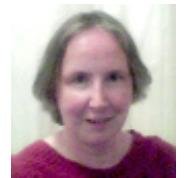


Book Review: Feminist Edges of the Qur'an by Aysha A Hidayatullah

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Aysha A. Hidayatullah offers the first comprehensive examination of contemporary feminist Qur'anic interpretation, exploring its dynamic challenges to Islamic tradition and contemporary Muslim views of the Qur'an. She offers no definite answers, but rather an embrace of the new ways of relating to the Qur'an that the uncertainty opens up, a dynamic and interactive relationship rather than that of a passive reader, writes **Elaine Housby**.



Feminist Edges of the Qur'an. Aysha A Hidayatullah. Oxford University Press. 2014.

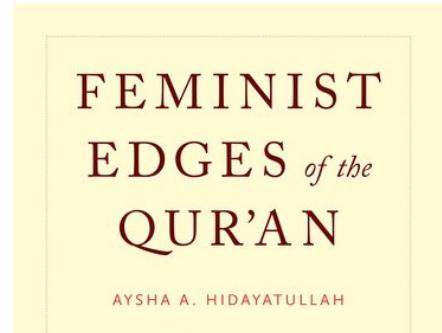
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This is the first comprehensive review of contemporary anti-patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'an, written by a scholar who firmly identifies herself as both a 'believing Muslim' and a feminist. The title was inspired by a book by Richard Bulliet called *Islam: the View from the Edge*, in which he argues that changes developed on the 'edge' of Islam have sometimes moved to the centre. Hidayatullah states that she has reservations about using the term 'feminist', because to many Muslims it suggests a secular and individualist ideology that they do not accept (her point about the arrogance and ethnocentrism of some white western feminists is well made), but that it is the clearest way of describing the aims of this exegetical project.

The main writers whose work Hidayatullah considers are (in the order in which they are listed in the book): Riffat Hassan, Azizah al-Hibri, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Sadiyya Shaikh and Kecia Ali. First she situates their work in the context of the wider modernist movement in Qur'anic exegesis. This is characterised by an emphasis on the text itself, freed of some of the accreted commentaries and traditions. She explains that Muslim feminists have found the work of Christian women theologians helpful and encouraging, but that Muslims cannot take the same approach to the Qur'an as Christians do to the Bible, because the Qur'an is understood to be the eternal and unmediated word of God, so its text cannot be disputed.

Hidayatullah explains and provides examples of the main techniques used by these scholars. These are: the historical contextualisation of some verses, on the grounds that although the Qur'an's prescriptions are eternal they were expressed in a form appropriate to the community to whom it was first revealed; a 'holistic' approach which considers verses in relation to other passages rather than 'atomistically' and perceives a cohesive ethos in the text as a whole; the argument that the concept of male supremacy is a contravention of *tawhid*, the belief in the oneness of God that is the central doctrine of Islam, because it grants men power over women that in fact belongs only to God.

I can remember how excited I was when I first came across this 'tawhidic paradigm' in the work of Asma Barlas, and I share Hidayatullah's disappointment at having to conclude that it does not quite work. She points out that, while any notion that women's relationship with God is mediated through men is un-Islamic at its core, having a direct relationship with God does not necessarily preclude having a lower status.



The central argument of these scholars is that the overall ethos of the Qur'an is one of justice, kindness and equality, and so any individual verse that appears to conflict with this needs to be explained away somehow. Hidayatullah has after many years of studying their work reluctantly come to the conclusion that this has led them into methodological inconsistency, where the use of historical contextualisation and the acceptance or rejection of hadith (traditions of the Prophet) literature is sometimes arbitrary and based only on whether it supports their case.

Hidayatullah is honest enough to say that there is no a priori reason why the Qur'an should promote equality for women; we modern women have got used to the idea of equality and if we also believe that God is perfectly just then we assume that the Qur'an must promote our version of equality, but this is ultimately a circular argument. She agrees with all those who have identified an assertion of the equal worth and equal moral agency of all human beings in the Qur'an, as this is demonstrated in many of its verses, but argues that we cannot project our own historical period's interpretation of this onto God.



Women in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Credit: [Kashfi Halford](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

The most challenging Qur'anic text for Muslim women is so notorious that within the literature considered here it is often referred to simply by its verse number, 4.34. It seems to tell men to hit their wives if they are disobedient. Some of the manoeuvres resorted to by feminist commentators to deny this reading of the text have an air of desperation about them and indeed Wadud in her later work has declared that she simply "says No" to this text. Hidayatullah also admits defeat and concludes that there is no interpretive technique that can adequately reconcile this verse with our own understanding of acceptable marital behaviour.

In the conclusion she bravely confronts the question of whether, if we acknowledge that some passages of the Qur'an stubbornly resist a woman-friendly interpretation, we must either question whether God is just as we understand justice or question the status of the Qur'an as a divine text. As a believer she maintains its divine status, but says circumspectly that we may need to move towards a new understanding of 'the nature of its revelation'. She offers no definite answers, but rather an embrace of the new ways of relating to the Qur'an that the uncertainty opens up, a dynamic and interactive relationship rather than that of a passive reader.

The most attractive feature of this book is that Hidayatullah cares so much about her subject. She writes movingly of the 'grief' it has caused her to have to criticise some of the work of writers who have meant so much to her personally, and she treats them with a scrupulous fairness that is all too rare in academic writing. She also writes with sobering openness about her fears that this book may give ammunition both to those who use traditionalist patriarchal readings of the Qur'an to justify laws oppressive of women and to non-Muslims who use the supposed sexism of Islam as a propaganda tool against it. So great were these fears that she seriously considered not publishing this work, but in the end her conviction that intellectual honesty is always the best course overcame them.

Hidayatullah writes well and explains concepts very clearly, so much so that this book could be understood even by those with no previous familiarity with the subject. Anyone working in Islamic studies will find it valuable, and for those actively engaged with the issue of the status of women within Islam it is an essential read.

Elaine Housby has a Masters degree in Politics and Sociology from Birkbeck College, London, a Masters degree in Modern Middle East Studies from St Anthony's College, Oxford and a PhD from the Open University for a thesis in the field of Religious Studies. She is the author of *Islamic Financial Services in the UK* and *Islamic and Ethical Finance in the UK*, both published by Edinburgh University Press. [Read more reviews by Elaine](#).

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