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Patriarchalism and the Qur'an¹

Asma Barlas

*Say: He is God,
The One and Only;
God, the Eternal, Absolute;
He begetteth not,
Nor is He begotten;
And there is none
Like unto Him (112).²*

* * *

Men are [qawwamuna 'ala] women [on the basis] of what Allah has [faddala] some of them over others, and [on the basis] of what they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are [qanitat], guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear [nushuz] admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and ... separate [daraba] them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them (4:34).³

* * *

*For Muslim men and women, –
For believing men and women,
For devout men and women,
For men and women who are
Patient and constant, for men
And women who humble themselves,
For men and women who give
In charity, for men and women
Who fast (and deny themselves).
For men and women who*

*Guard their chastity, and
 For men and women who
 Engage much in God's praise
 For them has God prepared
 Forgiveness and great reward (33:35).⁴*

* * *

In this chapter, I examine oppositional readings of Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, as a patriarchal and also as an anti-patriarchal text, and since it does not have a single 300-word-long passage that fits into either category, I will be quoting partial lines, single words and shorter verses, including the three cited above. Historically, however, Muslims have interpreted it as privileging men, which is why the history of Qur'anic exegesis is more than a moment, or series of moments, of 'patriarchalism'. It is, rather, a millennium-long history of Muslim patriarchy itself. And this in spite of the fact that there are fewer than a dozen lines and words in a text of about 80,000 words and 6,000 verses that are said to favour men. In recent years, therefore, some Muslim women have also offered anti-patriarchal readings of the Qur'an, which have, in turn, inspired some secular Muslims, especially third-generation feminists, to rebrand it as being incurably patriarchal, although they never say what they mean by patriarchy itself.

Clearly, these irreducible differences tell us about the range of Muslim attitudes to their religion but they also reflect how the Qur'an is interpreted, in what contexts and by whom. The *how* is crucial because while there are certainly some words and lines in it – moments, really – that speak to male authority, there are also teachings that are opposed to patriarchy. By this term I mean two distinct types of male authority over women. One is rule by the father/husband, which, in some of its religious iterations, draws on images of God as Father/male. The other is the politics of sexual differentiation that privileges men in their biological capacity as males. The Qur'an itself does not use words like 'sexual differentiation', 'male privilege', or 'father-rule', but I will be discussing its teachings in light of this comprehensive definition of patriarchy. I begin by reviewing its 'patriarchal moments', and then analyse what I consider to be some anti-patriarchal teachings; I end with a note on method.

The one verse that is quoted most often in defence of male privilege is 4:34 (cited above) which most Muslims interpret as saying that God prefers (*faddala*) men to women, that men are women's guardians (*qawwamun*), that good wives are obedient (*qanitat*) and that husbands can beat (*daraba*) those who are not

(*nushuz*). However, all five Arabic keywords have several other meanings as well, and so these are not the only possible, or plausible, choices.

For instance, al-Tabari, a medieval exegete, took *qawwamun* to mean financial maintainers, which is also how some contemporary feminists, notably, Riffat Hassan and Azizah al-Hibri, read it. They also point out that the first line of the verse is descriptive, not normative, 'since obviously there are at least some men who do not provide for women.'⁵ Moreover, since men can only be *qawwamun* 'in matters where God gave *some* of the men more than *some* of the women *and* in what the men spend of their money, then clearly men as a class are not "*qawwamun*" over women as a *class*.'⁶ (In their interpretation, *faddala* alludes to resources and not to God's partiality to men.) Incidentally, this is the sole use of *qawwamun* in the Qur'an, as Zainah Anwar and Ziba Mir-Hosseini note. 'In relation to marriage,' they say, 'it uses two other terms over twenty times: *ma'ruf* (good way, decent) and *rahmah wa muwadah* (compassion and love).'⁷ Yet, Muslim family law revolves around the concept of male guardianship over women. As to *qanitat*, Amina Wadud believes it means obedience to God since the Qur'an does not compel a wife to obey her husband; she therefore also reads *nushuz* as denoting marital discord and not a wife's disobedience to her husband.⁸ This seems right since the Qur'an also refers to a husband's *nushuz* (4:128), which Muslims never interpret as a man's disobedience to his wife.

Lastly, there is *daraba*, which the Qur'an uses over a dozen times for everything from strike/beat to leave/go away. Laleh Bakhtiar uses 'go away' and, although her choice is against the grain of the Muslim exegetical tradition, it is not outside all tradition.⁹ There are also *hadith* (narratives) that the Prophet never struck his own wives and forbade men to strike theirs. More to the point, the Qur'an does not permit violence against a wife in any other instance. About marriage it says: '[God] created for you helpmeets from yourselves that ye might find *sukun* in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy' (30:21).¹⁰ *Sukun* implies not only a sense of peace but also of sexual fulfilment.¹¹ Even where love is in short supply and husbands dislike their wives, the Qur'an still tells them to 'consort with them [wives] in kindness, for if ye hate them it may happen that ye hate a thing wherein Allah hath placed much good' (4:19).¹² Indeed, even in those cases where spouses are each other's 'enemies', the Qur'an urges them to be mutually forgiving and forbearing (64:14).¹³ In light of the rest of its teachings, then, 4:34 becomes anomalous when we pick the most punitive meaning of *daraba* and, in truth, there is no compulsion to do so when the Qur'an itself recommends looking for the text's 'best' meanings (29:18).¹⁴

