There has been a growing concern regarding the position of women in Muslim society, a concern which has presumably been largely triggered by the current wave of Islamic revivalism. As such, it has become a subject of debate among Muslims and non-Muslims, Islamists and opponents of Islamism, feminists and non-feminists. While Muslims generally argue that there is an ideal gender prototype in Islam, non-Muslims tend to disagree and emphasise that Islam is, in general, hostile to women.\(^1\) In this background, this paper attempts to study the Muslim feminist tradition and assess its experience, giving special emphasis to the new development of feminist notions within the Islamic framework, namely the attempt to re-interpret the Islamic sources from a female perspective.\(^2\)


\(^2\) In dealing with questions pertaining to gender and religion it is essential to make a distinction between culture and religion. For in most cases what is regarded as religious thought and practice is often little more than interpretation of religious text(s) in a specific cultural milieu. The failure to recognise this would amount to ignoring the role of culture in shaping the religious understanding of religious texts. In Islam, like other major religions, cultural practices have, for long, influenced the interpretation of the religious texts pertaining to gender issues. A quick look at the Islamic law would demonstrate the extent to which the social environment has affected the understanding of social issues. Hence, the traditional interpretations of women’s issues in the Islamic sources have been characterised by patriarchal attitudes. See Ann-Sofie Roald, *Women in Islam: the Western Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), ix; Riffat Hassan, “Jihād fi Sabīl Allāh: A Muslim Woman’s Faith Journey from Struggle to Struggle” in Leonad Grob, et al., eds., *Women’s and Men’s Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 11–30; ’Abd al-Halim Abū Shuqqah, *Ṭabārīr al-Mar’a fi ‘Ayr al-Risālab* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1990), 6 vols.

\(^2\) The androcentric interpretations of the Islamic texts tend to create resentment among educated Muslim women who believe that the gender pattern in the Muslim world rather than reflect the Divine imperative is in fact a male social construct aimed at keeping women in a position of inferiority. They tend to believe that Islam is being used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation. Realising that they have been kept for a long time away from public life and from the production of official Islamic knowledge, they have decided to become
Up until a few decades ago this type of feminism was virtually unknown to anybody and was not even recognised as a voice of feminism. It was overshadowed by another form of feminism that might be termed “secular feminism”. From its very inception, secular feminism has associated itself with Western secular tendencies in society, “predominantly the tendencies of the upper and upper-middle classes, and promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress towards western-type societies”. It gained momentum chiefly because the dominant political discourse in the region at the time was secular nationalist, which believed that the ideas surrounding women and reform were closely “linked to the advancement of European society and the need for Muslims to catch up”. Hence women started to contribute intellectually by writing in a variety of women’s journals, to found organisations which advocated women’s rights, and to highlight the situation of Muslim women and demanding an overall improvement in their position. This was done by pushing for women’s education, asking for political empowerment and seeking reform in the family law. In other words, they “campaigned for women’s rights and human rights in the language of secularism and democracy”.

However, although those efforts marked some change and an improvement in women’s lives and opportunities, nonetheless the change was superficial and minimal. It affected only a few, leaving the situation of more vocal in challenging patriarchal values and oppressive social structures that are common features of most Muslim countries. Therefore, more and more women in various Muslim countries are engaging in a process of re-interpreting and re-reading the Islamic sources in order to address the question of gender (in)equality in Muslim society. See R. Hassan, “The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition”, in L. Grob et al., eds., Women’s and Men’s Liberation, 66–67; and M. Cook, Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), xv–xviii.


3 Ibid., 65.

ordinary Muslim women virtually intact. Hence those efforts failed to gain their support and endorsement. This secularist approach has, in recent years, come under heavy pressure; indeed it has already created a backlash, since it alienates sections of Muslim women who want change, but not at the expense of their Islamic identity. These women have become less receptive to secular feminists’ views (one can also see this happening, to some extent, with Christian grassroots women). Also, this secularist variety of feminism has alienated a group of men whose support for and co-operation with the cause of women are essential to achieve the desired change in society.

Having said that, it is essential to stress that secular feminists continue to be an important force to be reckoned with. They continue to expose and highlight the abuses to which women are subjected in parts of the Muslim world. Also, their efforts to eradicate these abuses and achieve justice are extremely valuable. As such, their contribution, both as intellectuals and activists, to the cause of women’s human rights in the region must not be underestimated.

