Muslim Feminist Scholars and the Politics of Qur'an Reinterpretation: A Reading of Asma Barlas

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Abstract:

This article examines the role of Muslim feminist scholars in the reinterpretation of the Qur'an in the discourse of Islamic feminism with particular reference to Asma Barlas, a controversial "'Qur'an-only" feminist. In pursuance of their identity struggle, Muslim feminists have adopted a new gender sensitive methodology of rereading texts. This is particularly true for Barlas, who argued concisely that traditional exegetes manipulated Quranic interpretation in their favour to oppress women and to establish their "male-centric" authority. In other words, the classical methodology of *tafsir* is patriarchal, misogynistic and anti-woman. Hence, recontextualization of the Qur'an by adopting a new gender-oriented methodology of interpretation is not only desirable but also necessary. For Barlas, this will ensure the active participation of women in *tafsir* and create a link between Quranic hermeneutics and the project of gender equality. This article critically analyses Barlas's views within the Islamic paradigm and examines to what extent she breaks with patriarchal tradition in *tafsir*. Furthermore, it concludes that Barlas' rereading of texts is nothing but a biased attempt to politicise Quranic interpretation and to provide theological legitimacy to a secular-oriented discourse, Islamic feminism.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gender equality, misogyny, Islamic paradigm, Islamic feminism, text reading, women liberation, polygyny, veiling, seclusion

1.1 Introduction

The politics of "'rereading" texts goes back to nineteenth-century Egypt when Arab feminists began campaigning for gender justice and improving the status of Egyptian woman under the platform of the secular feminist movement. Those feminists were inspired by Qasim Amin, an Egyptian nationalist, and Muhammad 'Abduh, the father of Islamic modernism who engineered efforts to bring social and educational reform to Egyptian society making Quranic teachings their point of reference (Badran, 2002; Wadud, 2010). Using his pioneering book, *Women's Liberation* (*Taḥrir al-Mar'a*), Amin argued that it was necessary to educate women, improve their condition and ensure their active participation in the public sphere for the nation's progress. This book was

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to become the basis of feminism not only in Egypt but in the entire Arab world. Later, feminist discourse became more grounded in Egyptian society with the support of 'Abduh, who contended that it was in the interests of the nation to educate women, recruit them and incorporate them into the political process as symbols of modernity (Ahmed, 1992).

Towards the end of the 20th century, a paradigm shift transpired with the transition from secular feminism (which concentrated on nationalist, democratic and human rights discourses) to Islamic feminism, a discourse that seeks to gain authority grounded in Islamic religious texts. In these circumstances, Muslim feminist scholars changed their campaign into a definition of identity and sought theological legitimacy within an Islamic paradigm to respond to the political reverberations and anti-feminist theories of the early twentieth century. Within this new framework, they adopted a new methodology of rereading the Qur'an and early Islamic literature to challenge what they call "patriarchal interpretation" in order to establish their relevance. Similarly, they have claimed the right to engage in *ijtihad* (interpretive reasoning of Islamic law), including the right to lead communal prayers as an extension of a larger reform process within Islam. It was against this background that Asma Barlas, a twenty-first-century feminist, adopted a new hermeneutical approach vis-à-vis gender-sensitive verses in the Qur'an to critique what she calls an "anti-patriarchal rereading." Barlas has helped Muslim feminists advocate gender equality within an Islamic paradigm, using her book *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (2002) as a major vehicle. Her central argument is that the principles of gender equality are enshrined in the Qur'an but are distorted by a patriarchal reading (Barlas, 2002). She further insists that traditional exeges was manipulated by males simply to oppress women. Rereading the Qur'an is therefore necessary to exonerate its texts from the charges of being "anti-women" since it "has been continually decontextualized and recontextualized in light of Muslim sexual politics. And this politics is overwhelmingly male-centric" (Barlas 2002). The purpose of this article, therefore, is not only to critically analyze Barlas' Quranic hermeneutics but also to examine to what extent she does in fact break with the patriarchal tradition in Quranic interpretation.

