁰ Wadud, 'Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice', 37.

making connections between different forms of oppression. She notes, for example, that even Qur'anic commentators who argue that the text seeks to establish justice have continued, rather paradoxically, to issue highly patriarchal interpretations of verses dealing with women, reflecting the striking absence of gender in their understandings of justice.²⁰¹ Liberation, then, has to be a genuinely inclusive commitment, embracing everyone's experiences. But just as Wadud has been left out of androcentric constructions of justice, she has also felt excluded, as a poor Black woman, from feminist discourses headed by wealthy White women.²⁰² Indeed, because the lives of African American women have been shaped primarily by the realities of racism, they have sharply criticized the feminist movement for failing to take their experiences into account.²⁰³ Fleshing out this critique, Black women pioneered womanism and womanist theology as alternative liberationist discourses that acknowledged the key differences that exist between women, thinking holistically through questions of race, class, and gender.²⁰⁴ Indeed, it is precisely because of the historic exclusion of Black women, as well as women based in the Third World, from the predominantly secular project of Western feminism that Wadud is wary of identifying as a feminist, situating herself instead as 'pro-faith, pro-feminist'.²⁰⁵ This emphasis on the 'pro-faith agenda'²⁰⁶ of her work, moreover, underscores her conviction in the compatibility of Islam and women's rights, thereby transcending the polarized positions of secular Muslim feminists and Islamist women: the former claiming that religion is an obstacle to women's liberation and the latter maintaining that Western discourses of human rights are alien to the faith and, thus, un-Islamic.²⁰⁷

Before embarking on an exploration of Wadud's perspectives on justice beyond gender, however, it is important to note that her treatment of gender *itself* reflects a comprehensive commitment to liberation. Unlike Engineer, Wadud does not restrict her gender discourse to the problems of (heterosexual) women alone, standing in solidarity with LGBTQ Muslims. Being heterosexual, she situates

²⁰¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 35–6.

²⁰² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 80. ²⁰³ McCloud, 146.

²⁰⁴ Mary Grey, 'Feminist Theology: A Critical Theology of Liberation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 111.

²⁰⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 79–80.

²⁰⁶ Wadud, 'Sisters in Islam', 118.

²⁰⁷ Wadud, 'The Ethics of *Tawhid* over the Ethics of *Qiwamah*', 262–3.

herself as an ‘ally’, drawing a parallel between how men can stand in solidarity with women—discussed earlier in this chapter—and how heterosexuals can be in solidarity with homosexuals.²⁰⁸ For just as progressive men, in patriarchal contexts, need to challenge men who are sexist (as opposed to speaking for women) so must progressive heterosexuals, in heteronormative settings, confront fellow heterosexuals who are homophobic.²⁰⁹ In our interview, Wadud pointed to her role as a teacher in the university classroom. In addition to addressing homophobic comments, she makes a concerted effort to integrate examples relating to homosexuality into her teaching, thereby undercutting heteronormativity.²¹⁰ But being an ally does not mean that one is uncritical. Wadud criticizes the discourse of homosexual Muslims for being androcentric, foregrounding the diverse sexualities of men.²¹¹ As a result, the lived experiences and subjectivities of lesbian Muslims remain marginalized.

On Race and Religious Pluralism

As has been shown at numerous points in this chapter, issues of race permeate Wadud’s writings. In fact, race is arguably the most crucial aspect of her analysis after gender. Looking back at her early life, she records how Blackness became an inseparable part of her identity, especially during the final three years of high school. Recall that at the age of fourteen, Wadud left Washington, DC, to attend a reputed high school in an all-White suburb of Boston, living with different families.²¹² She vividly recounts her conflicted experience at this institution, being one of only two Black students:

I was a black female. During those years I was never for a moment allowed to let my Blackness escape me. Aspects of my color and ethnicity were the points of entry and exit into many facets of my high school life. Privileges were given to me or withheld from me because of my race. In my first semester, I refused to stand for the pledge of allegiance. I was permitted to make my protest, but not to enter the classroom. So, for three years, I spent homeroom period wandering the halls. I was allowed to do this—although no one else

²⁰⁸ Wadud, Interview 2009.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 86.

²¹² Wadud, Interview 2009.

ever was. . . . I was even excused from dissecting a frog on the day that Martin Luther King was shot. None of these favors were permitted to white students. In each case the affirmation was only that one set of rules applied for the whites and another set applied for me. No one ever knew that I simply didn't want to dissect the frog. . . . Being Black was a special prize and a unique curse. My first highschool crush told me he couldn't kiss me because I was Black. I had no boyfriends because I was Black, or I had them out of curiosity or pity because I was Black. In short, at no juncture was I to forget that I was Black. So I never forgot.²¹³

Though she had grown up in mostly Coloured spaces, it was, interestingly, with her entry into a predominantly White setting that her racial consciousness heightened.²¹⁴ This emerging sense of ethnic identity was intensified, moreover, by the wider American context: namely, the civil rights struggle—as the above passage notes, Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated during her senior years—and, more significantly, the rise of the Black Power movement.²¹⁵

And just as with gender, Wadud brings her racial background to the interpretation of the Qur'an. Reflecting upon Q. 49:11–13, she argues that while the text acknowledges the differences that exist between various communities, it never uses these differences as a measure of human worth.²¹⁶ The passage reads:

O you who believe! Let not any people deride another people: it may be that they are better than they are; nor let women (deride) other women: it may be that they are better than they are. . . . O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God are the most pious (*atqakum*) among you.

