

## Feminist Hermeneutics of The Quran and Epistemic Justice

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**Abstract:** *In this article I present religion and especially the position of women in religion as a narrative product. This means that, like other realities, it is made of speeches with validity and authority generated by the influence of power mechanisms favor the authority of patriarchy in its preparation. I describe, from a personal perspective, the two dominant discourses about Muslim women, both products of an orthodoxy: the idealization, sustained by religious patriarchy of Islam, and demonization, which corresponds to a Western vision universalizing their own particular way of seeing reality through the interaction of privileges and representations of otherness. Since neither of these discourses gives voice to Muslim women, I argue that the feminist hermeneutics in Islam is an effort to establish a discourse of gender justice from Muslim women's voices. Feminist hermeneutics of Islam is a discursive deconstruction in favor of epistemic justice, namely a proposal to establish Muslim women as the authoritative voice in matters that concern them.*  
**Keywords:** • **Muslim women • epistemic justice • Quran • Hermeneutics • Feminism**

### **Women in Religion are a Story**

The reflection on the role of women in Islam is not new. I dare say that from the beginning there has been a "*Theology of Women*", ie, "*a theological anthropology where she is the specific object.*" (Dermience, 2000: 492). The Quran itself gives rise to this by devoting a chapter to women and name them in different verses throughout the recitation. Tradition, meanwhile, recorded multiple Hadith (sayings and experiences of Prophet Muhammad) on women and in modern times, there is an abundant literature on the position and role of women in Islam.

Woman in religion is a story. This means that all that is said about women from religions, as well as from social and natural sciences, institutions and the media, are stories, stories that are the product of the interaction of mechanisms of power, authority of enunciation plus historical accumulation by performative actions. If gender is a

discourse with cultural significance, then the feminine and the category "women" in the religious field are too. The impact of these speeches and patriarchal structures have functioned historically, until now, as mechanisms of control discipline and punishment. Riffat Hassan argues that

*"In all the obvious causes (sociological, historical, economic) of the weak status of women, there is a cause that has theological roots"* (Hassan: 1989, 10).

The stories of the monotheistic traditions about the creation of women that play a key role in the establishment of attitudes and representations of women in their societies, are not dogmas, but history.

As Reza Aslan (Aslan, 2009: xvii) says:

*Religion is the story of faith. It is an institutionalized system of symbols and metaphors (read rituals and myths) that provides a common language with which a community of faith can share with each other their numinous encounters with the Divine Presence.*

If, following Aslan, religion is a story, then what is said about women in religion is a tale, and its representation an hermeneutical product, the result of an interpretation of the reality. The mainstream narrative about women is restrictive and disciplinary resulting in *"an identity derived from traditional roles, without paying attention to our contributions in other areas without considering the specific situation of women in the world"* (Dermience, 2000: 493). This gives space for the development of a "Biopolitics of Faith" that roots its authority holding discourses and practices of external control over the body, identity, and representations of women and the feminine.

### **Hegemonic Narratives on Muslim Women**

In my perspective, when we are addressing the situation of women in Islam, this is done nowadays from two opposite and dominant discourses that I call the *"idealization of Inequality"* and *"Demonization"*. I would like to describe each of them in their general aspects, knowing that they deserve a deeper analysis.

The *"idealization of inequality,"* argues that the Quran elevated the position of women from a terrible condition of *object* in the pre-Islamic Arab society, also called the age of ignorance or *Jahiliyya*, where they were killed at birth, to a state full equality and recognition of rights.

This statement: "The idea that the Quran changed the condition of women", implying a "before and after" from a situation of total oppression to a status of total liberation, has

facets and can not be taken as absolute. Nabia Abbott, for example, in his "Pre-Islamic Arab Queens" (1941) indicates that there are records of about 25 queens who were also priestesses of local gods. Jane Smith (1885) stressed the role of women in pre-Islamic Arabia in military activities. This particular author denies that female infanticide has been a standard practice in the Arab tribal society before Islam. According to her perspective women engaged in an active social participation, before and after Islam.

