

**Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on
Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence**

Kecia Ali

Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2006. 217 pages.

Kecia Ali's *Sexual Ethics and Islam* is a fresh and incisive examination of a variety of issues related to marriage and sexuality. Its primary objective is to

engage with the values and aspirations of contemporary American Muslims, although it should also find a broad non-Muslim audience in undergraduate courses and among non-specialist readers. Throughout the book, Ali analyzes the concerns of a Muslim community striving both to realize a vision of justice and equality informed by contemporary social realities as well as to cultivate a genuine and honest commitment to Islam's teachings. Although she sometimes addresses the internal dynamics of the Muslim community (both American and international) in ways that may resonate most with a faith-based audience, non-Muslim readers and students will be fascinated by the degree of Muslim social and theological diversity that she describes.

Ali identifies strongly with "progressive" Muslims, although she does not hesitate to critique liberal and conservative orthodoxies. She engages intensively with an emerging canon of English-language progressive Islamic thought, frequently citing such authors as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Omid Safi, and Farid Esack. One of the book's striking (and useful) aspects is that it does not assume that the Islamic "center" lies in the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East or South and Southeast Asia; it unapologetically (and accurately) assumes that the Muslims of North America and other minority communities can produce autonomous and valid developments in Islamic thought and practice. Although her sympathies clearly lie with, for instance, those who would seek to accommodate the religious and personal aspirations of Muslim homosexuals (chapter 5), she also displays an unsparing commitment to internal consistency and intellectual rigor. She neither resorts to easy platitudes about Islam's egalitarianism and justice nor tolerates them in the arguments of others.

Throughout the book, the author points out selective Qur'anic citations, inconsistent attitudes toward the authenticity of the hadiths, and other forms of methodological slippage in the arguments of both liberals and conservatives. She emphasizes the bias, misogyny, and cultural conditioning of traditional scholarship, for instance, in her unsparing examination of texts concerning women's sexual obligations within marriage (pp. 9-13). She is equally unwilling to countenance selectivity on the part of progressives, whom she criticizes for "resorting to apologetic and denial" in the face of the Islamic heritage's uncongenial aspects (p. 43). She argues that the treatment of hadith is "perhaps the most crucial methodological issue for contemporary Muslim reformist thinkers" (p. 136), cautioning against *ad hoc* dismissal of disturbing texts from the most authoritative collections.

Ultimately, some of her most acerbic critiques are directed against the arguments of those liberals whose stances fail to reflect a rigorous commitment to the words of the Qur'an, whose occasional dissonance with contemporary conceptions of gender equality Ali insists should be acknowledged. Unflinchingly refusing to read the Qur'an through the lens of contemporary values, she concludes "that in some crucial sense the Qur'an is a thoroughly androcentric – though not, I would argue, misogynist – text" (p. 132).

Ali's discussion is deeply informed by her academic work with classical Arabic sources. Basing herself largely on her impressive doctoral dissertation on marriage in early Islamic law, she argues that some aspects of the classical legal construction of marriage and sexual ethics are irreconcilably dissonant with the values held by most modern Muslims. Classical acceptance of the institution of slave concubinage, she argues, reflects an acceptance of slavery that should give rise to serious theological reflection about the relationship between God's justice as expressed in the Qur'an and contemporary understandings of human dignity and moral good (pp. 54-55). Moreover, she argues that the model of slave concubinage deeply informed the classical jurists' understanding of marriage (pp. 43-44). It also both shaped and reflected a lack of concern with consent as a central element in sexual ethics – a concern that the author argues is deeply held by many modern Muslims.

Indeed, Ali argues that it is "the legal construction of marriage and sexual relationships as both gendered and hierarchical," rather than simply a horror of same-sex physical intimacy, that makes same-sex marriage unthinkable in traditional *fiqh* (pp. 94-95). Due to the deep structural incompatibility between classical construals of marriage and sexual ethics and those pursued by contemporary progressive Muslims, Ali cautions against the selective reappropriation of individual elements of classical Islamic law (such as the absence of any legal requirement that wives perform housework). Due to the stylistic and space constraints of a book directed at a non-specialist audience, she does not present extensive textual evidence for many of her arguments about classical law. This may prove frustrating to some readers (particularly those who may wish to dispute some of her interpretations), but it is a function of the book's genre rather than of any shortcoming in the author's scholarship.

Ali highlights the aspects of classical law that will cause contemporary Muslims the most discomfort. For example, the book reviews a litany of embarrassing issues, from female genital cutting to A'isha's age at marriage.

Clearly, this is an intentional strategy aimed at forcing Muslims of all ideological stripes to acknowledge ethical complexity and historical change (although it might potentially upset or confuse some students with little exposure to Islam). While some of Ali's arguments will discomfit both conservative and liberal Muslims, it is praiseworthy that she scrutinizes and questions her own understandings of justice and equality and refuses to impose them on religious texts.

The author is keenly aware of the pressures and prejudices that have evoked Muslim apologetics, both on the left and on the right, and she acknowledges the global inequality and external scrutiny that condition contemporary Islamic thought. Her impatience with apologetics reflects a confidence that, although the quest to reconcile a complex religious heritage with the ethical aspirations of many modern Muslims has no facile resolution, an open and rigorous engagement with that heritage offers much promise for the future. This book is a vigorous and engaging contribution to a very important dialog.

Marion H. Katz
Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies
New York University, New York