1.2 Islamic Feminism and the Politics of Identity

Although feminist ideas have existed in the Middle East and elsewhere long before the emergence of colonialism and nationalism, they first gained currency in Egyptian society through male reformers within the context of modernist and nationalist movements (Haddad, n.d). These ideas arose from the belief that educating women and elevating their status was part, and perhaps even the major part, of a fundamental process

of transformation that society must undergo for the nation to progress (Kandiyoti, 1991). Further, education was seen as the only "effective means to national maturity and real independence" (Hourani, 1983). Under the reign of Muhammad Ali, Egypt became one of the most developed countries outside Europe because of his project of reform and modernization. Ali dispatched a number of emissaries to Europe to acquire Western thought and the Western heritage. It was this openness to Western culture that inspired those students to become reformists and advocates of feminism in the subsequent years.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a new chapter was opened in *tafsir* with the emergence of Arab feminism in Egypt, which was the first country in the Muslim world where the advocacy of women's rights and the feminist movement began (Badran, 2002; Wadud, 2010). In these circumstances, Muhammad 'Abduh (the father of Islamic modernism) and Qasim Amin (an Egyptian nationalist) engineered efforts to reform Egyptian society and improve the status of women, making the teachings of the Qur'an their point of departure. Amin, in particular, devoted much of his energy to the cause of the liberation of women, arguing that it was in the interests of the nation to educate women, recruit them and incorporate them into the political process as symbols of modernity (Ahmed, 1992; Mitchell, 1988). His famous work *Tahrir al-Mar'ah* (The Liberation of Women, 1899) initiated the discourse on women's education and emphasized the moral upbringing of children. He went on to explain, however, that the backwardness of Egyptian women stemmed from their being deprived of legitimate rights granted to them by Islam. For a woman to manage her household effectively, she should attain "a certain amount of intellectual and cultural knowledge" because any woman who "lacks this upbringing will be unable adequately to carry out her role in society or in the family" (Amin, 1998, p. 12; Najmabadi, 1998). On the other hand, Amin criticized some of the existing practices prevalent in his society, such as polygyny and the veil, condemning them as un-Islamic and contradictory to the true spirit of Islam. In response to widespread criticism and the storm of protest generated by his discourse, Amin published his second book, *Al-Mar'ah al Jadidah* (*The New Woman*), in 1900 (Amin, 1998). These two books formed the basis of feminism not only in Egypt but the entire Arab world.

Feminist discourse later became "'grounded" in Egypt with the support of a leading religious reformist, Muhammad 'Abduh. Using his independent method of intellectual inquiry, 'Abduh "espoused a process of reinterpretation that adapted traditional concepts and institutions to modern realities, resulting in a transformation of their meaning to accommodate and legitimate change" (Haddad, n.d). Further, like Amin, he also

argued that it was in the interests of the nation to educate women, recruit them and incorporate them into the political process as symbols of modernity. He similarly shared Amin's belief that the backwardness of Egyptian women originated from their deprivation of legitimate rights granted to them by Islam (Ahmed, 1992: 144).

It would be fair to say that despite the fact that advocacy of female emancipation was initiated by men, it was not long before Muslim women joined the trend and started demanding religious, educational and social reforms through various women's organizations. In 1919, for example, the wives of some prominent nationalists, like Huda Sha'arawi, led hundreds of women on a march in solidarity with the anti-colonial struggle of the nationalists. This development was seen as the first political involvement of women in the course of national reform. This active participation paved the way for them to advocate their rights in subsequent years. Later, in 1922, Sha'arawi and her exponents formed the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), a movement that was to become their major vehicle towards women's liberation in the next few decades (Ahmed, 1984). 1923 was a benchmark year in Egyptian feminist history. Believing that the veil and seclusion were the most powerful signifiers of woman's oppression and relegation to the private world, Sha'arawi removed her veil after the Rome conference to indicate her objection to its "'imposition." Later, she extended her campaign to include "a broad agenda of claims for political, social, economic, and legal rights" for women (Badran, 1991). On the other hand, Malak Hifni Nassef consolidated Egyptian feminist discourse by making it accessible to a wider audience through her writings.

