

Article

A Social Psychological Critique on Islamic Feminism

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Abstract: Islamic feminism, as a discourse within feminism, aims to re-read the Qur'an from a modern egalitarian perspective, which is outside the traditional and patriarchal interpretation of Islam. Islamic feminists reclaim an ethical vision of the Qur'an by presenting a reinterpretation, especially regarding verses that deprive women from having equal rights in the family, as well as in society. However, while Islamic feminism presents a gender equal interpretation of the Qur'an and raises new discourses and debates on gender relations in an Islamic context, a critical insight of Islamic feminism can provide a new gender and religious consciousness that, in turn, develops further perspectives on gender equality in a religious context. This paper aims to provide a critique of Islamic feminism from a social psychological perspective of gender using the theory of Abdulkarim Soroush. His theory considers revelation as the prophet's word resulting from his religious experience. Soroush defines revelation as an inspiration; in this way, revelation or Qur'an is not directly God's word, but Muhammad's word resulting from a divine experience. Accordingly, this paper deals with a social psychological perspective of the lived experience of the prophet as a man in a certain epoch of history, in which the lived experiences of women were not represented, and the revelation or the Qur'an is based on a male lived experience. It begins with an overview of Islamic feminists as well as the more general current of Islamic reformists and their efforts to view the revelation as the word of the prophet in order to avoid attributing the non-scientific content of the Qur'an to the direct word of God. This is followed by a critique of Islamic feminism based on Abdulkarim Soroush's theory of the recognition of the revelation as the word of the prophet, as well as gender theories from the field of social psychology.

Keywords: Islamic feminism; Islamic reformism; social psychology; revelation; prophet; gender; masculinity; femininity; gender roles



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1. Introduction

The idea of gender equality within the framework of Islam emerged with the rise of what is now being termed "Islamic feminism." Muslim feminists initiated an intra-religious discourse on women's rights by challenging patriarchal and unjust *Shari'a* law, which raised religious awareness of gender equality. However, with the egalitarian interpretation of the verses in the Qur'an that refer to women's rights, it seems that a modern concept of justice has been imposed on the patriarchal society of the prophet's time.

In this article, I have integrated Soroush's theory of revelation as the word of the prophet along with arguments from social psychological theories of gender to enrich feminist concepts of gender justice and equality in the Qur'an and to emphasize the importance of the historical aspects of revelation and its role in the concept of gender equality. To this end, I begin my discussion with an explanation of Islamic feminism and then point to the reform movement as a platform for the emergence of Islamic feminism. In the following, I will explain Soroush's theory on the historicity of revelation as a prophet's word. I then use the concept of gender in social psychological theories to explain that in the patriarchal society at the time of the prophet, the prophet's individual male experience is important to his divine experience and influences the content of verses that refer to women.

My suggestion for achieving gender equality in today's society and in the Islamic context is that it is our duty to challenge the patriarchal culture while recognizing the historical necessity of the patriarchal culture of the prophet's time. We should not try to justify the patriarchal parts of the divine word, but accept them as a historical fact, and this does not mean to doubt the prophethood of the prophet.

2. Islamic Feminism

If we define feminism as a critique of a patriarchal system that exists all over the world which distorts relations between human beings, then Islamic feminism frames this critique within Islamic religion and sacred text. Islamic feminism reclaims the justice and equality that the Qur'an and the prophet promised for everybody, including women. Islamic feminists challenge the treatment of women as unequal citizens both in interpretations of the text and in the system of Islamic law. In this way, they locate their feminism within its religious and cultural tradition (Mir-Hosseini 2015). Islamic feminism emerged as part of the Islamic reform movement in the field of gender awareness and discourse, which seeks a moral perspective based on equality and justice to empower women by offering a different interpretation of the Qur'an from its traditional and patriarchal interpretation (Anwar 2009). The various encounters with Europe, which were either desired (as by the reformers of the Ottoman Empire), ambivalent (for the Persian-speaking areas), or imposed by colonial occupation (for many in the Arab world) (Abu-Lughod 1998), played a broadly positive role in sparking an enlightened debate about women in Islam. Western colonialism, ignoring its own patriarchal tradition, challenged Islam as the main cause of women's oppression, which led to modernist interpretations of the Qur'an, including *tafsirs* by Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, Sayyid Qutb, and Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur (Mubarak 2022). For the first time since the establishment of Islam in Muslim societies, women were a central subject in Islamic tradition and law in discussions by Muslim male intellectuals (Ahmed 1992). It also launched the debate on individual rights and citizenship for Muslim men and women (Mernissi 1991).

Islamic feminism is not only identified as a field in Islamic reformism, but a new discourse within feminism (Badran 2001). Islamic feminists "argue for the necessity of a brand of feminism that takes Islam as a source of legitimacy and confronts patriarchy from within the tradition" (Mir-Hosseini 2020, p. 86). New discourses on gender relations and the achievement of gender equality in contemporary society have created a new awareness of gender issues and raised the need for discussion and revision of Islamic women's law (Mir-Hosseini 1996). These discussions within Arab and Muslim societies have intensified as many of these states are signatories to international conventions that seek to universalize women's rights.