However, it is undeniable that the Quranic revelation represents a socio-political revolution that broke the mold of Arab tribal societies of the time regarding the role of women in at least three aspects. Firstly, to demonstrate their equality through a sociological cosmogony that did not emphasize sex or gender: the Quranic message is addressed to the *aiuha an-nas* (humanity) and woman is not categorized as the original source of any sin. Secondly, naming women in a specific way in the sacred texts (Quran 33: 35, 16:97, 3: 195). And thirdly, establishing a codex of women's rights that Western societies had not achieved, mainly, until the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>

The advocates of this perspective are mostly male preachers who follow an orthodox view of Islam, no matter which branch they assign themselves. However, those better known as Yusuf al Qaradawi, Bilal Phillips, Zakir Nair, or Abu Eesa Niamatullah represent the Salafi-Saudi Wahhabism understanding. This latter, (Abu Eesa Niamatullah), Professor of Al-Maghrib Institute in UK, for example, has declared feminism has no place in Islam; nothing should be changed, that no new hermeneutics must be allowed since the only differences between men and women stem from biology: women can conceive, men have more disposition for physical force. This does not mean that some are inferior because, under the "cosmological equality" established by the revelation, the lives of women and men are equal before Allah.

Niamatullah, who was embroiled in a controversy in March 2014 for joking on Twitter about disciplinary rape and domestic violence on International Women's Day, said he was *"absolutely convinced that feminists are enemies of Islamic orthodoxy and [to]fight them is rewarded"* (Niamatullah: March 10, 2014).

According to Riffat Hassan this tendency to idealization is explained, in part, by the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the rights recognized explicitly in the Quran to women are: Right to equality before the law (2: 228). Right to work and property (4:32). Right to be consulted and to express their opinions (42: 36-38). Right to maintenance upon divorce (2: 241)

*"the Islamic tradition has inherited the anti-feminist prejudice that is on one side in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and secondly in the Hellenistic Greek traditions, and pagan Arab cultural biases against women in all this forms a mixture as well"* (Hassan, 1989: 2).

Beyond the controversy, the "idealization of inequality" represents a hegemonic discourse that lacks a strong and coherent response to the prevalence of discriminatory practices against Muslim women based on differences beyond their biological nature, such as the prohibition to enter or speak in some mosques, forbidding women to hold positions of spiritual and administrative leadership, enforcing worship-segregated spaces and separate entrances; none of these are related to equality stated by the Quran<sup>1</sup>. Neither does the "idealization of inequality" provide any concrete answers to the issues affecting Muslim women as institutional violence, racism, stereotypes, and the sexist burden of their own narratives.

The "Demonization", on the other hand, argues that with respect to religions it is not possible to speak of liberation of women, so all kind of activism or feminist initiative seeking a background in religion is operating an oxymoron; according to this, there would not be a Catholic Muslim or Mormon feminism or the possibility to develop a feminist hermeneutics that can be taken seriously, since, as Teresa Maldonado says *"the exercise of adjectives of feminism is at least debatable"* (Maldonado, 2009: 2). This means that there is only one real and universal feminism, valid for all women, all cultures and all contexts that can lead women to liberation.

An important feature of demonization is the assumption as an axiom of a difference between East and West, pitting the rationality of "we" against the irrationality of "them" and "our" development against "its" underdevelopment, which reaffirms the western identity as superior. And here lies the shortcoming of this feature: it relies on a judge and jury dynamic in regard to the description of the oppression of women who are perceived as "other": first, place them in otherness, and then define the causes of discrimination from which their societies suffer. Finally, grant the messianic ability to "save" those women.

