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*On the Convergence of Islam, Feminism, and Qur'anic Interpretation:
A Critical Review of Aysba Hidayatullah's Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*

Aysba A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 288 pp., \$24.95 (pbk), ISBN 9780199359578.

Overview

Aysba Hidayatullah's *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* is an analysis of feminist Qur'anic interpretation made bitter-sweet by attending to the possibility that the Muslim feminist enterprise has reached a theoretical dead-end. Divided into three parts, the book first traces the historical emergence of feminist Qur'anic interpretation and then, identifying "recurring interpretive techniques" (18), Hidayatullah defines three distinct methods of feminist Qur'anic interpretation: namely, a historical contextualization method that relies in some part on the methods of *tafsir* sciences, including an analysis of the occasions of revelation; an intratextual method that "treats the Qur'an holistically" (17), prioritizes its capacity to advocate for justice, and draws significantly on the work of Fazlur Rahman; and a third method, the *tawhidic* paradigm, a phrase borrowed from Amina Wadud, to illustrate that God's oneness and omniscience render sexism "a form of idolatry" (17). Thus, Hidayatullah constitutes feminist Qur'anic interpretation as a "coherent new field" of study which she also refers to as feminist *tafsir* (viii, 19).

In the final third of the book Hidayatullah moves from a third person observer to a first person participant, producing content and also shaping the field of feminist *tafsir*. Here she draws upon previous work from Raja Rhouni and Kecia Ali to make a "critical assessment" of what she describes as the prescriptive tendencies of feminist *tafsir* to employ "forcible readings" (172) that explain away the possibility of a "gender-hierarchical core" of the Qur'an in favor of an egalitarian core. Both kinds of impulses exist within the Qur'an, Hidayatullah argues. However, in recognizing that the Qur'an does not rest on contemporary feminist values, we have perhaps, she explains, "reached the end of this strand of feminist interpretation of the Qur'an" (172-173). Following this strain of thought, by the end of the book Hidayatullah brings us to a place of "radical uncertainty," which, depending on your perspective, has the potential either to shut down the viable future of feminist *tafsir* and spell its logical demise, or open possibilities for new convergences of Islam and feminism. The ontological shift of the last two chapters is important because, in my view, Hidayatullah's

most valuable work also happens at this juncture. It's through this shift that Hidayatullah makes herself most vulnerable and her project most precarious. First she positions the *tafsir* project so as to highlight the vulnerability of belief to difficult social circumstance, and next she challenges the believer to remain committed to a text potentially read as prejudicial. In Hidayatullah's employ vulnerability leads to radical critique; yet, in my assessment, because she is also directed by her own faith commitments, Hidayatullah is able to retrieve from this potentially fatal edge a new space called feminist *tafsir* and a new project that explores the limits of the text and limits of *tafsir*. At the edges of this critique she concludes her monograph with two theoretical positions that stem from her own vulnerability to radical critique; one pertains to how we understand equality, the other to how we understand the nature of the divine text, both pertain to how we maintain the Qur'an at the center of Muslim theorizing.

Relying on my own concerns for the nature of the convergence of Islam and feminism, my critical review of Hidayatullah's book argues that the apparent "impasse" that she brings us to is an illustration of what potential benefits lie in the simultaneous convergence and critical spacing of Islam and feminism. In an attempt to shift the debate on Islamic feminism away from the polarizing discussion on Islamic feminism as either viable or impossible, I have previously written on the need to maintain a critical distance in the convergence of Islam and feminism so that each intellectual paradigm may be allowed to continue to produce critical assessments of the other. I am critical of the easy conflation or inflation of the convergence of Islam and feminism as "Islamic feminism" and argue instead for a carefully articulated and tentative convergence of the two intellectual traditions; I advocate for "a critical distance between the two traditions" that "recognises that the convergence of Islam and feminism holds the potential to advance" not only Muslim but also other women's struggles for equality.¹ This critical distance enables each of the intellectual paradigms to remain potentially innovative not only for Muslim women but for other people too. In my view, Aysha Hidayatullah's *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* brings us into this critical space between the two intellectual paradigms and offers an opportunity to examine the innovative and critical potential available in this space. Hidayatullah's critique opens and holds a space for radical and productive Muslim feminist interrogations that allow us simultaneously to commit to and critique the text.