A variety of factors has led to this end: this form of feminism was and continues to originate from women with upper and upper middle class backgrounds, which explains the difference in between their and ordinary Muslim women’s ambitions and aspirations. The advocates of this brand of feminism were and still are westward-looking women, who have strong affinity to the West and who advocate “an outlook that valorises western ways as more advanced and more civilised than native ways”. Content with this model, they have decided to dismiss “all considerations of religion in the discourse over women’s human rights”. Moreover, they tend to ignore the relevance of issues such as the centrality of Islamic spirituality or Islam as an issue of identity to Muslim women. Very often they are at ease with accepting the Western understanding of rights, liberty, and freedom. And although they promote their notions as universal, they continue to espouse typical Western ethnic, class, and gender-based stereotypes. In doing so, they appear to many Muslims as deconstructionists whose aim is to confuse the central issue and undermine the position of Muslim women by giving them a misleading representation. Viewed as a Western inspired ideology, this form of feminism is very often linked to Western social problems such as rape, pornography, and family disintegration. Hence, “rather than seeing (it) as a political response to these social phenomena, feminism is seen as its cause”. Secular feminism was and still is regarded as part and parcel of the secular nationalist ideology which is very often associated with failure, defeat, betrayal and “is perceived as inadequate or as having exhausted its purpose”. See L. Abu Odeh, “Post-colonial Feminism and the Veil: Thinking the Difference” in Feminist Review, 43 (1993), 32; J. L. Esposito, “Women in Islam and Muslim Societies” in Y. Haddad and J. Esposito, eds., Islam, Gender, and Social Change (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), x; S. Duval, “New Veils and New Voices”, 52 and 66; Amina Wadud, “Aisha’s Legacy” in New Internationalist, 345 (May 2002), 17; A. Wadud, “Alternative Quranic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women” in G. Webb, ed., Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in the United States (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 8–9. On the issue of family disintegration, see L. Al Faruqi, “Islamic Traditions and the Feminist Movement: Confrontation or Cooperation” in The Islamic Quarterly, vol. 27: 3 (1983), 132–134. See also B. Shaaban, Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives (London: The Women’s Press, 1988), 113–114.
Muslim Feminism and the Re-interpretation of Islamic Sources

Until recently Islamic feminism had remained marginal and isolated, chiefly due to a hostile political establishment. However, since the 1970s it has grown stronger and has continued to gain ground. It is regarded as part of a wider response to the overall failure of the post-independent nation state to fulfil its developmental promises, and as such it must be viewed within the context of the “enfranchisement” which the Islamist movement in the region generally represents. It also claims authenticity since it represents an indigenous voice, fighting actively against the inequality of women within the Islamic

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8 The core of this trend can be traced back to mid-nineteenth century, when a few women in Muslim countries began to campaign for women’s rights, frequently pleading their case in Islamic terms. For example, Tahireh Qurrat al-'Ayn (mid-1800s Iran), Fatimah ‘Aliyah Hanim (late 1800s Turkey), Zaynab al-Fawwaz and A’ishah al-Taymurayyih (mid-nineteenth century Egypt), and Nazirah Zayn al-Din (1920s Lebanon) defended women’s rights. See H. Moghissi, Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: the Limits of Post-Modern Analysis (London: Zed Books, 1995), 127-129. More recently, three women representing a variety of generation and outlook have emerged, especially in the Arab world: Zaynab al-Ghazali who founded the Muslim Women’s Association in Egypt to advance their cause; Safinaz Kazem, and Heba Rauf Ezzat. For details see M. Azzam, “Gender and the Politics of Religion in the Middle East” in M. Yamani, ed., Feminism and Islam (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca Press, 1996), 229, and Azza Karam, “The Dilemma of the Production of Knowledge in Western Academia and Islamist Feminists” in A. Zhelyazkova and J. Nielsen, ed., Ethnology of Sufi Orders: Theory and Practice (Sofia: International Centre for Minority Studies, CSICMR, 2001), 362-85.

9 This trend has, in recent years, gained momentum for a variety of reasons: the increase in female education has given women the opportunity to question and challenge the traditional gender patterns; some Islamic organisations have allowed women to hold prime positions in their hierarchy, thus giving them the chance to influence religious discourse; the institution by UN in 1975 of the decade of women (1975-1985), and the specific UN meetings on women (Mexico City, 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, Beijing 1995) have raised the women’s level of awareness, but especially among women in the Muslim world, where they are still facing gross injustice. All this has prompted to think out the means to eradicate the prevalent abuses and has encouraged them to be more active in public life. This has also given impetus to re-address their situation via access to scriptural truth. The globalisation process in recent years has also resulted in globalising Western ideals and principles mainly via satellite, internet and information technology. In this process, a cultural encounter between Muslims and non-Muslim (Western) women has taken place, and in the course of this encounter, the dominant Western culture has impacted Muslim culture, challenging in the process traditional notions of gender relations. In response to this challenge, some Muslim women, as well as men, are re-thinking the tradition in light of the contemporary situation. The success, in recent years, of Iranian women in reclaiming some of their rights has also “provided a powerful instance of gender activism within an Islamic framework”, thus encouraging other Muslim women to follow suit. See M. Cook, Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature, xii; Roald, Women in Islam, x. See also Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Rethinking Gender: Discussions With Ulama in Iran” in Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East, vol. 13 (Fall 1998), 48-58.

framework. As a result, more and more Islamist women are asking for greater say in private as well as public life. Aware of the ethical and just voice of Islam, they are demanding egalitarian policies to shape not only their society but also their family life. Hence, they are gradually asserting themselves on the Muslim stage, and beginning to seriously challenge the dominant and rocentric culture that is hostile to women.\(^{11}\) In the realm of family life, Islamist women are calling for a new vision of womanhood, a vision inspired by models from early Islam during which women enjoyed a just and fair treatment. To realise such a vision, central issues such as marriage, divorce, and custody of children are discussed and looked at from a female perspective. They articulate their views in meetings (which reach down to the ordinary Islamic women), gatherings, public lectures, but most importantly, through their writings.\(^{12}\)