Thereafter, feminism gained the support of the upper-class men in the Ummah Party. Some middle-class nationalists, however, like Mustafa Kamil of the *Watani* party, were opposed to the feminist struggle, having perceived it as a threat because it would encourage Western influence (Badran, 1991). Moreover, members of the *Watani* party were conservative in favouring a caliphate system of government. It was within this context that nationalists positioned their views concerning the role of women in society and their own responses towards feminism. In these circumstances, feminist ideas continued to enjoy a supportive environment, despite the prevalence of liberal nationalism (Badran, 1991). Thus, the active participation of Egyptian women in the course of their anti-colonial nationalist struggle helped them construct their identity as "mothers of the nation" (Shakri, 1998, p. 131). It should be noted that, during the colonial era, men's approach to feminism was often more radical than women's. Amin, for example, called for the elimination of veiling, a philosophical position which female feminists compromised. In the postcolonial era, however, women's liberal feminism became more radical after male feminist rhetoric had disappeared. Further, the intersection of colonial and

nationalist projects with gender-related issues necessitated the contextualization of the Egyptian discussion of motherhood within the paradigm of the colonial-nationalist discourse on modernity (Shakri, 1998). For this reason, nationalist discourse "sought to uphold women as a source of cultural integrity," believing that "the advancement of the nation in the material fields of law [and] administration" was contextualized "in such a way that progress for the ummah, or community, could not be achieved independently of progress in the domain of women, and more specifically mothers" (Shakri, 1998, p 130).

1.3 Islamic Feminism: Paradigm Shift in the Twenty-First Century

Muslim feminists have, since the beginning of twenty first century – precisely after the colonial era – been engaged in a significant process of identity struggle, self-renaming in light of modernity and the global community. In addition, to respond to the political reverberations and anti-feminist theories of the early twentieth century, they changed their discourse into a definition of identity to defend their legitimacy and validate their demand for change. Consequently, they sought to reread the Qur'an and early Islamic literature to challenge what they call "'patriarchal interpretation" to give theological legitimacy to their course. This formed the basis of Islamic feminism. In these circumstances, Muslim feminists such as Asma Barlas adopted a new feminist hermeneutical approach vis-à-vis gender-sensitive verses in the Qur'an to challenge what they call "'anti-patriarchal rereading." For them, early Muslim scholars interpreted the Qur'an to reflect their socioeconomic and political settings. But this exegesis "is faulted for its atomistic methodology and lack of recognition of the Qur'an's structure of thematic unity" and the reason for this fault is that "all traditional Qur'an interpretations were written by men" (Wadud, 1992, p. 4). Every "'reading" of the Quranic text, argues Barlas, reflects the perspectives, circumstances and background of the person who does the reading. That is to say, "it is not the text or its principles that change, but the capacity and particularity of the understanding and reflection of the principles of the text within a community of people" (Barlas, 2002, p.5). Within this framework, Barlas, began her context-focused rereading of the Qur'an.

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it. In addition, she has proposed a "Quranic hermeneutics" that permits Muslims to argue in favour of gender equality and patriarchal mentality within an Islamic framework. In her recent work, she analyzes Muslims' methodology in their interpretation of religious texts, especially the patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'an, a topic she has explored in her book *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (2002). Her other works include *Islam, Muslims, and the US: Essays on Religion and Politics* (2004) and *Democracy, Nationalism, and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia* (1995) (<http://www.asmabarlas.com/cv.html>).

Barlas (2002) sets out to examine what she calls the patriarchal nature of medieval interpretations concerning gender-related verses and to provide what she considers "alternative interpretations" that respond to modern challenges in order to liberate women from the prevailing patriarchal mentality. Beginning with a historical analysis of religious authority, Barlas sought to demonstrate how cultural influence, patriarchal and social settings to a larger extent affect the mode of Quranic interpretation, adding that any interpretation of a sacred text necessarily reflects the viewpoint of the interpreters. Her central argument is not only that the Qur'an is not patriarchal but also that "the teachings of the Qur'an are radically egalitarian and even anti-patriarchal" (Barlas, 2002, p, 93). "As many recent studies reveal," Barlas (2002) observes, "women's status and roles in Muslim societies, as well as patriarchal structures and gender relationships, are a function of multiple purposes, most of which have nothing to do with religion" (p. 2). She then goes on to analyze the Qur'an's position on a wide variety of gender issues in order to argue that patriarchy finds no support of any kind in the teachings of the Qur'an. In what follows, we will examine Barlas' hermeneutic through an analytical study of her "rereadings" gender-sensitive verses.

