

Aysha Hidayatullah
Feminist Edges of the Qur'an
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I begin this review on a self-reflective note. When *Hypatia* approached me to consider reviewing *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, I was cautious. The challenge of analyzing commentary on a text to which I, like many Muslims, have close ties is daunting. This stems from knowing that a lack of academic rigor may not only bear consequences on one's own salvation, but also possibly create a much larger, unintended ripple effect within our social and political discourse. However, as a scholar of Islamic contemporary thought, I think it is crucial to undertake this exercise of examining the exegesis of the Qur'an in order to forge feminist possibilities for today's world.

As a self-identified feminist and Muslim, Aysha Hidayatullah is acutely aware of the responsibility of such a project and carries it well. Hidayatullah prefaces her analysis of the Qur'an with the aforementioned practical but indispensable concerns. She worries that any critique of feminist works by her predecessors, such as Riffat Hassan, Azizah Al-Hibri, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas, may work to erase Muslims' hope of ever reconciling feminist ideals with the Qur'an. Furthermore, it may provide fodder for both a violent Western imperialist agenda and for seemingly authoritative, patriarchal voices on Islam that rob women of their rights. Her acknowledgment of this awareness is significant because it allows Muslims who hold feminist ideals (even if they do not identify with the term *feminism*) and those who do not to approach her work with an open mind. This intellectually generous gesture creates an atmosphere that allows more engagement between feminist works on the Qur'an and those unconcerned with feminist aims and methodology.

The introduction and the second chapter of the book reflect an awareness of the baggage attached to the term *feminism* within an Islamic context. This term has been used to justify wars under the guise of saving Muslim women from their barbaric cultures and has also served to erase the experiences of liminals within feminism. However, Hidayatullah chooses to identify with the term in order to capture the essence and purpose of her critique, that of subverting the male-dominated interpretations of the Qur'an through a set of "dynamic epistemological tools" (45).

For scholarship on the Qur'an to be taken seriously by practicing Muslims, it has to engage with existing exegeses and move carefully with regard to established traditions. Amina Wadud, in her

seminal book *Qur'an and Woman*, functioned in a vacuum and engaged in conversations with those works that supported her preexisting beliefs in Islam's equitable treatment of men and women (Wadud 1999). This methodological move was necessary in order to forge possibilities for understanding the justice of God as it pertains to gender, independent of male-centric frameworks. Hidayatullah acknowledges that it is the work of feminists such as Wadud, Barlas, Hassan, and al-Hibri, among others, that has allowed her, a self-identified feminist, to re-engage with Islamic scholarship and explore gender relations anew. But, unlike some of her predecessors, she does not wish to rely on presupposed feminist ideals.

In her endeavor to re-examine gender relations, Hidayatullah systematically engages with some of the most influential works on the Qur'an. The book is divided into three main parts. Part I, "Historical Emergence of Feminist Qur'anic Interpretation," lays out the historical developments in the exegesis of the Qur'an, both traditional and feminist. The author explores the ways that feminist interpretations have engaged with and been affected by traditional interpretations and by Jewish and Christian feminist theological approaches.

In part II of the book, "Three Interpretive Methods of Feminist Qur'anic Interpretation," Hidayatullah articulates three main interpretive methods of reading the Qur'an: historical contextualization, intratextual reading (viewing the Qur'an as a cohesive text), and the *tawhidic* paradigm (focusing on the incomparability and supremacy of God).

Historical interpretive method places the verses of the Quran within the context in which they were revealed. This is used to figure out whether a ruling is particular to an event or is universal, and to distinguish between the descriptive and prescriptive verses. Hidayatullah writes that feminists within this framework, namely Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, deploy historically descriptive (as opposed to normative) claims regarding the Prophet that further the feminist cause but fail to give the same scrutiny to other traditions of the Prophet that may undermine those ideals. Hidayatullah advocates that feminists should pursue a more balanced approach when using the *hadiths* (traditions of the Prophet) and avoid cherry-picking preferred passages. Given the wide spectrum of the traditions, she insists that feminists should explicate their own stand on the use of the *hadiths*.

She finds similar problems with the other two frameworks of interpretation. Her critiques of Islamic feminist work focus on the underlying assumption among feminist Muslims apologists that claim that inequality between genders is a result of interpretation within a patriarchal framework, rather than an issue with the text of the Qur'an itself. According to Hidayatullah, feminist work within all three frameworks conveniently prioritized verses that emphasize gender equality over verses on gender hierarchy, by either relying on the exegetical principle that the Qur'an cannot contradict itself (the intratextual method) or on the theological principle of supremacy of God, which stands in contradiction to obedience of women to men (*tawhidic* paradigm). However, these earlier feminist works had little evidence to make such bold moves. As "believing women," these scholars are committed to the Qur'an being the exact word of God and a guide for all time; simultaneously, they are also committed to conceptions of gender equality that arise within their current social circumstances. Commitment to both, the infallibility of the Qur'an and to feminism, has led these feminist scholars to necessarily place the fault with interpretation, rather than with the text itself or with their understanding of justice as it pertains

to gender. Hidayatullah builds on the works of Raja Rhouni and Kecia Ali, who focus on the failure of feminist scholarship on the Qur'an that presupposes with certainty the truth of equality and then attempts to extract this "truth" from the Qur'an; it may be possible that it does not exist within the text.

