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Response to Barlas

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Response

Laura Luitje

Reading and doing research on Professor Barlas's paper has dramatically broadened my understanding of the dynamic world of feminist scholarship. While not underestimating the diversity of cultures that the United States is privileged (and challenged!) to encompass, I think that it is not inaccurate to state that Muslim feminism as a movement and a realm of scholarship is ignored by many Americans. In fact, when I described this assignment to people, their reactions many times were of surprise and disbelief, ranging from tactful to a blunt, "Isn't Muslim feminism an oxymoron?" This confusion could be easily dispelled by exposure to even a fraction of the thinkers on the position of women in Islam who are engaged in innovative scholarship.

In this essay, I first explore how Barlas's approach from within Islam fits in the Roundtable's greater theme of divergent perspectives on feminism. It is invaluable to this discussion to include some highlights from other thinkers on Muslim feminism, so I outline a few salient contributions of two that Professor Barlas has referenced in her paper: Amina Wadud, author of *Quran and Woman*; and Leila Ahmed, author of *Women and Gender in Islam*. I conclude by raising some questions that remained with me after reading Barlas's contribution.

Professor Barlas's essay makes two statements. The first is explicit: the Quran is an antipatriarchal document. The second statement is more implicit in approach but just as strong a statement on the Roundtable's theme of divergent perspectives on feminism. Choosing to locate her arguments within the Islamic context, specifically the text of the Quran, is in itself a powerful message. Return for a moment to the program for this forum and read the overview: "[Feminist] voices," it says, "come in a variety of guises, often shaped by spatial location, class consciousness, racial belonging, and broad cultural identity." The truth of this assessment has been borne out by the discussions yesterday and the day before. Barlas's work also underscores the diversity of women's realities. It could be argued that this emphasis on the specificities of different religious/cultural groups of women fragments the movement for women's empowerment but I believe that it actually

provides a unifying principle. That is, while feminism is a universally relevant project, it must in its application be specific to each group of women.

Unfortunately, the history of Western feminism's interaction with Islam has been an uneasy one. Scholar Leila Ahmed addresses this in her book, revealing that feminist rhetoric was used to justify Western colonialism in Muslim countries. She states:

The discourse of patriarchal colonialism captured the language of feminism and...used the argument that the cultures of the colonized peoples degraded women in order to legitimize Western domination and justify colonial policies of actively trying to subvert the cultures and religions of the colonized peoples.¹

With a history of such a distorted feminist project, it is small wonder that the very word "feminism" is viewed with suspicion in many Muslim communities, or that supporters of patriarchy should dismiss women's liberation as Western and antithetical to Islam. Ahmed continues:

The presumption underlying these ideas is that Western women may pursue feminist goals by engaging critically with and challenging and redefining their cultural heritage, but Muslim women can pursue such goals only by setting aside the ways of their culture for the nonandrocentric, nonmisogynist ways (such is the implication) of the West.²

Despite the recent emergence of transnational feminist networks, Barlas and the other scholars remind us that the specific context of women remains central in defining their oppression and, consequently, meaningful strategies for empowerment. As power itself is contextual, a single feminism is inevitably inadequate. This highlights the force of Barlas's assertion that she "[does] not view the project of women's 'liberation' itself as being Western or Feminist." Leila Ahmed goes one step further and proposes a principle that could unify the feminist projects globally by the very recognition of and respect for difference.

In the context of the contemporary structure of global power, then, we need a feminism that is vigilantly self-critical and aware of its historical and political situatedness if we are to avoid becoming unwitting collabo-

rators in racist ideologies whose costs to humanity have been no less brutal than those of sexism.³

I highlight some contributions of other thinkers on this subject because I found their work to be an invaluable context in which to consider Barlas's arguments. Anyone who does not have a background in Islamic studies or personal knowledge of the religion risks missing the full import and insightfulness of Barlas's work. Through the work of Leila Ahmed and Amina Wadud, I will make three points. First, there is indeed a rich body of dynamic Muslim feminist scholarship. Second, the interpretations of the Quran, and how to live those interpretations as social reality, have not been static but, in fact, contested since the inception of Islam. Finally, that the way that different Muslim cultures accommodate religious belief today,⁴ including the role of women, continues to be widely varied among different Muslim cultures from Indonesia to Sudan to the United States itself. I ask that those who are already familiar with these dialogues forgive the brevity and simplicity of my representation here.