So whereas she drew upon the first part of Q. 49:13 when reading through the lens of gender justice—'We created you from a male and a female'—here she focuses on the latter part of this verse, referring to God creating 'nations and tribes' so that they may recognize one another. Furthermore, just as with the case of gender, it is *taqwā*, appearing in this passage in the superlative form (*atqakum*: literally, the most God-conscious among you), that becomes the central

²¹³ Wadud, 'On Belonging as a Muslim Woman', 259.

²¹⁴ Ibid. ²¹⁵ Wadud, Interview 2009.

²¹⁶ Amina Wadud, 'American Muslim Identity: Race and Ethnicity in Progressive Islam', in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 274.

criterion with which God will render judgement.²¹⁷ But while White racism has undoubtedly played a formative role on Wadud's hermeneutic, it is important to note that the brunt of her critiques, at least insofar as race relations *within* the American Muslim community are concerned, centre on Arab and South Asian Muslim immigrants who, due to their superior socioeconomic standing in comparison to their African American coreligionists, have monopolized leadership and public representation roles within the American Muslim community.²¹⁸ Indeed, Wadud laments that the attacks of 9/11 have reinforced the mislaid notion that 'Islam in America is only the Islam of foreigners',²¹⁹ thereby rendering Black Muslims even more invisible.

Wadud also embraces questions of religious pluralism. Like Esack and Engineer, she is wary of exclusivist Islamic discourses that claim to *own* God, countering that Muslims constitute one of numerous faith communities that have been recipients of divine revelation.²²⁰ As she put it in her Friday sermon in New York City in 2005:

There is no chosen people, exclusive members of one of the world's many religions—some no longer in existence—some so widespread by numbers and powers that they look upon themselves as exclusively 'the chosen.' The 'chosen' are all of humanity.²²¹

There can be little doubt that her emphasis on the transcendence of God, underscoring the chosen-ness of all people as opposed to solely Muslims, is a direct result of her own diverse religious background, being born into a devoutly Christian household, living for a year as a Buddhist, and, finally, converting to Islam.²²² This deeply enriching experience enabled her to appreciate the intrinsic value of different faiths, to acknowledge the plurality of divine disclosure. Wadud's

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 271–2.

²¹⁹ Amina Wadud, 'American by Force, Muslim by Choice', *Political Theology* 12:5 (2011): 701.

²²⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 207. For an innovative work that engages the religious Other by drawing on the hermeneutical insights of women's gender egalitarian Qur'anic readings, see Jerusha T. Lamprey, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). The Islamic scholar Adis Duderija has also analysed gender and religious difference in contemporary Islam, focussing on how one's interpretive methodology can lead to radically different understandings of a paradigmatic believer and woman. See Adis Duderija, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal 'Believer' and 'Woman' in Islam: Neo-traditional Salafi and Progressive Muslims' Methods of Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²²¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 207.

²²² Ibid, 62.

writings on religious pluralism also delve into apologetics, however. Her commentary on polytheism is an illustrative example:

... 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 as well as the concept of the sacred as Ultimate. . . . There are no animists, believers in the sacred manifestations throughout creation, as in many indigenous 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.²²³

But since the Qur'an spoke to a specific context, addressing the religious communities and practices that were immediately present in that time and place—precisely the reason why Jews and Christians, in addition to polytheists, are mentioned—is it persuasive to reason that just because other faith traditions are not discussed that they are, therefore, outside the fold of the text's discourse on monotheism? For the Qur'an puts forth a *principle* with regard to belief: namely, that of not associating any partners with God, thereby undermining the unity of the Creator. Particular manifestations of such divine association, then, are contingent upon different historical contexts. Given Wadud's hermeneutical emphasis on principles over particulars, it is surprising that here she focuses on particulars, shying away from making broader generalizations on polytheism.

With regard to Wadud's approach to religious pluralism, two points of clarification are in order. Firstly, although religious pluralism plays a role in Wadud's thinking, it is squarely secondary to that of racial justice. If the two are in conflict, the latter takes precedence. This prioritization of race is vividly illustrated in a roundtable discussion in which Wadud participated, entitled 'Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity'.²²⁴ The roundtable addressed the Christian-centricity of feminist theology and included respondents from Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim backgrounds. Rita Gross—a White American Buddhist theologian—set the stage for discussion by contributing

²²³ Ibid, 194–5.

