

**Recovering the Female Voice in
Islamic Scripture: Women and Silence**

Georgina L. Jardim

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The absence of women's voices from the scriptures of the major world religions has been the subject of feminist theologians' inquiry, especially during the past three decades. Georgina Jardim's work in feminist scholarship and women's study is impressive. This book provides a fine synopsis of some of the important works in Islamic hermeneutical tradition while set in a compar-

ative framework. As such, it is a great contribution to the comparative feminist hermeneutics of scripture. The author makes good use of works by Amina Wadud, Barbara Stowasser, Asma Barlas, and other feminists who have worked on the Qur'an or on paradigms of Muslim women in the Islamic textual tradition. She weaves their ideas and theories with those of Annemarie Schimmel, Sachiko Murata, Denise A. Spellberg, W. Montgomery Watt, Richard Bell, Ashley M. Walker, Michael Sells, and others. In addition, she draws from Christian and Jewish feminist thought as well as that of secular philosophers or theoreticians in juxtaposition with Muslim interpretations. As the title suggests, she focuses on women's speech by emphasizing voice rather than silence. The author concludes that women not only have a voice in Islamic scripture, but that in the Abrahamic scriptures as a whole they break silence in order to invoke social justice.

The book's predominant theme, the Qur'anic account of "the woman who disputes," is juxtaposed with similar stories in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, which makes it an interesting exploration in Abrahamic inter-feminist interreligious dialogue. Her use of scriptural reasoning to bring Abrahamic and secular voices in conversation on this topic is original. Among the few works with a comparative hermeneutic approach to women in religion are Murata's *The Tao of Islam* (1992), a sourcebook on gender relations in Islamic discourse with references and analogies to the yin and yang elements, and Yvonne Yazbek Haddad and John L. Esposito's *Daughters of Abraham* (2002). Jardim's book is distinct in that it compares both feminist methodologies as well as a parallel scriptural story in these three traditions.

The main question is whether or not (or to what extent) scripture itself excludes women's voices. Her starting point – although from a non-confessional position – is the same as that belonging to those male and female Muslim feminist activists who have concluded that a misogynistic hermeneutic is responsible for women's absence in Islamic interpretive history. This, in turn, is the result of a patriarchal tradition in which the Abrahamic traditions have been revealed and understood.

The book contains nine chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, and an appendix. The introduction is a valuable summary of the existing scholarship on interpreting women's voices in Islam and specifically in the Qur'an. Chapter 1 explores the differences that should be the subject of inter-feminist and interfaith dialogue at the intersection of faith, subjectivity, and freedom. It draws upon the philosophical methodology of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero and, subsequently, Judith Butler's understanding of "self" and "other." The author then juxtaposes it with Saba Mahmood's discourse of fe-

male subjectivity. The chapter ends with an insightful twist about divine-human relation that produces individual responsibility and authority embodied in the female voice.

Chapter 2 deconstructs the Qur'an's paradigmatic women, Eve, Khadija, and A'isha, none of whom, by the way, are named in the Qur'an. In her analysis of the figure of Eve, Jardim judiciously points to Christian influence on the creation discourse and its ontological link to female sexuality and concludes that such an interpretation obscures the Qur'anic account of creation, in which gender is a mere detail. By emphasizing the concept of *jāhiliyyah* as a dynamic of history, Jardim questions some of the assumptions about pre-Islamic women's inferior status by referring to Khadija, an independently wealthy woman who employed men and ran her own affairs, including those related to marriage, without consulting her clan's leader or any other male authority figure. Thus, she concludes, neither accepting the conservative doctrinal role modeling of this figure nor abiding by the feminist critique of the female role models supports the destruction of her tomb by the Wahhabi reformation that, in her words, "signifies the monolithic attempt at androcentric ownership of Islamic memory" (p. 51).