It must be stressed that Islamic feminism is a category that includes scholars and activists who represent a mid-point position between the positions of secular feminists, who regard Islam as a purely cultural issue and hence understand Muslim women’s rights mainly in Western terms, and the ultra conservative females and those who desire to replicate the historical model of Islam without taking into consideration the complexities of modern life or the impact of modernity on Muslim society. The expression “Islamic feminism” does not necessarily encompass all Muslim women who support it since some of them would reject any variety of feminism because of its Western provenance. Nonetheless, the expression define and distinguishes the Islamic feminist approach from the other two approaches to Muslim women’s rights.\(^{13}\)

Many Islamist women have written books and articles attempting a re-interpretation of the Islamic sources. The female reading of the Islamic sources, however, is a fairly new phenomenon.\(^{14}\) This makes it a delicate project for a variety of reasons: first, the prevailing view in the Muslim world

\(^{11}\) Just consider to the following: “It is our duty as Muslim women to have a say in the politics of our country and the politics that shape our lives as women. Politics is not only the realm of men, as many men want to propagate. On the contrary, it has been made our primary concern throughout Islamic history since 1,500 years ago (sic), when the women gave the Prophet their vote \textit{Bay'a} personally. We were equally addressed, and were equal partners in matters of the state. This is, however, not the notion most Muslim men carry. Somewhere, the perception of women being only bodies fit for the kitchen or the bed lingers in the back of their heads”. Cited in Duval, “New Veils and New Voices”, 58.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 58–64.

\(^{13}\) See Amina Wadud, “Aishah’s Legacy”, 17.

\(^{14}\) The question of re-interpreting the Islamic sources by going back to the original texts started with the Salafiyyah movement in the nineteenth century, chiefly as a response to the Western attacks on the fundamentals of Islam. It heralded the beginning of the breakdown of the authority of the four schools of law, traditionally held in high esteem.
is that women cannot be entrusted with interpretation because they are emotional and irrational and therefore are not fit to perform a serious job such as interpreting the text. This is despite the fact that neither the Qur’an nor the Sunnah discourage women from becoming interpreters of the Divine Message.\(^5\) Second, despite the fact that there is a historical record of female interpreters\(^6\) and despite the existence of evidence of women intellectuals who contributed positively to the intellectual life of the early Muslim community, Muslim women continue to find it difficult to legitimise and strengthen their position in this field; third, in the Muslim context, the issue of gender relations is a very delicate and sensitive one. It requires considerable courage, knowledge and reputation to venture into this realm. Very often even knowledgeable and respectable male interpreters can easily be criticised and marginalised, especially if they speak in favour of women. For instance, Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905), a nineteenth century Muslim reformer, was trenchantly attacked, and his personal integrity questioned because he advocated reform in personal law. The late Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1416/1996), a scholar of al-Azhar background, was also criticised for speaking on behalf of women’s rights. A well-known contemporary Islamic scholar such as Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī has also come under fire for being “too liberal”. Hence, a considerable number of Muslims, tend to dismiss his views and verdicts out of hand as nothing more than empty assertions.

This illustrates the difficulties facing the women’s attempt to re-interpret the relevant Islamic texts and indicates the problems and risks that the task entails. Taking the above factors into consideration, one wonders whether the contemporary feminist re-interpretation of religious texts will at all be seriously taken into account, and whether it will impact the established Islamic thought. The female reading of the Islamic sources involves both the Qur’an and the Ḥadīth.\(^7\) However, as far as the present study is concerned, it will confine its focus only on the Qur’an.

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\(^5\) It must be stressed here that contrary to this view women, especially in early Islam, were highly regarded and seriously treated. This was demonstrated by the fact that they were entrusted with the task of protecting the scripture, narrating the Ḥadīth, and commenting on them. See for example M. Z. Siddiqi, *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development and Special Features* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 117–123.

\(^6\) Chief among them was ‘A’ishah, the wife of the Prophet, who was regarded as an authority on Islamic legal issues.

Female Reading of the Qur’an

Modern Islamic history shows that there are a few women who managed to venture into this territory. The first woman to have started the process was ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 1998), known as Bint al-Shāṭi’. She was born in Egypt in 1913, was educated in Cairo where she worked for several years as a professor of Arabic Literature and thereafter as a professor of Islamic Studies in Morocco. For her, the Qur’an “must be understood in terms of the time and place of its revelation”, thereby emphasising the moral and spiritual guidance of the scripture rather than the historical facts. Her approach to the reading of the Qur’an is best described as a critical approach, particularly of the early interpretations.