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<sup>1</sup> "I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other ( Quran 3:195)"

Djaouida Moualhi in her article *“Mujeres Musulmanas: Estereotipos occidentales versus realidad social”*<sup>1</sup> where she refutes stereotypical images of discrimination against Arab-Muslim from Maghrebi origin women which are widespread in the West, argues that:

*“When the West speaks about the alleged discrimination of women in the West Maghreb it is assumed that their religion is the source of their ills instead to seek the causes in the policy of the States concerned and the patriarchal sociocultural inheritance of their societies. To understand that perception is important to place it in the general framework of the stereotypes about the Muslim world, probing its origin in historical and political background. Finally After all, the currently displayed hostility and xenophobia towards Muslims are part of their food stale clichés about Islam”*<sup>2</sup>(Moualhi, 2000: 292).

For the "Demonization" approach, religions in general, and Islam in particular, are responsible for the oppression of women, as the Quran is a book of female oppression; therefore, the only way to end it is calling women to abandon their faith.

Regarding feminism in particular, this narrative does not explain how a woman can leave her religion and embrace the *"European model of free woman"* without internalizing colonization; this view is also neglectful and unaware of the intersectionality of gender exclusion, in which religion may or may not be a relevant factor but can be explained by a multiplicity of interacting elements. It does not provide indisputable reasons about why European Enlightenment notions about freedom should continue to be universal.

In a more negative aspect "demonization" is manifested in racism when not recognizing the condition, agency or capacity of women who do not identify with an Eurocentric universalist-colonial perspective, but instead relegating them to abjection and otherness, because, as Spivak stated: *“In the construction of the difference between the two worlds (East and West) gender has played a key role, as it has tended to represent East as a whole cultures or civilizations especially cruel and oppressive towards their women in the exercise of male social dominance* (Spivak, G. 1988 in Garcia, Vives, Exposito y otros, 2012: 286).

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<sup>1</sup> The article is written in Spanish. A translation in English of the title of Moualhi work would be: “Muslim Women: Western stereotypes versus social reality”.

<sup>2</sup> This translation is mine.

### **There is no Epistemic Justice**

Neither "idealization" nor "demonization" are perspectives that consider Muslim women as capable of developing a discourse outside the religious or secular mainstream to explain themselves. In both narratives about the status and rights of women in Islam, the representation of Muslim women is used to strengthen the privileges of reporting their embodiment, spiritual experiences, and rightful places as Other. This privilege of speech is expressed in mechanisms of control and discipline over women, whether they come from religious elites or the political-cultural colonialism, as if speaking from the "idealization" or the "demonization" respectively.

The problem with these views is in its episteme<sup>1</sup> which I understand as a place of talking and the beliefs and ideas that legitimate such place as valid. They set out from a hegemonic power based in religious androcentrism or the European-white world, with historical privileges to define the Self and define their own truths as universals. Both epistememes speak as source of authority over the world's knowledge, including women, and from this platform they have colonized spaces, corporalities, speeches, and performances based on the idea of Muslim women as inferior and voiceless.

In the stories constructed about Muslim women both from idealization and demonization there is no epistemic justice, since women are deprived of the right to speak for themselves and define their declarative places on two fronts: from the *idealization*, lack of epistemic justice is denying to women the ability to re-interpret and critically reflect on the narratives about them built by the religious androcentrism; and from the *demonization*, this lacking is given thought reinforcing of the epistemic racism:

*"in the form of epistemic Islamophobia that is a foundational and constitutive logic of the modern / colonial and legitimate forms of knowledge production. European humanists and scholars have argued that Islamic knowledge (and thus the knowledge coming from Muslim women) is lower than western one"* (Grosfoguel, 2011: 346).

