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This, of course, brings me to Barlas's assessments of heresy, blasphemy, and things no Muslim would ever do. In presenting her normative claims about the Qur'an as though they are self-evident, and in drawing the demarcating lines she does around the possibilities for legitimate Muslim views, what kind of religious authority is Barlas invoking? That Barlas does not recognize the positions I reach in *Feminist Edges* as the product of a faithful search by a Muslim makes me unsure about the potential of the field of feminist scholarship on the Qur'an to expand through intellectual and theological disagreements without reinscribing the same kinds of demarcating lines and boundaries the field arose to challenge. I can only hope that moving forward, scholars in the field (including myself) will be willing to accept the unintended results of our work as part of new directions in the field and to disagree with them productively, rather than disowning or denouncing them as a kind of heresy.

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BEYOND THE TEXT: BETWEEN ISLAM AND FEMINISM

Fatima Seedat

My contribution to this roundtable addresses the space between Islam and feminism and ventures to imagine what might be “beyond” the text to illustrate how, at this interstice, the Qur'an may remain central to Muslim meaning making yet open to evolving understandings of justice. Caught under the weight of Margot Badran's now well-rehearsed approach to Muslim women's equality work under the label “Islamic feminism,” Asma Barlas finds her work so “inextricably linked” that in responding to her critics she finds herself also responding on behalf of Islamic feminism. For the feminists among her critics, Barlas argues, Islamic feminism is “a straw woman on which they cut their academic teeth but without taking it seriously” (112).

Theorizing against the easy convergence of Islam and feminism as Islamic feminism, I have argued instead for a tentative engagement that neither inflates nor conflates the distance between the two intellectual paradigms but maintains a productive tension that lends itself to translucence rather than transparency

between feminism and its Muslim others.¹ In maintaining this critical space, I argue, we may avoid Islamic feminism as either a catchall solution or problem in Muslim women's equality work.

A close study of Kecia Ali and Aysha Hidayatullah's work shows that among scholars that have ventured a convergence between the two paradigms, Hidayatullah has perhaps been the most circumspect. Furthermore, Ali has "taken Islam for granted" in the sense where doing so indicates that she has not theorized her equality work as Islamic feminism.² Both scholars have allowed the two intellectual paradigms to articulate with each other but do not make claims to Islamic feminism. Therefore, it is surprising that Barlas comments as she does on their use of Islamic feminism as a "straw woman," more so because Barlas has in the past been among the strongest critics of the tendency to name Muslim women's equality work "Islamic feminism." Yet here, Barlas employs Islamic feminism as simply the combination of Islam and feminist principles. The distinction between Hidayatullah and Ali's respective works and claims to Islamic feminism is important, because theirs are unlike the project of Islamic feminism of the type that Badran has fashioned for Muslim women's equality work, which risks either conflation or inflation of the space between the two intellectual paradigms. To illustrate, in the conflation of the two, Barlas here finds herself immediately under the yoke of Islamic feminism and compelled to its defense. In inflating the space between the two paradigms, Barlas has also produced an unfortunate and unproductive polarity that separates "observant Muslims" from feminists (114).

Therefore, more than a charge against the straw woman of Islamic feminism here is the question of the "sacrality" of the Qur'an and its "sanctified relationship to God" (114). Confronted with Hidayatullah's concern for what it means to be confronted by the possible incommensurability of our desire for equality with the historical but divine text, Barlas finds that "treating the Qur'an as a discourse is a rather obvious attempt to secularize (desacralize) it" (116).³ Yet Hidayatullah's argument for the Qur'an as discourse speaks to the ways in which the Qur'an may also remain continuously relevant to the reader and not as a definitive closed text that "says" things with unassailable authority in the way that Barlas argues the Qur'an is antipatriarchal. Hidayatullah offers instead a "divine text that allows us to imagine justice."⁴ In feminist philosophy,

¹ See, for instance, Fatima Seedat, "Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 2 (2013): 25–45, and Fatima Seedat, "When Islam and Feminism Converge," *Muslim World* 103, no. 3 (2013): 404–20.

² Seedat, "Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism," 37.

³ Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Fatima Seedat, "On the Convergence of Islam, Feminism, and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Critical Review of Aysha Hidayatullah's *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*," *Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World*, March 24, 2016, 2.

⁴ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 173.

the “imaginary configurations” of a text instruct us on its “metaphoric networks” and the “grammar” of discourses that permit the text its forms of representivity.⁵ Accordingly, Hidayatullah’s analysis tells us much about the representation of women in the text concluding from which she makes two important suggestions for *how* we might enter a space “beyond” the text.⁶ Her preference is for a discursive approach applied both to the text and to ideas of sexual difference. The former relies on Abu Zayd’s work and her approach to sexual difference requires new ways of theorizing ideas of equality, namely “the specificities of situational contexts, variations that come with historical progression, and changing definitional relationships.”⁷ The value of this discursive approach to the text and to sexual difference for Muslim women’s equality work is that it is generative in the sense that it produces continuous becomings rather than finalized definitions.⁸

These discursive approaches indicate *how* we might move beyond the text, but we are still unclear as to *where* we might move to beyond the text until we recall that the text also offers the opportunity to “imagine justice.” The choice between the text already sufficient for sexual equality by virtue of being anti-patriarchal, and a “divine text that allows us to imagine justice” by inspiring in us aspirations for equality, replicates to some extent the historical contrast between subjective and objective ethics, respectively.⁹ In objective ethics, where the role of religion or the text is to “help us work out how we should behave,” the text indicates our “forms of conduct” and “how to think about our duties, but it does not establish the nature of our duty.”¹⁰ And so, as a discursive communication between the Creator and the reader, the Qur’an allows us “to imagine justice” in ways not yet materialized in the text. Rather than the incontrovertible last word on what that justice might be, the text offers the scope to “imagine justice” in the paradigm of each epoch.

