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Muslim Feminist Theology in the United States

1. Introduction

This article¹ discusses contemporary feminist exegesis of the Qur'an by Muslim women scholars located in the United States,² arguing that, studied as a whole, their works constitute an emergent field of Muslim feminist theology in the United States. All of these works, authored beginning in the 1980s, criticize sexism and male normativity in the exegesis of the Qur'an and advocate the full personhood and moral agency of Muslim women *within* the parameters of the Qur'an, understood as the Divine Word of God. The field's leading works are authored by Riffat Hassan, Azizah al-Hibri, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas. Other key scholars in the field are Fatima Mernissi and Sa'diyya Shaikh (who, though not located in the United States, have published works in English that are vitally and directly related to the work of the aforementioned scholars), as well as Kecia Ali (who, although primarily concerned with classical jurisprudence, has responded to the discussions of all these scholars in crucial ways). I argue that the works authored by these scholars form a cohesive field of scholarship warranting collective study based upon the observation of three common textual strategies they employ to interpret the Qur'an: 1) historical contextualization; 2) holistic/intra-textual reading; and 3) the *tawhīdic* paradigm.³

1 This article is based on lengthier discussions from my doctoral dissertation: "Women Trustees of Allah: Methods, Limits, and Possibilities of 'Feminist Theology' in Islam," (Ph.D. dissertation: University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009).

2 Or directly engaged in conversations in the United States.

3 I borrow this phrasing from Amina Wadud, who coins the term "the *tawhīdic* paradigm" in her *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 24.

It has been argued that a great deal of feminist scholarship on Islam has been “spearheaded” by Muslim women in the United States.⁴ Indeed, the location of Muslim feminist theology in the American academy has significantly impacted its emergence as a field. All of the scholars whose works are examined here hold advanced degrees from the United States (with the exception of Riffat Hassan, whose early scholarly development took place in the American academy), and their work is linked to the academic study of women and religion in the United States. Some speculate that “American soil has proven fertile for nurturing a more critical view of the Islamic past” because of the relative academic freedom from which United States scholars may benefit, especially as it concerns scholarship on religion.⁵ The vast array of educational resources and programs open to women in the United States has likely also facilitated the field’s development.

In addition, the influence of American Jewish and Christian feminist theologies has also impacted the field uniquely. For example, Riffat Hassan’s works are influenced by her experiences in dialogue with Jewish and Christian women in the United States beginning in 1979; she has explicitly called for the development of a parallel “feminist theology” in Islam. Azizah al-Hibri references African American Christian feminist theology by adopting the term “womanism” in describing her re-readings of the Qur’an. Like Jewish and Christian feminists, Muslim feminists have been interested in recovering the stories of female figures in early religious history, as observed in references to Hagar in the works of al-Hibri, Hassan, and Amina Wadud. Also like Jewish and Christian feminists, Muslim feminists (especially Wadud and Shaikh) call for the interpretation of the Qur’an in light of women’s life experiences, criticizing the treatment of men’s experience as normative. Shaikh in particular draws upon the terminology of feminist hermeneutics developed in the foundational works of Christian feminist theology, such as the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in reading religious texts for sexism. Finally, Asma Barlas is influenced by Jewish and Christian feminist paradigms in her criticism of the use of exclusively male imagery to refer to God in Qur’anic interpretation.

4 Hibba Abugideiri, “The Renewed Woman of American Islam: Shifting Lenses toward ‘Gender Jihad?’” *The Muslim World* 91 no. 1/2 (2001): 15.

5 Ibid.

2. Biographical Profiles

As a way to locate the scholars whose works are examined here, the following discussion briefly introduces each one. Riffat Hassan is a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. Born in Pakistan, she attended Durham University in England in the 1960s, earning a doctorate in the philosophy of Iqbal.⁶ She emigrated to the United States in the early 1970s and taught at Oklahoma State University, where, in her own words, she “began [her] career as a ‘feminist theologian’ in 1974.”⁷ Her involvement in “an ongoing ‘dialogue’ of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars” to investigate “women-related issues in the three ‘Abrahamic’ faith traditions” was formative to her work as a self-proclaimed feminist theologian.⁸ In 1999, she founded the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan (INRFVVP).

