

THERE SHOULD BE GENDER EQUALITY AT THE BEGINNING OF HUMAN EXISTENCE: A CRITICAL LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF CHAPTER ONE OF WADUD'S QUR'AN AND WOMAN (1992)

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ABSTRACT

Scripture plays a central role in the Islamic version of feminism. Feminists believe that the preferential position of the male within Muslim societies is due to traditional convictions informed by a specific, mostly literal reading of Qur'anic texts. They therefore insist on an alternative exegetical approach, which (according to them) would reveal clear tendencies towards gender equality. In this study Amina Wadud's perspectives featuring in *Qur'an and Woman* (1992) are analysed per chapter, subdivisions, and subsections, firstly in general and secondly from a fourfold viewpoint, focusing respectively on [1] the overall structure of the book and chapters, [2] the utilization of scripture (e.g., hermeneutic approach), [3] interaction with others (overtly and covertly), and finally on [4] perspectives pertaining to Wadud as person. Results obtained from the focus on the above selected features are revealing. [1] Chapters are, for example, independently structured, selectively choosing themes and material with clear gender objectives. [2] Selection and use of scripture is subservient to gender orientated presuppositions, with textual strategy favouring the interpretation of expressions in the light of general Qur'anic principles. [3] During the course of her argumentation, overtly mentioned sources are nearly exclusively used in support of her gender-equality convictions, while covertly mentioned sources reflect views counter to her own. Attention will be given to chapter one ("Creation of Humankind" of *Qur'an and Woman* (1992) separately, followed by a Final Reflection providing an overall and comparative view of the said two chapters.

Keywords: Gender studies in Islam, Gender, linguistic analysis, Qur'an, gender equality

INTRODUCTION

In chapter two of *Qur'an and Woman* (1992), Wadud provides perspectives on "The Qur'anic View of Woman". In this study, a similar procedure will be followed to ascertain her utilization of scripture and her conversation with sources (overt and

covert). Attention will be given to Chapter One (Creation of Humankind) and Chapter Three (The Hereafter) of Qur'an and Woman (1992) separately, followed by a Final Reflection providing an overall and comparative view of the said two chapters. The analysis of Chapter One, In the Beginning, Man and Woman were Equal: Human Creation in the Qur'an, will be done according to subdivisions of Wadud (1992) within chapter one of Qur'an and Woman.

Attention will be given to the following: Introductory Remarks to Chapter One, Creation and the Language of the Unseen, Creation of the First Parents, The Creation of Humankind, The Origins of Mankind, The Dualism of the Creation, The Events in the Garden, Conclusion, Selected Facets of Chapter One of Qur'an, and Woman (1992). Before introducing the respective subsections, Wadud (1992) makes a few Introductory Remarks to Chapter One in which she asserts her view on gender equality.

Introductory Remarks of Chapter One

Before introducing the various subdivisions of Qur'an and Woman (1992) chapter one, Wadud makes a few preliminary remarks. Chapter one (Wadud 1992,15) commences by asking the following question "How does the Qur'an describe the creation of woman?" She then responds to this question by asking other questions that she eventually denies. The latter questions clearly depict Wadud's characterization of traditional views, namely that:

1. The Qur'anic accounts of the process of the creation of humankind distinguish woman from man in such a way as to define her potential to a single biologically determined role.
2. The said view implies "created inferiority."

In the face of these views (derived from stated questions) regarding the position of women, Wadud (1992,15) proposes that:

1. There is no essential difference in the value attributed to women and men.
2. There are no indications that women have more or fewer limitations than men.

The Qur'an, according to Wadud (ibid.), does not make a distinction between men and women:

1. In the presentation of its major theme's creation,
2. In the purpose of the book,
3. In the rewards it promises.

Wadud thus, denies the said inferiority and any distinction between men and women in accounts.

CREATION AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNSEEN

“Creation and the Language of the Unseen” (3.1.2) is the first subdivision of chapter one of Qur’an and Woman (1992). The said subdivision consists of four subsections (3.1.2.a–d) In each of them Wadud focuses on related but differently stated aspects of the creation of human beings, using Qur’anic verses as points of departure. In the present subdivision (3.1.2), elucidated below, Wadud commences by asking to what extent scripture can be used to make statements about God.

According to Wadud (1992,15), “the full details of creation are beyond human language and comprehension.” In this regard she refers in an adapted way (i.e., applying it to creation) to Kenneth Burke (1961,14) who had stated that language “is intrinsically unfitted to discuss the supernatural literally. Words about God and the Unseen must be used analogically because these matters transcend all symbol systems.”