Hegemonic narratives of women in Islam require Muslim women to choose between the sexism of "idealization" or the racism of the "demonization". Perpetuating misconceptions about Muslim women and Islam has, according Homa Hoodfar, severe

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<sup>1</sup> I understand episteme as a place of privileged and knowledge about the self and others from which narratives are built. In this sense it relates to the statement made about it by Foucault, who defines it as the framework to know according to the particular "truth" imposed from a power.

consequences not only for Muslim women but also for non-Muslim women. The author, in an article on the implications of the Islamic headscarf in Canadian society, says that:

*"The mostly man-made images of oriental Muslim women continue to be a mechanism by which western dominant culture re-create and perpetuate beliefs about their superiority (...) Moreover, the negative images of Muslim women are continuously presented as a reminder to European and North American women of their relative good fortune and an implied warning to curb their excessive demands for equality with men..."* (Hoodfar; 1997: 5-6).

Over the past 25 years there have been scholars and activists assigned the task of reviewing the mainstream narrative about Islam and the role of women, leading to a process of hermeneutical deconstruction in the theological, political and cultural, that laid the foundation for the development of a third way and response to these narratives Muslim women made for themselves.

### **Feminist Hermeneutics of the Quran**

Hermeneutics has a narrative function. It is the explanation of sacred stories so that people of a certain context, space, and time understand the messages that they believe are divine. According to Jesus Vila:

*"The fundamental aim of hermeneutics is to provide the means to achieve understanding of the object or writing is interpreted, dodging the obstacles arising from the complexity of language or distance separating the interpreter of the investigated object"* (Villa, 2006; 1).

The aim of hermeneutic as a explanatory exercise would be meaningless if the interpretations did not serve a given context. Hermeneutics, being a story, is not timeless or ahistorical; in fact, what gives authority to Villa's conclusions is the relationship between who plays, interpretation and historical context for which it was conducted, as:

*"our understanding of the Quran's teachings is contingent on how we have, or have not, read it; on the sorts of questions we have asked of it; and the voices we have preferred to hear in response to our questions"* (Barlas, 2002: 10).

The aim of hermeneutics is to facilitate the understanding and "implementation" of the sacred texts; therefore, the more cognizant it is of the context, the more validity it has. At a time when the debate over the rights of women and the struggle for social

justice is present in all societies, hermeneutics of sacred texts must account for this and allow new stories; if its purpose is to stimulate the revealed books to give answers to the contingencies and dilemmas facing for believers in space-time, the text should be open to new speaking subjects and new dimensions of historicity, to deliver the need to suit reality and not vice versa.

The central mission of feminist hermeneutics is to develop a reading of liberation or, put it in another way, explain the scripture and tradition in order to *construct a narrative* in favor of social and gender justice.

Feminist hermeneutics poses a critique of religious misogyny and androcentrism of its traditions, in order to "*decolonize the divine*" through the questioning and deconstruction of the epistemological frameworks of religious discourses to "*rid ourselves of the false names of God modeled by patriarchal alienation*" (Radford, 1983: 128) and thereby the socio-political dynamics of submission to which these give rise.

It is possible to find background for a feminist hermeneutics of the Quran from prospects developed in the twentieth century by intellectuals like Mohammed Taha who, without talking from a feminist framework advocated for a hermeneutics for gender justice and raised the need to challenge patriarchal interpretations of the Quran because of the abuses that were committed against women and other groups in the name of religion.

According to Balkis Badri in her work "Feminismo musulmán en Sudán: un repaso"<sup>1</sup> Mohammed Taha was a Sudanese intellectual who in his book "The Second Message of Islam" proposed a radical view on the interpretation of the Quran. Taha holds that Islam has two main messages: The first is valid for all Muslims of all ages and consists of the verses revealed in Mecca. The second message is specific to the people of Medina, where the Prophet was a political leader and head of state. These verses of the Quran would have been revealed to guide him in his position as governor and, although they may provide guidance for the community, they should not be applied literally, since the time of the prophet is unique and can not be repeated. According to this argument, all the verses related to gender relations and the issues that affect women in particular are from the Medina period. Consequently, they are not completely closed and new interpretations and laws can be dragged from them.