Another female scholar contemporary with ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was the Lebanese Nāzirah Zayn al-Dīn (1908–1976), daughter of Shaykh Sa’īd Zayn al-Dīn, a judge and President of the Court of Appeal in Lebanon in the 1920s. Nāzirah paid special attention to the Islamic texts and their interpretations pertaining to the position of women. In 1928, she published a book in which she criticised the religious people, though not Islam itself, for the inferior status of women. Hence her approach is critical (like ‘Ā’ishah’s), but a bit more radical. Zaynab al-Ghazālī (1917–) of Egypt is another example. She is the only woman in the contemporary era to have produced a complete commentary on the Qur’an from a female perspective. More recently, a few female scholars have entered the field, chief among them being Heba Rauf Ezzat from Egypt and the African-American, Amina Wadud, from the US. The latter currently teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work, The Qur’an and Woman was originally a Ph.D. thesis which was subsequently published as a book and translated into several languages.


Amina Wadud: *The Qur’an and Woman*

The study concerns itself with the position of women from the Qur’ānic perspective. It attempts “to consider aspects of gender equality in the Qur’ānic world-view”. The study is strictly confined to the Qur’ān, so that the significance of the *ābdīth* relevant to the subject have not been considered. Wadud’s main concern is to demonstrate the relevance of the Qur’ān to the lives of modern women, via reading it from a female perspective and “reviewing the words and their context in order to derive an understanding”. She says: “I believe the Qur’an adapts to the context of the modern woman as smoothly as it adapted to the original Muslim community fourteen centuries ago. This adaptation can be demonstrated if the text is interpreted with her in mind, thus indicating the universality of the text. Any interpretations which narrowly apply the Qur’ānic guidelines only to literal mimics of the original community do an injustice to the text”.  

The form of reading she uses, according to her, transcends the limitations in the previous interpretations that have had a damaging effect on the lives of Muslim women. Wadud criticises the earlier interpretations for being biased and failing to reflect the overall intent of the text. These interpretations tend to “ignore the basic social principles of justice, equality and common humanity” which are the very essence of the message of the Qur’ān. Her criticism focuses on the tendency to confuse the interpretations with the text and the emphasis on the interpretations rather than the text, thus elevating the interpretations to a divine level. She says: “No method of Qur’ānic 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”. The result is a clear disconnection from the original text and its intent. Hence her work represents an attempt to bridge the gap and overcome the disconnection. But there is also an important rationale behind this attempt: for her “no interpretation is definitive”. The previous interpretations satisfied particular needs and answered specific questions. In the present situation, new questions have arisen and therefore new methods for answering them are needed. She insists that if the Qur’ān has to maintain its relevance and be kept alive, it must be continually re-interpreted. Otherwise “it will suffer the fate of other dead texts and defeat its stated purpose: to guide humankind – unconstrained by time or place”.  

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22 A. Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 95.  
23 Ibid., 97.  
24 Ibid., 1.  
25 Ibid., 4.
Wadud strongly believes that if the Qur’anic view of women is fully comprehended, Islam will become a motivating force for women’s empowerment. She defines three approaches to the interpretation of women in the Qur’an: traditional, reactive, and holistic. The traditional tafsirs interpret the whole Qur’an with specific aims in mind such as grammar, history, rhetoric or legislation. This approach, she says, is atomistic and lacks the hermeneutical principles which allow one to interpret each verse of the Qur’an in the light of the Qur’an as a whole. Also, all traditional interpretations, whether from the modern or classical periods, are exclusively written by males. Hence, women’s experiences are either precluded or interpreted via the male perspective. The reactive approach involves a criticism by modern scholars of the Qur’an and Islam, using the poor status of women in Muslim society as an excuse for their “reactions”. This approach is doomed to failure because scholars blame the text by failing to make a distinction between the text and the interpretation. The holistic interpretation of the Qur’an is the third approach, one that incorporates modern social, moral, economic and political issues, including women’s issues. For her, this is the most appropriate method, and it is within this category that she locates her work.26

In her attempt to study the Qur’an, she makes use of the method suggested by Fazlur Rahman. He states “that all Qur’anic passages, revealed as they were in a specific time in history and within certain general and particular circumstances, were given expression relative to those circumstances. However, the message is not limited to that time or those circumstances historically. A reader must understand the implications of the Qur’anic expressions during the time in which they were expressed in order to determine their proper meaning. That meaning gives the intention of the rulings or principles in the particular verse”.27

Wadud’s approach to the study of the text is hermeneutical. A hermeneutical model is concerned with: first, the context in which the Qur’anic passages were revealed; second, the grammatical composition of the Qur’anic passages, and third, the Qur’an’s world-view.28 A significant part of her work involves examining the meanings and implications of individual words or word-groups because, according to her, some Qur’anic words are employed narrowly to restrict the application of the Qur’anic principles. She

26 Ibid., 1–3.
27 Cited in ibid, 4. Also, for an elaboration of this method see Fazlur Rahman, Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).
28 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 3.
claims that some interpreters bring down the text to their standards in order to project negative meanings that satisfy their prejudices about women. Very often this is done on the basis of one word. Other words are not even found in the Qur’ān. She writes: “Other negative terms, if used at all, in the Qur’ān are neither directly nor exclusively associated with women. Even when a negative word is coincidentally used exclusively with reference to women, it does not mean that all women necessarily fall prey to the indications of that word, nor that men are exempted from falling prey or permitted to fall prey. The interpretations of these words and other syntactical structures have not been juxtaposed with the entire Qur’anic world-view”.29

