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Book Review: *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*

Merna Aboul-Ezz

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***Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Aysha A. Hidayatullah, 2014. Oxford University Press: Oxford. 259 pages. £16.99. ISBN 978 0 19 935957 8.**

Reviewed by:
Merna Aboul-Ezz¹

In *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Hidayatullah provides a compelling synthesis on the development of feminist interpretation of the Qur'an. There are six scholars whom she chose to examine their work. These scholars are: Riffat Hassan, Azizah al-Hibri, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Sadiyya Shaikh and Kecia Ali. At first, Hidayatullah was skeptical to use the word "feminist" to describe the work of these scholars, since the word could have imperialist implications as well as negative connotations attached to it. For example, scholars defined as Islamic feminists are usually accused of serving a secular or a Western anti-Muslim agenda. However, Hidayatullah chose the word "feminist" since it is the most efficient word to explore how these scholars have a common characteristic of challenging male power and normativity (p. 44). She provides a brief introductory background about each one of the scholars. She then tries to address their work in a historical context, relating them to the modern developments of *tafsir* (exegesis). In the *History of tafsir* section, she discusses the work of Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Muhammad Abduh, and Fazlur Rahman. According to Hidayatullah, these modern scholars had a great impact on the feminist exegetes, because of their arguments that the Qur'an should be accessible to everyone, and that there can never be a one definitive interpretation for it.

Hidayatullah provides three methods conducted by feminists in their Qur'anic interpretation. The first one is "historical contextualization", which is addressing the verses in the context they were produced in, researching the occasion of the revelation and distinguishing between universal and particular verses. The second approach is "intratextual method", which involves comparing some Qur'anic verses to one another rather than reading each verse in isolation. Finally, the last method is the "tawhidic paradigm", which is applied in two ways; the first one is the feminists' claim that male supremacy over women is a form of *shirk* (a violation of the oneness of God), since only God has this kind of power. Furthermore, the second rationalization is the belief that there would never be an accurate final interpretation of the Qur'an, since it is a divine text and no one shall claim to have God's knowledge of it.

In her criticism, Hidayatullah examines two important common issues in the feminist interpretation. The first criticism is how most of them talk about "sex differences" and "equality" in an ambiguous way, and the second criticism is not admitting that certain verses cannot be interpreted in favor of women. To address the first issue, Hidayatullah explains that feminist scholars claim that men and women are "sexually different" yet should be treated "equally". However, according to Hidayatullah, stressing on the biological difference between males and females leaves room for justification of inequality. She asks certain questions related to this subject, one of which is "When the Qur'an recognizes or even accommodates social-functional

¹ Political science and Middle East Studies Graduate, currently enrolled in a Masters Degree Program studying International Human Rights Law. Known for being hard worker, committed and quick. Online writer at www.scoopempire.com and worked as teaching and research assistant for various professors throughout my four years of college.

difference, how does it do so while also continuing to distribute power and authority equally to men and women?" (p. 128). She argues that the fact that the Qur'an assigns men financial responsibility on the basis that "they cannot bear children" then it acknowledges the gender differences and has differentiated the social roles accordingly (p. 155).

Instead, she introduces an alternative approach when examining sex differences, which is treating sexual categories as "mutually interdependent". Hidayatullah explains that it would be more accurate if the exegetes look at sex categories as relative and fluid, meaning that "each requires the other, and neither can exist within a fixed or static self" (p. 189). Following this approach, Hidayatullah argues that notions of difference and equality would not now be opposed to each other. However, Hidayatullah is unclear about how would this approach prevent having social roles based on gender? So if sexes are now considered interdependent on one another, how is this different from assigning women the social role of nursing their children, and assigning men the social role of financing their homes (which many feminist exegetes describe as a genuine Qur'anic objective to balance between men and women)?

When it comes to "equality", Hidayatullah argues that none of the scholars defines the term, as if it is self-evident. She thus criticizes the fact that exegetes demand equality as if it is an "ahistorical, timeless idea", with lack of contextualization (p. 131). She explains that the contemporary meaning of equality is different from the context where the Qur'an was written in, where male-female relations were perceived differently from now. She points out that passivity and submission were considered "natural" in love relationships in the traditional times (p. 165). However, a deeper understanding with clear examples of the situation and status of women in the Pre-Islamic Arabia and Islamic history could have helped the author in providing examples of how different is the notion of equality in the medieval era compared to the modern understanding. I find it stereotypical to assume that women during this era were not offended or seen as unequal if their husbands were permitted to beat them, as verse 4:34 has generally been understood. Moreover, Hidayatullah criticizes how feminist exegetes perceive any interpretations of male domination as contradictory to the Qur'anic basic messages of equality and justice. She claims that male domination in the Qur'an does not necessarily contradict with its main objectives of kindness and mutuality between men and women. However, she is unclear about how does this comply with the general message of human equality in the Qur'an.

As for the second criticism, Hidayatullah examines certain verses that cannot be interpreted differently from the traditional exegetes. The most prominent one is 4:34, which gives the permission to husbands to hit their wives in certain situations. According to Hidayatullah, this verse includes the word *daraba*, meaning "to beat", which clearly indicates a Qur'anic presumption of male control. Hidayatullah examines how some scholars, such as Azizah al Hibri blames this on the gradual social change of the Qur'an, where certain dogmas could not be challenged at the time. This makes Hidayatullah wonder why has not women-beating called for dramatic reform such as the prohibition of female infanticide (p. 136).

She further voices her contestation by stating that women who are subject to domestic violence would not perceive "gradual change" as an accurate or effective strategy in the process of domestic violence elimination. For her, this verse shows that female exegetes can sometimes be apologetic when reading and interpreting the Qur'anic "sexist" or harmful verses (p.137). However, when it comes to her claim that feminists sometimes forcibly and apologetically impose their own interpretations on the Qur'an, it would have been useful if she studied and linked the feminists' debates to other controversial topics in the Qur'an, like the historical developments and reforms to the concept of slavery, for example.

In the end, Hidayatullah clearly states that she has much respect to all the scholars analyzed in the book, which is why she found it really challenging to criticize their work. She mentioned this to address her concern of giving a chance for some to use her book in favor of the patriarchal structure and against the modern feminist interpretation. However, this is why Hidayatullah keeps repeating throughout the whole book that her work is a continuation of feminist movement for understanding more about the Qur'an and its messages. While it might be necessary that she mentioned her struggle and fears that the book might be used against the work of these great feminist scholars, it could have done less extensively and less repetitively.

In her conclusion, Hidayatullah addressed that posing questions about gender inequality and injustice in the Qur'an is difficult and could threaten someone's faith, but she believes that "confronting the uncertainty" can lead to new possibilities in reading and interpreting the Qur'an. She point out that asking such questions does not necessarily ends one's faith, but it opens new doors and creates new beginnings (p.195). Overall, the book is more about posing questions rather than answering them. Even though Hidayatullah provided few new methodologies when trying to understand the Qur'anic verses throughout the whole book, she had not addressed the ensuing possibilities the feminists might find from applying these new approaches. Consequently, I was left with even more questions than the ones I had when I started reading the book.

Feminist Edges of the Qur'an is an excellent research on the doctrine of Qur'anic tafsir and the developments it has encountered throughout the years. It provides a summarized analytical overview of the different feminist interpretations, which promote gender equality embedded in the Qur'anic verses. However, Hidayatullah, while giving no answers, poses controversial questions that might propose different strategies when trying to interpret the Qur'an, in an objective and contextual basis. It is a great book for anyone who is interested in this field, even if one has no previous background.