This intersection of ethics with Muslim feminist critique brings feminist *tafsir* to the intersections of text and experience. In the contestations of authority between the two, feminist *tafsir* privileges experience as a means of “imagining

⁵ Michelle Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.*, trans. Trista Selous (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); and Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74–80.

⁶ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 172–77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸ See Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Fatima Seedat, “On the Convergence of Islam, Feminism, and Qur’anic Interpretation.”

⁹ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 173.

¹⁰ Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 107.

justice” over texts that produce gendered injustice. amina wadud cites the difference between Qur’anic and contemporary notions of social justice to show that “Muslim women create their own voice as they experience the text” and so she refers to the “authority of experience.”¹¹ Furthermore, Sa’diyya Shaikh has argued for a “*tafsir* of praxis” “informed by the full, embodied realities of Muslim women.”¹² Accordingly, to use the reader’s experience of being beaten or not in order to make an argument against the implementation of the text of 4:34 on the grounds of patriarchy and sexual bias, for example, is to go beyond the text—and if not beyond the text, then certainly beyond the verse—and in that space “beyond” to “imagine justice” through an ethic that makes the application of 4:34 untenable.

Feminist *tafsir* makes the distinction between the ethical vision of the text and the pragmatic or legal voice of the text.¹³ A normative response to 4:34 would cite the *tafsir* of Qur’an-through-Qur’an exegetical method and thus remain within the confines of historical *tafsir* sciences. However, when the exegete finds a seemingly unethical legal proposition in the text and when the idea of justice that the reader imagines is only facilitated in the ethical vision of the text but not actualized in the legal voice of the text—or, as Hidayatullah explains, when the reader’s idea of justice is “outside the text’s limited pronouncements”—then the reader is compelled through her experience to go “beyond” the text.¹⁴ It is not from the legal pronouncement of 4:34 that the reader knows it is not ethical to beat or be beaten, but her experience of being beaten or not tells her that beating is not ethical. While the historical exegetical methods allow the text to abrogate itself, there’s little space in the historical method for the experience of those who are beaten to abrogate the text that facilitates their beating. Conceptualized thus, we may theorize the authority of experience by asking: where adherence to the text results in the experience of injustice, may the experience abrogate the text that produces the injustice?

¹¹ Amina Wadud, “Towards a Quranic Hermeneutics of Social Justice: Race, Class, and Gender,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 12, no. 1 (1995): 37–50, quotations on 37 and 47; and Deborah Majeed, “Amina Wadud and the Promotion of Experience as Authority,” in *A Jihad for Justice*, ed. Kecia Ali, Julianna Hammer, and Laury Silvers (Akron, OH: 48hrbooks, 2012), 59–61. More recent, see “Muslim Women and the Challenge of Authority Conference Boston March 2012,” unpublished presentation, August 22, 2012, <http://laurylivers.com/2012/08/22/mwca2012/>.

¹² Sa’diyya Shaikh, “A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community,” in *Violence against Women in World Religions*, ed. Daniel Maguire and Sa’diyya Shaikh (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 69.

¹³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 65–66.

¹⁴ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 173.

When the text is generative—when it is constantly in the process of being produced in the sense of a continuous and discursive becoming—the text also remains at the center of Muslim meaning making. Through the Qur’an as a continuous and discursive becoming, we may imagine a justice that excludes the unethical legal provisions of 4:34 and with it a source of sexual hierarchy. And through the tension produced in the space between feminism and the Qur’an, Muslim women might highlight the value of experience as a site of exegetical authority beyond the text. Accusations of an anti-Qur’anic turn limit the forms of divinity available to the text to the degree to which the definitive text can tell us what God says. Yet in these spaces “beyond” the text that Hidayatullah and others suggest, equality and the text are never definitive, always discursive, and drawn from the experiences of the reader, always receptive to continuous becomings.

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

FEMINIST EDGES OF MUSLIM FEMINIST READINGS OF QUR’ANIC VERSES
YaSiin Rahmaan

Muslim feminist readings of Qur’anic verses, by Riffat Hassan, amina wadud, Asma Barlas, Azizah al-Hibri, and others have provided important insights and alternative readings for many Muslims who seek gender equitable understandings of the Qur’an and Islam. However, their limited modernist methodology and framework in effect instrumentalizes the central Muslim text albeit for the justifiable purpose of countering the misogynist and oppressive uses to which the text had been and is being subjected. Moreover their vision of divine justice and compassion, which does not extend to as many sentient