Continued Engagement through the Limits of Intelligibility

To begin, Hidayatullah's arguments are not the same as those who argue there is no possible convergence between Islam and feminism; neither is she taking the predictable liberal feminist position that would rescue Muslim women from the supposed false consciousness of their faith. She is also not arguing for a convergence that ends in ideas of gender complementarity or a potentially hierarchical mutuality.

Instead Hidayatullah asks what it means for our belief when we acknowledge the possibility of incommensurability between our desire for equality and the historical but divine text. And the answer she offers is not the simplest way out: to abandon an apparently misogynistic text and accede to the possibility of an irredeemably vengeful god who does not support the equality of women and men.

¹ Fatima Seedat, "When Islam and Feminism Converge," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 103, No 3 (2013), 404 and Fatima Seedat, "Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2013): 29.

In Chapter 8, when Hidayatullah moves from third to first person, she moves her concern from an account of the feminism of first and second generation *tafsir* scholars under study to what I consider an attempt to give an account of herself. That is, Hidayatullah makes her ontological position evident to her reader. She too is a believer and she too must decide how to engage the text when she finds herself simultaneously unable to make sense of the text yet also cannot step away from it. In much the same way, Judith Butler has argued that:

...the question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgements: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received.²

Extending Bulter's analysis, we can replace "someone else," with "the text" and so address the question of ethics in the relationship between the believer and the text. The challenge to our schemes of intelligibility is not in itself novel, for the Qur'an is commonly read as a text that will and perhaps must always remain beyond complete human comprehension, such is its divine nature. And, as Hidayatullah shows, scholars such as Amina Wadud have conceded that some statements addressed specifically to women such as Qur'an 4:34 are "inadequate or unacceptable, however much interpretation is enacted" upon them (137).³ In circumstances where the text is not sufficient for what Wadud calls "women's full dignity" (139)⁴, Wadud employs Khaled Abou El Fadl's "faith based objection"⁵ or "conscientious pause"⁶ (140). When stepping away from the text is not possible or even desirable, believers face the possible demand of continued engagement through the limits of intelligibility. This is Hidayatullah's challenge: How do we make claims for a feminist *tafsir* that is transformative yet loyal to the androcentric text? In my view, Hidayatullah does not resolve the impasse, rather her achievement in this book lies in focusing on feminist *tafsir* as a deliberate and identifiable project and further in highlighting its challenges. Firstly, Hidayatullah constitutes and contests the field as "feminist *tafsir*," next she interrogates the idea and nature of equality as a fundamental principle for feminist *tafsir*, and finally she invites us to further discussion on the definitive nature of the text. If each of these, our ideas of equality and our experience of the text, is continually emerging, then the demands of self-constitution for the believing feminist are never finite but always evolving and always present.

Constituting the Field

While there has been a substantial amount of analysis of the feminist writings of Muslim women, amongst them the *tafsir* scholars cited in this book, these various works have not

² Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 21-22.

³ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 192.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 106.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

been brought together in a single argument for feminist *tafsir* as a distinct field of scholarship as Hidayatullah does. Elementary as this might seem, among Hidayatullah's achievements is the recognition and also constitution of the field feminist *tafsir*. While she begins her analysis calling this "feminist Qur'anic interpretation," she soon moves to what now seems like more familiar terminology, "feminist *tafsir*," and eventually the terms work interchangeably. Further demarcating the terminology, Hidayatullah traces the genealogy, contours, and theoretical framework of the field. She places Amina Wadud in what she calls the first generation of feminist *tafsir* scholars, accompanied by Riffat Hassan and Azizah al-Hibri. The second generation includes Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Kecia Ali and Sa'diyya Shaikh. Asma Barlas is located between the two generations. While there are many other such scholars who are not dealt with in the book, Hidayatullah recognizes their importance to the field and explains that their absence in the book is solely due to her focus on monographs and only the most substantial contributions to the field. Hidayatullah's analysis demonstrates that the first and second generations of scholars together inaugurated the field that Hidayatullah names feminist *tafsir*, even though at the time of their writing the scholars might not have called themselves feminist. In characterising the field, she avoids other possible names. Naming it "women's *tafsir*" might suggest there is a common women's response to *tafsir*. In the same vein "gender-sensitive *tafsir*" would imply that the *tafsir* is critical of the unexamined associations of gender and sexuality. In her retrospective reading of the literature, the definitive feminist parameters of the field are marked by their "pointed challenge to male power and interpretive privilege"(4); this renders the work feminist even if authorial intent is otherwise.