By utilising a hermeneutical model, Wadud is able to argue against some traditional interpretations, specifically regarding some words employed in the scripture to discuss and achieve universal guidance. Also, she renders some discussions previously regarded as gendered into neutral expressions; by the same token, she renders other discussions heretofore viewed as universal into specific.30

Throughout the book Wadud argues against the negative attitudes of Muslims toward women which, she claims, have influenced the interpretation of the Qur’ān regarding the position of women. She refutes the prevailing view that there are essential distinctions between men and women on issues related to the creation, ability and function in society, the ability to attain guidance, and the recompense owed to them in the life after death. She stresses that although there are distinctions between men and women, these are not of an essential nature. Moreover, she argues against the values that are given to these distinctions. These values, she says, portray women as weak, inferior and unfit for performing certain tasks, while men are portrayed as strong, superior, inherent leaders and caretakers who have the ability to perform the tasks that women cannot. This, she laments, has resulted in confining women to functions related to her biology only.31

How, then, does Wadud see these issues? With regard to human creation, she argues that despite the fact that the Qur’ān distinguishes between men and women, there is no difference in the value attributed to them. Both are equal before God, and both are equally essential.32 She asserts that the details of creation, like other unseen matters, are humanly incomprehensible, “every discussion of the unseen involves the ineffable”.33 Hence, any debates of the

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29 Ibid., 97.
30 Ibid., 3.
31 Ibid., 7.
33 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 16.
human creation in the text is primarily a linguistic debate. Wadud rejects the prevailing view that human creation started with a man and that, therefore, all men are better than all women. Instead, she insists that the creation of humankind is gender-neutral and there is nothing in the Qur’ān to indicate otherwise. She states: “In the Qur’ānic account of creation, Allah never planned to begin the creation of humankind with a male person; nor does it ever refer to the origins of the human race with Adam. It does not even state that Allah began the creation of humankind with the nafs of Adam, the man. This omission is noteworthy because the Qur’ānic version of the creation of humankind is not expressed in gender terms”. To prove her point, she cites the following Qur’ānic verse: “And from (min) His signs (āyāt) is that He created you (humankind) from (min) a single soul (nafs), and created from (min) it its mate (zawj), and from (min) these two He spread countless men and women” (4: 1). Wadud draws from this verse three key terms: min, nafs, and zawj to explain her approach.

As for min, she states that it has two possible meanings: it can be used for the preposition “from” to indicate the extracting of something from other thing(s); second, it can be employed to mean “of the same nature as”. Consequently, the meaning of the above verse can be changed according to which interpretation of the word min one may choose or prefer. Giving the example al-Zamakhsharī, she says that in his commentary he interprets the verse to mean that “humankind was created in/of the same type as a single nafs, and that the zawj of that nafs was taken from that nafs”. This kind of interpretation led to the belief that the first created human being was a male person who was complete and perfect, and the second created person was the woman who was derived from the whole and consequently was less than it. She confirms that al-Zamakhsharī arrived at this conclusion chiefly because he relied on the Biblical statement which indicates that Eve was derived from the rib of Adam.

The second term she deals with this subject is nafs; according to her, nafs illustrates the common origin of humankind. Grammatically, nafs is feminine, but conceptually it is neither feminine nor masculine. She states that the Qur’ān never mentions that the creation begins with the nafs of Adam, the

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34 Wadud, Qur’ān and Woman, 19–20.
35 Wadud mentions also other Qur’ānic verses which can be interpreted in the same way and thus give the same meaning. For instance, verses 7:189, and 39: 6 state that “Allah ja’ala from the nafs its zawj”. The word ja’ala means “to create something from another thing”. Hence, it lends the word min the meaning “from”, i.e. extraction. See ibid., 18–19.
36 It must be stressed that there is a hadith which conveys more or less the same version. This hadith is found in the collections of both Bukhārī and Muslim. See also R. Hassan, “The Issue of Women-Man Equality”, 70–81.
man. As for the word *zawj*, she says that the Qur’an provides us with scant information about it except that “it is (from) min the first *nafs*, and is *zawj* in relation to that *nafs*”. For her, it is this sparse information not only about *zawj*, but also about *nafs*, that had caused al-Zamakhshari and other scholars to consult the Biblical version which supports the view that Adam was the first human being to be created.\(^37\) Wadud rejects the image of the woman as temptress and the source of evil, prevalent especially in the Judeo-Christian heritage, but also among some Muslims. She stresses that the Qur’an employs the dual form, with only one exception,\(^38\) which shows that the woman is not responsible for Adam’s first mistake; both were equally wrong in disobeying God. Both asked for forgiveness and both were forgiven. In the light of this discussion, she reiterates that human creation is gender-neutral and that there are no essential distinctions between the distinct but compatible pair.\(^39\)