Azizah al-Hibri is a professor of Law at University of Richmond, Virginia. She received her B.A. in philosophy at the American University of Beirut.⁹ She emigrated to the United States in 1966; at the University of Pennsylvania, she earned a doctorate in philosophy in 1975 and a law degree in 1985.¹⁰ Al-Hibri was initially inspired by feminist movements in the United States in the 1970s, as well as Marxist and feminist philosophy. In 1993 she founded the Washington, DC-based organization KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, with the aim of creating a new generation of women interpreters of Islamic law.¹¹

Fatima Mernissi, who writes in French and is not located in the United States, teaches at Mohammed V University in Morocco, where she was also a student in the 1960s. There and at the Sorbonne in Paris, she was trained in political science. She earned her doctorate in sociology at Brandeis University in Massachusetts in 1974. Though her first

6 Riffat Hassan, “Jihād fī Sabīl Allāh: A Woman’s Faith Journey from Struggle to Struggle to Struggle,” in *Women’s and Men’s Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit*, eds. Leonard Gobb, Riffat Hassan, and Haim Gordon, 11–30 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

7 Ann Braude, “Riffat Hassan,” in *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion*, ed. Ann Braude (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 181.

8 *Ibid.*, 183.

9 Azizah Y. al-Hibri, “Hagar on My Mind,” in *Philosophy, Feminism, and Faith*, eds. Ruth E. Groenhout and Marya Bower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 203.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Braude, “Azizah al-Hibri,” 53.

book, *Beyond the Veil*, about women's struggles in Morocco, was published in the United States in 1975, her more relevant work is *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, published in English in 1991. This work, often viewed as a "pioneering text of Islamic feminism," along with her *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1992), are regularly cited by all of the other Muslim feminist theologians studied here.¹²

Like Fatima Mernissi, Sa'diyya Shaikh, while not living in the United States, completed her doctoral studies there, and her work is inextricably related to the works of American Muslim feminist scholars. She teaches at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Born and raised in South Africa, Shaikh witnessed first-hand the anti-apartheid movement, which has shaped her interests in reading the Qur'an for its liberatory possibilities, especially in relationship to Sufism.¹³ Shaikh received her doctoral training in religion at Temple University in Philadelphia in the 1990s, and her book, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*, was published in 2011.

Amina Wadud is a visiting scholar at the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California and retired professor of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. She received her B. S. in Education from the University of Pennsylvania and earned her doctorate in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan in 1988. Wadud's life was powerfully marked by racism against African Americans in the United States, which has been formative to her scholarship as an African American Muslim woman.¹⁴ She published her landmark book, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, a work of *tafsir* now considered a classic of feminist Qur'anic interpretation, in Malaysia in 1992, where she became an active member of the non-profit research collective, Sisters in Islam. The book was later published in the United States in 1999.¹⁵ In 2005 she famously led a mixed-sex congregational Friday prayer in New York City, and in 2006 she published her book *Inside the Gender Jihad*.

12 Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 2009), 314.

13 Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Transforming Feminisms: Islam, Women, and Gender Justice," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 147.

14 Amina Wadud-Muhsin, "On Belonging as a Muslim Woman," in *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles, 253–265 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

15 Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Asma Barlas is a professor of Political Science at Ithaca College in New York. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, she worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan.¹⁶ She received her university education in journalism and literature in Pakistan and received her doctorate in International Studies from the University of Denver in 1990. Though her primary field is politics, her “*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’ān* was published in 2002.¹⁷

Finally, Kecia Ali is a professor of Religion at Boston University and a specialist in early Sunnī jurisprudence on marriage. She earned her doctorate in Religion from Duke University in 2002. Her *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* was published in 2006, and *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* in 2010.

3. *Historical Contextualization*

The first interpretive method observed across the works of these scholars is that involving historical contextualization: researching the occasion of a verse’s revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*); distinguishing between universal and particular verses (i.e., differentiating between verses that apply to specific historical situations and those that apply to human beings generally); and distinguishing between descriptive and prescriptive verses of the Quran (i.e., differentiating between verses that are describing the practices of the seventh-century Arabian audience to which it was directly addressed, and verses that are prescribing practices). Muslim feminist scholars argue that a historically-contextualized reading of the Qur’an helps produce more precise readings by aiding readers in determining whether the Qur’an is making particular or universal evaluations. They argue that when Qur’anic exegetes have ignored verses’ historical contexts, they have often failed to distinguish between ‘*amm* (general) and *khāṣṣ* (specific) verses. By ignoring the role of a verse’s historical context in constructing its meaning, conservative male exegetes have tended to attribute general or universal

16 Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 157.

17 Asma Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’ān* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

meanings to verses that address only particular, limited, or conditional circumstances.