While Taha's position was not popular in Sudan and in the Islamic World:

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<sup>1</sup> In English, the name of this essay would be: *Muslim feminism in Sudan: An overview*.

*"It is useful for feminists, because it provides the easiest and accessible means for the Emancipation of Women in Islam. The most radical secular Muslim feminists can make laws that maintain gender equality, while retaining the Islamic principle of equality between men and women"* (Badri, 2008: 102; proved how this is useful for feminism).

Efforts to develop a feminist methodology for an non androcentrist, decolonial and for discursive justice hermeneutics within Islam, are traced back to the late 80s and early 90s.

Feminist hermeneutics of the Quran is a critical proposal that aims to break with androcentrism as a guiding principle of "Truth" in the interpretation of the text and systematize a critical genealogy of the coloniality of patriarchal religious discourse on women as a category and being subjected to a biopolitics encouraged from religious discourses that reinforce epistemic injustice.

As criticism of androcentrism, Islamic feminist hermeneutics was born with the intention of rescuing the review, analysis and experiences of Muslim women in Islam that are hidden under patriarchy, thus vindicating – as Riffat Hassan says- the original meaning of the revelation:

*"Islam tried to free them, and the Quran, if properly interpreted, is a very human document: but the intent of the Quran was diverted due to the existence of all inherited traditions and the fact that Muslims don't know not even separate what Islam is from what is pre-Islamic"* (Hassan, 1989: 2).

Following Asma Barlas, when we speak of a hermeneutical criticism, some of the questions that appear before us are:

*"Does the Quran advocate gender differentiation, dualisms, or inequality on the basis of sexual (biological) differences between women and men? In other words, does it privilege men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treat man as the Self (normative) and woman as the Other, or view women and men as binary opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do?"* (Barlas, 2002: 2).

When we wonder if the Quran supports a reading of liberation, we wonder if his teachings about God, of human creation, ontology, sexuality and relationships challenge gender inequality and patriarchy; the Quran: Are we allowed to theorize social justice, as the context requires, women and men?

Hermeneutics of the Qur'an with a gender perspective proposes a theology and critical practice of liberation that are not based on the specificities of women as such,

but in its historical experiences of suffering, mental and sexual oppression, structural insignificance derived from sexism prevalent in the religious structure of Islam and their societies.

In its decolonial approach, proposes the development of a genealogy of colonialism from the religious field, ie, a historical analysis of the predominant discursive paradigms, to contextualize and deconstruct them based on questions such as: Which factors influence or influenced certain readings or interpretations of the Quran? Why some have criteria of truth and others don't? How it came to establishing the authority of tradition and its interpretations? How influential was western colonialism in shaping the mainstream Islam that comes up today?

So, this hermeneutics becomes a rebellious discourse and a symbolic matrix from which it is possible to develop new discourses from which it is possible to develop new discourses aimed at allowing a declarative justice for fairer realities, which raises a conflict of meanings around the "Truth" as something fixed exclusively from androcentrism and hegemonies to allow the uprising of new theological subjects - women, in this case, to enable *"... a broader framework of reflection, as well as instances of reviews from non mainstream particularities and pluralize further the emergence of other theological subjects"* (Panotto, 2014: 5).

The conclusions of the feminist hermeneutics of the Quran from a feminist perspective, through the work of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir Hosseini, among other authors, state that there is, in the fundamentals of Islam, unquestionable reasons for the existence of patriarchy, gender discrimination or segregation and subordination of women in the name of religion. Asma Barlas said that "The history of Western civilization in terms of women's oppression, is proof that there is nothing innately Islamic misogyny, inequality or patriarchy. However, these often justified by states and Muslim clerics in the name of Islam. According to Asma Barlas:

*"This association serves as the strongest argument for inequality and discrimination among Muslims since many people either have not read the Quran or accept its patriarchal exegesis unquestioningly. However, as numerous scholars have pointed out, inequality and discrimination derive not from the teachings of the Qur'ān but from the secondary religious texts, the Tafseer (Quranic exegesis) and the Ahādith (s. hadīth) (narratives purportedly detailing the life and praxis of the Prophet Muhammad)"* (Barlas, 2002: 3).