The first scholar that I will discuss is Amina Wadud, author of *Quran and Woman*, whose work supports Barlas's arguments. Her approach also emphasizes hermeneutics, or *how* to read and interpret the Quran. One of her main arguments is that the Quranic worldview is adaptable, that is, that the Quran's message must be understood within the specific historical context of its revelation in order to draw out a message that is meaningful to later, different communities of Muslims. Referring to the androcentric (or male-focused) culture in which it was revealed, she says:

That such a cultural bias was the context of Quranic revelation has serious implications for later communities which try to understand the social ideal the Quran was attempting to establish in that community. The Quran's . . . treatment of many ill practices, including misogynistic ones, was to advocate gradual reform, beginning with what could be accepted within the specific cultural context of the time of its revelation.⁵

Wadud's work also supports Barlas's argument that the worldview and agenda of patriarchal readers of the Quran led them to base the notion of male superiority on lines and verses taken out of context.

Wadud further argues that the verses traditionally used to justify patriarchy, namely, those concerning inheritance, witnessing, divorce, and polygyny, reflect not a Quranic advocacy of patriarchy but specific aspects of society in 7th century Arabia, that no longer have the same meaning for Muslim communities today. She skillfully demonstrates this point by reading those verses in the context of the verses surrounding them. For example, in reference to inheritance, she concludes that far from mandating that a brother should *always* receive twice the share of a sister, the Quran outlines a number of ways in which to divide inheritance of which the 2 to 1 ratio is only one possibility.⁶

Now I would like to turn to a second Muslim feminist, scholar Leila Ahmed, author of *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Her work challenges the misconception that Islam is monolithic and static, unchanged and uncontested since the moment of its revelation.

Her work seems to differ from Barlas's in that she asserts that Islam does indeed contain conflicting messages, what she describes as "two distinct voices . . . and two competing understandings of gender, one expressed in the pragmatic regulations for society, the other in the articulation of an ethical vision."⁷ She points out that this ethical voice is why the Quran was revealed — to provide the followers of Islam with moral guidance in "the spiritual and ethical dimensions of being and the equality of all individuals."⁸

An often-noted difference between the West and Muslim countries is that Muslims are enjoined to govern their communities according to Islamic law, not a secular ideology. This means that the first communities after Muhammad had to develop social laws based on the Quran. The difficulty entailed in this endeavor is that Quranic precepts are broad and deal mostly with ethical concerns. A result of this difficulty, Ahmed says, is that "the specific content of the laws derivable from the Quran depends greatly on the interpretation that legists chose to bring to it and the elements of its complex utterances that they chose to give weight to."⁹

Much of the body of political and legal rules is, in fact, based in the hadiths, the sayings of Muhammad and accounts of his life, and not the text of the Quran. Like Barlas, Ahmed argues that attitudes toward women in the time of Muhammad were more positive than during the centuries following his death when many important interpretive decisions were made. What Ahmed calls the "textual edifice" of Islam, or the body of customary law, was elaborated during a time of extreme

androcentrism whose “practices, and the conceptions they gave rise to, informed the dominant ideology and affected how Islam was heard and interpreted in this period [as well as] how its ideas were rendered into law,” exactly when, perversely, “the spiritual egalitarian voice of the religion...[was] exceedingly difficult to hear.”¹⁰

This distinction between two conflicting voices in Islam is useful for understanding competing interpretations of the proper Islamic social order. I wonder, however, whether the feminist choice to exclude the voice of gender hierarchy could be viewed as equally subjective as the patriarchal decision to privilege it.