1.4 The Concept of Gender Justice

Gender justice entails addressing and ending the problems of inequalities that exist between women and men and lead to women's oppression in society. These inequalities "may be in the distribution of resources and opportunities that enable individuals to build human, social, economic and political capital"; they also involve "the conceptions of human dignity, personal autonomy and rights that deny women physical integrity and the capacity to make choices about how to live their lives" (Kamlian, 2005, p. 6). Moreover, gender discourse demands the prevention and sanctioning of all actions that limit women's access to the public sphere on the grounds of their gender. The Islamic religion has a very fundamental concern with justice and equity and thereby enjoins the internationalization of these norms among its adherents. For this reason, the Qur'an

destroys all hierarchical structures by promoting gender equality. As Barlas (2002) points out, the Qur'an clearly explains that "humans, though biologically different, are ontologically and ethically-morally the same/similar inasmuch as both women and men originated in a single self, have been endowed with the same natures, and make up two halves of a single pair." The fact that both men and women originated from a single "'self" destroys any claim of gender superiority. "Male and female thus are not only inseparable in the Qur'an but they also are ontologically the same, hence equal" (p. 134). But "Muslims continue to view them as binary opposites and as unequal (p. 134)." "The concept of sexual hierarchy is supported by the traditional belief that woman was created from man and is hence inferior to him" (Barlas, 2002).

In support of this, Haddad (1982) maintains that "in the broader scope of Islamic tradition ... the image of Eve became altered, often to the point where she alone was seen as responsible for the downfall of her mate" (p. 135). The Qur'an does not in fact make any reference to the name of Adam's partner or her creation, yet patriarchal interpreters "continue to voice the traditional view that Eve is responsible for Adam's fall" (Haddad, 1982, p. 142). Thus, the traditional interpretations of Eve were used to create women's culpability, thereby justifying her sexual inferiority and her oppression. On the other hand, Wadud (2000) concisely argues that recontextualization of the Qur'an through new modes of reading and methods of interpretation is not only desirable but also necessary. Since Quranic knowledge is eternally evolving, the Qur'an must therefore be continually interpreted by the formulation of a "hermeneutical model which derives basic ethical principles for further developments and legal considerations by giving precedence to general statements rather than particulars" (Wadud, 2000, p. 30). To critique patriarchal interpretations that have justified gender inequality, Wadud concentrates on verses that have been misinterpreted and assimilated into societal patterns as indicating the superiority of man over woman. Using her hermeneutical methodology, she analyzes the traditional interpretations of gender-related verses from linguistic, theological and juridical perspectives. She further presents alternative interpretations that will conform both to a Quranic egalitarian awareness and to modern perceptions of the impact of culture and context on the development of religion. Concerning the narrative of Adam's creation upon which the theory of women's inferiority is based, Wadud (2000) argues that the Qur'an "does not consider woman a type of man in the presentation of its themes." The Qur'an explains that "man and woman are two categories of the human species given the same or equal consideration and endowed with the same or equal potential" (p. 15).

The above arguments suffer, however, from some limitations since Barlas makes

no attempt to differentiate between the major sources of Islam and the opinion of Quranic interpreters. The understanding of the configuration of the roles of men and women in Islamic society would have to be based on the teachings of primary sources of Islam (the Qur'an and sound *Sunnah*) and the proper methodology of interpretation. The Qur'an is the primary source to be used in judging Muslims' actions, rather than a mere set of theories. Also, "*[t]afsir* is (hu)man-made and, therefore, subject to human nuances, peculiarities, and limitations" (Wadud, 2000, p. 15). Accordingly, the opinion of any scholar, jurist or interpreter, however learned he appears to be, must not in any way be equated with the Qur'an or sound *Sunnah*, since only the Prophet Muhammad is infallible. Indeed, the erroneous interpretation of the Qur'an results from a lack of contextualization of its rulings, misunderstanding the circumstances surrounding the revelation of a particular verse, or a lack of familiarity with *hadith* literature (or ignoring a *hadith* related to a particular verse) and relying on the lexical and literal meaning of the text (Badawi, 1974).

Moreover, the universalism of Quranic doctrine entails recognizing the historical context and specificity of its teaching, since the Qur'an, as Rahman (1982) acknowledges, "provides either explicitly or implicitly, the rationales behind solutions and rulings, from which one can deduce general principles" (p. 133). But critical scholarship involves favouring the formulation of hermeneutic principles of reinterpretation of the Qur'an and adopting a thematic-historical method in its contextualization. For Rahman, this methodology is necessary since "all interpretations are historically and geographically contextualized"; therefore, "Muslims must exert every effort to understand those contexts in order to be able to distinguish the essential from the contingent" (Sonn, 1996, p. 65). In light of this position, Barlas would appear to be overambitious in her claims. Her conclusions would have been more persuasive if she had discussed how modern (male) interpreters contextualised the Qur'an to reflect the sociopolitical settings of their time. For example, 'Abduh, despite his familiarity with medieval *tafsir*, still gave particular attention to the contextualization of the Qur'an. He banned polygyny when he realised that people had started abusing the institution (Stowasser, n.d.). As regards the narratives of Adam and Eve, the Qur'an, of course, does not hold the woman sole accountable for eating from the forbidden tree: both the man and the woman are held responsible for the sin (Qur'an, 7:19-27). As Bint al-Shati (1984) observes,

