

BOOK REVIEW
by
(Dr.) Nimat Hafez Barazangi
Visiting Fellow
Women's Studies Program
391 Uris Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853

Qur'an and Woman

By Amina Wadud-Muhsin. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bh.d. 1992.
pp. 118.

Wadud-Muhsin's book is a welcomed addition to Islamic studies scholarly work as well as to the list of readings in Women's Studies and Islamic Studies courses. The media and the popular culture literature in America and Europe are not the only biased group in portraying women in Islam as "oppressed" and that their liberation can take place only outside Islam. Contrary to my trust in the impartiality of educational institutions, I am finding that such institutions are more inequitable when it comes to scholars who address the "Muslim woman question" from within the framework of Islam. I was surprised, for instance to find that only one theological seminary library in the entire United States has obtained this book, even though many universities, including my institution, have a long list of recent publications on Muslim women.

Qur'an and Woman "is an analysis of the concept of woman drawn directly from the Qur'an." "The Qur'an represents a 'world altering' force which must be recognized and understood" (p. iv). As Wadud-Muhsin states, the Qur'an was a catalyst for change in the political, social, spiritual, and intellectual lives of the immediate community of people in the Arabian Peninsula. I would add, the Qur'an can also be a catalyst for change in the present lives of Muslims as well as non-Muslims if understood away from many of the presuppositions of the many interpreters and commentators. The book originated in the author's University of Michigan Ph. D. dissertation, and is a concise, easy reading, and invaluable source for understanding woman's "liberation" from within the Islamic world view. The uniqueness of this book is in its analysis of the Islamic worldview, based on the "original source," the text (the Qur'an), and not on the secondary sources (interpretations and other literature) that have often produced a "disconnection from the original text and its intent" (p. iv). Secondly, the rationale behind this analysis is also significant. The author's discussion of the motivations behind each disciplines that defined the parameters in which the discipline was to focus is as important. This is exemplified in "the question of the *concept* of woman" in Islam that was largely "inspired by the sad condition of women in Islamic societies at the time of independence from colonialist forces (p. v).

Examining *Woman* in the
Qur'an--the emphasis is mine to draw attention to the significance of Wadud-Muhsin's analysis of the role of *woman* as a human entity in the Qur'an--does not merely concern Muslim woman, nor woman as part of the gender group, but it concerns woman as an autonomous human being. To examine *woman* in the Qur'an may seem formidable to those who are not synthesizers of the Islamic world view and its underlying principles.

Wadud-Muhsin's task was more than just examining the related parts (verses) of the Qur'anic text. Her intent was that this "research was to make a 'reading' of the Qur'an that will be meaningful to women living in the modern era" (p 1).

Qur'an and Woman is an affirmation of two major themes in the study of the Qur'an, especially with reference to woman, that have not been captured by many Western scholars, Westernized feminists and Muslim male writers. The first, and the focus of this review, is that the Qur'an as a text should be read in space and time, but without being atomized as an historical text, nor interpreted outside its context and spirit in order for such a reading to have "an effective tool for the liberation of Muslim women: demonstrating the link between that liberation and this primary source of Islamic ideology and theology" (p 2-3).

The second theme, which is not unique to the *Qur'an and Woman* as it has been increasingly emphasized in recent years among Muslim scholars and writers, is the need of continuous interpretation of the Qur'an (e.g., M. Shahrur, *al-Kitab wa-al-Qur'an*, 1990) in order to realize its principles in practice, particularly with reference to women (e.g., A. Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, 1992).

Wadud-Muhsin's book consists of introduction, four chapters, and conclusion. In the introduction, the author discusses "how perception of woman influence interpretation of the Qur'an." She basically lays out the background of the book, including methodology, language of prior text, perspectives on woman, key terms and concepts of the Qur'an, and chapter outlines. Her emphasis is on the role of woman in the Qur'an as the primary source, and the importance of a feminist reading of its text (p. ix).

Chapters one and two, "In the Beginning, Man and Woman were Equal: Human Creation in the Qur'an," and "the Qur'anic view of women in this world," are most effective when read together. They represent two stages in human existence, the first emphasizes equality in creation of humankind of a single *nafs* (soul). The second explains the distinction between individuals only on the basis of *Taqwa* (reflecting both a pious attitude of "constraints appropriate to a social-moral system" and an action of "consciousness of Allah" because of such pious manner) and "how the potential for change, growth and development lies within the *nafs* of the individual (or the group)" (p36-37). A special significance in the second chapter, as emphasized by the author, is that of the women mentioned or referred to in the Qur'an, and woman as individual.

Chapter three, "The equity of recompense: The Hereafter in the Qur'an," addresses human recompense on the basis of human activity, adding a third stage in human existence. The fourth chapter, "Rights and roles of women: some controversies," disputes the concept of inherent value placed on man or woman and affirms that functional distinctions are baseless in the Qur'an (p. 63). Despite recognizing the biological and the noble function of child bearing and suckling that only woman can do, the Qur'an does not consider mothering as the woman's only, nor exclusive role (p. 64). The author suggests the significance of context and chronology in "understanding Qur'anic social reform for women," as the Qur'an does not operate in vacuum, but was responding "to particular circumstances in Arabia at the time of the revelation" (p. 78).

