Towards an Islamic Feminist Hermeneutic

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Introduction

> Depending on how it is used, the sacred text can be a threshold for escape or an insurmountable barrier. It can be that rare music that leads to dreaming or simply a dispiriting routine. It all depends on the person who invokes it.[1]

Islamic scriptures – the Qur'ān and ḥadīth – contain the moral and ethical elements to develop a society based on egalitarianism – including gender equality. The challenge that faces feminist scholars of these scriptures is to develop and use hermeneutical models that reveal such liberatory potential, to realise within Islamic scriptures 'a threshold for escape' and to hear 'that rare music that leads to dreaming'.

Questions of language and understanding and interpretation of texts have occupied human minds for centuries. Many have theorised these concepts and attempted to find the most correct way of approaching language and texts. Paul Ricoeur is one of the outstanding scholars from the latter half of the twentieth century to grapple with these issues. Ricoeur has become particularly well-known for his theory of hermeneutics which has become influential in a variety of disciplines – from philosophy to linguistics to Biblical Studies.

Ricoeur successfully explains the meaning of texts and their impact on the human imagination. But more than that, he has

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[1] Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991, 64.

succeeded in developing a set of theoretical tools to assist in the interpretation of texts. It is these tools and some of their possible applications for Islamic scriptures that will be one of the focuses of this article.

Certain of Ricoeur's hermeneutical tools have been appropriated by some feminist scholars to develop frameworks for gender analyses of texts. However, no such appropriation has been done by scholars to interpret Islamic texts from a feminist perspective. I will attempt to do just that: modify certain of Ricoeur's hermeneutical tools to interpret the Qur'ān and ḥadīth and to show how the use of these tools could present us with a feminist reading of these texts. However, I will argue that because of the nature, history and understanding that Muslims have of Islamic scripture, Ricoeur's hermeneutics is not adequate in providing a methodology of interpretation for these scriptures. I will suggest that some of the hermeneutical tools of Ricoeur and of Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman enrich each other when developing a theory for the interpretation of the Qur'ān. The ḥadīth, however, presents us with a different kind of text and a different kind of hermeneutical challenge, one for which Ricoeur's theory about hermeneutics and the nature of texts cannot be as easily applied. I thus argue that his understanding of the text does not apply to the ḥadīth. However, I will show that Ricoeur's 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is an invaluable tool for a feminist reading of ḥadīth literature. Indeed, I argue that a hermeneutic of suspicion has been utilised by Muslim scholars since the beginning of the development of ḥadīth texts. Finally, I will develop some ideas towards a model for a feminist hermeneutic of Qur'ān and ḥadīth. These will include certain useful hermeneutical keys, the use of a hermeneutic of suspicion, the Ricoeur-Rahman combination for interpreting the Qur'ān, and some key strategies for a feminist interpretation of Islamic scriptures.

Ricoeur's Hermeneutics

All discourse, according to Ricoeur, is realised as an event and understood as meaning.[2] The text is a discourse fixed by writing. However, it must be noted that while such discourse could be spoken, it is fixed by writing – as text – precisely because it is not spoken.[3] Text, then, is only *really* a text when it is not restricted to transcribing anterior speech. And the aim of reading a text is interpretation. To interpret a text, says Ricoeur, is to 'follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* towards the *orient* of the text'.

However, in interpreting, we need to go 'beyond a subjective process of interpretation as an act *on* the text' to 'an objective process of interpretation which would be an act *of* the text'.[4] Thus Ricoeur's theory is based on an understanding of the primacy of the text in the interaction between text and subject. Even interpretation, before being an act of the exegete, is an act of the text where the text interprets itself.[5] But if the purpose of reading the text is interpretation, then what must be interpreted within such an interaction? '[W]hat must be interpreted,' argues Ricoeur, is 'a *proposed world* which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities.' This is what he calls the 'world of the text'.[6] But Ricouer does not completely deny the pre-understanding that the reader brings to the text. He accepts a role for pre-understanding and agrees that the text 'invites multiple

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[2] Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", in (ed.) John B. Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 134.

[3] Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text: Understanding and Explanation", in (ed.) John B. Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 146.

[4] Ricoeur, "What is a Text", 162.

[5] Ricoeur, "What is a Text", 162.

[6] Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", 142.

readings'.[7] However, his point is that 'subjectivity must not be described in terms of projection'. Understanding oneself in front of the text, he argues, 'is quite the contrary of projecting one's self and one's own beliefs and prejudices; it is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself.'[8] Ricoeur's idea of the world of the text is critical to his theory of hermeneutics with its key elements of distanciation and appropriation.

Distanciation

Ricoeur argues that although text is not just an inscription of anterior speech, speaking and writing are both legitimate modes of the realisation of discourse. Such realisation in writing involves characteristics which distance the text from the conditions of spoken discourse. He outlines four instances of distanciation.