Islamic feminists point to the injustice of patriarchal customs and laws and see them as the result of pre-modern interpretations of the *Shari'a*. At the same time, they try to provide defensible and coherent alternatives, as well as egalitarian interpretations within the framework that recognizes equality and justice in Islam (Mir-Hosseini 2020, pp. 87–88). They use interpretive methodology or hermeneutics to show "not only that the Qur'an's episteme is inherently antipatriarchal but that it also allows us to theorize the radical equality of the sexes" (Barlas 2019, p. 2).

The different strategies employed by Islamic feminists to interpret the Qur'an are categorized in three methods of historical contextualization, holistic/intra-textual reading, and the *tawhidic* paradigm (Hidayatullah 2014).

Historical contextualization is about researching the occasion of a verse's revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*), and distinguishing between universal and particular verses; in other words, feminists differentiate between verses that apply to specific historical situations relevant to the events of the seventh century and those that apply to human beings generally and prescribe practices for them. One of the basic arguments for this perspective is from Fazlur Rahman's explanation about the importance of identifying precisely the historical contexts of verses, since the Qur'an's concerns, interests, and guidance were directly connected

with, and are related to, the linguistic, cultural, political, economic, and religious life of the seventh-century Arabs (Hidayatullah 2014, p. 32).

Muslim feminist scholars argue that by ignoring a verse's historical context in constructing its meaning, there is a threat of attributing them to general or universal situations. In this way, feminists attribute restrictions on women to the interpretation of Qur'anic solutions to problems in a particular context at the time of the prophet. They acknowledge the immediate context of revelation as a patriarchal and sexist society; although, the Qur'an does not impose the characteristics of such a society upon future readers (Hidayatullah 2014). "The Qur'an may refer to situations that are degrading to women, but that does not mean it is prescribing those circumstances for its readers" (Hidayatullah 2014, p. 71).

In the second strategy, holistic/intra-textual reading, feminists insist on holistic reading and comparing verses to each other instead of atomistic insight and reading verses in isolation. In general, Muslim commentators of Qur'an have emphasized that scripture is its own interpreter, as Hamid al-Din al-Farahi (in Sirry 2022, p. 1) explains "The Qur'an mentions things in a variety of ways, sometimes brief and at other times in detail; what is left out in one place is mentioned in another."

For Muslim feminists, the aim of this interpretive perspective is to establish egalitarian ethics as the guiding principle of the Qur'an; therefore, any interpretive statement about the Qur'an must be aligned with this core principle of the Qur'an regarding moral equality and equal rights for men and women (Hidayatullah 2014).

The *tawhidic* method, as the third interpretive strategy, involves the concept of *tawhid*, which means the unity and oneness of God. In this perspective, human beings are considered as fallible creatures with imperfect abilities and knowledge. They can only strive to understand God's commandments, but they never reach the final interpretation. Accordingly, Muslim feminists attribute the difficulties in understanding the text to human limitations. Therefore, there is a constant process of trying to understand the text, even if it is imperfect. Thus, the Qur'an must always remain open to continuous, dynamic interpretation (Hidayatullah 2014).

The principle of *tawhid* recognizes the equality of all human beings, as they are all creatures of God and should be treated as equally capable moral agents. "Both are of equal significance and neither can be above the other because the divine function establishes their reciprocal relationship. If human beings really are horizontally equal, independent, and mutually co-dependent, each has the same potential for performing any social, religious, political, or economic task" (Wadud 2008, p. 168). The differences between people are based on their piety, devotion to God, and moral consciousness, which can only be judged by God. According to this view, Muslim feminists recognize discriminatory acts, including sexism, as a violation of God's supreme authority and uniqueness (Hidayatullah 2014, p. 95).

Despite all these methods, Islamic feminist approaches have not been able to find a solution to some cases of sexist and male-centered meanings of the Qur'anic text mentioned in the publications of Kecia Ali's *Sexual Ethics and Islam* and Amina Wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad* in 2006.

The most famous limitation arises in the interpretation of verse 4:34, stating, "As for those from whom you fear disloyalty, admonish them, and abandon them in their beds, then strike them"¹, which, as Wadud (2008, p. 192) explains, provides for the possibility of abuse in the form of perpetual violence against wives. In her view, "strike them" cannot be fully explained either by a textual strategy or by reference to the weaknesses of the medium of human language. Wadud therefore calls for saying "no" to verse 4:34 in its literal form while preserving the full divinity of the text. She refers to this as Qur'anic trajectory and says: "Surely the Qur'anic trajectory as universal guidance should not be made into retrograde patriarchal standards" (Wadud 2008, p. 205).