Elsewhere, while Hidayatullah has been clear on what motivates this scholarship, she also emphasizes that the terminology used to describe it is imprecise. Similarly, scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadi have also expressed misgivings when associating Muslim women's critique of religious practice with feminism. Najmabadi's cautious treatment of the convergence has also recognized the historically imperial impulses of feminism and its instrumentalization in the politics of colonial domination of Muslim societies. Margot Badran by contrast has theorized Islamic feminism categorically.⁷

Against the contentions over what and how to name Muslim women's feminist work, Hidayatullah's constitution of feminist *tafsir* as a field of inquiry is a significant moment in the development of both feminist thought and Islamic thought. Not only is Hidayatullah creating a subset of Qur'an and *tafsir* studies that is feminist, she is also defining one aspect of feminist Islamic thought from others and highlighting the growing nuance and depth of Muslim feminist scholarship; no longer is it sufficient to talk about literature on women and Islam in general terms. The field has grown substantially in recent years and analyses such as Hidayatullah's help us understand the emerging contours of the field. Moreover, Hidayatullah is defining what constitutes the feminist character of Muslim women's studies of the Qur'an, namely the "challenge to male power and interpretive privilege."

Her characterization of feminist *tafsir* as a historical and emic or indigenous Muslim response to patriarchy, is supported by the work of others such as Sa'diyya Shaikh who has argued for Muslim feminist commitments as a response to the central Qur'anic messages of justice and "an ontology of radical human equality" (40). In contrast to Shaikh's indigenous claim to feminism, Mohja Kahf has shown that in the geo-politics of an imagined civilizational clash, the interplay of Islam and feminism also produces a narrative of the

⁷ For an analysis of these different approaches see Seedat, "When Islam and Feminism Converge," and Seedat, "Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism."

oppressed Muslim women that operates undetected at levels so pervasive that they often need no substantiation.⁸ Even Saba Mahmood's work, ostensibly a corrective of liberal feminist approaches to Muslim women, inadvertently replicates the dynamic of oppressed Muslim women evaluated against liberal standards of agency. Mahmood confesses to the visceral repugnance of a project that gives agency to the socially conservative women in the pietistic mosque movements of Egypt.⁹ And though Mahmood is careful about not reading resistance into the women's mosque movement too easily, her analysis originates in an impulse to categorize Muslim women in the polarities of oppressed or rebellious. In the end, though her conclusion takes us a few steps away from that impulse, it leaves us precariously close to reverting to the same polarity. Mahmood's achievement, however, is in that even though she cannot align the mosque movement with feminism's liberatory impulses, she is committed to the productive tension between intellectual and political reflections on the intersections of feminism and Muslim women's pietistic lives, and open to the insights that emerge out of a "dynamic distance and tension" between the two.¹⁰ Similarly committed to this relationship of productive tension, I find that Hidayatullah's constitution of feminist *tafsir* as a field of study renders that relationship more intimate than Mahmood might.