> the truth is that in the Book of Islam there is no reference to Satan deceiving Hawwa first or to her beguiling her husband into eating of the forbidden tree which caused his deportation from the Garden. Rather, in the Noble Qur'an she is responsible, even as he is... (p. 43)

1.5 Veiling and Seclusion

Recent developments in the discourse of Islamic feminism have heightened the need to re-examine the concept of veiling and seclusion within the Islamic paradigm. In the Islamic tradition, the concept of veiling involves "keeping women confined within the home and covering them in veils whenever they venture outside of the home," whereas, in a wider context, it refers to the restriction of women's participation in the public arena, confining them to certain tasks in society (Rozario, 1992, p. 88). While seclusion and veiling have become standard practices in many Muslim countries, though to varying degrees, it is interesting to note that they predate Islam. Archaeological evidence confirms that veiling and seclusion originated in the urban centres of the pre-Islamic Middle East, where women suffered all kinds of oppression. For example, women were excluded from participation in the public sphere and their sexuality was designated as men's property. In these circumstances, the veil was used as a major yardstick for judging women's decency and determining their respectability. For this reason, veiling was regarded as one of those cultural traditions and alien social structures incorporated into Islam after its expansion in the post-conquest era (Stowasser, n.d.).

In modern times, however, Muslim feminists have continued to challenge the imposition of the veil on Muslim women within the discourse of an Islamic worldview. Mernissi (1982), for example, considers the veil a "device" tactically imposed on women not only "to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home," but also "to highlight their illegal position on male territory by means of a mask" (p.189). Thus, the patriarchal construction of the veil is aimed at distancing women from the site of power and the public domain. In support of this, Barlas (2002) argues concisely that veiling and seclusion were enforced only on the wives of the prophet. Since it is clearly depicted in the Qur'an that the wives of the prophet were unlike other women, it may be said that these injuncctions "are not a universal mandate for all Muslim men to force women to comply with them" (p. 55). If the exclusion of women from public life is encouraged in Islam, she argues, then the Quranic rulings that enjoin women to avert their gaze when they come across people who are not their relations would be unnecessary. Barlas (2002) goes on to explain, however, that the reference in the verses in question is clearly made to the *jilbab* (cloak) and *khumur* (shawl) which "cover the bosom (*juyub*) and neck, not the face, head, hands or feet" (p.55). For her, the veil was imposed "on the grounds that women's bodies are pudendal, hence sexually corrupting to those who see them"; in these circumstances it is "necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing women's bodies by concealing them." Accordingly, the veil was imposed to protect Muslim women from the molestation of "a slave-owning *jahili* society" where "sexual abuse"

prevailed (Barlas, 2002, pp. 54-56). Conservative exegetes, she argues, then distorted the meaning of the verses by generalizing and de-historicizing their concepts simply to satisfy their motives of making the veil the hallmark of an Islamic society, thereby secluding women from the public sphere. For Sa'adawi (1982), veiling is more or less a product of pre-Islamic myth, where women are seen to be the origin of all the evils of humanity and hence need to be covered. In adhering to this belief, Kandiyoti (1991) advocates that seclusion and veiling are detrimental to the nation's progress. In addition, they violate woman's rights because they "created ignorant mothers, shallow and scheming partners, unstable marital unions, and lazy and productive members of the society" (p.10).