Wadud asserts that the historical contexts of *khāṣṣ* Qur'anic pronouncements must be understood in order to deduce their intents and thereby derive their universal meanings in a sound manner. Wadud argues that particular practices referred to in the Qur'an are often "restricted to that society which practised them ... Therefore, each new Islamic society must understand the principles intended by the particulars. Those principles are eternal and can be applied in various social contexts."¹⁸ Highly influenced by the work of Muslim modernist scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Wadud insists that the Qur'an 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.

This interpretive strategy—of understanding verses within their historical context and distinguishing between particular and general statements of the Qur'an—is especially useful with regard to Qur'anic passages that address women and gender, since, as Wadud points out, "[s]ome of the greatest restrictions on women, causing them much harm, have resulted from interpreting Qur'anic solutions for particular problems as if they were universal principles."¹⁹ The universalizing of the particular in the Qur'an has also led to the related problem of confusing the Qur'an's descriptive statements with its prescriptive statements. Wadud argues that though the immediate context of the Qur'an's revelation was a patriarchal and sexist society, the Qur'an does not impose the characteristics of such a society upon future readers. The Qur'an may refer to situations that are degrading to women, but that does *not* mean it is *prescribing* those circumstances for its readers.

For instance, Muslim feminist scholars have used historical contextualization to take on the controversial sanctioning of polygyny in the Qur'an. The relevant verse, 4:3, reads: "*wa-'in khiftum 'allā tuqsiṭū fī-l-yatāmā fankiḥū mā ṭāba la-kum min al-nisā' mathnā wa-thulāth wa-rubā' fa-'in khiftum 'allā ta'dilū fa-wāḥidat aw mā malakat aymānukum.*" The verse is commonly translated as: "If you fear that you will not deal just-

18 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 9.

19 *Ibid.*, 99.

ly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to do justly (with them), then only one, or what your right hands possess.” This verse is often used to justify the taking of multiple wives by men to satiate men’s sexual desire for more than one partner. However, Muslim feminist scholars argue that the verse cannot possibly sanction multiple marriages for this purpose; its historical context makes it clear that the verse is concerned with just treatment of orphans under a particular set of conditions.

Wadud points out that the verse is speaking to an immediate seventh-century audience with a particular understanding of marriage: “marriage of subjugation at the time of revelation was premised on the need for females to be materially provided for by some male.”²⁰ She also observes that the verse is specifically addressing a historical situation in which warfare had resulted in the orphaning of many children in the Muslim community. The immediately preceding verse provides the context that “[s]ome male guardians, responsible for managing the wealth of orphaned female children, were unable to refrain from unjust management of that wealth.”²¹ In response, verse 4:3 allows these male guardians to marry up to four female orphans under their care for the express purpose of protecting the orphans’ wealth within the legal structure of marriage.

Wadud, among others, argues that the historical context of the verse makes it clear that the limited allowance for polygyny pronounced here (limiting the number of wives to four) is concerned with the equitable treatment of orphans. Azizah Al-Hibri echoes Wadud’s arguments, pointing out that the first part of the *āya* “conditions the permission [for multiple wives] upon a certain context ... at the time of its revelation, namely, one of justice and fairness concerning the treatment of orphaned wives.”²² Like Wadud, al-Hibri concludes that this verse is “highly conditional and fact-specific” and thus should not be taken as a general rule.²³

Wadud also observes that the verse stipulates that if a man is incapable of using this allowance to treat the orphans under his care justly, that this allowance is nullified. According to Wadud, this condition it-

20 Ibid., 82–3.

21 Ibid., 83.

22 Azizah al-Hibri, “An Introduction to Muslim Women’s Rights,” in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 66.

23 Ibid.

self signals that the Qu'rān is speaking to "the archaic idea of marriages of subjugation" in which the measure of equitable treatment was solely financial; many would argue that this understanding of marriage has subsequently been superseded by a form of marriage which understands the just treatment of a wife to cover a territory broader than financial treatment alone.²⁴ In addition, Wadud argues that the verse is clearly speaking to a historically specific context since it is addressing a situation in which women exist only as financial burdens to their families; it does not address modern situations in which women have the capacity to themselves be financial providers.²⁵ For example, many women today "neither have nor need male supporters."²⁶ Thus, the verse does not supply a rationale for taking multiple wives in a situation in which women can indeed provide for themselves. Thus, Wadud demonstrates how an understanding of the historical context of revelation can drastically limit the liberties that men have taken and justified using the Qur'an to generalize from specific conditions and situations. As many of these particularities do not exist in the present, these verses must be reevaluated for their meaning under circumstances in which these conditions do not exist.

