



ISLAMIC FEMINISM: WHEN THE QURAN MEETS GENDER EQUALITY

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New economic and sociopolitical dynamics sparked by globalization have increasingly put the condition of women and the traditional patriarchal order in Islamic countries under the international spotlight. In these countries, family and social roles have traditionally been gendered, a condition mostly justified by recurring to religious sources. This male-dominated mindset started to be shaken in its foundations in the last decades of the 20th century when, due to social and economic transformations, an increasingly educated female population began to contribute to the family income, partially reversing the traditional distribution of tasks and decisional power within the family pattern. As properly explained by Margot Badran, a historian and expert on Islamic feminism, *"cette instauration d'une égalité de fait au sein de la famille s'accompagna de l'expression de principe du partage du rôle de chef de famille entre les époux. (...) Parallèlement, le concept de «genre», outil*



d'analyse créé aux Etats-Unis par les specialists des études féminines, faisait son chemin dans les milieux universitaires.”^{1 2}

Thus, when the Western-crafted concept of “gender equality” made its way also to the Islamic world, it somehow found a fertile ground to stimulate the debate and breed some new ideas and perspectives; these openings are exactly the theme of this contribution.

What is fundamental to underline is that while the call for gender equality implies the adoption of a paradigmatic change that is still ongoing worldwide³, the issue in all those contexts permeated by Islam is even more complicated: female rights and conditions are often ruled by religious sources to whom Islamic communities tend to wholly or partially look up to when it comes to social and family matters. Hence, a potential reform in this sense firstly has to come to terms with the traditional, centuries-old reading of religious sources, where we usually find little space for the equality between men and women. In this framework, it is necessary to distinguish between the text and its interpretations, between what is actually holy for the believers and what has been made holy later on, between Islamic sources and traditional exegesis.

This is indeed the core of so-called Islamic feminism, a new transnational trend that started to spread within academics and intellectual reformists in Islamic countries at the end of the 20th century. This “*contemporary interpretive knowledge project*”⁴ is centered on the attempt to re-read Islamic holy sources through the

¹ Throughout this analysis, we are going to mention and/or quote some of the authors who up to now have contributed the most to the debate about Islam and gender equality. In order to better understand each author’s specific approach, please refer to the bibliography.

² M. Badran, “Où en est le féminisme islamique ?”, *Critique internationale- Presse de Sciences Po*, vol. 1, n. 46, 2010, pp. 25-44, p. 30.

³ Please refer to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal n.5, “Gender equality”. (<https://www.sdgfund.org/goal-5-gender-equality>)

⁴ M. Al-Sharmani, “Islamic Feminism- Transnational and national reflections”, *Approaching Religion*, Vol. 4, N. 2, December 2014, pp. 83-94, p. 83.



lenses of gender equality, thus producing a religious knowledge that could be defined to be “*gender sensitive*”⁵.

In order to so, the proponents of Islamic feminism – mostly women – claim for themselves the right to interpret Islamic religious sources, smashing a tradition of male exegesis that is fourteen centuries old and has produced a mainstream interpretation dominated by a patriarchal dogma.

As Bahlul clearly explained while introducing the concept of an interpretative process (*ijihad*) that takes into account the gender factor,

*“the basic idea behind “gender-conscious ijihad” is to bring out the relevance of gender to the interpretation of religious texts and the elaboration of ethical insights which they embody. Hitherto such tasks have been the exclusive domain of men, who often proceeded to fashion God in a masculinist image that could be relied on to serve and protect their interests. The challenge which an Islamic feminism faces is to go over the religious texts and traditions with the intention of reclaiming at least part of them for women.”*⁶

Islamic feminism has been interestingly defined as a “*two-front battle*”, fought against Islamic traditionalism and Western Imperialism at once⁷. This definition explains why the characterization of the intellectuals that more or less overtly ‘belong’ to this school of thought as ‘Islamic feminists’ is far from linear. Indeed, some would prefer not using this label to avoid being associated with Western feminism, “*an intellectual tradition that is inescapably entangled with the history of Western colonialism and*

⁵ Idem

⁶ Cfr. R. Bahlul, “On the Idea of Islamic Feminism”, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, n. 20, 2000, pp. 34-63. (<https://www.juragentrum.org/topics/islam/mw/en/bahlul.htm>)

⁷ R. Bahi, “Islamic and Secular Feminisms: Two Discourses Mobilized for Gender Justice”, *European University Institute Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies - Mediterranean Programme Series*, vol. 25, 2011, p. 5.



the othering of non-western Muslim women"⁸. This is the reason why some have opted for such a simple label as *'believing women'*, or *'Muslim women scholar-activists'*, which underlines the militant character of this category⁹.