Hidayatullah makes her most significant contribution in her last two chapters, "A Critical Assessment" and "Confronting Feminist Edges," which appear in part III. She makes the normative claim that feminist exegetes superimpose their own historically particular notion that verses in which men are deemed dominant are in contradiction with verses that support gender equity. We, present-day feminist Muslims, find the two in contradiction precisely because of how we are situated in time. So although the Qur'an explicitly asserts equal worth and moral agency of men and women, feminists tend to impose their own interpretations of what this equality ought to look like in God's plan. Thus, Hidayatullah attempts to untangle, from the Qur'anic text, what she regards as a historically specific and theoretically unclear movement of feminism.

Until the last chapter in the book, I was not certain how to proceed after accepting the irreconcilable idea of gender equity with my belief in the divine status of the Qur'an. Hidayatullah writes of new possibilities, but she is not at all clear *what those possibilities are* for feminist Muslims. She suggests that we either revise our sense of justice as it pertains to gender or renounce the Qur'an as the unaltered word of God, both of which carry an immense psychological burden for feminist Muslims. However, toward the end, Hidayatullah offers us a glimpse of what may be possible in the field of feminist exegesis of the Qur'an.

One possibility that she wants to explore is treating sex as a fluid and historically contingent concept, much like how feminist Muslims view gender. Here she relies on Joan Scott and Judith Butler's conceptions of sex to forge a new avenue of a Qur'anic interpretation where sexual difference is viewed as a shifting relation of interdependence, rather than a binary. For example, because of a technological shift, men too can now feed their children. If sexual difference is treated as context-dependent, then a woman's biological difference is no longer relevant to that particular context. Hidayatullah writes: "Not only does this view of difference make it more difficult to divide the sexes hierarchically (since they are generative and mutually constitutive of one another), but it also allows for a scheme in which difference and equality are not opposed to one another" (191). A fluid, contextualized view of sex can help us in reevaluating male–female hierarchy to account for the realities of interdependency. Verses that refer to nursing a child can be reexamined with a different sort of feminist lens.

Although I find her example hopeful, there is much more work to be done in order to interpret the Qur'an with conceptions of sexual differences as mutually and constitutionally interdependent, while still holding onto the text's divine status. For example, it is unclear how one would evaluate the verse on inheritance or the verse that asks for two female witnesses in place of one male in debt contract cases without indulging in the same theoretical somersaults in which Wadud partakes in order to quench one's feminist spirit. Hidayatullah acknowledges this point insofar as she states that theoretical ideas may not have practical import and that there is great uncertainty in where this sort of inquiry would lead (193, 194).

Furthermore, the book lacks a Shia perspective and mentions it only in passing. Shia Islam draws heavily on examples of women from the Prophet's time to contextualize the Qur'an and makes reference from certain verses to specific people from the Prophet's time. For example, according to Shia interpretation, in *Surah Kausar* (chapter 108 of the Qur'an), *Kausar* refers to the daughter of the Prophet, and not to "abundance," as Sunni interpretations claim. Some of the strong women whose lives guide Shia interpretation include Khadija binte Khuwaylid (the wife of the Prophet, who was an independent businesswoman, and the first convert to Islam), Fatima binte Mohammad (daughter of the Prophet, who fought for her inheritance from the first Caliph after the Prophet's death and has the status of being free of sin--*mausoom*--within Shia Islam), and Zainab binte Ali (granddaughter of the Prophet, who is credited with securing the message of Islam through her courage in the face of the brutal seventh Caliph.)

Similarly, Murtadha Mutahhari, a noted Shia theorist, has distinguished between what he terms *identicalness* and *equality of rights*. Mutahhari holds unwarranted assumptions about the "innate" natures of men and women, a notion that Hidayatullah explicitly argues against in her conclusion. He also makes broad and hasty generalizations about the West. However, he too, like Hidayatullah, is wary of ideals situated within a particular sociohistorical framework and reading them into a scripture meant for eternity. He writes:

If we can begin to put aside the imitation and blind following of western philosophy . . . we must see firstly whether identicalness of rights is or is not necessary for equality of rights. . . . Equality means parity and equitableness, and identicalness means that they are exactly the same. It is possible that a father distributes his wealth equally and equitably among his sons but he may not distribute it identically. (Mutahhari 1980)

He distinguishes between social rights and family rights. A social right is constituted in the public sphere, where men and women have equal *and* identical rights, whereas family rights are constituted in the private sphere, where men and women have equal rights but *not* identical ones.

However, Hidayatullah's lack of engagement with Shia interpretations is not in any way fatal to her analysis, but is merely indicative of a broader lack of serious engagement by mainstream Sunni scholars with the Shia school of thought.

Overall, this book is indispensable for anyone wanting to have a richer understanding of how the Qur'an is read and interpreted within a feminist context. It is a wonderful synthesis of the work that has been done in the field thus far and provides tools necessary to seek out new avenues in understanding the Qur'an while still retaining a feminist spirit. Yet, in the end, this book does not disturb Muslim world order. It remains an overwhelming possibility for Hidayatullah that interpretations that differentiate hierarchically between men and women may not be wrong. There is a comforting sense of resignation, or at least an affirmation of the ambivalence that Muslim mothers have transmitted to their daughters for centuries. We feminist Muslims are left with the same ambiguity with which we started the book. However, we now have a much deeper understanding of the nature of that ambiguity, and that perhaps is worth embracing in itself.

References

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