A second point that Leila Ahmed makes is that not only are there contesting messages within Islam, but that the history of Muslim communities reveals that not all of them interpreted the Quran as do fundamentalist governments today, although it is in the interests of these traditionalist groups to represent their way as the original and true way. She mentions three groups in particular; the Sufis, the Karijis, and the Qarmatians, of which she explains:

Islam in this period was interpreted in ways, often representing the interests and vision of **different classes**, that implied profoundly different societies, including with regard to arrangements governing the relationship between the sexes... [t]he uniformity of interpretation and the generally minimal differences characterizing the versions of Islam that survived reflect not unanimity of understanding but rather the triumph of the religious and social vision of the Abbasid state at this formative moment in history.¹¹

Just as the history of Islam contains a diversity of interpretations, today the ways that “religious belief and social reality accommodate one another”¹² continue to be immensely varied among different Muslim countries and communities. In their book *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, Camilla Fawzi El-Sohl and Judy Mabro affirm, “The way in which the legal status of women in a given Muslim society is actually defined, and perhaps more importantly, the de facto application of their legal rights, cannot be isolated from a host of other variables, such as cultural specificity, social and political structures as well as the level of economic development.”¹³ In this sense, it is not as if Muslim feminist work is the only way that Muslims differ on how God’s message should be lived, nor is it true that the proper

Quranic role for women in society is understood or practiced similarly in every Muslim community.

These arguments of two other Muslim feminists help make clearer the context of Barlas's work for those who are less familiar with the heterogeneity that exists within Islam.

In conclusion, I would like to raise some questions that have remained with me after reading Barlas's essay. The first question regards her argument concerning the attribute of God's Justice. She states that the Quran says that God's Justice does not encroach upon the rights of anyone, so patriarchy is therefore not Quranic. However, I imagine that most of her opponents would argue that patriarchy is not bigotry, hatred, or oppression, but rather the natural social order, which, like any system, can be abused by some individuals. Therefore, in order to view patriarchy as encroaching upon the rights of women, mustn't one first believe that their rights are the same as men's?

Secondly, in the Epilogue, Barlas addresses some of the obstacles to translating theories of women's empowerment into reality, making clear that it *is* an enormous challenge. As she notes, it is in the interest of repressive societies, well-entrenched interpretive communities, and states jealous of their monopoly on religious knowledge to reject new or alternative interpretations. If the cause of textually justified patriarchy is *who* is reading the Quran and *how* are they reading it, how can the status quo of reading be changed in order to take Muslim feminist scholarship into account? Are women in repressive environments aware of this scholarship, and if so, what are some of their reactions to it?

Thirdly, notwithstanding the validity of the arguments that Barlas presents and the excellence of the analyses that she and her colleagues advance, it remains a dangerous assertion on a charged and sensitive subject to say that 1,500 years of Muslim majorities have lived their belief according to an erroneous interpretation of the Quran. Sudanese scholar of Islamic law Abudulla an-Na'im writes, "To attribute inadequacy to any part of the *Shari'a* is regarded as heresy by the majority of Muslims, who believe that the whole of *Shari'a* is divine. This widespread view creates a formidable psychological barrier, which is reinforced by the threat of criminal prosecution for the criminal offense of apostasy."¹⁴ Does a feminist interpretation require that the hadiths or

the Shari'a be abandoned? I also wonder if Barlas could elaborate on her vision of how gender roles might be revised in a way that preserves cultural integrity?

Finally, as Barlas herself points out, the vested interests in patriarchy are powerful, so androcentric interpretations are liable to retain a strong appeal. It seems to me that despite the arguments of Barlas and Wadud concerning the adaptability of the Quranic worldview, some traditionalist or fundamentalist groups are irreconcilably opposed to the idea that the Quran can or should be reinterpreted for modern communities, regardless of the fluid history of interpretation. Therefore, although I personally find those arguments on this point very convincing, I know that some Muslims believe exactly the opposite—which seems to create a sort of stalemate. Is meaningful dialogue possible between feminism or feminist scholarship and those groups?

These questions and the obvious complexity of their possible answers are useful in highlighting some of the difficulties that are also a part of this exciting scholarship.

Notes

1. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 243.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
4. Camilla Fawzi El-Sohl and Judy Mabro, *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*. (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p. 2.
5. Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 81, 82.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
7. Leila Ahmed, pp. 65–66.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
12. Camilla Fawzi El-Sohl and Judy Mabro, p. 2.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 180–1.