QUR'ĀNIC INTERPRETATION POLITICIZED: ASMA BARLAS' TEXT REREADING

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Muslim feminist scholars in the reinterpretation of the Qur'ān within the discourse of Islamic feminism with particular reference to Asma Barlas, a controversial 'Qur'ān-only' feminist. In pursuance of their identity struggle, Muslim feminists adopted new gender sensitive methodology of text rereading to prove their worth. This is particularly true for Barlas who concisely argues that traditional exegetes manipulated Quranic interpretation in their favour to oppress women and to establish their 'male-centric' authority. In other words, classical methodology of tafsir *is patriarchal, misogynistic and a nti-woman. Hence, re-contextualization of the Qur'ān through adopting new gender orientated methodology of interpretation is not only desirable, but also necessary. For Barlas, this will ensure active participation of women in* tafsir *and create a link between Quranic hermeneutics and the project of gender equality. This paper critically analyses Barlas's views within the Islamic paradigm and examines to what extent she did break with patriarchal tradition in* tafsir. *Furthermore, it concludes that Barlas' rereading of text is nothing, but a b iased attempt to politicise Quranic interpretation and to provide theological legitimacy to a secular orientated discourse, Islamic feminism.*

Keywords: patriarchy, gender equality, misogyny, Islamic paradigm, Islamic feminism, text rereading, women liberation, polygamy, veiling, seclusion.

Introduction

The politics of text 'rereading' stretches back to nineteenth-century Egypt when Arab feminists began campaigning for gender justice and improving the status of Egyptian women under the platform of the secular feminist movement. These feminists were inspired by Qasim Amin, the Egyptian nationalist, and Muhammad 'Abduh, the father of Islamic modernism who engineered efforts to bring social and educational reform in Egyptian society, making Quranic teachings their point of reference (Badran, 2002; Wadud, 2010). Using his pioneering book, *Women's Liberation* (*taḥrir al-mar'ah*), Amin argues 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 to become the basis of feminism not only in Egypt, but also in the entire Arab world. Afterwards, Feminist discourse became more grounded in the society of Egypt 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 (that concentrated on nationalist, democratic and human rights discourses) to Islamic feminism, a d iscourse that sought to gain authority grounded in Islamic religious texts. In this climate, Muslim feminist scholars changed their campaign towards a definition of identity and seeking 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'ān and early Islamic literature to challenge what they called 'patriarchal interpretation' to establish their relevance. Similarly, they claimed the right to engage in *ijtihād* (interpretive reasoning of Islamic law), including the right to lead congregational 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'ān to critique what she calls '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'ān, but they have been distorted by patriarchal reading (Barlas, 2002). She further insists that traditional exegeses were manipulated by males simply to oppress women. Rereading of the Qur'ān, therefore, is necessary to exonerate its texts from the charges of being 'anti-women' as it 'has been continually decontextualized and re-contextualized in the light of Muslim sexual politics, and this politics is overwhelmingly male-centric' (Barlas 2002). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is not only to critically analyse Barlas' Quranic hermeneutics, but also to examine to what extent she did in fact break with the patriarchal tradition in Quranic interpretation.

Islamic Feminism and the Politics of Identity

Although feminist ideas had 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 were born out of 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 had to undergo for the nation to be advanced (Kandiyoti, 1991). Further, education was seen as the only "effective means to national maturity and real independence" (Hourani, 1983). Egypt under the reign of Muhammad Ali became one of the most developed countries outside Europe, as a result of his project of reform and modernization. Ali dispatched a number of missions to Europe to acquire western thought and 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, the first country in the Muslim world where the advocacy of women's right and feminist movement began (Badran, 2002; Wadud, 2010). In these circumstances, Muhammad 'Abduh (the father of Islamic modernism) and Qasim Amin (Egyptian nationalist) engineered

efforts to reform the Egyptian society and improve the status of women making the teachings of the Qur'ān their point of departure. Amin in particular, devoted much of his energy to the cause of 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 deprivation 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. 1 2; 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 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 in 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, he 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 the belief of Amin 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 m ovement which was to become their major vehicle towards women's liberation in the next few decades (Ahmed, 1984). 1923 was a benchmark 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 of the Ummah Party. However, some middle-class nationalists, like Mustafa Kamil of the *Watani* party, were opposed to the feminist struggle, having perceived it as a t hreat because it would encourage Western influence (Badran, 1991). Moreover, members of the *Watani* party were conservative, 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 the 'mothers of the nation' (Shakri, 1998, p. 131). It should be noted that in 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