On naming and defining the field of feminist *tafsir*, Hidayatullah delimits the scholarship in her study by its challenge to male interpretive privilege in much the same way that feminism is most popularly cited in its challenge to male privilege. Accordingly, "feminism" appears to be the inevitable language for articulating this scholarship. And, since the subject of study is Qur'anic interpretation, it falls almost instinctively into the realm of *tafsir*, hence the name "feminist *tafsir*." However, because some forms of feminist language remain the exclusive preserve of the colonizer, feminism is also potentially inadequate. As Kahf tells us, the narrative on Muslim women only changes when, in the process of decolonization, "Muslim women speak back in the language of the colonizer."¹¹ Therefore, I argue, constituting the field of feminist *tafsir* is less elementary than it might seem. It challenges normative definitions of both aspects of the name, feminist and *tafsir*. It is an achievement because it recognizes Muslim women speaking back to the colony in the language of the colonizer, i.e., feminism; but, it is also a risk because of the inadequacy of the language of feminism and the hegemonies of imperial forms of feminism. It also challenges hegemonies of the historical forms of *tafsir*. And so there are two questions concerning adequacy that apply. Firstly, is feminism adequate to the demands of feminist Muslim women committed to a divine text? This is not a new question and has been taken up in different ways before. Hidayatullah's accomplishment is to demand and then allow the argument to take a step forward, by asking the second question which pertains to the adequacy of the Qur'an and *tafsir* methods for Muslim feminist concerns: conceptually, is the Qur'an and attempts to understand it through traditional forms of *tafsir* conducive to current concepts of equality, and, contextually, is feminist *tafsir* conducive to correcting women's historical exclusion from shaping the practice and historical narratives on women's *tafsir*?

⁸ Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Terzagant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 1-2.

⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹ Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, 179.

On the Adequacy of the Field of Tafsir for Muslim Feminist Concerns

By constituting the field of feminist *tafsir* Hidayatullah corrects the marginal position of women exegetes in the interpretive enterprise. Already, in the early days of feminist *tafsir*, Wadud offered a linguistic analysis for the argument that the Qur'an was addressed equally to men and women and that men were not the privileged recipients of a revelation intended only tangentially for women (38). While this might seem an unremarkable observation at this point in our history, it bears reminding that classical thought did not always extend the position of addressee to women. Historically the "scope of address" of God's commands was not necessarily thought to include women. Abu al-Husayn al-Basri (d. 478/1085) a *Mu'tazili* scholar, for instance, was of the opinion that

God must make his speech about menstruation clear to scholars because they are charged with understanding it, though not with obeying it; but he need not make it clear to women, because they are charged only with obeying the rules derived from it by the scholars.¹²

It would seem almost bizarre to suggest in contemporary debates that the text of the Qur'an might not be addressed to women. More palatable is the idea that the text is not available to the understanding of all readers and that scholars, by virtue of their advanced learning, access the text at different levels from non-scholars. Notwithstanding, the premise of *tafsir* scholarship is the idea that the Qur'an is opaque to ordinary believers, to some degree at least, and potentially most clear to those schooled in its sciences. In gendered terms the absence of female exegetes implies also the absence of women as addressees of the text. Therefore, the recognition of women scholars of *tafsir* is more than a simple historical correction to their absence but a necessary realignment of the trajectory between the Creator, the text, and the addressee that identifies women as learned scholars and readers of the text. If God is required to make clear God's speech to the scholars, then, in the framework of feminist *tafsir*, this includes female scholars because they too are charged not only with "obeying it," but also with "understanding it." And so the constitution of feminist *tafsir* as a field of study is also the recognition of women's agential activity in *tafsir* studies, another way in which Hidayatullah's constitution of the field of feminist *tafsir* is a milestone in Qur'anic exegesis. What distinguishes Hidayatullah, however, is that she constitutes the field of feminist *tafsir* and contests it simultaneously.

On Incommensurability and Anachronism

Among Hidayatullah's concerns are anachronism (especially of the concept of equality), the matter of interpretive choice, and the need to further theorize sex difference. The "possible incommensurability of our (feminist) demands" (151), Hidayatullah explains, pertains in part to an anachronistic application of our "contemporary notion of gender equality" (147), which is not historical and therefore "not reflected in the Qur'an" (152). Yet, it is my view that contemporary exegetes who argue for the Qur'an as a patriarchal text are equally guilty of anachronism for projecting contemporary ideas of inequality and sexual

¹² David R. Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2011), xviii.

prejudice upon the historical text. In that all forms of *tafsir* make contemporary demands of the historical text, patriarchal readings of the text are equally anachronistic when they insist that their patriarchal readings of the text are historical and not contemporary; these readings of patriarchy in the text are no more historical than the feminism projected upon the text by feminist *tafsir*. Anachronism is perhaps less obvious, though equally present, in non-feminist exegesis.