Therefore, in the view of Wadud (1992,16), the discussion of woman and man in the Qur’an “is primarily a discussion of language.” She explains:

1. It is because the complete meaning of allegorical verses cannot be empirically determined.
2. Every discussion of the Unseen involves the ineffable.
3. Eventually it ends upon itself: a discussion about the words used to discuss that which is unattainable in language.

As scriptural proof for the above statements Q. 3:7 is quoted (1992,16) where reference is made to “clear revelations” (ayāt muḥkamāt) and “others’ [which are] allegorical (mutašābihāt).” The said verse would account for statement one above, but not for two and three.

Creation of the First Parents.

“Creation of the First Parents” is the first subsection of subdivision 3.1.2 The subsection commences by giving attention to the interpretation and application of Q. 7:27. As regards the creation of the “first parents” of mankind, Wadud (1992,16) cites Q. 7:27 which focuses on the seduction of Adam and his wife. She translates:

*Oh, children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you as he caused your first parents
[’abawā’i-kum] to go forth from the Garden.*

“First Parents” is an elucidating concept in terms of Wadud’s reasoning. It would mean that the focus is upon a pair and not a single person. Except for being created, Wadud assumes “that our ‘first parents’ were like us” (1992,16). She does not explain the assumption but deems it to counter assumptions drawn from “the discussions, myths, and ideas about the creation of the first parents” such as that “human creation began with a man: which gives men a priori superiority over all women” (cf. Wadud 1992,16, 27).

The Creation of Humankind

In the second aspect of creation highlighted by Wadud, Q. 38:71-72 is used as point of departure. Three steps of human creation identified by Maududi (1983, IV, p. 11), and quoted by Wadud (1992,16), are:

1. The initiation of creation, 2.
The formation or perfection,
3. The bringing to life.

According to Wadud, the said analysis is based on verses like Q. 38:71-2. Verse 71 refers to the intention to create a creature (khalīq) of fresh from clay (cf. step 1). Verse 72 mentions the actual making (sawwaitu-hu, translated by Wadud as “I perfected it”) as described by Allah (cf. step 2), followed by reference to God’s blowing into it “from my Ruḥ” (cf. step 3).

In her application of step 1 Wadud states that the initial act of creating (khalāqa) also applies to every human being (cf. Q. 25:2; cf. 27). Step 2, the act of perfection, is illustrated by Wadud (1992,17) with reference to Q. 38:72 (see previous paragraph) where the expression sawwaitu-hu (root s-w-y[!] II) is used (see previous paragraph). The said act of perfection is furthermore elucidated with reference to Q. 95:4, “We created humankind [khalāqnā ‘l-’insāna] in the best of stature” [fi ‘aḥsani taqwīmi], and Q. 40:64 “and [Allah] perfected your shapes” [fa-’aḥsana suwara-kum]. In Wadud’s view the two genders are included in the act of perfection. In this regard she mentions Q. 32:7 which she translates as “[Allah] – Who gave everything He created the best form” (literally, ‘who perfected [‘aḥsana] everything He created’ [kalaqa-hu]). Step 3, coming close to the Biblical account (Wadud 1992,27), is the breathing of the Spirit of Allah, which Wadud (1992,17) again asserts as relating to both male and female.

In concluding her discussion of “The Creation of Humankind”, Wadud (1992,17) states, “one characteristic of human creation is the two distinct but compatible genders”. She adds, “The two [i.e., man and woman] constitute a part of that which ‘perfects’ the human created form” (ibid.). Although admitting affinity with the biblical description, emphasizing gender equality during the act of creation is important in the reasoning of Wadud.

The Origins of Mankind.

The third angle from which creation is viewed lays stress on the interpretation of Q. 4:1. In this sub-division, Wadud (1992,20) emphasizes the Qur’anic version of creation over the Biblical one which state that “Eve was created from Adam” (cf. Genesis 2:22) thus providing support for a patriarchal point of view. Special attention is given to the Qur’anic verse Q. 4:1 which reads:

wa-kalaqa-kum min nafsīn wāḥidatin wa kalaqa min-hā zawja-hā wa batta min-humā rijālan kathīran wa nisā’an.

The traditional rendering of the above verse is: "He [Allah] created you from one nafs (soul) and created from it its mate and dispersed from [both of] them many men and women". The said verse is translated in an amplified way by Wadud as: "And min His ayat (is this :) that He created you (humankind) min a single nafs, and created min (that nafs) its zawj, and from these two He spread (through the earth) countless men and women."

She interprets the verse in such a way as to support her own feminist views. In her English rendering of Q. 4:1, Wadud leaves nafs ['self'], min ['from'; 'of the same nature'], and zawj ['mate', 'spouse' or 'group'] untranslated. With reference to the concept ayah used in her rendering, she argues for a deep structure behind the explicit linguistic signs (demonstrated in the Qur'an): "Explicit ayāt which give information about the Unseen cannot be discovered or fully perceived by ordinary human faculties" (cf. Izutsu 1964,134; Wadud 1992,18 and 27) The expression min ayatihi does, however, not appear in the Qur'anic version of the verse 4:1. It was probably taken from a source, such as a commentary that was consulted. The Arabic original may have been min ayati-hi anna-hu.