The first case of distanciation is that of the meaning of discourse – inscribed in writing – surpassing the event. In the second instance, what the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant. The intention of the author (and thus the author her/himself) becomes distant from the discourse after the creation of the text. Indeed, 'to read a book is to consider its author as already dead'.[9] This is unlike spoken discourse where the intention of the speaker and the meaning of what is spoken usually overlap. Thirdly, the text is emancipated from the limits of ostensive reference. In spoken discourse the reference is determined by the shared reality of the speech situation between

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[7] Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and hermeneutics", in (ed.) John B. Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 108.

[8] Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the problem of hermeneutics", in (ed.) John B. Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 178.

[9] Ricoeur, "What is a Text", 147.

the speaker and the listener; in writing the shared reality no longer exists and it is thus not possible to identify the thing spoken about as the common situation of the interlocutors. Finally, there is the distanciation of the audience. In spoken discourse the hearer is specified by the dialogical relationship with the speaker; written discourse, on the other hand, is addressed to an unknown audience. The audience, then, is anyone that can read. This highlights an essential characteristic of a literary work, according to Ricoeur: that it must be able to transcend its own socio-psychological conditions of production and open itself up to an unlimited number of readings, all of which are situated in different socio-cultural conditions. Hence the text 'decontextualises' itself so that it might be 'recontextualised' elsewhere.[10]

Arising from the theory of distanciation, Ricoeur makes important criticisms of other hermeneutical models. The first is in reference to what he calls the Romantic tradition, which emphasises the attempt to understand the intention of the author[11] or the 'genius' of the author during the process of interpretation 'genius to genius'.[12] According to the distanciation model, the intention of the author is irrelevant. What is important, Ricoeur repeatedly emphasises, is not what lies *behind* the text – the author and her/his intention – but what lies in *front* of the text – the world of the text.[13] The world of the text is the world that the text projects in front of itself, the world with which the reader interacts. Secondly, Ricoeur criticises the 'historicist' understanding of interpretation which links the contents of works to the social conditions of the community in which the work was produced.

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[10] Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", 139.

[11] Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", 140.

[12] Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation", in (ed.) John B. Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 190.

[13] Ricoeur, "Appropriation", 192.

Thus, interpreting the text implies considering it as an expression of certain socio-cultural needs and as a response to certain conditions localised in time and space. Ricoeur's 'anti-historicist' position is that the text is not primarily a message addressed to a specific group of readers. Rather, it is an atemporal object through which the chain of historical development has been broken.[14] Thus, the original audience of the text and its socio-cultural conditions are irrelevant. Finally, he rejects the notion that readers approach a text with their own 'prior text' which they would project onto the text. For him interpretation is not about projecting one's self onto the text but allowing the text to 'enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself'.[15] The tool that is necessary for the subject/reader, then, is that of appropriation.

Ricoeur's theory of distanciation is useful for the gender analysis of texts. The fact that any text distances itself from the original author, audience, meaning and references, means it has the inherent ability to decontextualise itself. That this decontextualisation necessarily implies that it has to be recontextualised variously by different interpreters means that, apart from any tension within a text (tension that would be interrogated using a hermeneutic of suspicion), there also exists a tension between the reader and the text. But such tension is positive in that it opens the space for a range of 'recontextualisations' of texts – including feminist recontextualisations.

Appropriation

Interpretation, says Ricoeur, is essentially the power of the text to disclose a world; the relation of the reader to the text is the reader's relation to the world thus disclosed.[16] Again, the text is

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[14] Ricoeur, "Appropriation", 183-185.
[15] Ricoeur, "What is a Text", 178.
[16] Ricoeur, "Appropriation", 182.

the primary actor because '[t]o understand is not to project oneself onto the text; it is to receive an enlarged self from the apprehension of proposed worlds which are the genuine object of interpretation'.[17] The purpose of the text is to create meaning for the reader. The reader achieves this through interpretation which overcomes cultural and historical distance and makes the text contemporary. This process, for Ricoeur, can only occur through appropriation. Appropriation, indeed, allows the re-realisation of discourse because through it interpretation becomes an event. Thus we have a circle which starts with an event which is surpassed by meaning which, in turn, creates another event – repeatedly.

Contrary to what the immediate understanding of the term appropriation might be, Ricoeur does not understand appropriation as a process of taking possession. Rather, and importantly, it is a 'letting-go'. 'Relinquishment is a fundamental moment of appropriation.'[18] According to Ricoeur, interpretation has no place for the 'narcissism of the reader: to find only oneself in a text, to impose and rediscover oneself … It is in allowing itself to be carried off to the reference of the text the *ego* divests itself of itself.'[19] The moment represented by appropriation, then, is not a moment when the reader takes possession of the text but it is a moment of dispossession of the ego. Thus appropriation can be understood as being the process by which 'the revelation of new modes of being *gives* the subject new capacities for knowing himself'.[20] The interpretation of the text culminates in 'the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself.'[21] And such self-interpretation occurs by letting-go into a world not behind the text but in front of the text, a world which the work unfolds, discovers and reveals.