Several feminist scholars have also used historical contextualization as a method to examine issues of veiling and seclusion in the Qur'an, in particular in their readings of verses 33:53 and 33:59. These verses are often translated as:

O ye who believe! Enter not the Prophet's houses, until leave is given you ... and when ye have taken your meal, disperse, without seeking familiar talk ... And when ye ask (his wives) for anything ye want, ask them from before a screen [*fa-is'aluhunna min warā'i ḥijābin*]: that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs ... (33:53)

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their cloaks [*jalābīb*] over their persons (when abroad): That is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested (33:59).²⁷

24 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 83.

25 Ibid., 84.

26 Ibid.

27 Based upon the translation of 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, 4th ed. (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1989).

Asma Barlas and Fatima Mernissi note that 33:53 is specifically concerned with the modesty practices of the Prophet's wives, while 33:59 addresses both the Prophet's wives and Muslim women in general. Next, both identify the occasion of the passages' revelation—a time of turmoil in the Prophet Muhammad's life.²⁸ Mernissi points out that readers must understand the verses in light of an uncertain and vulnerable time for the Muslim community, which had become weakened by the enmity of non-Muslim opponents in Medina. These opponents, as well as dissenting members of the Muslim community (commonly referred to as “the Hypocrites”) constantly sought ways to injure and undermine the Prophet; among their strategies was the targeting of the Prophet's family, in particular his female family members. They not only spread sexually offensive rumors about the Prophet's wives in order to insult him, but also attempted to harass his wives physically in public.

In this hostile environment, one incident annoyed the Prophet perhaps more than it would have otherwise: one or a few impolite men had lingered too long at the celebration of the wedding of the Prophet to Zaynab, and perhaps a man had touched her hand.²⁹ According to Mernissi, the instructions of verse 33:53 to men to approach the wives of the Prophet from behind a *ḥijāb* (“screen” or “partition”) were swift and drastic because of the threat to the Prophet's reputation and community at the time of the revelation.³⁰ These verses were not a general pronouncement for all interactions between Muslims, but rather a solution to a specific problem for the Prophet's wives arising from a specific moment in the Prophet's life.

As for verse 33:59, Barlas argues that the instruction to all Muslim women to cover their bodies using their *jalābīb* (sing. *jilbāb*), or “cloaks” (which, as will be discussed later, is itself an ambiguous directive since it does not clarify which parts of the body should be covered or what type of cloak should be used), is specific to the social norms prevalent during the time of revelation. Barlas reads this passage in light of the historical context in which the verse was revealed: “the social structure of a slave-owning society in which sexual abuse, espe-

28 Barlas, 56; Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1991), 89, 92.

29 Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite I*, 86.

30 Ibid.

cially of slaves, was rampant ... at a time when women had no legal recourse against such abuse.”³¹ In the context of a slave-owning society governed by pre-Islamic sexual norms, the Qur’an’s directive constructs *jilbāb* as a marker of Muslim women’s sexual nonavailability to men, as distinct from non-Muslim slave women who were considered sexually available to men according to *Jāhili* (pre-Islamic) custom. In this sexually charged environment, the *jilbāb* of verse 33:59 is meant to “render [Muslim women] *visible*” to and “recognizable” by “*Jāhili* men, as a way to protect the women.”³² However, as Barlas suggests, only in a slave-owning, sexually corrupt *Jāhili* society would *jilbāb* protect and signal the sexual nonavailability of women.³³ Barlas’s implication is that outside of these specific social conditions, the instructions of verse 33:59 would no longer serve the purpose of protecting women. Thus, the meaning of the passage is specific and relevant only to its context, and should be applied only under similar social conditions.

4. *Holistic/Intra-textual Reading*

The second interpretive method involves reading the Qur’an holistically and intra-textually (i.e., comparing verses to one another instead of reading them in isolation). Muslim feminist theologians argue that atomistic treatments of the Qur’an have resulted in misleading, distorted understandings of the Qur’an, especially in relation to verses about women. Barlas observes, for instance, that “patriarchal or oppressive” readings of the Qur’an often “result from reading the text in a piecemeal and decontextualized way, for instance, by privileging one word, or phrase, or line, or āyah, over its teachings as a whole.”³⁴ For Muslim feminist theologians, holistic readings of the Qur’an are essential to developing feminist interpretations of the Qur’an. Wadud, in particular, calls for Muslims to re-establish the exegetical premise of the Qur’an as a unified whole, proposing a holistic method of interpretation based on the principle of *tawhīd*, or unity, in the Qur’an. Wadud calls for the development of an organized exegetical system for how

31 Barlas, “*Believing Women*,” 55–56.

32 *Ibid.*, 55.