Wadud argues for a specific interpretation of the preposition min. The preposition min is repeatedly used in Q. 4:1 (cf. Q. 7:189 and Q. 39:6). Wadud (1992,18) refers to two possible translations of the word min, namely "from" and "in/of the same type." Wadud (1992,19) prefers to render min in the sense of "in/of the same type" in accordance with the use of min in the phrase min anfusi-kum in Q. 42:11 and Q. 30:11. Her possible reason for not supporting the min as "from" could be that the said translation "from" of min may give "rise to the idea that the first created being (taken to be a male person) was complete, perfect and superior (1992,18-19)". Wadud argues, "The second created being (a woman) was not his equal, because she was taken out of the whole, and therefore, derivative and less than it" (ibid.).

About the word nafs in the verse Q. 4:1, Wadud (1992,19) refers to the following possible translation equivalents:

1. "Self" (nafs) and its plural "selves" (anfusi). According to Wadud, this is "a common ... usage. It is never used in the Qur'an with reference to any created self, other than humankind."
2. The second one is a technical usage in the Qur'an; "nafs refers to the common origin of all humankind."

According to Wadud (1992,19), the grammatical gender of the word nafs "is feminine, taking the corresponding feminine adjectival and verbal antecedents. Conceptually, nafs is neither masculine nor feminine". Although the term nafs also has masculine antecedents, the meaning "person" would preferably apply (cf. Fazlur Rahman 1980,112; Wadud 1992,19 & 27). Amina Wadud contends that "[i]n the Qur'anic account of creation [cf. Q. 4:1], Allah never planned to begin the creation of humankind with a male person; nor does it ever refer to the origin of the human race with Adam (cf. Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf-Allah 1965, 185; Wadud 1992,19-20 & 28)." Furthermore, "It does not state that Allah began the creation of humankind with the nafs of Adam, the man."

According to Wadud (1992,20), the word *zawj* has three possible translations equivalents. *Zawj* means “mate”, “spouse”, or “group.” Its grammatical gender is masculine but “[c]onceptually it also is neither masculine nor feminine”. Regarding the statement in Q. 4:1 *min nafsi...min-ha zawja-hā* (‘from a nafs ... from it [i.e., the nafs’s] mate’), Wadud (1992,20 & 28) argues that it does not refer to Adam and Eve, respectively. “It is perhaps the scarcity of detail that has caused Qur’anic commentators like al-Zamakhsharī and other Muslim scholars to rely on Biblical accounts which state that Eve was extracted from (min) the rib side of Adam.” Wadud argues that details like this i.e., elucidating the creation are “unnecessary” and therefore “redundant”. “These details are unimportant to the point which the Qur’an is making at the particular time.”

From the above discussion, one notices that Wadud seems to be influenced by her gender perceptions in her approach to interpretation of certain verses which leads to an ad hoc application of linguistics.

The Dualism of the Creation

In the final subsection of the first subsection, a range of verses are used to argue the necessity and equality of masculine and feminine as pair. Wadud’s essential preconception when interpreting the Qur’an may be deduced from the following statement (1992,22):

Femininity and masculinity are not created characteristics imprinted into the very primordial nature of female and male persons, neither are they concepts the Qur’an discusses or alludes to. They are defined characteristics applied to female and male persons respectively based on culturally determined factors of how each gender should function.

In the same paragraph, she also refers to “other[s]” view:

They [the concepts masculinity and femininity] have figured very strongly in interpretation of the Qur’an without Qur’anic substantiation of their implications.

Wadud emphasizes the use of the term “pairs” in the Qur’an (1992,21). She refers to *zawj* in the context of the creation in general (Q. 36:36), stressing that the said pairs are “equally essential” (Q. 51:49), each consisting of a male and female (Q. 53:45) without attributing “explicit characteristics to either one or the other” (1992, 21). Within the said pair, child-bearing function belongs with the female (Q. 35:11-12), but according to Wadud (1992, 22) “all other functions connected with childcare and rearing, if mentioned in the Qur’an at all, are never described as essential created characteristics of the female”.

According to Wadud (1992, 22), “There is a tranquil link between the human pair, man and woman”, which may be deduced from her rendering of Q. 30:21:

Among his signs is this: that he created azwaj for you from you own anfus so that you may find rest in them.