²²⁴ Rita Gross ed., 'Roundtable Discussion: Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16:2 (2000): 73–131.

the opening article, reflecting on her own experiences as a non-Christian scholar in feminist theological circles. For Gross, a key problem is that discussions of diversity have largely revolved around diversity within Christianity:

When I have pointed out that some of us are not Christians and that religious diversity, not just intra-Christian diversity, needs to be on the agenda, my comments have been repeatedly ignored. As soon as I would finish speaking, people would return to the topic of intra-Christian diversity and complain that not enough non-white Christian feminist theologians were in the group.²²⁵

Wadud responds with a pointed criticism of how 'diversity' is being framed, unearthing the racial privilege that underlies Gross' grievances:

For anyone to espouse an enlightened expression about the use of the term diversity, she must first accept the necessity to annihilate all forms of white supremacy. I will not accept to coordinate my efforts with any white feminist—for whatever reasons of her own personal experiences of marginalization—who chooses to ignore this reality of race.²²⁶

In other words, why should the inclusion of non-Christians, in particular White non-Christians, into Christian feminist circles be privileged over the inclusion of Black and other Coloured Christians into these very circles? Is racial diversity, even within Christian contexts, less significant than interreligious diversity? Indeed, in this roundtable Wadud (despite her non-Christian faith) sides with her excluded Christian sisters of colour,²²⁷ that is, she privileges racial diversity over interreligious diversity. Yet, as she herself observes, Christian-centricity is a problem in feminist theology.²²⁸ So how can this be addressed while still paying due attention to pressing questions of race? She resolves this puzzle by switching her interlocutor altogether, speaking to *Coloured* Christian feminist theologians. Here, Wadud challenges the hegemony of Black Christian feminist thought and experience over womanist theology and how, for example, Islam's historic role in Black religion is routinely ignored.²²⁹ What is necessary, then, is greater interreligious diversity within

²²⁵ Rita Gross, 'Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighbourhood or Christian Ghetto?', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16:2 (2000): 73.

²²⁶ Amina Wadud, 'Roundtable Discussion: Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16:2 (2000): 92.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid, 90.

²²⁹ Ibid, 95–6.

feminist theologies of colour, which hitherto have been Christian dominated.

The second point of clarification is that, in terms of religious pluralism, Wadud's primary interest is not in Muslim/non-Muslim relations—interreligious pluralism—but rather in the interfaith dynamics that exist within the Muslim community, that is, intrareligious pluralism. Referring to Q. 2:256, 'There is no compulsion in religion', she argues that not only is entry into Islam a purely personal decision that cannot be forced upon anyone but so, too, is a Muslim's decision to leave the faith—a right that is severely undermined by the punishment of death for apostasy, as outlined in the *shari'a*.²³⁰ This accusation of apostasy, of being outside the pale of Islam, is used not only to ensure that Muslims remain Muslims but also as a powerful tool to silence alternative religious voices within the community.²³¹ Indeed, Wadud herself, as a highly controversial figure amongst mainstream Muslims, has been constantly accused of being non-Muslim, even an enemy of Islam. A YouTube video that covered aspects of the 2005 Friday Prayer in New York City captures the deeply controversial (and marginal) nature of this event within the wider Muslim community, showing an angry group of Muslims protesting outside the prayer venue—a church, the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine—amongst them a man holding a placard that read: 'Ameena Wadud [*sic*] is not a Muslim according to the Qur'an and Sunnah.'²³² Fostering an inclusive atmosphere of interpretive pluralism within the community is crucial, therefore, in order to mainstream egalitarian interpretations of Islam, especially in terms of gender justice.

Class and Global Politics: A Problematic Analysis

Along with race and religious pluralism, Wadud incorporates class into her thinking. As was already noted in the biographical sketch at the beginning of this chapter, her early life was marred by poverty.

²³⁰ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 81–2. She incorrectly cites the verse as Q. 3:256—an obvious typographical error given that there are only two hundred verses in the third chapter.

²³¹ Ibid, 55–6.

²³² 'Female Imams—Morocco', *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qgk5JFGUkRw> accessed 22 September 2011.

Because her father was unable to pay the mortgage for their house in semirural Maryland—a home that he himself had built—the family was forced into homelessness.²³³ She recounts this painful episode:

For the next 2 weeks, we must have slept in my father's car . . . When school was out, my father built a trailer for us to stay in . . . Since we did not remain at any one place for more than a month, I suppose I knew that we did not belong . . . By the time the school year started [that is, when Wadud entered the sixth grade] my father had rented 2 rooms on the 3rd floor of someone else's house. But this time, we were in the city: Washington, DC. We lived in these 2 rooms for 1 year.²³⁴

This formative experience has had a lasting impact on the way in which Wadud interprets scripture. Referring again to Q. 49:13—‘O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God are the most pious among you’—she argues that by looking solely at piety (*taqwa*), God refuses to differentiate between human beings on the basis of wealth.²³⁵ The affluent and the poor, then, are to be treated the same. And it is here that a notable difference emerges between Wadud's and Esack's readings, as the former is less radical than the latter. Esack, referring to the Exodus, maintains that God makes a ‘preferential option’ for the marginalized. He cites (among other verses) Q. 28:5,²³⁶ which reads: ‘It is Our Will to bestow Our grace upon the downtrodden of the Earth, and to make them the leaders and to make them the inheritors of the Earth.’ In other words, this is a divine being that *does* take material realities into account. To put it another way: the affluent and the poor are not to be treated the same. According to the preferential option for the oppressed—a hallmark of liberation theology—a just deity, in a context of manifest inequality, cannot remain a neutral broker but rather must take sides, standing in solidarity with the poor against the wealthy. Indeed, in our interview Wadud explicitly refused to identify as a liberation theologian, underscoring two points: firstly, that while liberation theology has great value to the extent that it addresses oppression—that is, as a means to transition out of states of injustice—it has little to say beyond these oppressive contexts, and,

²³³ Wadud, ‘On Belonging as a Muslim Woman’, 255.