33 *Ibid.*, 56.

34 *Ibid.*, 168–169.

to compare different parts of the Qur'an with each other: studying recurring terms, linguistic structures, and themes in tandem to derive a broader and more unified picture of Qur'anic meaning and intent.³⁵

A central component of holistic feminist readings is reading the creation story in the Qur'an as evidence for its overarching, guiding message of human equality regardless of gender. This understanding of human creation, then, serves as a central reference point when performing holistic readings of the Qur'an: if the Qur'an is read as a unified whole, any of its verses must then be read in comparison to, and in light of, its creation story. Riffat Hassan's work on human creation in the Qur'an is the most extensive and referenced of Muslim feminist works on the subject. Hassan's signature thesis is that according to the Qur'an, woman and man are created in egalitarian terms, from a single *nafs*, or soul unit, at the same time. The first woman is neither created from nor for man; nor does she cause man's "fall" from grace. Collectively reading portions of the story of Adam and Eve found in various chapters of the Qur'an, Hassan finds that the Qur'an does not narrate any sort of "fall" of humankind: both Adam and Eve commit the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge; both are tempted by Satan, equally responsible for committing this sin, and there is no reference to Eve causing Adam's temptation.³⁶ Though God banishes them from the Garden, both Adam and Eve are forgiven by God, and the rest of humankind does not bear responsibility for any sort of unfavorable sin.³⁷

After comprehensively comparing the Qur'an's verses on creation, Hassan concludes: "In none of the thirty or so passages that describe the creation of humanity ... is there any statement that could be interpreted as asserting or suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man."³⁸ In particular, Hassan focuses on verse 4:1, which reads: "Oh humankind! Reverence your Lord, who created you from [*min*] a single soul [*nafsin wāḥidatin*], created from it [*min-hā*] its mate [*zawjahā*], and from the two [*min-humā*] scattered (like seeds) countless men and women."³⁹ Hassan and Wadud both

35 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 3, 62.

36 Riffat Hassan, "Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, eds. Paula M. Cooney, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 47, 49.

37 *Ibid.*, 49–50.

38 *Ibid.*, 44.

find that there is no textual or linguistic justification for attributing maleness to the *nafs* from which all of humankind originates, or, for that matter, for assuming that this original *nafs* is Adam.⁴⁰ Likewise, the *zawj* (translated as “mate”) partnered with the *nafs* is conceptually neither male nor female, though grammatically it is masculine, which also belies any assumption that the *zawj* of the *nafs* is female, or “Eve” for that matter.⁴¹ Using this verse, Hassan asserts that according to the Qur’an, “Allah’s original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman”; in addition, “both man and woman were made in the same manner, of the same substance, at the same time.”⁴² They “share a single point of origin” and thus are equal partners with-in creation.⁴³

In conjunction with this Qur’anic evidence for the equality of the sexes in creation, feminist theologians also emphasize the Qur’an’s explicit statements concerning the equality of the sexes in their potential for independent moral virtue and righteous action in the world. Citing key verses, they assert that in the Qur’an, “both women and men have the same capacity for moral agency, choice, and individuality.”⁴⁴ A unanimously cited verse is 33:35, which features a nine-time repetition of the phrase “men and women,” indicating the partnership of both women and men in engaging in several examples of righteous deeds.⁴⁵ As Barlas argues, this verse, by leaving no doubt as to women’s inclusion in this statement of human beings’ capacity for moral virtue, clearly indicates that “women and men are able equally to acquire *taqwá* (moral personality)” and moral capacity.⁴⁶ In addition to this partnership in moral action, men and women also share in the partnership of mutually encouraging morality among themselves. Feminist theologians frequently point out that according to verse 9:71, the Qur’an designates men and women each other’s mutual *awliyā’*, or “protectors,” indicating a “shared moral discourse and mutual care be-

39 Riffat Hassan, “The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition,” in *Women’s and Men’s Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit*, eds. Leonard Grob, Riffat Hassan, and Haim Gordon (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 74.

40 Hassan, “The Issue,” 74; Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 19–20.

41 Hassan, “The Issue,” 72; Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 20.

42 Hassan, “The Issue,” 74, 77.

43 Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 26.

44 Barlas, “Believing Women,” 140.

45 Hassan, “Muslim Women,” 52–53.

46 Barlas, “Believing Women,” 143.

tween the sexes.²⁴⁷ According to feminist scholars, by describing men and women as each other's moral guides, the Qur'an emphasizes the equality of their moral potentials.