In any case, even those who end up accepting such *'Islamic feminists'* classification tend to stress its Islamic flavor, as *"it qualifies our feminist agenda, drawing lines of demarcation among trends and orientation"*¹⁰.

As Badran explains, whatever we decide to call it, this paradigm represents *"l'oeuvre de musulmanes qui se qualifient elles-mêmes de « militantes lettrées » et proclament explicitement leur engagement religieux en s'appliquant le terme de « croyantes » (mu'minat)"*¹¹.

Indeed, the force of rupture of Islamic feminists is especially represented by the fact that they act *"within the systems that are trying to marginalize them"*¹²: using the same arguments of the most conservatists, namely Islamic sources, these feminists try to overcome patriarchy, blaming it to be essentially against Islam. Thus, comparing it with secular feminism, this project goes even one step beyond: while secular feminists during the 20th century in Islamic countries called for the equality of men and women in the public space, in their capacity of citizens, calling for gender equality within Islam bears consequences on the political and social side, but also on the family and religious spheres.¹³

Islamic feminism ultimately is a search for compatibility based on a deconstruction, a sort of dismantling of all the patriarchal and misogynic interpretations of the Islamic corpus, to suggest a new

⁸ M. Al-Sharmani, « Islamic Feminism- Transnational and national reflections », p. 84.

⁹ R. Bahi, "Islamic and Secular Feminisms: Two Discourses Mobilized for Gender Justice", p. 6.

¹⁰ O. Abu Bakr, 'Islamic feminism? What's in a name? Preliminary reflections', Middle East Women's Studies Review, 2001.

¹¹ M. Badran, « Où en est le féminisme islamique ? », p. 30.

¹² M. Cooke, "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies", *Nepantla : Views from South*, n.1 vol.1, 2000, 91-110, p. 93.

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 28-29.



reading stemming from the basic pillars of gender justice and equality. When we use the expression 'Islamic corpus', we hint to the fact that these projects of re-interpretation have been focusing on the Quran as well as on the *Ahadith* (the sayings of the Prophet) and on the *Shari'a* (Islamic law); anyway, this analysis specifically dwells into feminist deconstructions of the Quran, since we deem that they represent the most logic access point to seize the core of this movement. Indeed, as explained by the Muslim and feminist sociologist Hamidi, the Holy Book constitutes a "*référence ultime pour rendre crédible ce discours dans les sphères théologiques et intellectuelles musulmanes*"¹⁴.

According to Bahlul, "*giving voice to that which has been passed over in silence by male mujtahids is not the only task which a gender-conscious method of ijihad can carry out. It can also offer a "re-reading" of the texts; it can search for alternative interpretations and neglected possible meanings*"¹⁵. How is this search carried out?

From the point of view of methodology, Islamic feminism disposes of the same 'toolkit' used by the traditional Islamic establishment, namely *tafsir* (exegesis) and *ijihad*. An expertise in sociology, history, anthropology and linguistics, as well as a feminist mindset, complete the picture¹⁶.

More specifically, as explained by Hidayatullah, professor and expert of gender dynamics within the Islamic religion, there is a common methodological framework that allows us to track the existence of an Islamic feminist movement at a transnational level, namely the fact that all of these thinkers use three common

¹⁴ M. Hamidi, "La pensée féministe islamique à l'ère de la Mondialisation : entre stratégie herméneutique et Mobilisation transnationale", *L'homme et la société*, n.198, October-December 2015, pp. 113-125, p.116.

¹⁵ R. Bahlul, "On the Idea of Islamic Feminism".

¹⁶ M. Badran, "Islamic feminism: what's in a name?", *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, n. 569, January 2002, p. 4.



strategies to reinterpret the Quran: historical contextualization, holistic reading, and the paradigm of *tawhid*¹⁷.

First and foremost, the contextualization of a verse is what allows the believer to distinguish between universal (*'amm*) and particular verses (*khas*), between mere descriptions and normative prescriptions: *"the Qur'an (has to) be read with the understanding that its pronouncements are framed by the context of the seventh-century Arabian audience to which it is immediately addressed; in order for the text to have broader meaning outside of that immediate context, the particular historical circumstances must be acknowledged, taken into account, and examined."*¹⁸

An example of how such a method can change the interpretation of the holy text is provided by Asma Barlas, one of the most well-known Islamic feminists: the verse that invites women to cover their bodies with cloaks (33:59) is directly linked to the context of its revelation, namely a dangerous society where women needed to be protected, and according to her interpretation should only be applied in similar circumstances¹⁹.

The holistic reading relies on the principle that the core message of the Quran is the complete equality (*musawah*) of all human beings; thus, no interpreting effort could contradict this underlying principle without going against the divine message itself. It goes without saying, then, that all interpretations that deny the equality between men and women are not to be considered valid and applicable.