Concerning the ability to attain guidance, Wadud stresses that the Qur’an recognises the woman as an individual in her own right.\(^40\) Spiritually speaking, the Qur’an deals with the individual, whether male or female, on an equal footing: “that is, whatever the Qur’an says about the relationship between Allah and the individual is not in gender terms”.\(^41\) Hence, there is no distinction between the two with regard to individual capacity, potential relationship with God, and personal aspirations. The Qur’an, she continues, does not state, either implicitly or explicitly, that there is a primordial distinction between the two in spiritual matters; therefore, any existing differences between them have no inherent value. She affirms that the Qur’an clearly indicates, through three stages in human existence, that all persons, males and females are inherently possessed of equal value. For example, the Qur’an emphasises the common origin of humankind, the *nafs*; it stresses that the potential change, growth and development in the human condition on earth lies within the individual (or group) souls; and that all human endeavours are promised rewards based solely on individual efforts. Having said that, however, there is only one basis of distinction, namely *taqwā* (piety). *Taqwā* rather than wealth, nationality, race, or sex is, in the sight of Allah, the criterion by which human beings may be differentiated.\(^42\) To strengthen her

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\(^37\) Some would disagree with her on this point. See Roald, *Feminist Re-interpretation of Islamic Sources*, 31–32.

\(^38\) The exception refers to the Qur’anic verse in which Adam was portrayed as solely responsible for the whole episode. See The Qur’an, 2: 36. See also Haifaa Jawad, *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 6.


\(^40\) The Qur’an also deals with women as members of society.

\(^41\) Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 34.

\(^42\) Ibid., 34–38.
point concerning women’s ability to have access to guidance, Wadud uses female characters mentioned in the Qur’ān to demonstrate that women are not only recipients of wahiyy (revelation) such as the mothers of Moses and Jesus, but are also used in the Qur’ān as models for universal guidance: “Allah cites an example for those who disbelieve: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot, who were under two of our righteous servants, yet they betrayed them so that they were of no avail to them against Allah and it was said: Enter the fire along with those who enter!” (Qur’ān 66: 10). In sharp contrast to that is the case of the wife of Pharaoh: “And Allah sets forth an example to those who believe: the wife of Pharaoh when she said My Lord! Build for me a home with you in the garden, and deliver me from pharaoh and his work, and deliver me from evil doing folk” (Qur’ān 66: 11), “And Mary, daughter of ‘Imrān, whose body was chaste, therefore We breathed therein something of Our rūḥ.43 She put faith in the words of her Lord and His scriptures and was among the qānitūn”. (Qur’ān 66: 12).

These examples, says Wadud, are universal and are aimed for “those who believe and those who disbelieve”, those who are good and those who are bad. Namely, “they are non-gender specific examples”. Nonetheless, she laments that these “universal examples” are being interpreted as gender-specific examples; that is, they are exclusively related to women. Another example she uses is the famous female character in the Qur’ān, Bilqīs, the queen of Sheba. The Qur’ān describes her as a powerful, knowledgeable person who had a magnificent throne. When Solomon invited her and her people to worship God instead of the sun, she acted shrewdly and wisely; she read the letter of Solomon, asked for advice from her advisers, and took her decision independently.44 In doing so, she demonstrated her “independent ability to govern wisely and to be governed wisely in spiritual matters”.45 Again, although Bilqīs is a universal example for wise leadership for both males and females, the majority of Muslims regard leadership positions as inappropriate for women.46

As for the recompense owed to women in the Hereafter, Wadud finds a consensus among the Qur’ān commentators regarding this issue: recompense is awarded with complete equity to both men and women; gender plays no part in it, it is the individual efforts that count most.47 By the same token, the

43 A more accurate translation of the verse would be: “And Mary, daughter of ‘Imrān, who guarded her chastity ...” Ed.
44 Wadud, Qur’ān and Woman, 33–34, 38–42; see also, 99–100.
45 Ibid., 41.
46 For detailed information on the subject see the Qur’ān, chapter 27.
47 See the Qur’ān, 40: 39–40.
possibility to gain the best reward or receive a hideous punishment lies equally before them.\footnote{Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 50–51.} Having said that, however, Wadud finds some paradoxes concerning this system of equity. For example, some commentators deliberately ignore the Qur’ānic emphasis on individual equity with regard to recompense when they deal with the term *zawj* in the Hereafter: “You who have believed in Our revelations and were self-surrendered, enter the Garden; you and your *azwāj*, to be glad” (Qur’ān 43: 69–70).\footnote{See also 36: 54–6, 40: 8, 18: 23.} The term *zawj* (pl. *azwāj*), she continues, has been interpreted in a way that it would allow the man to settle the destiny of his spouse. “Through these misinterpretations, the female *zawj* is either restricted by the limitations of her husband, or given increased rewards on the basis of his merits”.\footnote{Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 55.} She refuses to accept such a notion, arguing that it goes against the Qur’ānic view that no human being, no matter how closely affiliated on earth, can increase or decrease the merits earned by another on the day of judgement. According to her, “the use of you and your *zawj* (means) you and whoever is paired with you because of like nature, deeds, faith, etc”.\footnote{Ibid., 56.}