Altogether, by reading Qur'anic verses on human creation and moral capacity, feminist theologians establish a substantial body of evidence in support of the Qur'an's overall position on the moral and spiritual equality of men and women. The importance of this interpretive maneuver—of establishing the moral equality of the sexes as an overarching, guiding principle of the Qur'an as a whole—cannot be understated in its value to the Muslim feminist project. It is this holistic understanding of the Qur'an's egalitarian ethic that allows Muslim feminist theologians to argue that in order to be valid according to the Qur'an own principles, any interpretive statement about the Qur'an must cohere with its core principles concerning the moral equality and equity of men and women; by the same token, any interpretive statement that does not cohere with these core principles is invalid. By elucidating the Qur'an's treatment of the *nafs*, feminist theologians are able to establish that any readings of the Qur'an that devalue or denigrate women must categorically be deemed incorrect on the grounds that they contradict a foundational premise of the Qur'an and are “contrary to the letter and spirit of the Qur'an.”²⁴⁸ The impact of such statements is far-reaching; they establish that the moral equality of men and women is a core moral objective of the Qur'an with which all understandings of the Qur'an must contend.

This strategy is useful, for example, in reading verse 2:228, which is often translated: “Women have rights similar to the rights that are claimed of them, but men possess a degree more than them.” This verse has been used to claim that men are given moral and/physical advantage over women by God. In addition to pointing out that the verse is referring only to specific rights granted to men but not women in the context of divorce (using the historical contextualization method), Wadud writes: “To attribute an unrestricted value to one gender over another contradicts the equity established throughout the Qur'an with regard to the individual: each *nafs* shall have in accordance to what it earns.”²⁴⁹ Thus Wadud uses an intra-textual strategy to point

47 Ibid., 147–148.

48 Hassan, “The Issue,” 80.

49 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 68–69.

out that common interpretations of the verse clearly contradict the Qur'an's other statements about moral equity and justice for all human beings.

5. *Tawhīdic Paradigm*

The third interpretive method, the *tawhīdic* paradigm, engages the Islamic concept of *tawhīd*, that is, God's unity, indivisibility, incomparability, and justness. In this scheme of God's oneness and omniscience, the understanding of human beings is as fallible creatures, who attempt to fulfill their role as God's trustees using only the imperfect capacities, knowledge, and means that are endowed to them; as such they are subject to their own flawed understandings of the Qur'an in a particular time and space. Thus, they can only *attempt* to understand God's mandates and engage in an open-ended *process* of searching for understanding. They can never pronounce a final interpretation of the Qur'an, since to do so would be to claim to have God's knowledge and to place themselves in the role of God. Thus, the Qur'an must be open to continual, dynamic interpretation as the contexts for interpretation evolve; likewise, clear distinctions must be made between the text of the Qur'an and its interpretation.

According to the principle of *tawhīd*, all human beings are united under one Creator, and no one may share in the Creator's authority. Muslim feminist theologians have argued that the Qur'an supports "the fundamental metaphysical sameness of all humans as creatures of God," treating them as equally capable moral agents, all created from the same *nafs*.⁵⁰ Differences between human beings are based solely on their achievement of *taqwā*, their devotion to God and "moral consciousness."⁵¹ Thus, the only distinction between human beings exists on the basis of one's piety, not on the basis of superficial characteristics such as race, sex, or class. Furthermore, the sole distinguishing characteristic of *taqwā* may be judged only by God; it is "not an external matter accessible for human-to-human judgment."⁵² Thus, the right to evaluate differences between human beings belongs to God and God alone.

50 Al-Hibri, "An Introduction," 52.

51 Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 2006), 185.

Therefore, 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). Wadud points out that the same principle applies to personal relationships: “When a person seeks to place him or her self ‘above’ another, it either means the divine presence is removed or ignored, or that the person who imagines his or her self above others suffers from the egoism of *shirk*.”⁵³ Thus, using the doctrine of *tawhīd*, Muslim feminist theologians define acts of discrimination, including sexism, as a violation of God’s supreme authority and uniqueness.