Finally, the paradigm of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) as intended by these thinkers represents a precise blow to patriarchy: in front of the incomparability and justness of Allah, men are nothing but fallible creatures who can only try to engage in the interpretation of the divine scripture; in this framework, the interpretation is an ongoing,

¹⁷ A. Hidayatullah, "Muslim Feminist Theology in the United States", in E. Aslan et al., *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, Peter Lang AG, Frankfurt Am Main, 2013, pp. 81-100, p. 81.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p.85.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 89-90.



open process where claiming to hold the truth equates to raise oneself at the level of God - that is, a blasphemy. In parallel, also claiming the superiority of men over women is to be condemned: *"to construct hierarchies between human beings—to attempt to evaluate the superiority of one group or individual over another— is to assume a role that belongs exclusively to God. Such an act amounts to putting oneself in the position of God and assuming God's authority; as such, Muslim feminist theologians argue, it is an act of shirk (associating something else with God's power)."*²⁰

One of the critical points of Islamic feminism is what we have also presented as one of its strengths and peculiarities, namely the will to loyally stick to the Quranic text to advance new, egalitarian religious interpretations. Indeed, since the Quran is divine and immutable, any call for (gender) equality must already be there, being it explicit or not; this implies the fact that in order to legitimate their views, Islamic feminists have to find justification and legitimacy for their egalitarian view directly in the scripture.

This exercise, that requires an excellent *maitrise* of the text, may somehow seem a little forced, maybe exactly because - as these thinkers themselves argue - we have been used to centuries and centuries of traditional male interpretations. To clarify this point, it is useful to report the words of Barlas, dealing with the issue of polygyny: *"the Quran (...) does not privilege male in its treatment of polygyny. Odd as it may sound to us today, particularly given its abuses by Muslims historically, in the Quran polygyny serves a very specific purpose: that of securing justice for female orphans."* The author continues by explaining how *"since Muslim exegesis of the Quran's position on polygyny is the most notoriously decontextualized of all"*, it is necessary to reread and contextualize the concerned verse (4:3), and to operate a text analysis to understand what it actually means: *"the Quran is not giving all Muslim men the right to marry multiple wives, but only those guardians of female orphans who fear they may not be able to treat*

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 95.



their wars justly outside of marriage tie. To me this implies (...) that polygyny is being restricted to the female orphans.”²¹

On the other hand, the decision of wholly accepting the Quranic word as divine may lead Islamic feminists to an impasse in those cases where the literal meaning of the text itself, and not just its traditional *tafsir*, evokes a misogynist or discriminatory principle that seems difficult to read otherwise. In these cases, one may decide to introduce a backup reading through more or less intelligible techniques, such as a contextualized and complicated textual analysis. Alternatively, while analyzing Wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Badran suggests another way to overcome those difficult passages:

“Elle (Wadud) montre que certaines pratiques prévalant à l'époque et sur le lieu de la Révélation, et que le Coran a tolérées et encadrées plutôt que de les interdire purement et simplement, sont devenues par la suite intolérables. L'esclavage, le fait de battre sa femme ou la polygamie sont des usages dont le rejet est conforme à l'esprit et aux principes élevés du Coran ainsi qu'aux conceptions actuelles de justice et d'égalité. Aujourd'hui, mieux vaut simplement dire « non » plutôt que de se lancer dans des exégèses qui restent prisonnières de la scolastique patriarcale. Dire « non » à ce qui n'est plus acceptable ne signifie pas rejeter le Coran ; cela peut au contraire être considéré comme une célébration et une mise en actes des principes les plus élevés de l'Écriture.”²²

However, we wonder if the extreme level of agency that this Muslim philosopher grants to the believer may not go against the axioma of the divine nature of the Quran, that represents the starting point of Islamic feminism as well as the potential bridge to initiate a dialogue with the more conservatives.

²¹ A. Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, University of Texas Press, January 2019.

²² M. Badran, “Où en est le féminisme islamique ?”, p. 37



Nevertheless, building this bridge is not an easy task: not only does the development of a constructive exchange with the male Islamic establishment seem extremely complicated, but also launching a joint platform with 'classic' reformists feels unlikely²³.

This leads us to wonder about the real impact of Islamic feminism: is this project too elitist? Does it have the possibility to convince and influence the backgrounds that appear far from the progressive, intellectual contexts of its creation – both at the level of the religious establishment and at the popular one? Does it have enough strength to replace traditional, centuries-old readings of the Quran? While the efforts of Islamic feminists are extremely praiseworthy, we are afraid that their vision cannot be implemented until a real change at a political, social, educational, and cultural level occurs. Indeed, in spite of its inherent strength, Islamic feminism does not appear solid enough to spark and lead this paramount change; however, it may represent an interesting frame of reference once the whole background is ready to evolve.

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²³ Ibidem, p. 31



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