A line that is also read as affirming male superiority is: 'men are a degree above women' (2:228). However, the only context in which the Qur'an says this is when it speaks about a couple who has separated, pending their divorce. During this period, it says, they can reunite 'if they desire a reconciliation. And they [women] have rights similar to those [of men] over them *in kindness*, and men are [*darajah*] above them'.¹⁵ The 'degree' husbands enjoy, therefore, is only in cases of divorce and reconciliation.

A word that also evokes patriarchal interpretations is *harth*: 'Your women are a *harth* for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls' (2:223).¹⁶ *Harth* is usually taken to mean sowing and therefore as indicating vaginal intercourse, though some men think it means a wife is her husband's property to treat as he likes. However, this is a patriarchal fantasy because not only does the Qur'an counsel mutuality in a marriage but it also warns husbands against lewd behaviour (5:6). Furthermore, it does not describe any human being as property even when it speaks about slaves to its first audience, a seventh-century tribal Arab slave-owning patriarchy. Lastly, the Qur'an also speaks of paradise as *harth* (42:20), which cannot possibly be taken to mean land, property or sowing. I therefore read it as a metaphor for sexual pleasure given Islam's positive view of sexual desire.¹⁷

Finally, Muslims claim that one man equals two women because the Qur'an gives him double a woman's share in inheritance, treats his evidence as more important than hers and caters to his sexual needs through polygyny. All these are glib generalizations, however. Only a son gets double what a daughter does from their parents' property; parents get equal shares from their child's. Also, while two women can take the place of one man as witnesses to a financial deal, a wife's evidence outweighs her husband's if he accuses her of adultery. (A man must either produce four male witnesses, or swear four times to this effect himself, but, if his wife swears her innocence four times, there the matter ends.) As to polygyny, the Qur'an permits only *some* wards of female orphans to marry more than one orphan if doing so will secure justice for *her*. However, even in such situations, it says monogamy is better for the wife (4:3). This is the extent of 'patriarchal moments' in the Qur'an, and I will now look at some teachings that run counter to patriarchal ideologies and practices.

The Qur'an's approach to fathers differs from that of religious and traditional patriarchies in two ways. First, it does not patriarchalize God. This is a critical point since men claim power when 'the source of ultimate value is ... described in anthropomorphic images as Father or King'.¹⁸ As should be clear from verse 112 cited at the outset, however, the Qur'an explicitly says that God is not father

or son or, for that matter, like any other being. Since God is incomparable, it even forbids using similitude for God (16:74), or trying to define God (37:180). These prohibitions mean the Qur'an's own gendered language about God is just that: language; it is not a claim that God is a male.

Second, the Qur'an does not endorse father-rule. In fact, it criticizes those who follow the 'ways' of their fathers and warns of '(The coming of) a Day/When no father can avail/Aught for his son, nor/A son avail aught/For his father' (31:33). To this end, it tells children *not* to obey their parents (not just their fathers), 'If they strive/To make thee join/In worship with [God]/Things of which thou hast/No knowledge' (31:14–15).¹⁹

This conflict between monotheism and patriarchy – that is, between what believers owe to God and to their fathers – is also the motif of Abraham's story. As a youth searching for the one true God, Abraham breaks with his father, and also the idols his father worships, as the condition for submitting to God. And when his father has him thrown into a fire, it is God who saves him. Since God is not father in Islam, I interpret this rescue not as affirming God as patriarch but as displacing father-rule altogether. Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his own son years later also shows that, far from exalting fathers, the Qur'an limits their authority and subordinates it to God's. Thus, Abraham not only does not have the right to kill an unwary son (he can only proceed with the sacrifice after his son freely consents to it), but, in the end, he cannot kill even a willing son since God saves him from *Abraham*. He does not therefore have the absolute power fathers did in traditional and religious patriarchies or even his namesake does in the Biblical narrative.²⁰

I believe what makes the Qur'an's episteme anti-patriarchal is not only its descriptions of God and its attitude to fathers but also the fact that it does not ascribe 'psycho-social distinctions' between women and men to their biological differences, as do patriarchal religions.²¹ Even its 'patriarchal moments' do not claim that sex/gender differences make men and women unequal. In fact, the Qur'an does not map cultural symbolism (gender) onto biology (sex), which means there is 'no *concept* of woman' or of 'gendered man' in it.²² Nor is there a 'hierarchy of being',²³ which means it also does not discriminate between women and men on the basis of their sexual identities. To the contrary, it consistently affirms their ontological equality in describing human creation, moral personality and religious praxis.