The analysis of A'isha's role as a Mother of the Believers in the Shi'a-Sunni civil strife often leads to the general agreement in both groups' exegesis that she is an example of the regression that will occur if women become involved in public affairs. An intertextual reading of A'isha's defense of her actions connects her account to the Qur'anic account of Joseph's seduction, thereby confirming a Qur'anic source as providing a possibility for revisioning a liberatory way. The Shi'a understanding of Fatima's light points to her conversation with Angel Gabriel, which was written and collected by her husband Ali as the *Muṣḥaf Fāṭimah*. In this section, the broad definition of *Ahl al-Bayt* includes the Prophet's wives, which is not the case in the Shi'a context. Zaynab, the daughter of Ali and Fatima, is not mentioned, despite the fact that the significance of her speech and activism, along with that of her sister Umm Kulthum, has made her the chief source for propagating the message of Karbala' and of her brother Husayn's martyrdom. Her voice testifies to the significance and primacy of women's voice, as she spoke out publicly and vociferously against tyranny. Her mention would have added to the section.

Chapter 3 summarizes and critiques the Wadudian hermeneutics, as well as compares it with Barlas' approach beginning with Ibn Hazm's (d. 1064) idea of female agency in his piece on the prophethood of women. At the same time, it points out the shared approach in Christian and Islamic feminism of recov-

ering narratives that feature women in various historical contexts. Chapter 4 focuses on discussing the sequence of revelatory ideas, the chronology of revelation, and the analysis of various historical-critical and literary approaches to reading for a female voice in the Qur'an.

Chapter 5 seeks to answer the question of how God talks to and about women in the Qur'an and whether or not they address God. A lengthy discussion on signs both in sound and in shape can be linked with gender. How signs reflect on the women-revelation relation is the focal point of chapter 6, which discusses both Mary and her mother as agents of direct speech along with "the woman who disputes." Chapter 7 engages in a detailed discussion of the meaning of *jadala* (dispute as a theme of persuasion and argumentation) in the Qur'an in contrast with *kadhaba* (lied, made a false statement) or *kafara* (hid the truth, inclined toward disbelief). Using the example of the *mujādilah*, the author concludes that this case undermines traditional gender performances and reflects that any expression of human (female) consciousness impacts divine justice.

Chapter 8 analyzes this example further by referring to the Biblical feminist narratological analysis of Mieke Bal and putting her in conversation with Mohja Kahf and Salah El Sheikh. From that perspective, the *mujādilah* challenges societal structures and establishes the Qur'anic reformation by replacing the *jāhilīyah*'s traditions. This reading views this particular woman as a rational subject who argues with the Prophet and is heard and supported by God. She initiated an action in the pursuit of justice, thereby repudiating the androcentric language expressed in *zihār*, the pre-Islamic practice by which a husband could divorce his wife simply by saying "You are to me as my mother's back" (pp. 182-83).

Chapter 9 continues this focus on woman's subjectivity, a subjectivity that Catholic theologian and feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether (b. 1936) considers the epitome of feminist theology. The *mujādilah* is compared with the daughters of Zelophehad who, in Numbers 27:1-11, argue about their right to inherit. A Christian story is also juxtaposed with the *mujādilah*: Mark 7:24-30 describes a Syro-Phoenician woman's encounter in Tyre with Jesus as the dialogue that insisted on the inclusivity of the Christological mission to all people. In the three narratives, the words *qawla*, *doberot*, and *logos* are taken as key points in presenting the voice of women in the Abrahamic tradition. These voices constitute a prophetic critique of the androcentric status quo by calling for divine justice. Comparing the three stories of the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian *mujādilahs*, Jardim states that the generalized practice of silence prescribed for women cannot be viewed as rooted in any of these scriptures.

The appendix supports this point (as it did in the introduction) by reflecting on Ibn Hazm's short piece on Muslim scholarly debates on the prophethood of women. In sum, this valuable addition to the body of scholarship on feminist Islamic hermeneutics greatly enhances the interreligious dialogue on women's subjectivity in sacred scriptures.

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