These scholars argue that the Quran is essentially a feminist book; a revelation that provides sufficient evidence to provide a basis for a system of interpretation in favor of greater social justice for women, which originates in women and the appropriation of the message because

*"... women should know that there are other possibilities and that the word and the will of God can be interpreted in different ways. They must also know that this interpretation is not owned by anyone, more so because Islam does not have centralized church" (Hassan, 2002: 3).*

Gender inequality and discrimination are not exclusive products of misogynistic readings of the Quran. The status of women in Muslim societies under patriarchal structures and gender relations are the result of multiple factors, in which religion is one more.

### **Foundations for an Epistemic Justice**

This feminist hermeneutics is to show and bring to the forefront a number of ethical principles and cosmological present across the board in the Quran(Prado, 2012: 40) such as:

*Tawheed* (oneness of all creation in terms of complementarity as opposed to the stratification of creatures based on their qualities or attributes)<sup>1</sup>

*Tawqa* translated as piety or consciousness of God<sup>2</sup> that is the only thing that distinguishes one human from another. According to Abdennur Prado:

*"If we apply this principle to gender relations, it seems clear that it eliminates any possibility that men are superior to women, simply by virtue of biological consideration that is not in the text".*

*Adl* or Justice (as cosmological and ethical concept based on a balance between the complementary attributes) as Prado states:

*"between active and passive, heaven and earth, expansion and contraction, change and permanence, male and female, and so on. Here comes the idea of Islam as a religion of moderation that searches for the harmony between the price and the object, between reason and instinct, between corporal and spiritual needs, or between the individual and the collective..."*

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<sup>1</sup> Quran 7: 59; 16:36; 51:56; 72:13; 10:31; and, of course, Surat 112

<sup>2</sup> Quran 49: 13

*Caliphate* (individual responsibility towards God and creation. Those are Caliphs of Allah on earth, that is, are their representatives vice-regents and responsible for the evolution of creation. Its mission is to develop fully a spiritual level and intellectual to help improve it)<sup>1</sup>

*Wilayat* or mutual collaboration (the Quran says that men and women are protectors and accomplices of each other)<sup>2</sup>

*Shura* or consensus (the Quran says that believers, men and women are consulting each other to make decisions by consensus, which excludes obedience of women to men).<sup>3</sup>

To the list provided for Abdennur Prado I would add:

*Zulm* or principle of non-Oppression (by which Allah does not oppress or endorse oppression). About this, Asma Barlas (2002: 14) states in her work that:

*“by teaching the precept of the inherent inferiority of women, which breeds misogyny, and by justifying women’s subordination to men, patriarchies violate women’s rights by denying them agency and dignity, principles that the Quran says are intrinsic to human nature itself”.*

*Ijtihad* or intellectual effort: The Quran in many verses calling believers to meditate on his words and defines itself as a book to *“the people who reason”*.<sup>4</sup> It is the right and duty to reflect the tool from which interpretations and stories that feed the religious discourse are generated.

The classification of a system of belief as patriarchal starts in the conception of God from which that system develop. In this regard, Asma Barlas emphasizes the rejection of the Quran to the idea of God as a Father<sup>5</sup>. Tawheed, the unity of Allah, not only means that there is one God for all mankind; also, this Divinity has no equivalent, no companions, can not be associated with any human characteristic like gender or sex, or can be divided into manifestations as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Barlas, 2002: 95- 96).

If we define patriarchy, broadly speaking, as a social model and a symbolic paradigm governed by androcentrism, based on the division and sexual hierarchy, which grants

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<sup>1</sup> Quran 2:30 y 38:26.