²³⁴ Ibid, 255–6. ²³⁵ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 36–7.

²³⁶ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 98–9. Esack also cites Q. 7:136–7.

secondly, that she wants to situate herself within a more organic Qur'anic framework (as opposed to adopting an approach that emerged external to the text and Islam in general) and, thus, prefers to identify as a 'tawhidist'.²³⁷

It is in the realm of global politics, however, that Wadud's discourse on poverty is problematic. She is explicit about the evils of capitalism and consumerism, which she refers to as capitalism's 'bastard child', criticizing a cruel economy whereby massive numbers of people are being impoverished, particularly women and children.²³⁸ At the same time, a tiny fraction of the world's population is enjoying increasingly lavish and wasteful lifestyles, driven by the market and fuelled by mass consumption.²³⁹ To evidence her argument, Wadud provides statistics from the 1998 U.N.D.P. Human Development Report, showing that the wealthiest 20 per cent of the world's population consume a whopping 86 per cent of private consumption expenditure while the poorest fifth account for a meagre 1.3 per cent.²⁴⁰ Yet after suggesting a critical linkage between the affluence of the few and the deprivation of the many—the implication clearly being that the sin of structural poverty can only be alleviated through a far-reaching, systematic redistribution of global wealth—she makes the following conclusion: 'We have the means to not only eradicate poverty but also to do so without depriving the well to do from experiencing extreme luxury and privilege.'²⁴¹ Constituting a glaring contradiction in an otherwise politically progressive discourse, this statement betrays wider inconsistencies in Wadud's approach to global politics.

Her writings on 9/11 are a compelling case in point. Radical Muslims like Esack have highlighted the political economy of 9/11, arguing that this event cannot be disentangled from the oppressive web of global inequalities sustained by American imperialism, as shown, for instance, by the rejoicing of people not only in the Muslim world but also in other parts of the South like Brazil and China.²⁴² To be sure, Wadud notes that 9/11 has forced Americans to wake up, to

²³⁷ Wadud, Interview 2009.

²³⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 136–7.

²³⁹ Ibid, 137.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 267. For the original report, see 'Human Development Report 1998', *United Nations Development Program*, available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1998/> accessed 23 September 2012.

²⁴¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 267.

²⁴² Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11', 94.

acknowledge the dire consequences of their quest for world dominance.²⁴³ Yet despite her critique of US hegemony, she plays into ideologically loaded language surrounding 9/11: namely, the juxtaposition of the good Muslim, who is peaceful, loving, and acquiescent, with the bad Muslim, who is angry, violent, and virulently anti-American.²⁴⁴ The following passage reveals this dichotomous construction in her writings:

Islam is not a monolith. It has a plethora of meanings and experiences . . . Indeed, just as Americans were presented with a horrible affront to their sense of integrity and security by the event of Sept. 11, 2001, when a dozen or so Muslim men laid claim to "Islam" as justification for their vehemence and violence, so too are babies born and women and men surrender in peace and harmony to a claim of 'Islam.' Which is the truer picture, the face of evil and destruction or the face of love and life? . . . while I do not identify with suicide bombers or acts of violence, I cannot ignore that they occur within the ranks of that vast community of Islam.²⁴⁵

While Wadud avoids the liberal Muslim trap of essentializing Islam—one that, as was seen in the third chapter, Engineer falls into—acknowledging that there are both peaceful and militant interpretations of the faith, she reduces a highly politicized and symbolic event to mere religious fanaticism, contrasting 'the face of evil and destruction' (the bad Muslim) with 'the face of love and life' (the good Muslim). She even uses the sweeping term 'the terrorists' to refer to the attackers, arguing that so long as Americans continue to live in a state of fear and alarm, as exhibited, for example, by increased security measures at airports, 'the terrorists have won'.²⁴⁶

A particularly curious aspect of Wadud's discourse on 9/11 is her portrayal of this event as an expression of patriarchy in Muslim societies. She states that 'men perpetrated these events in response to actions men exclusively had decided upon, planned and orchestrated', concluding that 'men make war while women and children are victims as well as other men'.²⁴⁷ Such statements problematically

²⁴³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 224.

²⁴⁴ For a seminal study of the emergence of this 'Good Muslim/Bad Muslim' paradigm and its usage in American foreign policy, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

²⁴⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 5.

²⁴⁶ Wadud, 'American by Force, Muslim by Choice', 701.