Another textual limitation mentioned by Ali is about men's control over women's bodies. She refers to Surah 2, verses 222–23² which in her opinion "clearly assigns a dominant role to men in the sexual decision making process, with regard to both initiation

of sex and sexual positions" (Ali 2006, p. 129). She explains that none of the feminist interpretations can account for the Qur'an's androcentrism, which "is not equivalent to misogyny, but neither is it unproblematic for interpreters concerned with matters of gender and justice" (Ali 2006, p. 112). She believes that applying textual interpretive strategies to the Qur'an does not offer a perspective on the equal, self-determining actions of men and women. In a nutshell, Muslim feminists stand on a spectrum; on one side are those who seek an egalitarian interpretation of the Qur'an, such as Wadud, Mir-Hosseini, and Barlas; on the other side of the spectrum are scholars such as Ali and Hidayatullah, who argue that the egalitarian readings are a projection of contemporary feminist sensibilities onto the Qur'an that involve an anachronistic perspective on the Qur'an and do not represent the literal meaning of the text (Mubarak 2022).

Hidayatullah (2014) criticized egalitarian interpretive strategies in her book *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*. She also gives her own insight and solution for the critics of Islamic feminism. To this end, she refers to Nasr Abu Zayd's argument that the problem in feminist exegetical approaches is that they treat the Qur'an only as a text and not as an interactive discourse between the Word and the reader. In other words, as Hidayatullah (2014) explains, as long as the exegetes are not able to think in new ways about the nature of the revelation of the Qur'an, their methods will continue to be apologetics and manipulation of the text. Abu Zayd recognizes the Qur'an as a "discourse" instead of a text. Thereby, "the Qur'an should be understood as a dialogue between itself and its addressees" (Hidayatullah 2014, p. 176). In this insight, "the Qur'an is a revelation that interacts with human comprehension to yield human understanding, and thus, its audience contributes to the text's meaning" (ibid.).

In the following, I will expand the view of Hamid Abu Nasr by using the theory of Abdulkarim Soroush and consider the Qur'an not only as a dialogue between the Qur'an and its addressees, but also as the words of Muhammad as a messenger of God and the result of his divine experience confirmed by God. Soroush's theories have been previously used in feminist arguments. For example, Ndeye Adüjar has used Soroush's theory of the distinction of religion and religious interpretation to analyze the role of women in the foundational texts, their interpretations, and the impact that these readings have on practice (Adüjar 2013). I have integrated Soroush's theory of revelation as the word of Muhammad into this thesis to enrich feminist notions of gender justice and equality in the Qur'an and to develop further arguments based on gender theories from social psychology to show the importance of the historical aspects of revelation. This attempt, of course, would be a small contribution to the plethora of literature dealing with gender equality in the Qur'an and aiming to clarify the field of Islamic feminism by adding an interdisciplinary perspective through the concept of gender and gender justice in more detail in the sociological and social psychological perspectives.

3. Islamic Reformism

As mentioned earlier, Islamic feminism is in fact a part of Muslim reformist thought. While the reformist thought stream could be traced back to modern times as a response to colonialization, modernization, and globalization, the long history of reformism should not be ignored. The relationship of revelation and reason did not begin in the Muslim world with the impact of Enlightenment thinking from the West (Clarke 2006); rather, the roots of this discourse go back to the early history of Islam and to the Mu'tazilite school that flourished in Basra and Baghdad in the 8th–10th century. The importance of explaining the Mu'tazila in this section is to show how Islamic reformism and even the roots of Islamic feminism emerged in the early years of the growth and expansion of Islam after the death of the prophet and not merely as a reaction to modernity, colonialism, and postcolonialism.

Influenced by classical Greek philosophy, the Mu'tazilites recognized human reason, rather than revelation, as the criterion for distinguishing between good and evil and between justice and injustice. They believe that justice is defined not by religious sources but by rational thought. Therefore, whatever reason considers as being just must be religiously obligatory, and whatever reason considers as being unjust must be religiously forbidden.

In this way, Shari'a must follow reason, and wherever religious decrees contradict reason, they must be reviewed on the basis of a rational verdict.

The Mu'tazilites faded into the shadows in the advent of the Ash'ari school and did not become very popular. Unlike the Mu'tazilites, the Ash'arites believed in the fallibility of reason in defining true human rights and considered human reason incapable of defining justice (Robinson 1998). The most original source for defining justice is the Shari'a, i.e., God, who created man, knows good and evil better, and sets the necessary criteria for justice and injustice in the Qur'an. Since *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) considers human reason as incapable of understanding all the hidden harms and benefits of things, the latter is a useless and unreliable source for discovering true human rights (Kadivar 2011).