<sup>2</sup> Quran 9:71

<sup>3</sup> Quran, Sura 42 y 2:233

<sup>4</sup> Quran 7:179, 67:10, 45:13

<sup>5</sup> Quran Surat 112; 4: 171, 4: 172, 9: 30

privileges to men while subjects women, the Quran does not cover such a concept or system.

In its analysis of the creation story in the Quran, Amina Wadud argues that Allah does not create woman from the rib of man, but creates all humanity, with equal rights and duties from the same essence or *nafs*. The Quran describes man and woman as Zauj (partner) of each other.

None of the thirty passages or more than describing the creation of humanity - called generic terms such as *An-nas*, *al-Insan* and *Bashar* there any statement that could be interpreted as that man was created before woman or vice versa .While recognizing the biological difference between men and women, God does not give or attribute to these specific hierarchies according to gender (Wadud 1992: 17-20).

Riffat Hassan adds that the scope of the word Adam or Adam, which for most people means a person, "Man" or the first man. For Hassan, this is a mistake since "Adam" is a Hebrew word that has been induced into Arabic and is a common name that means "humankind":

*"Adam means more specifically" land "and comes from the word" adama ". So this word is intended to mean the human race. If we analyze the different passages of the Quran where "Adam" appears every sense of the reading changes" (Hassan, 2002: 4).*

To Wadud, the perception people have about women influences the interpretation of the Quran (Wadud, 1992: 2)

*"No method of Quranic exegesis is fully objective. Each exegete makes some subjective choices. Some details of their interpretations reflect their subjective choices and not necessarily the intent of the text. Yet, often, no distinction is made between text and interpretation".*

Aisha Bewley, meanwhile, says that

*"the place of human beings in Islam is to become a fully alive human being who worships the Creator connected to the wonders revealed in existence; a person seeking to establish social and political justice in an environment through fulfillment of the Message of Allah. The Abd / Rabb dichotomy: Servant and Lord, is more important than the dichotomy Men / Women" (Bewley, 2002: 1).*

### **Contributions of Hermeneutics**

You can not get epistemic justice without challenging those that prevent it. To do this, feminist hermeneutics of the Quran has focused on deconstructing patriarchal interpretations of the holy book that give to men authority over women and extensively, authorizing phallocentrism for establishing itself as ruler of the lives of women in the bodily, spiritual and symbolic enabling it to develop narratives about gender roles and status without having to count on women participation for it.

An important and fundamental exercise of feminist hermeneutics that has been done in relation to verse 4:34 that would establish, in different shades, the authority of men over women, according to translations:

Sahih International:

**Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth....**

Muhsin Khan:

**Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means.**

Yusuf Ali:

**Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means**

Dr. Gali:

**Men are the ever upright (managers) (of the affairs) of women for what Allah has graced some of them over (some) others and for what they have expended of their riches**

Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri:

**Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)**

The word that set the authority of men over women here through different expressions like "in charge", "managers", "one to excel the other" is *Qawwamun*. This is a plural form of a word which is generally translated as "lord", "teacher", "leader", "ruler", "director". Once established that the man is the leader, it is evident that women are followers. So you've established a hierarchical relationship.

For scholars, the most appropriate translation of *Qawwamun* is not “authority”, but “responsible for the maintenance of the family” and is a term that refers to economic matters related to an specific time and situation and not moral issues nor to all the contexts. For feminist hermeneutics, this verse talks about the division of labor: While women are responsible for “carrying in her womb” to the children, and during the period in which they fulfill this function, men would have an obligation to be responsible for the costs of family, and therefore men should play that role of maintainers during that period.