Barlas makes no attempt, however, to differentiate between what Muslims practise as individuals or as communities and what Islam teaches as a religion. She tends to perceive Islam as a monolithic religion where all Muslims practice its every detail in almost the same way. Of course, there are some major issues that unite all Muslims; yet there still exists cultural diversity on the basis of society, nation or race. Thus, not everything that prevails in Muslim countries or cultures is necessarily Islamic. In Iran, for example, the condition of women was largely affected by political paradigms and the transition period in the post-revolution era (Najmabadeh, 1991). Iranian women participated actively with all their resources to make the Iranian revolution possible. Thereafter, they became socially involved in the public sphere and occupied several positions. But when the power was consolidated, strict rules were imposed and harsh policies were targeted at women. These rules and policies included the "annulment of many laws seen as un-Islamic, elimination of women from the judiciary, segregation of women in public places ... and the campaign to impose [the] veil" (Najmabadeh, 1991, p. 52). This is, of course ,an injustice against women by an Iranian regime that has no connection of any kind with Islam. Islamic history confirms that women were not caged behind iron bars or regarded as worthless creatures, as was the case during the pre-Islamic era. On the contrary, at the time of Prophet Muhammad women were found enjoy considerable freedoms, including access to the public sphere. For example, early Muslim women used to attend communal prayers like the Friday service, 'Eid and the lessons of the prophet (Muslim, 34: 1932). Furthermore, they used to fight in the Muslim armies, nurse the wounded, prepare supplies and serve the warriors, as Anas narrates: "on the day of Uhud, Aisha and Um Salim, their sleeves rolled up, would carry water in skin bags on their backs and empty the contents into the soldiers' open mouths" (Muslim, 34: 1811).

Moreover, it is not correct to say that seclusion is an impediment to the nation's

progress. Historical records show how Aisha Taimur (a famous Egyptian writer) continued her struggle after her marriage by reconciling "domestic and non-domestic preoccupations" (Hatem, 1998, p. 80). On the other hand, Kandiyoti would appear to be overambitious in his claim that seclusion of women secludes their minds. A serious weakness with this argument is that she fails to take Taimur's childhood experience into account. Aisha's veiled mother, for example, had compromised and used her intelligence to facilitate Aisha's willingness to pursue her new learning, despite her opposition to it. If she had wished, she could have undermined the efforts of her husband and daughter in achieving that dream (Hatem, 1998, p. 78). An additional limitation of Barlas' argument is that it does not explain why "conservatives" impose sexual segregation in favour of the sexes mixing freely. It is argued that free mixing of men and women has its moral and social consequences. For example, it leads to the disintegration of morality, the loss of any sense of chastity and shyness. Furthermore, high rates of rape, illegitimate births and divorce, a reduction in the number of marriages, the destruction of family life and the spread of lethal diseases are some of the bitter fruits of the dissolution of barriers separating men and women as a result of sexual freedom.

An important question that needs to be asked is if the veil was indeed imposed only on the wives of the prophet. It is clearly stated in Qur'an 24:31 that women "*should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers ... sons ...*" and other relatives. Another relevant verse reads:

> O Prophet, tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons [when abroad]; that is most convenient that they should be known [as such] and not be molested.... (Quran, 33:59)

A renowned Quranic commentator, Ali (1947), comments: "This is for all Muslim women, those of the prophet's household, as well as the others. They were asked to cover themselves with outer garments when walking out of doors" (p.1126). He further defines *jalabeeb* (the term used in this passage): "An outer garment; a long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom" (Ali, 1947). Further, by wearing the veil, a woman feels more secure, respected, modest and dignified. While concealing her sexuality, she is at the same time revealing her identity and femininity (Seikaley, n.d.). Of course, there are some extremists who, based on their understanding, have gone so far as to claim that the face should be covered. This interpretation has no support in the Qur'an or the authentic *Sunnah*. The fact remains, however, that veiling is enjoined not to degrade women but to protect their modesty and sexuality; women wear the *hijab*, not because they are under certain constraints but to fulfil their religious commitments.

1.6 Polygyny

One of the most significant current discussions in the discourse on gender equality is the institution of polygamy in the form of polygyny. This tradition is probably the most misunderstood and vehemently condemned by feminists and non-Muslims alike. According to Muslim tradition, a man has the right to marry up to four wives at any given time. In her attempt to challenge the institution of polygamy, Ahmad traces its origin and points out that it was institutionalized as a result of "intermingling" with Judaic and Zoroastrian socioreligious systems brought about by Islamic conquests (Ahmed, 1992, p. 62). She further explains that the Abbasid dynasty (749-1258) appears to have been the worst regime in terms of women's oppression. It engaged excessively in polygamy and concubinage, while secluding women from public and social life. In support of this, Mernissi (1982) argues that sexual inequality is evident in the deeply rooted traditional Muslim family that "condemns women alone to monogamy and the control of sexual instinct," while men are given the right to have "four legal wives" and to take "as many concubines" as their "purchasing power permits" (p. 187). In adhering to this belief, al-Hibri (1982) asserts, "it seems rather evident that the whole issue of polygamy is the result of patriarchal attempts to distort the Qur'an in the male's favour" (p. 217). The verse in the Qur'an that has been used most prominently to justify polygyny is:

> Marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one.... (4: 3)

According to al-Hibri (1982), those who are determined to practice polygyny tend to overlook another relevant Quranic passage that reads:

> You are never able to be fair and just among women, even if you tried hard .... (Quran, 4:129)

This lack of justice lies in the practical impossibility of sharing love equally in a relationship involving more than one wife. Barlas shares this view, contending that since a man is emotionally incapable of loving more than one wife equally, polygyny is illegal (2002).

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether polygamy is the rule or an exception. The Qur'an clearly explains that polygyny is an exception, not the rule, given that the only direct reference to polygyny is in passage 4:3, which stipulates its conditional permissibility. It is clear from the verse in question that polygyny was legalized to address the contingencies of the Battle of Uhud, where dozens of Muslims died, leaving a number of widows and orphans behind. As a result of this imbalance,

polygyny was permitted to provide a moral, financial and practical solution to their problems. The main weakness of the arguments is the failure to contextualise the endorsement of polygyny in some Middle Eastern countries. In Egypt, for example, polygyny was endorsed when women started demanding their equal right to divorce in the 1960s (Hatem, 1998). Some have argued that polygyny is an obstacle to the progress of a nation. A serious weakness with this argument, however, is that there is no link between polygyny and the degree of civilization of a nation, as this practice has been in existence everywhere over the centuries. Furthermore, the institution of polygyny is supported by way of three arguments. First, while ensuring progeny through a second young wife, the system compassionately protects the older, sick, or barren wife against divorce (Al-Aqqad, 1974). Second, polygyny is an effective way of addressing demographic problems created by wars. Third, polygyny is far better than the type of monogamy practiced in some countries, which permits extramarital sexual relationships and consequently leads to social hypocrisy (Bint al-Shati, 1984; Haddad, n.d).

1.7 Conclusion

This study has shown that the politics of text reinterpretation stretches back to early nineteenth-century Egypt when the emergence of feminism in the Middle East coincided with the struggle of nationalist movements. Towards the end of twentieth century, however, a paradigm shift transpired with a transition from secular-oriented feminism to Islamic feminism, a discourse grounded on the theological authority of the text. In these circumstances, Muslim feminist scholars changed their campaign into a struggle for identity and sought theological legitimacy within an Islamic framework. Their basic argument is that the principles of gender equality enshrined in the Qur'an are obstructed by patriarchal interpretations. Consequently, they proposed an alternative "rereading" of texts that recontextualizes gender-sensitive verses in a manner that corresponds with their hermeneutical approach.

Moreover, the study has argued that condemning traditional exegetes for the manipulation of texts is unfair because no classical scholar had ever disputed women's right in Islam or manipulated his exegesis to oppress woman. While it is true that there are cases of gender injustice and issues of sexual abuse in Islamic societies, the "rereading" of texts is certainly not the best way of addressing them. Of course, they should be exposed and challenged but not at the expense of the Islamic tradition. Similarly, the study has demonstrated that even though the Qur'an is the central sacred text that unites all Muslims; there still exist cases of oppression of women and cultural diversity in some Muslim communities. Thus, not everything that prevails in Muslim countries or

cultures is necessarily Islamic.

While it is true that contextual reading is an important tool through which Quranic verses could best be interpreted, it does not necessarily provide the correct/perfect interpretation. In other words, although reading verses in their context may be valid and correct, there is no guarantee about the authenticity of the interpretation. Furthermore, applying a hermeneutical approach in "rereading" texts is an indirect way of claiming a "definitive reading" of something that contradicts the Quranic heritage of *ikhtilaf*, the possibility of producing a number of interpretations from a text. Thus, if Barlas condemns traditional exegetes for "manipulating" the real message of the Qur'an, her hermeneutical approach is no less distorting. Given the fact that feminist scholars have been actively engaged for over two decades in rereading the Qur'an to seek legitimacy, the expediency of objective critique of their hermeneutics is not only relevant but essential.

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