The reformist school follows on from the Mu'tazilite school and reinforces the rational approach to Islamic teaching. The increasing confrontation of Muslims with modernity in the mid-19th century, especially due to foreign threats such as European military expansion into Islamic countries, resulted in a moral and intellectual decline as well as a stagnation of science and technology and military power in Muslim societies. The reformist currents in Islamic countries played an important role in restoring the identity and authority of Islamic societies in the transition to modernity. They saw reform as the only way for Muslims to resist European domination and preserve the "moral fabric of society." Therefore, in order to emerge from stagnation, as well as to connect the modern with the traditional world, changes and revisions of traditional structures such as jurisprudence were permitted and deemed necessary in Islam (Hunter 2009).

All reformists emphasize the revival of the rationalist approach to Islam and the reinterpretation of religious teachings in accordance with the current conditions and needs of Muslim societies. However, they differ in the methodology of Qur'anic analysis as well as in the extent to which they recognize the authority of human reason, and in their views on the permissible limits of interpretation.

In an alternative, Abdulkarim Soroush, along with other thinkers such as Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, and Muhammed Arkoun, belongs to a small group of radical reformers who advocate a historical approach to the Qur'an. Soroush contends that the Qur'an is not only the product of the particular historical conditions under which it came into being, but also a result of the prophet's mind and all his human limitations. Soroush says that this is not a new theory, for many medieval thinkers have already referred to the Qur'an this way (Soroush 2008).

Accordingly, in 1998–1999, Soroush proposed one of his most important theories on the Expansion of the prophetic Experience. This theory explains the historicity of the prophet's revelatory experience and asserts that the Qur'an is not the direct word of God.

In the book *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, Soroush examines the process of revelation and how the text appears. He believes that the way the text emerges affects the meanings that we perceive from it (Soroush 2008), because our presuppositions are effective in understanding a text. Therefore, this theory, which explores the origin of the text, deals with one of the most important presuppositions for interpreting a text. Soroush also refers to the relationship of the prophet to the text he produced, and now has reached us. Finally, Soroush raises the question of the religious and devotional duty we have to the Qur'an—as a text created by the prophet (*ibid.*).

The prevalent view in the traditional approach is that the prophet plays a passive role in the process of revelation. The prophet is only a passive tool for receiving revelation from God through Gabriel and transmitting it to people, with no role in the content or nature of the revelation. Soroush (2007), on the other hand, considers revelation as "inspiration." The best analogy for understanding revelation is poetry. In writing poetry, the poet communicates with an external source and composes a poem under the influence of this connection. The prophet also felt influenced by an external force, although he played the pivotal role in producing the revelation. In fact, in the process of revelation, the prophet is both subject and object. However, in this process, he has divine approval and reaches the intuition with God's guidance (Soroush 2007).

The prophet uses his communication language and personal knowledge to express his intuitional and revelatory experience. Therefore, the account of his personal life and personality, as well as his personal reality, are very important in shaping the text. Accordingly, the prophet had a major role in narrating this revealed experience; hence, there is a human aspect to the revelation. Accordingly, Soroush considers the prophet as the creator of the revelation and advocates a humanistic view of the Qur'an (Soroush 2007).

As Soroush (2009, p. 273) explains, not everything mentioned in the Qur'an about historical events, other religious traditions, and matters related to the material world and human society is true. The traditionalists justify them by arguing that the prophet adjusted these statements to the level of knowledge of the people of his time in order to speak to them in the language of their time. Another argument of the traditionalists is that people are not yet able to understand the truth of the Qur'an which, as explained earlier, is also argued by some Islamic feminists. Soroush rejects both arguments and explains that the prophet spoke based on his personal knowledge and language and believed everything he said. His knowledge of the universe and humanity was at the level of ordinary knowledge and no more than that of other people of his time. Such errors in the Qur'an are limited to the knowledge of the prophet at the time and are considered completely natural. However, such errors do not violate his prophecy and do not question the divinity of the revelation, for he was a prophet, not a scientist or historian (Soroush 2007).

According to this theory, God's will is for the prophet to be active and creative in the process of revelation rather than a passive person who only receives God's message. Therefore, it is God's will that the prophet be the narrator. The prophet speaks and what he says is practically attributed to God, and, therefore, the Qur'an is both the word of the Prophet and the word of God. For Soroush, it is noteworthy that the language of any human community is related to its requirements and conditions. It can be concluded that the Arabic language at the time of the prophet was not able to express some philosophical ideas. Therefore, the complete message of God could not be received by the prophet independently of, and beyond cultural characteristics and is, thus, dependent on the limited knowledge at the time of the prophet. This is because the prophet himself, as a human being, was not beyond his time and place (ibid.).

Not only was the Arabic language of Islam contingent, but its culture was also likewise contingent. This means that if the prophet received his message in another cultural context, his message could be expressed in a different way. Muhammad embraced the Arab worldview and culture, as well as Arab customs, habits, perceptions, and traditions (ibid.).

Soroush tries to present a deep religious experience such as the revelation of the prophet as a natural phenomenon, which is strongly influenced by the characteristics of the prophet. Consequently, the revelation has deep, natural, and human faces and limits in its development and completion (Naraghi 2005).