²⁴⁷ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 228.

presuppose that women themselves do not partake in violence, whether it be through imperialist wars waged by women in the global North to purportedly save Muslim women in the South or militant resistance in which women take up arms alongside men in order to defend their lands and families. Indeed, women have historically been, and continue to be, active participants in militant struggle, especially in nationalist resistance against occupation. The Palestinian medical worker Wafa Idris (d. 2002) is a noteworthy example. During the Second Intifada, she became the first female suicide bomber, and was followed in the same year by three other Palestinian women: namely, Dareen Abu Aisheh, Ayat Akhras, and Andaleeb Takatkeh.²⁴⁸

In order to appreciate my critique of Wadud's discourse on 9/11, it is essential to examine the wider global context in which 9/11 occurred. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (2005), edited by Bruce Lawrence and translated by James Howarth, is a collection of letters, transcribed speeches, interviews, and video recordings of Bin Laden between 1994 and 2004. Collectively, these texts demonstrate that the 9/11 attacks, while certainly being cloaked in the language of a militant Islam, were far from simply being religiously motivated. Rather, Bin Laden's grievances were primarily political. The US military's stationing in Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War—and thus being in close proximity to the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina—and the US-backed Israeli occupation of Palestine are two recurring themes in Bin Laden's discourse.²⁴⁹ He condemns not only the 'aggressive Crusader–Jewish alliance', but also 'traitorous and cowardly Arab tyrants' for collaborating with this alliance.²⁵⁰ Furthermore, Bin Laden laments the deaths of countless children in Iraq²⁵¹—an outcome of UN-imposed sanctions—as well as atrocities committed against Muslims in general, including in Kashmir, the Philippines, Somalia, Chechnya, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.²⁵² Hence, confronting empire in the Muslim world, particularly American empire, lies at the heart of his militancy and it is within this broader framework that the attacks of 9/11 have

²⁴⁸ For a perceptive study of these four female fighters and how they have represented themselves and been represented within the larger Arab world, see Frances S. Hasso, 'Discursive and Political Deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian Suicide Bombers/Martyrs', *Feminist Review* 81 (2005): 23–51.

²⁴⁹ Bruce Lawrence ed. and James Howarth trans. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), 7–9.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 104.

²⁵² Ibid, 25.

to be understood, symbolically targeting both the political and economic centres (Washington and New York City, respectively) of the present world order. Though Bin Laden does not take direct responsibility for the 9/11 attacks and emphasizes that his role was one of 'incitement',²⁵³ that is, encouraging Muslims to engage in anti-American militancy, he points out that the USA has no moral authority to condemn the targeting of innocent civilians:

It is very strange for Americans and other educated people to talk about the killing of innocent civilians. I mean, who said that our children and civilians are not innocents, and that the shedding of their blood is permissible? Whenever we kill their civilians, the whole world yells at us from east to west, and America starts putting pressure on its allies and puppets. Who said that our blood isn't blood and that their blood is blood? What about the people that have been killed in our lands for decades?²⁵⁴

Thus, it is deeply problematic and simplistic to portray the 9/11 attacks, with their manifestly political grievances and demands, as a 'face of evil and destruction' and to frame the attacks in gendered terms, as another expression of Muslim men's dominance over Muslim women.

Hagar: The Complexity of Oppression Embodied

Wadud's holistic approach to injustice is captured paradigmatically in the figure of Hagar. Indeed, Hagar has become a central, scriptural symbol for womanist theologians, who have discerned in the Black slave of Abraham a 'woman who is rejected on the grounds of race, sex and class, yet at the same time is the recipient of a divine revelation.'²⁵⁵ In particular, Wadud sees in Hagar's abandonment in the desert and in her desperate efforts to locate water for her child the predicament of the 'homeless, single parent',²⁵⁶ forced to provide for herself and her family in a classist, patriarchal society. In so doing, Wadud forges a direct hermeneutical link between Hagar's experiences and her own as a divorced, single mother.²⁵⁷ Her focus on Hagar, moreover, is significant in terms of interpretive methodology. For while she privileges the Qur'an over other Islamic texts, Wadud's

²⁵³ Ibid, 108.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 117.

²⁵⁵ Grey, 112.

²⁵⁶ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 143.

²⁵⁷ Wadud, Interview 2009.

writings on Hagar reveal her interest in engaging the *shari'a*. A key problem with Islamic law, she argues, is that it is 'premised upon an ideal of an extended family network',²⁵⁸ thereby ignoring the lived realities of a growing number of Muslim women in general and of African American Muslim women in particular. The *shari'a*, then, needs to be reinterpreted in order to address the Hagar paradigm, to speak to situations in which women are the sole, financial providers of their families.²⁵⁹ But Wadud's interest in Hagar not only reflects her willingness to engage the *shari'a*, but also the Qur'anic exegetical tradition. Whereas Hagar is discussed in the Old Testament (Genesis 16), she is actually never mentioned by name in the Qur'an. Rather, she is implicitly referred to in a supplication that Abraham makes shortly after leaving Hagar and Ishmael in the desert.²⁶⁰ The prayer reads:

When Abraham said, 'My Sustainer! Make this city [Mecca] a sanctuary, and save me and my children from worshipping idols. My Sustainer! Indeed they have misled many people. So whoever follows me indeed belongs to me, and as for someone who disobeys me, surely You are All-Forgiving, All-Merciful. Our Sustainer! I have settled part of my descendants in a barren valley by Your sacred house, our Sustainer, that they may maintain the prayer. So make the hearts of the people fond of them, and provide them with fruits, that they may give thanks. Our Sustainer! Indeed you know whatever we hide and whatever we disclose, and nothing in the earth or in the sky is hidden from God. All praise belongs to God, who, despite my old age, gave me Ishmael and Isaac. Indeed, my Sustainer hears all supplications. My Sustainer! Make me a maintainer of the prayer, and my descendents. Our Sustainer, accept my supplication. Our Sustainer! Forgive me, my parents and all the faithful on the day when the reckoning is done.' (Q. 14:35-41)

Hagar has made her way into Muslim memory, therefore, not through the Qur'an itself but rather through Qur'anic commentaries, which drew upon a number of unauthenticated prophetic reports and biblical traditions (*isra'iliyat*) in order to flesh out her story.²⁶¹ The following passage from the medieval commentator Isma'il ibn Kathir (d. 1373) is an illustrative example, depicting Hagar's deep, abiding faith in God:

When he [Abraham] left the two of them there and turned his back on them, Hagar clung to his robes and said: 'Abraham, where are you

²⁵⁸ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 144.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 144-5.

²⁶⁰ Abugideiri, 83.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

going, leaving us here without means to stay alive?' He did not answer. When she insisted, he would still not answer. So she said: 'Did God command you to do this?' He said: 'Yes.' Then Hagar said: 'He will not let us perish.'²⁶²

So despite Wadud's critique of the Qur'anic exegetical tradition, her usage of the Hagar paradigm shows that she is prepared to draw upon this body of knowledge when doing so can further gender egalitarian understandings of Islam.

Walking the Walk: Justice as a Way of Life

The most crucial aspect of Wadud's comprehensive approach to justice, however, is the commitment to *live out* these principles in the private sphere. Citing Q. 61:2—'Why do you say that which you do not do?'—she writes that calling for equality in the public sphere is meaningless, even hypocritical, if such progressive discourses are not put into practice in one's personal life.²⁶³ As she phrased it in our interview:

it's like you live that consciousness. And in that sense that's where I think back to my father. I think my father lived his consciousness as much as you can for a poor, not very well educated man. I mean like sixth grade's top education for him. So to me it's the idea of walking the walk, not just talking the talk . . . Islam as *din* [literally, religion], as a way of life. Justice is a way of life. Justice is a relationship between yourself and between others inspired by your relationship with God, who created you. And so there's no public/private divide, where you can do all kinds of stuff in private as long as you look good in public.²⁶⁴

The organizational dynamics of SIS reflected this commitment to walk the walk, to harmonize progressive pronouncements in the public sphere with egalitarian practice in daily life. While numerous human rights organizations call for social justice and gender equality, their administrative structures, paradoxically, tend to be rigidly hierarchical. There is a critical disconnect, then, between the empowering public discourse of these movements and the unequal manner in which their members actually relate to one another. However, SIS,

²⁶² Isma'il ibn Kathir, as cited in Stowasser, 47.

²⁶³ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 207.

²⁶⁴ Wadud, Interview 2009.

at least during Wadud's time in Malaysia between 1989 and 1992, was acutely non-hierarchical in its organizational structure, operating without a chairperson, president, or executive committee—what Wadud describes as 'the standard male corporate lines'—as members, working purely as volunteers, interacted with each other as essentially equals.²⁶⁵ In other words, SIS not only forwarded an inclusive discourse in the public sphere, supporting women's full participation in sociopolitical and religious life, but also strove to translate these egalitarian ideals into its everyday functioning, fostering a genuine culture of sisterhood between its members.

The family is the most important private space wherein professed commitments to social justice need to be lived out. The centrality of the family in Wadud's writings is captured in the acknowledgements of her second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), in which she emphasizes the pivotal role that her children have played in her life. Despite her pioneering contributions to Islam and gender reform, or what she collectively refers to as 'work for Allah outside the home',²⁶⁶ it is the efforts and sacrifices that she as a single mother has made for her family—work for Allah inside the home—that takes centre-stage, constituting the very 'foundation'²⁶⁷ of her gender *jihad*. But it is precisely here, in contributing to familial tasks like housework and childcare, that Wadud discerns a disjuncture between the public discourses and private lives of progressively minded Muslim men. As she forcefully put it in our interview:

There's too much lip service. This is a disappointment that I had with actual persons who are considered reformist. And then you go [to his] home and the wife never comes out of the kitchen . . . [or] . . . they are married to traditional women or women who are not as well educated as themselves so they don't engage them intellectually at the same level that they do with other men or even women who are educated in the public space . . . whatever it is, I'm not seeing, I'm not seeing families, where the progressive men are doing everything that they say that they are talking about in the public space. It's like, who are you talking for? Are you talking for your wife here? Are you saying that, oh yeah, well, I want it in the public space but at home, you know?²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 117–18. She notes, however, that SIS has since developed into a full-fledged NGO with an executive director and salaried workers and, thus, an institutionalized, hierarchical structure.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, xvii.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Wadud, Interview 2009.