Feminist scholars employ the *tawhīdic* paradigm to a portion of verse 4:34 which reads, “*fa-l-ṣāliḥāt qānītāt ḥāfiẓāt li-l-ghayb bi-mā ḥafiẓa Allāh.*” Most commentators have rendered this verse as: “Therefore the righteous women are obedient and guard in their husbands’ absence what Allah would have them guard.” Feminist scholars take issue with readings of the term *qānītāt* to mean women who are obedient to their husbands. They argue that interpretations of this verse that claim women must be obedient to their husbands (rather than solely to God) are erroneous on the grounds that they are based upon *shirk*. Medieval and modern interpreters have used the term *qānītāt* to suggest that the righteousness of women is conditional upon obedience to their husbands. Al-Hibri notes that in any such reading, “disobedience to the husband is subsumed under obedience to God”; by this measure such a reading “borders on *shirk*.”⁵⁴ Barlas notes that any notion of men’s divinely ordained authority over women “violates the concept of *tawhīd* that places God above such correspondences and also establishes the principle of the indivisibility of God’s Sovereignty.”⁵⁵

Sa’diyya Shaikh asserts that the problem with such a reading is that “sacralized male authority and marital hierarchy become foreground-

52 Ibid.

53 Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 32.

54 Al-Hibri, “An Islamic Perspective on Domestic Violence,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 27 no. 1 (2003):11.

55 Barlas, “*Believing Women*,” 108.

56 Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Exegetical Violence: *Nushuz* in Quranic Gender Ideology,” *Journal for Islamic Studies* 17 no. 1 (1997): 10.

ed in the relationship between female-believer and God.”⁵⁶ In other words, the submissive relationship of woman to God is replicated in the relationship between woman and husband; in this scheme, obedience to one’s husband is not only parallel to one’s obedience to God but also becomes a requirement of one’s obedience to God. Implicit is an “assumption, no matter how indirect, that God’s Sovereignty and man’s are coextensive.”⁵⁷ Shaikh notes that such an understanding produces a “spiritual hierarchy” in which “God occupies the pinnacle, men the centre, as mediators, and women ... the bottom echelon.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, “the God-believer relationship [for women] becomes secondary and only accessible via a ‘correct’ man-woman relationship.”⁵⁹ Because the husband figures as the mediator between the female believer and God, men effectively become “divine intermediaries if not demi-gods.”⁶⁰ This arrangement disallows a direct relationship between woman and God and gives men God-like authority.⁶¹ Thus, Shaikh argues, interpretations of 4:34 based on this scheme subvert the notion of God’s uniqueness and absolute sovereignty and are thus “idolatrous.”⁶²

Using similar arguments, Muslim feminist scholars also point out that treating the *tafsīr* of early scholars as incontestable contradicts the *tawhīdic* notion of human beings’ fallibility in understanding the divine text. Wadud asserts: “*Tafsīr* is (hu)man-made and, therefore, subject to human nuances, peculiarities, and limitations. This natural limitation is unlike the divine will, which cannot be contained, explained, or even maintained by any one such limited being or community.”⁶³ Barlas concurs: “a reading of the Qur’an is just a reading of the Qur’an, no matter how good; it does not approximate the Qur’an itself.”⁶⁴ She adds: “the Qur’an is inimitable, inviolate, inerrant, and incontrovertible; however, our understanding of it is not.”⁶⁵ Thus Wadud and Barlas criticize the supreme authority given to any interpreta-

57 Barlas, “*Believing Women*,” 106.

58 Shaikh, “*Exegetical Violence*,” 10.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*, 16.

62 *Ibid.*, 10.

63 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: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 11.

64 Barlas, “*Believing Women*,” 17.

65 *Ibid.*, 33.

tion of the Qur'an, claiming that all interpretations are subject to the limitations of human error. This critical attitude allows feminist theologians to counter "the claim ... that only males, and conservative males at that, know what God *really* means."⁶⁶ Feminist theologians fortify these arguments by establishing that the treatment of classical exegeses as if they are unassailable is a violation of *tawhīd*, since this treatment amounts to "equating their ... authority with that of revelation."⁶⁷ Assigning them this level of authority effectively "collapses divine discourse with its human interpretations" and confuses human interpretation with divine will.⁶⁸ As such, it is implied that classical interpreters share in the knowledge and sovereignty of God. In declaring such attitudes as contradictory to *tawhīd*, Muslim feminist theologians are able to distinguish between the Qur'an and its exegeses, and to approach those exegeses as open to criticism and revision.

Just as Muslim feminist theologians argue that in accordance with the doctrine of *tawhīd*, no one may pronounce a perfect interpretation of the Qur'an, they also argue that no one may produce a final interpretation of the Qur'an. This concept is helpful in Muslim feminists' approach in questioning classical Qur'anic interpretations as immutable and in calling for revised interpretations. They argue that human beings can do no more than *attempt* to understand God's mandates and engage in a *continual* process of searching for understanding. Since complete understanding of the Qur'an belongs solely to God, human beings are never able to produce a final, perfect interpretation of the Quran; all they can do is engage in an ongoing process of trying to understand the text, however imperfectly. Thus, the Qur'an must always remain open to continual, dynamic interpretation.