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[17] Ricoeur, "Appropriation", 182.
[18] Ricoeur, "Appropriation", 191.
[19] Ricoeur, "Appropriation", 191.
[20] Ricoeur, "Appropriation", 192.
[21] Ricoeur, "What is a Text", 158.

Ricoeur's theory of appropriation includes the notion of 'play' as part of the 'dynamic activity of the reader'.[22] Such 'play' within the text and between text and reader allows feminist or gynocentric readings to emerge as much as it allows androcentric readings to emerge.

Having reviewed some of Ricoeur's hermenuetical theory, I will now examine the extent to which it may be applied to the two most important Islamic scriptures: the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth.

The Qur'ān

That the Qur'ān is the Word of God (revealed to the Prophet Muhammad) raises important issues about the nature of the Qur'ān that must be noted before proceeding. Firstly, the 'author' of the text in this instance is not human but Divine. The 'mind' of the author is thus beyond the comprehension of the reader or interpreter; the author's intention can never be grasped. Secondly, while the Qur'ān exists as written text, it was revealed as an oral 'recitation'. Allied to this is the third point: Muhammad, the first 'reader' of the Qur'ān, was the 'sent-doer',[23] expected not only to interpret the scripture but, more importantly, to engage his community in making it a lived experience. Without this latter task, Muhammad would have no status as Prophet. Finally, the Qur'ān was not a text that was authored and then delivered to the reader as a text. Rather, it operated, in the Prophet's context, more as speech with regular communication, over 23 years, between the reader and the author; it thus is seen – at the end of 23 years – as

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[22] Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology", in (ed.) John B. Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 94.

[23] Harold Coward, *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions,* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988, 82

the result of a dialogical relationship between the Makkan and Madinan communities on the one hand, and God on the other. Having considered the above, however, it is important to note that the Qur'ān always saw itself ultimately as being text, a book.[24]

These points about the nature of the Qur'ān have significant bearing on how Ricoeur's hermeneutics might apply to the Qur'ān. Most importantly, these comments imply that while Muhammad was alive, the Qur'ān could not be regarded as 'text' in the sense that Ricoeur describes a text. Hence, when dealing with the Qur'ānic hermeneutic, a distinction needs to be made between the period when Muhammad was alive and the period after his death until today. While the Qur'ān saw itself as ultimately being text, it was not so until its 'collecting' was done i.e.: until just after the death of the Prophet.[25] Because of the centrality of the Qur'ān within Islamic theology and Muslim practice, we can undoubtedly assume for Muslims the primacy of the text over the reader – which is one of Ricoeur's main arguments.

While God is understood in Islam to always be active within the human community and upon the human condition, it might be said that as far as the Qur'ān is concerned, the completion of the delivery of the scripture to its recipient – Muhammad – meant the distanciation of God from the text. This despite the assurance within the Qur'ān itself that it is a text 'protected' by God from any corruption.[26] This understanding of distanciation implies that, as Ricoeur argues, the intention of the author – God, in this case –

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[24] See, for example, Qur'ān, 2:2, 2:89, 2:121, 2:174, 2:176, 2:177, 2:231, 3:3, 3:7, 3:23, 4:105, 4:113, 4:127, 4:140, 6:38, 6:92, 6:114, 6:155, 7:2, 7:170, 8:75, 10:1, 11:1, 12:1, 13:1, 14:1, 16:64, 16:89, 18:1, 18:27, 19:16, 19:41, 19:51, 19:54, 19:56, 21:10, 26:2, 27:1, 28:2, 28:86, 29:45, 29:47, 29:51, 31:2, 32:2, 35:29, 35:31, 38:29, 39:1, 39:2, 39:41, 40:2, 41:3, 41:41, 42:15, 42:17, 43:2, 44:2, 45:2, 46:2.

[25] One of the meanings of the word 'Qur'ān' is 'the collection', which is how the word is used in 75:17.

[26] Qur'ān 15:9 and Qur'ān 41:41-42.

becomes irrelevant. Upon the death of Muhammad, the text became an 'autonomous space of meaning which is no longer animated by the intention of the author; the autonomy of the text, deprived of this essential support, hands writing over to the sole interpretation of the reader'.[27] The fact that soon after the death of Muhammad the Qur'ān actually achieved written status strengthens this point. Qur'ānic interpretation, then, should not concern itself with attempting to grasp the 'original intention' of God. This also means that the interpreter should not concern her/himself with the 'world behind the text' but should rather focus on the 'world in front of the text', the world *of* the text through which the reader/interpreter gains an enhanced sense of self-understanding.