Hence, there is emphasis on comfort, harmony and friendship in Paradise, as opposed to the lonely life in Hell. Maybe one might be reunited with his/her earthly partner in Paradise, but this can be done on account of common belief and good actions. Wadud raises another point about the term *zawj*: most commentators, she says, interpret the Qur’ānic expressions that there will be pure *azwāj* in paradise as an illustration that a devout man will have many *hūris* (women) at his discretion. She rejects such a notion because “the use of the plural *azwāj* corresponds to the use of the plural preceding it: for “believers” [and such terms [meaning] that companionship awaits those who believe – male or female in their attainment of paradise – not that each man will get multiple wives”.\footnote{Ibid., 57.} Also, *zawj* and *azwāj* cannot be equated with *hūris*: to do so would reduce the descriptions of the ultimate reality into a narrow perspective reflecting a single ethnocentric world-view, and this cannot be true.\footnote{Ibid.}

Wadud’s starting point regarding their roles on earth is that: first, “there is no inherent value placed on man or women. In fact, there is no arbitrary, pre-ordained and eternal system of hierarchy; second, the Qur’ān does not strictly delineate the roles of women and the roles of men to such an extent as

48 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 50–51.
49 See also 36: 54–6, 40: 8, 18: 23.
50 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 55.
51 Ibid., 56.
52 Ibid., 57.
53 Ibid.
to propose only a single possibility for each gender – that is, women must fulfil this role, and only this, while men must fulfil that role and only men can fulfil it.”  

She stresses that the Qur’ān confirms that human beings operate in social systems with certain functional distinctions. These functional distinctions have been employed to reinforce the idea that men are inherently superior to women. For example, the primary distinction for woman, from the Qur’ānic viewpoint, is her ability to bear children. However, the use of “primary” has resulted in the false belief that women can only be mothers. This, she insists, is not the accurate intent of the text: rather, the Qur’ān desires to demonstrate the importance of the “function of child-bearing, which is exclusively performed by women”. For her, this function becomes primary only in relation to the survival of the human race, meaning that since women are the only humans capable of bearing children, it is of crucial importance that they would continue to do so. Apart from this function, no other function is comparably unique to one gender or the other, even though there is the popular misconception that men have special qualities because they were charged with the responsibility of risālah. She rejects this notion, stating that although there are no Qur’ānic examples of female prophets, women (such as Mary and the mother of Moses) were among those who received revelations. Moreover, those chosen for this task were of exceptional qualities; hence prophecy does not represent an exclusive and universal rule for all men.

Wadud discusses two important terms in the Qur’ān: darajah (step, degree) and faddāla (prefer), which have been used to support the notion of value in the functional distinctions between people on earth. First, she makes it clear that the Qur’ān does not divide the labour, setting a uniform order for every social system completely ignoring the natural differences in different societies. Instead, it confirms the need for variation and encourages each social system to decide its functional distinctions between its members. Having said that, however, the Qur’ān applies one single reward system which can be adopted in every social setting. Within this context, Wadud focuses on the term darajah which, she says, is very often associated with good deeds, but God also gives darajah on the basis of knowledge or socio-economic distinctions. Then she discusses the verse which mentions that a degree exists between men and women. For her, this verse deals solely with divorce.

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54 Ibid., 63.
55 Ibid., 64–5.
56 Ibid.
57 For the occurrence of faddāla in the Qur’ān see 4: 34 and 17: 21. For the use of darajah see 2: 228 and 17: 21. Ed.
58 Ibid., 65–67.
59 The Qur’ān, 2: 228.
matters (men are in a position to divorce their wives relatively easily and without court intervention). Hence it cannot be interpreted and generalised to mean that there is a *darajah* between all men and all women in all contexts, for this kind of reading would contradict the Qur’ānic principle of equity with regard to the individual.  

As for *faddāla*, she believes that the Qur’ānic usage of it is relative rather than absolute. This is due to the fact that although the Qur’ān states that some prophets (or a group of people) are preferred over others, at the same time it makes no distinction between them. With regard to *faddāla* in the context of male-female relations, the following verse is crucial: “Men are (qawwamūna ‘alā) women, (on the basis) of what Allah has (preferred) (faddāla) some of them over others, and (on the basis) of what they spend of their property (for the support of women)”.  

Wadud sees this preference as relative and conditional and rejects the interpretation which emphasises that men are preferred over women in consideration of superiority in strength and reason, which is a common interpretation of this verse. She argues that if this were the case, then verse 4: 34 should have read: “they (masculine plural) are preferred over them (feminine plural)”, instead of the actual text: “*ba’d* (some) of them over *ba’d* (others)”. She asserts: “The use of *ba’d* (some) relates to what obviously has been observed in the human context. All men do not excel over all women in all manners. Some men excel over some women in some manners. Likewise, some women excel over some men in some manners. So, whatever Allah has preferred, it is still not absolute”.  