Simply put: just conduct is equally important in the public and private spheres.²⁶⁹ In order to be truly committed to justice, men need to *value* housework, to appreciate the labour that women have historically undertaken inside the home. Men need to start seeing this work as being as valuable in the eyes of God as the work that is done outside the home—recalling Wadud's description of both as 'work for Allah'—and then to play an even share in that labour. The Qur'an, she points out, never describes domestic activities like child rearing as being an essential aspect of womanhood.²⁷⁰ There is no scriptural mandate, then, for a gendered division of labour across public and private spaces, leaving the distribution of these tasks open to the possibilities of new contexts. Such an egalitarian arrangement within the family exemplifies what Wadud calls the principle of reciprocity (*mu'awadha*). For her, a reciprocal moral culture is the solution to patriarchy and its base assumption of a hierarchal relationship of domination between women and men, reconfiguring this relationship into one of 'partnership',²⁷¹ marked by equality, interdependence, and mutual responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

Paralleling Esack's and Engineer's exegeses, Wadud focuses on the Qur'an as the principal, textual source of Islam. Because the text represents the Word of God, a clear distinction needs to be made between this Word and other Islamic sources like the exegetical tradition, which is often conflated with the Qur'an itself. This is particularly problematic given that men have dominated the field of Qur'anic commentary, inevitably leading to patriarchal understandings of the text. Women, therefore, need to partake in the exegetical enterprise, bringing their subjectivities, insights, and experiences to the task of interpretation. While Wadud treats the *hadith* literature as a primary source of Islam, she, like Esack and Engineer, is wary of the

²⁶⁹ Amina Wadud, 'Islam beyond Patriarchy through Gender Inclusive Analysis', in *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, ed. Zainah Anwar (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Musawah, 2009), 98.

²⁷⁰ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 22.

²⁷¹ Wadud, 'Islam beyond Patriarchy through Gender Inclusive Analysis', 101–2.

authenticity of numerous prophetic reports and warns that this highly disputed corpus needs to be approached through the framework of the Qur'an. She does not consider the *shari'a* to be a primary source of Islam. But despite this subordination of the *shari'a* to the Qur'anic Word, she argues that the legal tradition still needs to be engaged due to the legitimacy that it enjoys within Muslim societies, exerting an enormous influence on people's lives, especially women. In interpreting the Qur'an, Wadud draws upon Rahman's double movement theory, which seeks to extract ethical principles from the text and then apply these principles to contemporary contexts. However, as this interpretive method is based heavily on historical criticism, entailing an exhaustive and systematic study of the original context of revelation, it raises a larger question concerning religious authority: namely, how accessible is this mode of reading for everyday Muslims? It also raises questions about objectivity, for who gets to decide what constitutes a Qur'anic principle? Wadud's espousal of the double movement theory points to the importance of action in her Islamic discourse. For once timeless, ethical principles are derived from the text, they need to be practically applied to lived contexts of oppression. Wadud's involvement with SIS played a crucial role in allowing her to see how theoretical research could be meaningfully translated into concrete reforms through activism. Knowledge, then, must necessarily lead to action. And it is here that a key difference emerges between Wadud's and Esack's exegeses, for while the former's is a hermeneutic of application, the latter's is a hermeneutic of *praxis*. Because the experience of struggle sheds valuable insight into the Word of God, Esack argues, knowledge does not simply lead to action but action, too, effects new understandings. In other words, whereas Wadud's hermeneutic is more linear in nature, characterized by a general movement from knowledge to action, Esack's is more dialectical, marked by a continuous interplay *between* knowledge and action.

Wadud uses textual analysis and historical criticism extensively in her work, reflecting the centrality of these twin interpretive strategies in women's gender egalitarian exegesis, as they play less prominent a role in Esack's and Engineer's commentaries. Her emphasis on a careful, linguistic study of the Qur'an—showing exactly what the text says and, just as significantly, does not say—comes out most clearly in her reading of the beginning of time. Critiquing the entrenched notion among Muslims that Eve was created from