In this article, I intend to elaborate based on Soroush's view of the impact of the prophet's cultural and linguistic conditions on the words of the Qur'an, the impact of the prophet's personal and lived experiences as a man in a patriarchal society, and the impact of this social psychological dimension on the content of revelation. To this end, I draw on various social psychological theories on gender to explain the importance of the individual male experience of the prophet in his divine experiences, shaping the content of verses that refer to women.

4. Gender in Social Psychological Theories

At the beginning of my explanations in this section, I draw the reader's attention to a crucial point. Humanity encompasses more than two genders and is indeed a continuum of people from male and female; the restriction to the division into men and women is fundamental to all historical cultures (see: Beall et al. 2004). Since this article concerns a historical issue, I will only employ the traditional binary categories.

While it has not been long since gender theories were developed, it appears that by applying them to historical studies, we can gain a better understanding of gender and its

impact on human relations in past societies. I begin by defining the concept of gender and how the concepts of masculinity and femininity are formed in theories of gender.

The term *gender* was adopted by feminists in the late 1970s in order to differentiate biological sex from social cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness. While biology plays an essential role in gender differences, most of the attributes and roles linked to gender arise more from cultural design and social condition than from biological endowment (Bussey and Bandura 2004). In other words, “sex is to gender as nature is to nurture; that is, sex pertains to what is biological or natural, whereas gender pertains to what is learned or cultural” (Marecek et al. 2004, p. 200). Accordingly, a clear distinction is made between sex and gender. However, Judith Butler illustrates in her work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), that neither gender nor sex is natural nor are they categories of human identity. [. . .] In other words, there is no male and female prior to cultural engenderings of those two categories of identity. We cannot think outside our culture, and “male” and “female” identities are as culturally determined as are “masculinity” and “femininity.” That sexual identity is natural, that there are two sexes in nature, is a cultural idea” (in Deal and Beal 2005, p. 53). We play our given gender roles through repetitive behavior, because we desire to fit into society. In this way, she explains masculinity and femininity as constructed attributes.

In order to understand more precisely how ideas of femininity and masculinity come about, it is important to understand the sociological view of social reality and how it is constructed, which is illustrated in the theory of the social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966). They elucidate subjective realities, in which humans subjectively perceive themselves and their everyday life. They consider society as a dialectic phenomenon. This means that society is the human product of human collective activities. At the same time, human beings are the product of society, so that social processes shape an individual’s identity. In this way, the dialectical phenomenon of society manifests itself through externalization, objectivation, and internalization. “Externalization is the outpouring of human beings into the world, both in the physical and the mental activities of men” (Berger 1967, p. 3). Objectivation refers to the reality created by human’s physical and mental activity, which confronts its creator as an external reality. Through objectivation, institutions and interactions create what ultimately constitutes culture. The third stage of the dialectical process of society is internalization, which refers to the transfer of this objective reality into the structure of mental consciousness. Socialization in this process plays an essential role in the transmission of social reality, including culture and mental meanings, from one generation to the next (Berger and Luckmann 1995).

According to Berger, people create a stable framework for their actions. This is created by the institutionalization of actions. Institutions, in turn, are human activities that form their patterns and become habits through repetition. Institutionalization is defined as “a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 72). In other words, every institution consists of a mutual interaction characterized by a habitual phenomenon. Butler argues that gender identity in a culture takes a social and institutional form through repeated action. In this way, sexual identity is performative. “Gender is not being but doing; it’s not who you are but what you do” (Deal and Beal 2005, p. 53).

Similarly, the doing-gender approach emphasizes the production of gender in everyday life. Gendered behavior is primarily based on the knowledge of how to behave as a man or a woman. This knowledge and the resulting behavior lead not only to producing gender, but to also reproducing it (West and Zimmerman 1987). There are societal expectations about a man’s or a woman’s behavior. Men and women adjust themselves in a certain way based on these social expectations so that they are perceived as desirable. This is how, for example, ideal images of how a woman must behave in order to be recognized as a woman are created. A notable point is that gender-linked behavior entails social sanction in societies. Therefore, “evaluative social reactions are important sources of information for constructing gender conceptions” (Bussey and Bandura 2004, p. 96).

So far, we have discussed the concept of gender and the role of social attributions in its formation. To explain inequality and the recognition of domination, we proceed to explain the status and power approach.

5. Status and Power Approach

The status approach acknowledges that “people’s cultural beliefs about status shape their behaviors and evaluations, independent of their own personal traits” (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004, p. 218). The theory aims to explain how gender becomes a prevalent basis for inequality in everyday social affairs. It illuminates “how gender, through the status beliefs associated with it, affects . . . who is judged to have the best ideas or the most ability, who rises to leadership, and who is directed toward or away from positions of power and influence in society” (ibid).