Yaratullah Monturiol expanded the hermeneutics of *Qawwamun* and confirms the interpretative deviation of *authority* from the root word in Arabic. This author says that the word *Qawammun* comes from the verb *qâma-yaqûmu* from the same semantic family of *Qiyama* (resurrection, uprising), *Iqama* (getting ready for salat) *Qayyum* (to stand), *Istiqama* (righteousness), *qaum* (people, nation), *maqâm* (place), *Mustaqim* (like in Sirat al- mustaqim: Straight path):

*“It seems that in this verse the Quran was saying the man: Qum! (Wake up! ); awakens to a situation, awakens to an attitude, an action. The dynamic and cyclical nature of the one who, in a given moment is in a position of **Qa'im** (literally <<he who stands up>>), contrasts with any kind of static and definitive definition such as <<preeminence or superiority>> as reflected in many translations of the Quran. Being **Qa'im** is not a situation of law, but a matter of context”* (Monturiol, 2009: 40).

For feminist hermeneutics, the authority of men over women is not a Quranic principle but a legal product of an interpretative construction of Muslim scholars throughout history. Challenging the authority and power from which unfair narratives about Muslim women, and the consequent actions justified by them are established, it is relevant because:

*“Most problems for women stem from the fact that Muslims on the whole buy into an ideology of male supremacy – an epistemic place - that manifests itself in a variety of forms. These range from misogynistic attitudes towards women, to laws that discriminate against them, to outright violence against them in the shape of domestic abuse and, most egregiously, the heinous <<honor killings>>”* (Barlas, 2006: 1).

## **7.- Final Comments**

Although hermeneutics alone can not end the patriarchal practices and authoritarian governments it is crucial, as Asma Barlas points:

First, because there is an inescapable connection between the existential questions it tries to answer the religion and the interpretation of the sources from which their responses are made. There is a relationship between what we believe God says about women, the way we represent, the way we view ourselves and the way how we are treated. This has been a driving idea in the work of theologians and feminist scholars of religion.

Second, the reinterpretation of the scriptures is particularly important because the Quran provide role models for men and women, regulating social and interpersonal relationships. Whereas different readings give rise to different ways of understanding Islam, it is essential to review the scriptures and that Muslims can develop a theory of equality and social justice based on the Quran.

Third, if we want to ensure and respect the rights of Muslim women, we need to challenge not only the readings of the Quran that justify their abuse and degradation, but we must also recognize and legitimize the liberating, emancipating and alternative readings.

Feminist hermeneutics of the Quran is an activity in progress, posing questions to different partners. Through the revision of the doctrine and interpretations canonized by history, it raises questions about what it means to be a Muslim today: if it means taking a stand against those who insist on unfair practices and sanctify tradition above all without subjecting it to reflect or taking an active and conscious comittment on behalf of the fundamental cosmological principles.

For secular voices, whether progressive or feminists, Muslim feminist scholars in Islam have something to offer: looking back critically to their own troubled relationship with religion and revisiting their dogmas and concepts about what is religion, what is Islam and what are the representations on Muslim women they have.

In all situations what feminist hermeneutics of the Quran calls and demands is justice for women: the ethic of justice given by God in the Quran through their cosmological principles on behalf of which the women's soul is not lesser than men's soul<sup>1</sup>; declarative justice, as the Quran gives to women equality and dignity and thus the ability to define and decide by themselves on their lives; socio-political justice regarding the participation with equal rights in all kind of affairs that affect their lives as members of a community.

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<sup>1</sup> 33:35; in Yusuf Ali, The Holy Qur'an, 1116-17

According to the belief that this dynamic renewal of narratives is necessary because the Divine “*every day manifests itself in a new and wonderful way*”<sup>1</sup> is not possible to achieve changes in society or in religious communities if there is not a change in the narrative and speaking subjects. For gender justice, epistemic justice is the key. Feminist hermeneutics in Islam is the possibility of developing that epistemic justice for Muslim women from releasing new stories from themselves that enable us to overcome:

*“The apparent impasse between the threat by those who want to impose patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts of Islam and the” panacea “of those who fight for a neo-colonialist hegemonic global project on behalf of human rights and feminism” (Mir Hosseini, 2011: 3).*

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<sup>1</sup> Quran 55:29

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