As for the word “*quwwamūna ‘alā*” in the same verse, Wadud reviews other interpretations and accepts the ideal arrangement (women’s primary responsibility is child-bearing, whereas men’s responsibility is the support of the family). At the same time, she questions the practicality of this model to current social reality, especially when the balance of responsibility changes due to the inability of the man to provide material help.  

Within the context of the same verse (4: 34), Wadud further looks at the following portion: “So good women are *qānitāt*, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear (*nushūz*), admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them”. She stresses that this passage has been interpreted to mean that women must obey their husbands, and if they do not

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60 Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 68.
61 Ibid., 69–70.
62 Ibid., 70–71.
63 Ibid., 71–74.
64 Cited in ibid., 74.
do so the latter have the right to beat them. She opposes such readings, insisting that this passage aims to resolve disharmony between husband and wife. She goes on, explain that the word qānitāt is very often mistakenly interpreted to mean obedient, and then presumed to indicate obedience to the husband. She refutes this interpretation, stating that the word qānitāt refers to “good” women and it has been used throughout the Qur’ān for both males and females. It portrays “a characteristic or personality trait of believers towards Allah. They are inclined towards being co-operative with one another and subservient before Allah. This is clearly distinguished from mere obedience between created beings which the word tā‘a indicates”.

By the same token, the term nushūz is used for both genders, although it is defined differently for each. When it is associated with the wife, it assumes the meaning of disobedience to the husband. She disagrees with this interpretation, stating that since the Qur’ān uses nushūz for both sexes, it cannot be interpreted to mean disobedience to the husband. She agrees with Sayyid Quṭb that nushūz refers to a state of disorder between husband and wife. Thus, when there is disorder between the couple, the Qur’ān suggests three steps to deal with it: first, reconciliation (to give chance for consultation); second, [temporary] separation (to allow for a cooling-off period); third, and in the extreme circumstances, the scourge is permitted. In commenting on the third step, Wadud seems markedly unclear, preferring to tell us that according to Lane’s Lexicon, “daraba (scourge) does not necessarily indicate force or violence” and that the word is employed in the Qur’ān to indicate different meanings. She then advises that this verse should be understood as preventing excessive violence against women rather than allowing it; she does that without any convincing argument. Taking the above discussion into account, Wadud concludes that: “The Qur’ān never orders a woman to obey her husband; it never states that obedience to their husbands is a characteristic of the better women, nor is it a prerequisite for women to enter the community of Islam ... no correlation is made that a husband should beat his wife into obedience. Such an interpretation has no universal potential, and contradicts the essence of the Qur’ān”.

Finally, Wadud focuses on the chronological development of the Qur’ānic programme for women. For her, it is very important to look at the reform programme brought about by the Qur’ān for it illustrates the natural progression in eliminating deep-rooted practices in the Arabian society. This

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65 Ibid.
66 See ibid., 75–76.
67 Ibid., 77.
Qur’anic model could be applied to eradicate the current ill-practice against women. She argues that the changes introduced by the Qur’an were never meant to stop after the revelation had been completed. On the contrary, many social customs had to wait for a while to be completely eradicated. Although the Qur’an in some circumstances proposed an immediate abolition of certain customs, in most cases it preferred a gradual process for reform. For if all ill-practices had had to be abolished at once, it would have created problems and the Divine instructions would never have been implemented. Taking the above into consideration, Wadud stresses that it is a natural evolution in society that further social reforms with regard to women would be introduced. These changes are to be based on the overall Qur’anic intent of social justice, especially with regard to issues such as divorce, polygamy, inheritance and the rules of witnessing.  

Concluding Remarks

Wadud’s work represents an interesting attempt which is taking place within the context of the current Islamic debate on gender issues. Instead of dismissing the work as a futile exercise coming from a modernist female scholar, I think this attempt ought to be taken seriously for it represents a new dimension (the female standpoint) which could enrich the Islamic debate. Its relevance lies in the fact that it challenges patriarchal interpretations from within, the Islamic tradition bestowing upon it the distinction of acting as a pioneering study for future research along the same lines.

Having said that, it also needs to be pointed out that in her work Wadud demonstrates a tendency to condemn the traditional commentaries of the Qur’ân without providing any systematic analysis or comparative studies of these commentaries, which makes her work vulnerable to criticism. The work can be viewed as part and parcel of a recent trend among educated Muslim women of different backgrounds who, while criticising the patriarchal worldview, make it a point to emphasise their allegiance to Islam as an essential part of their self-identity. For them, the aim is to restore the humane aspect of Islam which underpins Islamic social justice for all human beings irrespective of race, class, gender or religion. The rationale behind such an approach is, as we have explained, to re-visit the traditional legalistic commentaries in order to re-address gender imbalance. In other words, they are principally concerned with the exoteric aspect of the Law (Shari‘ah). But while these efforts are commendable, they tend to be oblivious to the other important aspect of

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68 Ibid., 78–91.
Islamic tradition: that is, its spiritual dimension which has, historically speaking, favoured women and allowed the pursuit of feminine activities. This is crucial if one has to present a balanced approach to women’s rights in Islam. Without taking into account the spiritual dimension of the tradition, the distortions of the image of Muslim women can hardly be corrected.

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