The task of the exegete is to navigate the interpretive operations of the text, cognizant of the historicity of contemporary demands on the text. Interpretive choice is an essential aspect of exegesis; therefore, Hidayatullah is correct to point out that the text is as available to patriarchal interests as it is to feminist interests. Patriarchal interests however have much more historical and material support within the world of text. In other words, while feminist *tafsir* must “reach” through and beyond sources that have either been documented in patriarchal ways or where women’s voices have been silenced completely to find egalitarian demands reflected in the text, patriarchal *tafsir* can call on a long and well-documented genealogy that affirms its legacy. In my view, however, while it is important to note the interpretive enterprise as a subjective one, the acknowledgement does not imply the incommensurability of the text for feminists any more than it might imply incommensurability for other interpretations.

Discursive Equality

Further to questions on the adequacy of feminism and *tafsir* to the concerns of feminist Muslim women, Hidayatullah’s work offers an approach to equality and the text as discursive rather than definitive.¹³ In terms of moving forward with the feminist *tafsir* project, Hidayatullah suggests theorizing afresh concepts of equality and sexual difference using a discursive rather than a definitive approach to ideas of equality. She shows the limits of existing models of sexual difference such as the male-female mutuality model and a model where male-female ontological and moral equality work in tension with social inequality. Hidayatullah suggests a theory that is not essentialist but dynamic and discursive. In this model “[s]exual difference should be viewed as dynamic in relation to three factors...the specificities of situational contexts, variations that come with historical progression, and changing definitional relationships” (190).

Specificity in situational contexts implies that “the significance of biological differences should be treated as context-dependent” (190). Since difference is not “transcendent,” to understand the function of sexual difference analysis must be specific to where and when biological difference is significant and also to the nature of that significance. Hidayatullah does not provide a Qur’an-based example but illustrates this point through the varying significance of male and female reproductive biology in the market economy. Whereas it is important for the market to recognize both reproductive and productive labor, the market cannot treat the reproductive labors of both sexes the same. However, it can, for example, give equal treatment to male and females who are also primary caregivers for their children. Similarly, we may add, the varying significance of men’s and women’s presence in mosques illustrate the relative significance of sexual difference. In terms of Qur’anic interpretation, in conventional arguments, polygyny is premised upon heightened levels of male desire and

¹³ For more on this topic, see the concluding chapter of my unpublished dissertation: Fatima Seedat, *Sex and the Legal Subject: Woman and Legal Capacity in Hanafi Law* (McGill University, 2015), <http://digitool.Library.McGill.CA/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=130731>.

therefore an exclusively male sexual facility. A dynamic interpretation of sexual difference would argue for either equal application of monogamy to men and women or equal application of polygamy for both sexes. Neither interpretation would make heightened levels of sexual desire the exclusive preserve or definitive of a single biology. In Hidayatullah's view, "[i]n some contexts, a biological difference is relevant to men's and women's capacities to perform the same tasks, but sometimes that biological difference is irrelevant" (190). As opposed to a notion of "fixed difference," "fluid difference" allows sexual difference to be either relevant or irrelevant and not absolute, but situational (190). Paying attention to "historical progression and changing definitional relationships" allows for time and change to alter "sex-based roles and thereby change the relationship between men and women" (191).

She examines Wadud's theory of male-female relations as dependency and Shaikh's theory of the male-female relationship as interdependence, both of which resonate with Ziba Mir-Hosseini who problematizes formal equality and also allows us to avoid the potential injustices of complementarity models (191-192). In Hidayatullah's framework, "biological difference is best treated as historically fluid, relational, and contextual" (191). This prevents easy hierarchies between the sexes and "allows for a scheme in which difference and equality are not opposed to one another" (191). Hidayatullah suggests a framework for theorizing sexual difference that allows for fluidity or contingencies of situation, time and relationship. This contrasts against traditional approaches to sexual difference, which determines masculinity and femininity through definitive characteristics. It is potentially an approach that allows difference to evolve and shift through contingency instead of definition. Through a comparison of historical and contemporary legal responses to sexual difference, I have illustrated elsewhere the increasing rigidity of modern definitional approaches over historical and situationally determined understandings of sexual difference.¹⁴ Hidayatullah appears, in my view, to be moving in this direction too; the contrast of a situational, discursive approach, rather than a definitional approach, to gendered legal subjectivity illustrates a wider ambit of possibility in the former.