The absence of a sexual hierarchy is apparent in the Qur'an's declaration that God 'created you/From a single Self/Created, of like nature, [its mate]' (4:1).²⁴ Many Muslims who believe that God made men in 'His' image refuse to accept this ontology of a single self and insist that Eve (who is not named in

the Qur'an) was created from Adam's rib, an idea borrowed from the Bible by some exegetes. Others, meanwhile, claim that men and women are only equal in the religious sphere and not in the social or marital. The Qur'an, however, does not bifurcate these three domains. For instance, when it talks about *sukun* between a wife and husband, it explicitly references their origins in a single self. Similarly, when it speaks of God's vicegerents (*khalifa*) on earth, it refers to both women and men whom it also calls each other's guardians: 'The Believers, men/And women, are *awliya*,/One of another: they enjoin/What is just, and forbid/What is evil' (9:71–72).²⁵ *Awliya* means having *walayah*, or custody of/guardianship over, another. In effect, guardianship is mutual despite Muslim insistence on interpreting *qawwamun* as meaning that men are women's guardians and 'in charge' of them.

Finally, the Qur'an 'pairs' women and men when outlining the nature of moral personality and the scope of religious obligations, as 33:35, quoted at the beginning of this essay, demonstrates. Muslims, however, discount such verses and focus on the Qur'an's 'patriarchal moments' instead. So, I will end with a critique of this predilection on the part of conservatives and secular Muslims and feminists alike.²⁶

Contrasting the Qur'an's anti-patriarchal teachings with its 'patriarchal moments' may seem like waging an interminable and unproductive war of verses since people will select those that resonate most with their own sensibilities. Yet, it would be absurd to think that there are not better or worse ways to interpret texts. The Qur'an itself praises 'Those who listen to the Word and follow the best (meaning) in it' (39:18).²⁷ (Since notions of what is best are likely to depend on time and circumstance, interpretations of the Qur'an will also always be time and context-bound.) In addition, it urges Muslims to read the 'whole of it' (as a textual unity), and to privilege its foundational verses over allegorical ones (to read it intratextually). However, those who interpolate male privilege into the Qur'an usually ignore these basic hermeneutical principles.

First, they treat words as if they have one fixed meaning, precluding others even if these yield better readings and/or readings that are more congruent with the totality of the Qur'an's teachings. Examples would be *qawwamun*, *daraba* and *harth*. Second, they read the text selectively which generates a fragmentary and sometimes a patently false understanding of it, as, for instance, when 'degree' is taken to mean that men are ontologically superior to women, or when deceptive generalizations are made about marriage, inheritance and evidence. Third, they disregard the Qur'an's foundational

verses – about creation, moral personality and mutual guardianship – which affirm the ontic equality of women and men while overstating the significance of allegorical allusions, such as the one to wives as *harth*. They also ignore the range of the Qur'an's rulings on evidence, inheritance and marriage that do not fit into the template of male privilege and underscore only those that do, often at the cost of ignoring the intent of specific verses (like the one on polygyny) and of holding the Qur'an hostage to a few words and verses. Finally, those who read male privilege into the Qur'an do not differentiate between teachings that apply to Muslims across time and space and those that were directed at its first (seventh-century) audience. This collapse of the universal and the particular results in part from an unwillingness 'to reckon with moving time'.²⁸ In other words, it is not just questionable textual practices but also the failure to contextualize its teachings that ties the Qur'an in perpetuity to a long defunct patriarchy. However, trying to make it 'immune from history' also makes the Qur'an's 'own history irrelevant', argues Kenneth Cragg. This idea, he says, 'emerges indisputably from the Quranic text itself', which stresses 'the necessarily periodic and contextual nature of its contents'.²⁹ I believe its 'patriarchal moments' are in the nature of these 'periodic and contextual' contents since they pertain to a historical situation in which men had a certain type of authority over women. That the Qur'an takes this authority as a given does not mean it upholds patriarchy. To the contrary, as I have argued, its core teachings incline against the ideology of male supremacy propagated by religious, traditional and secular patriarchies. It is, rather, the belief in the idea of fixity, of both time and text, that results in interpretations which tie the Qur'an to a seventh-century patriarchy, thus prolonging its life much beyond its historical origins, prime and logic.

However, as I see it, Muslim patriarchies are hanging by one of the flimsiest ideological threads in history. This is not only because they have hung an ontology of sexual oppression on a scandalously few lines in the Qur'an but also because they have done so by suppressing all that is egalitarian in Islam and by corrupting our very conception of God. For observant Muslims, the Qur'an is the word of a God who, the Qur'an says, does not transgress against the rights of another (God is just), forbids coercion in religion and is beyond sex/gender. I fear that as long as we continue to project sexual partisanship and injustice onto this God by interpreting the Qur'an as a patriarchal text, we will be no better than the 'illiterates who know not the Book/But [see therein their own] desires,/And they do nothing but conjecture' (2:78).³⁰