Status beliefs are related to cultural beliefs about the relationships between two distinguished social groups in society within different social categories such as occupation, gender, race, education, or ethnicity. Status beliefs ascribe social significance to specific skills of people in one group compared to those in another. Through this evaluative significance, status beliefs legitimate inequality between people from different social categories (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004, p. 219). Gender is known as a status characteristic in most societies. Status beliefs evaluate men as more superior and competent than women, while granting each sex specialized skills, such as mechanical ability for men and nurturing skills for women (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004, p. 219). Status beliefs are learnt and reproduced through the socialization process. Status beliefs lead to expectations about behavior that apply to people based on their gender which are called gender roles (Eagly et al. 2004).

Gender roles help organize relationships based on four factors of power that involve violence, resource control, and asymmetrical obligations supported by cultural ideologies. “All four bases of power, and roles associated with them, are differentially held by men, which explains why gender inequality can be found in so many domains, such as marriage customs, wages, inheritance laws, use of violence, and ideologies, and in so many societies” (Pratto and Walker 2004, p. 257). The remarkable point is that most people, whether belonging to advantaged or disadvantaged groups, believe in the superiority and competence of advantaged groups. Therefore, status beliefs and gender roles are more *consensual* rather than competitive. In this way, status beliefs dictate people’s perception of self and others as well as how they attribute themselves in important social situations, which lead them to have a sense of being self-fulfilling (ibid). “These implicit *self–other performance* expectations . . . are not necessarily conscious, are always relative to salient others in the setting, and are specific to the task or goal at hand” (ibid: p. 224).

As mentioned earlier, in the theory of the Social Construction of Reality (1966) by Berger and Luckmann, individual actions are formed based on objective meanings derived from social reserves. Accordingly, there is a constant interaction between the objective meaning and the formed subjective meaning. A crisis of meaning occurs when this interaction is disrupted and the objective meaning and the subjective meaning overlap and conflict with each other (Berger and Luckmann 1995). Similarly, as long as the status beliefs and gender roles (objectified meaning) are aligned towards self-fulfillment (subjective meaning), there is no place for crisis. “Self-fulfilling, status-biased expectations continually construct and reconstruct gender inequality across the diverse range of social activities in which men and women cooperate in goal-oriented ways” (Ridgeway and Bourg 2004, p. 237). If this interaction is unsettled, status beliefs lose their legitimacy for inequality and we witness a crisis, in which women feel discriminated against.

Internalizing some normative beliefs that regard men as powerful, dominant, and self-assertive, and consider women as caring, intimate with others, and emotionally expressive provides people with criteria to feel good about themselves as long as their behavior is consistent with these norms. It seems that in premodern societies, men with their dominant experiences and women with their communal experiences designed a self-concept and behavioral pattern for themselves, which became an ideal standard that they wished to

adhere to (see [Eagly et al. 2004](#), p. 279). Similarly, in the premodern society of the prophet, “descriptive norms” ([Eagly et al. 2004](#)) of gender roles were directed towards status beliefs. This means that the majority of both groups of men and women were satisfied with differing normative beliefs that people held about ideal women and men, and they desired and approved of communal qualities in women and agentic qualities in men. Of course, in the society at the time of the prophet, as in any other society, there were women who sought to be recognized as women even in the Qur’an. Asma [Barlas \(2019\)](#) mentions the example of Umm Salama, one of the prophet’s wives, who, when the Qur’an was revealed to the prophet, asked him why God was not addressing women directly in the Qur’an. This criticism by Umm Salma was responded to by addressing women as women in the Qur’an. This example can be a proof that the Qur’an is the word of the prophet and was written from the perspective of a man, based on his lived experience in the patriarchal society of that time, and the prophet could not have any experience beyond his own gender. Therefore, after Umm Salama’s question, the prophet paid attention to the fact that women should be addressed in the Qur’an. On the other hand, this example shows that there were not many women demanding equal rights for women at the time of the prophet, because if women had demanded this from the prophet, discriminatory verses would probably have had less chance to appear.

Accordingly, if we consider the revelation and the Qur’an not as the word of God, which should be beyond time and space and infallible, but as the product of the prophet’s mind and thinking, which was restricted to the social conditions of his time as explained in Soroush’s theory, we do not need to justify the inequality in some verses, because in his time these rules were suitable to what the majority of women and men held about their ideal selves and the attitudes and prescriptive beliefs that people held about the roles and responsibilities of women and men. Considering gender roles in deliberating gender relationships in the prophet’s time is also important, because they have benefits for men and women. “Since men and women undertake different specific roles, women and men behave differently, learn different skill sets, and orient themselves toward different life goals” ([Eagly et al. 2004](#), p. 277). Furthermore, men and women gain specific experiences based on their gender roles. “Women and men confirm others’ gender-stereotypic expectancies; regulate their own behavior based on gender-stereotypic self-concepts” (*ibid*).