Discursive Qur'an

Hidayatullah's final contribution is that her argument for a discursive approach encompasses not only the concept of equality but also the Qur'an as text. Drawing upon the work of Nasr Abu Zayd, she highlights the value of the Qur'an not only as definitive text cast in a single era, but as a discourse that descends continually, not "upon humanity but rather to humanity" (177). In Abu Zayd's view, limiting the Qur'an to the form of a definitive text limits its discursive potential; viewed as an "interactive discourse between the Word and the reader" instead places the Qur'an in the direct reach of its feminist interpreters and allows us "to rethink the nature of divine meaning" (177). She does not elaborate much on this idea, and her suggestion is also not novel in that feminist scholarship has already employed Abu Zayd's approach. Hidayatullah's contribution is in coupling his approach with a discursive understanding of equality.

Moving Forward

¹⁴ Ibid.

While it might seem at first that Hidayatullah leaves feminist *tafsir* defeated in its cause and its arguments, the opposite is true. Bringing feminist *tafsir* to what seems like the abyss of radical uncertainty, Hidayatullah has illustrated some of the operations that can come into play when maintaining a dynamic distance and tension between Islam and feminism. The distance offers space for improvised and critical, rather than pre-scripted and conciliatory, associations between Islam and feminism. In nuptial terms, this space allows for a “tentative engagement” between Islam and feminism based on “a promise to consider” the possible ways and means for coming together, rather than an “arranged marriage” based on predetermined parameters. Hidayatullah’s feminist *tafsir*, may at first glance appear to be an arranged marriage which has failed, for the combined effect of the syntheses in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 in conjunction with the critiques in Chapters 8 and 9 is that Hidayatullah constitutes a field of study while simultaneously questioning its viability, announcing its limitations, and potentially dislodging it from feminist favor. For this reason a number of we-told-you-so anti-feminist voices may think that Hidayatullah has proven the association between Islam and feminism a failed enterprise. To the contrary, Hidayatullah’s arguments illustrate why the engagement must not be called off and that the negotiation between the two intellectual paradigms *must* continue.

And while she asks the important questions that measure Islam against feminist principles, we must also consider weighing feminism against Qur’anic principles. If believing women insist on a framework of emancipation that is Qur’anic, then what operations of thought must we consider in order to find the liberatory aspects of the Qur’anic framework? Furthermore, what and how might feminism benefit from these new operations of thought? Feminist philosophy is continually being made and remade as women think through our subjective realities in different ways. And if the Qur’an is to remain in meaningful engagement with feminist thought, if the goal is indeed for each intellectual tradition to teach and learn as much from the other, then the engagement must be of the sort that will allow for radical shifts in both; what about sexual difference and equality can both paradigms learn from each other? At the core of the response is an analysis of the ontological postulates of sexual difference in the Qur’an and the degree to which these speak to present day and evolving ideas of equality. Hidayatullah brings us into a vulnerable space when she asks us to consider how sexual difference works and how it might work in an affirmative, feminist, and Muslim framework. To abandon the Qur’an at this stage in feminist *tafsir* is to release it from responsibility to female believers. It is my opinion that Hidayatullah’s challenge allows us to do exactly the opposite. If the project of feminist *tafsir* continually interrogates the idea and nature of equality and the definitive nature of the text, if the concepts of equality and the text are continually in discursive emergence, then the demand for self-constitution by the believing Muslim feminist is never complete though always present. Either the text and our concepts are sufficient to this scrutiny in how they are understood presently, or they will insist on and provide us with other, newer avenues for engaging the text as a space for divine meaning making; the final challenge is to continue to hold a space where the Qur’an maintains its place in Muslim theorizing toward justice envisioned as equality between the sexes.

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