Adam's rib, she shows that this is actually a biblical narrative and that the Qur'anic text itself never mentions this story, describing man and woman as being created from a single soul. While she utilizes textual analysis when interpreting the origins of humankind, she employs historical criticism to grapple with androcentric descriptions of sexual pleasure in Paradise, arguing that such depictions spoke to understandings of beauty at the time of revelation and were thus shaped by the patriarchal realities of Meccan society. Moving into the here and now, Wadud uses textual analysis and historical criticism to tackle a number of women's issues, from polygamy and female seclusion to veiling and men's guardianship over women. Her interpretation of the opening of Q. 4:34 is a compelling example of the convergence of these two hermeneutical techniques. Examining the precise wording of the passage, she comments that it never makes any categorical claims of men's superiority over women, presupposing a marital arrangement in which the husband is the sole financial provider. Men's authority is thus conditional, presuming a societal context in which women are confined to the home. Therefore, in a radically different context wherein both partners are economically productive, such as in the present time, the husband would cease to function as guardian and authority would be shared equally between both partners. However, unlike Engineer, who portrays the Qur'an as a human rights document upholding complete gender equality, Wadud steers away from apologetics. For instance, she argues that however the last part of Q. 4:34 may be reinterpreted, such as it being a significant restriction on violence against women in seventh-century Arabia, she cannot accept any type of physical strike against women. In a similar move to Esack, who also acknowledges certain problems with the Qur'an, she negotiates this difficult verse by prioritizing the underlying, egalitarian spirit of the text over its literal letter.

A number of theological paradigms surface at various points in Wadud's writings. Whereas Esack and Engineer draw on the Exodus and the Battle of Karbala as models of struggle, respectively, she reflects upon the nature of Islamic monotheism. Echoing the earlier ideas of Shari'ati, she argues that *tawhid* has direct sociopolitical consequences. For the unity of God must translate into the unity of humanity, undivided by gender, race, and class. But while humanity is marked by duality, as expounded in Wadud's reading of the Creation Story, God is utterly unique, unpairable. Therefore, patriarchal portrayals of God as being masculine—that is, pairing God with men's

experiences—undercuts the singularity of this deity. In order to uphold *tawhid*, Muslims must thus tirelessly work towards creating an egalitarian and just social order. And in this new society, the only marker of distinction is that of *taqwa*—a key Qur’anic principle and a theme that permeates Wadud’s Islamic discourse. A truly just deity, she argues, is one who looks beyond mere material and physical differences, focussing on piety alone as a measure of human worth. In addition to *tawhid* and *taqwa*, she unpacks the Islamic concept of *khilafa*, historically understood as the Sunni political institution of the caliphate. Bringing the meaning of *khilafa* back to its original Qur’anic usage, in which it is defined as trusteeship, she argues that it is the solemn duty of every human being, as trustee of God, to establish social justice on the Earth, thereby fulfilling her/his divinely sanctioned purpose. Hagar is the final paradigm that Wadud elaborates upon. What makes this figure so compelling for Wadud, and for womanist theologians in general, is the way in which Hagar captures the complexity of suffering, marginalized on the basis of class, race, and gender. Drawing on her own experience as a single working mother, Wadud sees in the example of Hagar, who was abandoned in the desert and forced to provide for her child in the face of overwhelming odds, an inspirational model of struggle for Muslim women today, especially African American Muslim women.

Indeed, as the Hagar paradigm suggests, Wadud has a holistic commitment to justice. Because she has been excluded from liberationist discourses—whether as a woman in androcentric struggles based primarily on class and race or, conversely, as a poor Black woman in feminist struggles spearheaded by affluent White women—she has an acute sense of the multifaceted nature of oppression. In a strikingly similar fashion to Esack and Engineer, she integrates questions of race, class, and religious pluralism into her thinking. While Wadud’s discourse on race draws upon her lived experiences as a Black woman growing up in a White supremacist society, she is also highly critical of race relations among American Muslims, criticizing the privilege of Arab and South Asian immigrant Muslims, whose superior socioeconomic standing has allowed them to monopolize leadership and representational roles within the community. Embracing religious pluralism, Wadud acknowledges the plurality of divine disclosure and argues that Muslims constitute one of numerous recipients of revelation. The bulk of her writings on pluralism, however, focus on internal Muslim dynamics, criticizing the

marginalization of alternative, reformist voices and defending the right to religious freedom. Like gender and race, the experience of poverty, particularly during her childhood years, has had a lasting impact on her Qur'anic hermeneutic. Reiterating her emphasis on piety as the chief criterion of human worth, she argues that God, as a fundamentally just deity, does not differentiate between humankind on the basis of wealth. At a global level, however, Wadud's discourse on poverty is problematic, for at the same time as she condemns the devastating economic inequalities created by capitalism, she concludes that such disparity can somehow be dismantled without a systematic redistribution of global wealth, without 'depriving the well to do from experiencing extreme luxury and privilege.'²⁷² Here, she is at variance with Esack and Engineer, for whom global socioeconomic justice must entail precisely such a far-reaching redistribution of resources. Her discourse on the attacks of 9/11 is also problematic, representing an overtly political act of militancy—seeking to challenge US dominance in the Muslim world—as a simplistic manifestation of evil, even patriarchy. The most crucial aspect of a comprehensive approach to justice, for Wadud, is walking the walk: that is, living out professed progressive values in one's personal life, thereby collapsing the public and private spheres. And the family is the most important space wherein such commitments need to be actualized. Indeed, it is hypocritical to support women's rights in public while being complicit in patriarchal practices in one's own household. A genuine commitment to justice, then, must transcend discourse, impacting one's most intimate relationships.

²⁷² Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 267.