Hence, it seems that the prophet also had his own lived experience as a man with his specific role towards specific life goals which was the establishment of his new religion. He cannot be expected to have a personality that transcends men and women, and to have had the experiences of both genders in order to draft religious regulations to favor both men and women. It seems unrealistic to expect him to empathize with women in that society, and to legislate equal laws in their favor—which can threaten the power of men. Social dominance theory explains that gender inequality is required and a characteristic feature of group-dominance societies ([Pratto and Walker 2004](#)). Soroush refers to the prophet’s powerful and authoritarian personality and how the prophet deliberately used the concept of power and fear to protect the religion he established. When talking about power and authority, a negative connotation is usually evoked, while power and authority are not necessarily reprehensible and have many positive and practical aspects. In order to expand the religion he founded, the prophet did not limit himself to spreading the faith and did not hesitate to use violence in order to maintain his power and fulfill his mission and build his society. Of course, these qualities do not contradict the mercy and kindness of the prophet. In addition to the characteristics of an authoritarian personality, the prophet was also a peacemaker and a person of consultation and agreement. Therefore, to fulfill his mission of spreading his nascent religion and strengthening the faith, he made use of power, including violence. This violence, however, was just and not selfish, ambitious, or acquisitive, and it did not abuse power. Perhaps today, this authority seems harsh and strange, but in the minds of Muslims of that time it was neither cruel nor violent. Soroush emphasizes that this method of subjugating others to one’s power belongs to the time of the establishment

of the religion and is not allowed to be used in the post-establishment period and today (Soroush 2020).

Therefore, as a man in a patriarchal society, the prophet strives for power and its preservation through gender superiority. Accordingly, there are laws in the Qur'an that establish the superiority of male power over women. Even violence against women (strike them) as mentioned in verse 34 of Surah 4. Al-Nisa is seen as a legitimate means of exercising power in a patriarchal society. Ahmed (1992), for example, points to the verses that explicitly prescribe and emphasize "obedience" in response to some sort of protest or disobedience among the prophet's wives that was dealt with decisively (Ahmed 1992)³. Men's advantage in power over women is not simply because they are advantaged in arenas, but also because their power in this arena enables them to gain power in other arenas. Therefore, men hold authoritative power over women in patriarchal societies through legitimacy of law or religious decree (Pratto and Walker 2004).

The prophet's kind and merciful character, as Soroush explains, is also reflected in the Qur'an. Ahmed (1992) also distinguishes two different aspects of the Qur'an's treatment of gender. One provides the basis for establishing practical regulations in society, which is considered as the protector of male power. The other side emphasized the importance of spiritual and moral aspects and the equality of people. The first view prevailed in political and legal thought and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The second view of morality, on the other hand, has disappeared throughout the history of patriarchal society (Ahmed 1992). As Barlas explained, in the Qur'an "both women and men have been equally endowed with the capacity for moral choice and personality" (Barlas 2007, p. 261), and the "Qur'an locates the origins of both women and men in a single *nafs* (self)" (ibid, 259). Nevertheless, as a man in a patriarchal society, the prophet sought to maintain power relations based on protecting the interests of men, and this was not against justice. The verses based on maintaining power relations are not evidence of misogyny in the Qur'an, because the prevailing general belief of the society at that time was that both men and women accepted this power and status relationship. Since the post-prophet societies were also patriarchal societies, the verses that refer to the preservation of men's power extended beyond the second category of verses. For example, the concept of men being guardians and protectors of women (verse 34:4) has become the basis of family rights and marital relations in the legal tradition of Islam. As Mir-Hosseini (2012) points out, there are other concepts in the Qur'an related to marital relationships and the relationship between spouses, such as *ma'ruf* (good way, decent) and *rahmah wa muwadah* (compassion and love), in the verses 7:189 and 30:21. However, the jurists preferred not to convert these two terms into legal rulings. Even if one accepts the historical fact that the verses, which refer to spirituality, morality, and the equality of people in the verses, were not taken into account by jurists in patriarchal societies, no acceptable justification can still be found for the use of the word "strike" from the divine. As Ali (2003) points out, any attempt to fix the meaning of this verse once and for all is doomed to failure, if we consider the Qur'an as God's words.

Therefore, it is inappropriate and distorts historical reality to interpret these verses in terms of gender equality and try to prove that the prophet sought equal and non-discriminatory rights for women in pre-modern society. Considering gender equality as a norm set by the Qur'an seems to contradict the accepted norms of patriarchal society at the time of the prophet. Of course, as Soroush explains, being restricted to the cultural conditions and knowledge of the time does not put the divinity and the prophetic mandate in question. Finding that the Qur'an does not support our definition of justice and equality need not lead to any disappointment with belief in a just God or the Qur'an. Nor need it lead us to question our current concepts of justice and equality, since, as Soroush (2020) explains, nowhere in the Qur'an do we find a definition of justice; rather, its definition has been entrusted to the custom of the time. In parallel, our concepts of gender equality are not historically applicable to the gender roles and status concepts of society at the time of the prophet.