6. *Future Directions*

In relying exclusively on the techniques of historical contextualization, holistic reading, and the *tawhīdic* paradigm, Muslim feminist theologians have remained unable to account for the existence of certain

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁷ Asma Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: Women Rereading Sacred Texts," *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (London: Oxford, 2006), 106.

⁶⁸ Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics," 106.

Qur'anic statements that appear to be irreparably neglectful and/or harmful to women despite the application of these approaches. In effect, they have not addressed the limitations of attributing anti-woman readings of the Qur'an exclusively to human interpretation but never to the Qur'an itself. It was not until the publications of Kecia Ali's *Sexual Ethics and Islam* and Amina Wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad* in 2006 that any of the Muslim feminist scholars studied here began to openly discuss such admissions about the Qur'anic text. Ali and Wadud are the first and (to date) the only Muslim feminist theologians to admit that in some cases, the interpretive approaches studied here fall short in "rescuing" the Qur'anic text from sexist and male-centered meanings.

For Wadud, such limitations arise in readings of verse 4:34 that have sanctioned domestic violence. The portion of the verse of most concern reads, "*wallatī takhāfūn nushūzahunna fa 'izūhunna wahjurūhunna fī-l-maḍājī' waḍribūhunna,*" often translated to the effect of: "As for those women whose disobedience you fear, admonish them, abandon their beds, and beat them." In *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadud examines how the text of the verse may be "inadequate or unacceptable, however much interpretation is enacted upon it."⁶⁹ Here, she openly confronts the possibility that the Qur'an *itself* may serve violent ends, describing the process of revisiting verse 4:34 as "grappling with textual inadequacies" in it.⁷⁰ For her, the existence of *iḍribūhunna* (the term often translated as "beat them") cannot be fully explained using any textual strategy or by pointing out the flaws of the medium of human language. Wadud therefore calls for saying "no" to 4:34 in its literal form while maintaining the full divinity of the text.⁷¹ She argues that it is *the Qur'an itself* that allows for human beings to say "no" to its literal pronouncements in limited cases.⁷² In providing "eternal" and "universal" guidance for future contexts and civilizations, the text outlines what she calls a "Qur'anic trajectory" that guides human beings "to higher moral practices even if not fully articulating these" in literal form in the context of its seventh-century revelation.⁷³ Thus, she

69 Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 192.

70 *Ibid.*, 199.

71 *Ibid.*, 200, 192.

72 Ali makes a similar claim in noting that in reconciling Qur'anic verses about slavery with the belief that slavery is unjust, "the only possible response is to suggest that the Qur'anic text itself requires Muslims to sometimes depart from its literal provisions in order to establish justice," Ali, *Sexual Ethics*, 55.

claims that Muslims “can promote the idea of saying ‘no’ to the text” while “still pointing to the text to support this ... It is therefore neither un-Islamic nor heretical” to do so.⁷⁴

For Ali, textual limitations arise in Qur’anic verses about sex that grant men control over women’s bodies. Of verses 2:187 and 2:222–223 (which respectively declare lawful men’s sexual approach of their wives on the nights of fasting days, and instruct men to approach their wives sexually as their “tilth”), she observes that both undeniably “pre-suppose male agency and female passivity with regard to the initiation of sex.”⁷⁵ Ali argues that in these cases, “women are spoken about and men are spoken to in a way that presumes male control” over women’s bodies, a presumption for which no amount of historical contextualization can fully account.⁷⁶ For her, feminist interpretations of these verses cannot “explain away the male-centeredness of the Qur’anic text.”⁷⁷ Ali concludes that while such “androcentrism is not equivalent to misogyny,” “neither is it unproblematic for interpreters concerned with matters of gender and justice,” since they cannot remove this tendency from the existing text of these verses through any act of interpretation.⁷⁸ Looking to the future, Ali calls for a turn to feminist interventions in Islamic jurisprudence, an area of interpretation that lends itself to greater flexibility than Qur’anic exegesis.⁷⁹ At the time of writing, Wadud and Ali’s calls for these interventions in treating the Qur’anic text await further development by Muslim feminist scholars.

73 Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 212–213.

74 *Ibid.*, 192.

75 Ali, *Sexual Ethics*, 129.

76 *Ibid.*, 128.

77 Kecia Ali, “Timeless Texts and Modern Morals: Challenges in Islamic Sexual Ethics,” in *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*, eds. Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 96.

78 Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 112.

79 *Ibid.*, xx–xxi.