In Wadud's view the verse lays emphasis on the female/male pair as "the essential contingent in humankind functions on a physical, social and moral level" (1992,22). She furthermore declares that "the Qur'an depicts a necessary link between the functional members of each gender." To illustrate the "contingent-pair system" nafs and zawj (from which mankind multiplied) as inherent part of the structure of the created order, Wadud (1992, 26) refers to Q. 4:1, discussed in above.

As regards the statement that pairs are "equally essential" (Q. 51:49) an overt reference is made to Qutb, vol. 2, p. 648 (cf. 1992, 21 & 28) "dualism becomes a necessary characteristic of created things". Reference is also made to Izutsu (1964, 85; cf. Wadud 1992, 21 & 28) who contends that "each member of the pair presupposes the other semantically and stands on the very basis of this correlation."

Wadud convincingly states her case for the importance attached to "pairs" in the Qur'an. Whether the different usages as illustrated above support the notion of gender equality is however to be doubted.

EVENTS IN THE GARDEN

In the second subdivision (3.1.3) of chapter one of Qur'an and Woman (1992) the emphasis is no longer on creation proper, but on an encounter of the first human pair in the abode they were, quoting related portions of scripture.

When referring to "The events in the Garden", Wadud (1992, 25) has in mind the Biblical version of temptation with its "negative Greco-Roman and Biblical-Judaic implications that woman was the cause of evil and damnation" (cf. Alvin J. Schmidt, 1989,39-68, Veiled and Silenced: How Culture Shaped Sexist Theology; Wadud, 1992:28). However, by means of an exposition, the Qur'anic version of the Events in the Garden (Q. 20:118-119, 7:22, 20:117, 12:5, 7:21, and 7:23) Wadud provides an alternative view, emphasizing:

Nevertheless, this is much clear: woman is never singled out as the initiator or temptress of evil (1992,25).

Wadud (1992, 24-5) proves the above statement by mentioning that:

[T]he Qur'an always uses the Arabic dual form to tell how Satan tempted both Adam and Eve and how they both disobeyed. In maintaining the dual form, the Qur'an overcomes the negative Greco-Roman and Biblical-Judaic implications that woman was the cause of evil and damnation.

She states (1992, 25) that only once attention is drawn in the Qur'an to Adams temptation (Q. 20:120) followed by the eating of the tree fruit by him and his wife (Q. 20:121). In this instance, according to Wadud, the focus is on the forgetfulness of Adam of the covenant of old (min qablu, "before") due to Satan's seduction. Wadud (ibid.) explains:

The Prophet used to try to memorize the verses as they were revealed for fear of forgetting. However, the Prophet need not have worried. Here, in the story of Adam, the point of forgetfulness is mentioned. Satan seduced Adam, but Allah forgave Adam and accepted his repentance and gives him guidance.

In the temptation tradition, there are, according to Wadud (1992, 23), four concepts that the Qur'anic version demonstrates.

1. Fundamental guidance in the Qur'anic scheme.
2. Temptation and deception which hinder humankind's efforts.
3. Divine forgiveness.
4. Individual responsibility.

She elaborates on these concepts as follows:

1. In the Garden, Allāh provided the first parents Adam and Eve a warning (1992, 23) "against approaching one of the trees in the Garden" and afterwards provided them guidance as well by means of "explicit revelation" (1992, 24).
2. Regarding the "temptation and deception" by Satan, "humankind share the same test: the choice between obedience and disobedience." Wadud states (1992, 24), "They [i.e., Adam and Eve] failed to remember Allāh's admonition and approached the tree."
3. The requirement for divine forgiveness was the recognition of their error, repenting, and asking for forgiveness (1992,24).
4. The Qur'anic view about individual responsibility is "that every man and woman individually and every people collectively are alone responsible for what they do" (Rahman 1980, 19; Wadud 1992, 25). In this regard Wadud (1992, 24) refers to the mercy of "the explicit guidance–revelation."

CONCLUSION

Wadud ends the discussion of creation (the theme of the chapter) by adding a conclusion which is partly a summary of chapter one, but also lays stress upon theological considerations underlying the Qur'anic version of the creation of man. In the conclusion, Wadud firstly reiterates points made in the chapter (although not in the same sequence as in the sub-divisions).

The focus is thus on singularity (Allah's) versus dualism (male and female), implying gender equality. Secondly, although no mention of gender is made, emphasizing the theological content of creation and garden events, the Judaic-Christian versions (portraying woman as secondary or negatively) are challenged. Thirdly, the said act of Allah clearly indicated the elevated position of both male and female, implying gender equality. Fourthly, Wadud explains that differences in the hierarchical status of genders are culturally defined.

Fifthly, Wadud emphasizes: “The Qur’anic version of the version of the story of the Garden signifies individual responsibility. Finally, Wadud repeats her view that “The Qur’anic account of the creation of humanity ... points out that humans share a single point of origin.”

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