Two major contributions that are particular to *Qur'an and Woman* and that deserve special attention: The hermeneutical methodology and the prior text of gender-specific (Arabic) language, distinguishing between grammatical vs. conceptual function of

masculine and feminine. I will elaborate on the first only, but it is necessary to mention here that it would have been more effective, had the author maintained the non-gendered translation of the Arabic text when she was referring to "Allah" as she did with "nafs" since both refer "to something Unseen," and cannot be understood in the human context of maleness or femaleness (p. 20).

A hermeneutical model, within which Wadud-Muhsin places her work, is, in her words, concerned with three aspects of the text in order to support the conclusion: (1) the context in which the Qur'anic text was revealed; (2) the grammatical composition of the text; and (3) the whole text, its world-view (p. 3 and 62). Because "differences of opinion can be traced to variations in emphasis between these three aspects," the author's 'reading' of the Qur'an from within the female experience becomes especially effective. A feminist reading of the Qur'an can "argue against some conventional interpretations," one of the purposes of the book and a special task which the author has set for herself. But, in my view, such reading also brings to the surface the intention of the Qur'an as a book to be read and interpreted by every one. To avoid the potential relativism, the author asserts, "there is continuity and permanence in the Qur'anic text itself" as exemplified by the points of convergence of the various readings (p. 5). Thus, she adds, the unchangeable principles must be understood by each social context to be able to implement them, which is the objective of the Qur'an.

Three questions, however, Wadud-Muhsin has left unanswered with relation to hermeneutical method and the various readings of the Qur'an. The first, is how can one draw principles from outside the Islamic world view (such as those of a hermeneutical model) and apply them in the study of the Qur'an without risking a diversion from the metaphysical and epistemological underlying assumptions of the Qur'an? The second is how can one draw a line between the universal intent of Qur'anic principles and the subjective interpretation when each reading has to be in a social context? And the third, is how may a woman recapture her humanity and move beyond exercising a reading of the Qur'an from a feminist perspective?

Even though Wadud-Muhsin's methodology and the discourse of her argument allowed for such a follow-up, for some reason she has opted not to do what could have been an added pedagogical value to her work. This gap between analyzing the principles and determining the contextual application, or the ideals and reality remains unresolved, despite the author's systematic analysis and convincing arguments, particularly in chapter two when discussing *Taqwa*. Since *Taqwa* was the only distinction between a woman and a woman or a woman and a man, then perhaps the answers to the above three questions lie in understanding humankind as a moral being. If one accepts Fazlur Rahman's interpretation of the term, *Taqwa*, (as alluded to in footnote 21 of chapter two)--and at this time I see no other plausible interpretation that can both preserve the integrity of the individual, and maintains the universality of Qur'anic principles-- then one may accept the need to maintain such tension between the ideal and application, or else humankind loses its humanity. That is, as Rahman states, without human's strive to balance, or the ability to maintain an equilibrium of the "limits of God" and the limits of individual and social moral standard, then the entire purpose of human existence and ability to choose loses its meaning (p. 43). *Taqwa* gives meaning to human existence as much as the individual choice, even among what God has ordained, gives credibility to being

distinctly characterized as a *Muttaqi* (a person who is conscientious of this moral balance).

But would this type of explanation mean surrendering to the dominant social-moral standards that resulted from males interpretation of the Qur'an, as it appear to be the case in the author's analysis of the terms "*darajah* (a step of distinction among deeds)," "*faddala* (Allah has preferred some of creation over others)," and "*nushuz* (disruption of marital harmony)" (pp. 66-78). It is not enough to indicate the discrepancy between the principle and practice to convince the reader with the Qur'anic social reform for women, nor to allude to the patriarchal society in Arabia at the time of Qur'anic revelation as a justification for the dominant males' social bias. To achieve the required equilibrium among Muslim men and women--that is being neglected at present mainly because woman is being denied her humanity by not being able to maintain this equilibrium on her own--would require invoking other important Qur'anic principles, such as the recognition of woman as a Khalifah (trusteeship) too. Though the author alludes to Khilafa (pp. 74 and 85), she did not elaborate as to how the Qur'an encourages woman's (and man's) immediate action to bring woman up to this level and, consequently, change some of the prevailing social norms.

What is important to remember in this process, however, is that the goal is not to eliminate the tension by claiming sameness in the struggle for equality, but to balance the tension back, perhaps in favor of woman, as the Qur'an has intended in the first place. The pedagogical responsibility of this book then lies in intervening among men by coaching them to read, and act within this perspective of the Qur'an, and to make women realize the vastness of their task in educating themselves and others in the Qur'an.