6. Changes in Gender Roles over Time

In postindustrial societies, the division of labor has evolved with the development of social structures. Some changes in the division of labor—such as the emergence of the nuclear family, decreases in the birth rate, improvement in compatibility of employment and family roles, advances in technology and the declining importance of men's physical strength in many occupations, increase in women's education, their qualifications for jobs with more status and income than the jobs they typically held in the past, along with increase in men's tendency to take more responsibility for child care and other domestic work—resulted in changes in gender roles and hierarchy (Eagly et al. 2004). Insisting on traditional gender roles appropriate to patriarchal societies leads to a crisis. According to Berger and Luckmann's theory of the crisis of meaning, when the interaction between objectified meaning and subjectively constituted meaning—which here refers to traditional gender roles and women's expectations—is disrupted, status beliefs lose their legitimacy and it leads to a crisis, in which women feel discriminated against.

As Soroush explains, when we accept a human view of the Qur'an, it makes it possible to recognize gender inequality in the Qur'an as a norm in a patriarchal society, which is no longer relevant today. The prophet embraced his time- and space-based worldview and culture, which was patriarchal and defined specific gender roles and power relationships. Similar to the Arabic language of Islam, which is contingent, this patriarchal tradition is also contingent.

The common human perception and expectation is that God's words and message must be beyond human boundaries, time, and space in order to be valid for all people of other eras. When God's words mention injustices that are specific to a historical period, it discourages faith in the justice of the divinity and causes many scholars to try to justify such injustices through various strategies. Despite all the efforts of scholars and all their knowledge in this field, there may still be a perception that the direct word of the deity cannot meet women's contemporary needs for justice. Women must also struggle for their rights and justice in the field of the divine, and they must adopt various interpretive strategies for their belief in a just God. If we consider the Qur'an as the religious experiences of a human being imprisoned in the natural and social conditions of a particular time and space, this can help us to see the Qur'an as a historical text and believe in a God who is free from all kinds of injustices related to temporal and spatial limitations. And of course, this has no contradiction with the mission of the prophet. Karen Armstrong (in Ali 2014, pp. 202–3) defines the prophet's mission as follows: “in all the great religions, seers and prophets have conceived strikingly similar visions of a transcendent and ultimate reality . . . I believe that Muhammad had such an experience and made a distinctive and valuable contribution to the spiritual experience of humanity.”

In this article, I acknowledge the efforts of Muslim feminists who have opened the discussion on gender and equality in the context of Islam and raised religious consciousness in this area. Based on Soroush's theory, which considers the Qur'an as the word of Muhammad, I suggest that in order to establish and achieve gender equality and gender justice, we only need to challenge the patriarchal culture and not try to justify the divine words. Attempting to “identify the significance of the female voice in the text” (Wadoud in Barlas 2007, p. 261) or argue that since God is beyond sex/gender, so is divine speech (Barlas 2007, p. 261), cannot justify the power relationship between men and women in the verses, especially in attempting to justify the word ‘strike’ in the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the prophet tried to impose justice in his time, even if the criteria of this justice differ from the standards of justice in our time. To this end, it is necessary to follow the prophet's tradition of imposing justice and disrupt the culture of patriarchy in our time that has defined status beliefs and norms and perpetuated deep-seated inequalities in Islamic ways of life.

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Notes

- ¹ 4:34, Translation by Talal Itani in Sirry (2022, p. 110).
- ² 222 And they ask you about menstruation: say, “It is harmful, so keep away from women during menstruation. And do not approach them until they have become pure. Once they have become pure, approach them in the way God has directed you.” God loves the repentant, and He loves those who keep clean.” 223 Your women are cultivation for you; so approach your cultivation whenever you like, and send ahead for yourselves. And fear God, and know that you will meet Him. And give good news to the believers (2: 222–223, Translation by Talal Itani in Sirry 2022, p. 69).
- ³ O Prophet! Say to your wives, “If you desire the life of this world and its finery, then let me compensate you, and release you kindly. But if you desire God, His Messenger, and the Home of the Hereafter, then God has prepared for the righteous among you a magnificent compensation.” wives of the Prophet! Whoever of you commits a proven indecency, the punishment for her will be doubled. And that would be easy for God. But whoever of you remains obedient to God and His Messenger, and acts righteously, We will give her a double reward; and We have prepared for her a generous provision. O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any other women, if you observe piety. So do not speak too softly, lest the sick at heart lusts after you, but speak in an appropriate manner. And settle in your homes; and do not display yourselves, as in the former days of ignorance. And perform the prayer, and give regular charity, and obey God and His Messenger. God desires to remove all impurity from you, O People of the Household, and to purify you thoroughly (33: 28–33, Translation by Talal Itani in Sirry 2022, pp. 445–46).

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