However, because the Qur'ān began its life as recitation (speech) instead of as text; because its 23-year revelation meant a regular to-fro communication between the audience and an author that had not yet been distanced from the text and because the first audience regarded it as speech to be lived rather than as text to be interpreted, the distanciation between the text and the original audience is not as applicable to the Qur'ān as it is with other texts. But such an assertion means that Ricoeur's anti-historicist approach cannot be adopted and a historicist approach would be more appropriate. It is exactly such an approach to the Qur'ān that Fazlur Rahman proposes.

For Rahman, the process of interpretation 'consists of a double movement, from the present situation to Qur'ānic times,

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[27] Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics", in (ed.) John B. Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 174. It should be noted that this argument is not a comment on the notion that God is Ever-Present and able to intervene in the affairs of the world as He wishes. The argument here relates specifically to God's role in the process of interpretation.

then back to the present'.[28] The Qur'ān, according to Rahman, is the Divine response, through Muhammad's mind, to the moral-social situation of seventh century Arabia.

> We see, then, that the Qur'ān and the genesis of the Islamic community occurred in the light of history and against a social-historical background. The Qur'ān is a response to that situation, and for the most part it consists of moral, religious and social pronouncements that respond to specific problems confronted in concrete historical situations.[29]

On the basis of this historicist approach, Rahman explains his hermeneutical approach:

> The first of the two movements mentioned above, then, consists of two steps. First, one must understand the meaning or import of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it was the answer … The first step of the first movement, then, consists of understanding the meaning of the Qur'ān as a whole as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute responses to specific situations. The second step is to generalize those specific answers and enunciate them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be 'distilled' from specific texts in light of the socio-historical background and the often-stated *rationes legis*.[30]

One example would be sufficient here to illustrate the importance of this historical method. The Qur'ān, in Surah 2 verse 282, says that in a credit transaction the credit should be written down and there should be two witnesses to the agreement. The witnesses can be two adult males or, if two males are not available, one male and

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[28] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 5.

[29] Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 5.

[30] Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 6.

two women 'so that if one of the women is forgetful, the other would remind her'. The reason that one male witness in this case would be substituted by two female witnesses is that a woman might be 'forgetful' about such issues since the general situation in seventh century Arabia was that women were commercially inexperienced. Rahman's historical method would relate that context of the 'original audience' to the Qur'ānic stipulation to extract the principle that equality in these cases is based on equality of experience. Thus, Rahman argues that 'when women became conversant with such matters … their evidence can equal that of men.'[31] The historical method, then, becomes an effective tool in the development of an Islamic feminist hermeneutic.

While Rahman's methodology is innovative in many respects, his emphasis on a historical approach is not new to the discipline of Qur'ānic interpretation. The concepts of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (circumstances of revelation),[32] *naskh* (abrogation)[33] and the differentiation between Makkan and Madinan verses[34] are

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[31] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān,* Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980, 48-49.

[32] Ahmad von Denffer, *'Ulūm al Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān*, Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1983, 92-103; Sayyid M.H. Tabātabā'i, *The Qur'ān in Islam: Its Impact and Influence on the Life of Muslims,* London: Zahra Publications, 1987, 90-94 and Farid Esack, *Qur'ān Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1987, 56-57.

[33] von Denffer, *'Ulūm al Qur'ān*, 104-113 and Esack, *Qur'ān Liberation & Pluralism*, 57-59.

[34] Islamic scholarship divides Qur'ānic revelation into two phases: Makkan and Madinan, each with somewhat distinct themes. Makkan verses focus mainly on the Unity of God, the accountability of a hereafter and issues of belief. The last theme – belief – includes verses referring to social issues like liberating people from oppression, treatment of orphans and encouraging assistance to the needy. Madinan verses contain more legal injunctions and focus on the development of a new community with social and political autonomy. See von Denffer, *'Ulūm al Qur'ān*, 87-91 and Tabātabā'i, *The Qur'ān in Islam*, 88-90.

examples of classical Islamic scholarship's attention to placing the Qur'ān within its proper historical context for the purposes of interpretation. Indeed, scholars recognised that 'it is impossible to understand a verse without knowing the story and the causes that led to its revelation'.[35] Rahman, however, makes an important contribution by rejecting what he calls an 'atomistic' approach to interpreting the Qur'ān in favour of a more 'holistic' approach and his two-step model.

Having stated that the theory of the distanciation of the original audience is not relevant to the Qur'ān, I must add, however, that as regards all generations of readers after Muhammad, the notion of the distanciation of the audience applies. Thus, the text does decontextualise itself and allows for its recontextualisation in a new situation. This, however, does not negate the usefulness of the Rahmanian model. Indeed, recontextualisation is precisely what Rahman's model wants to achieve.

Since the Qur'ān – as per Ricoeur's hermeneutic – creates its world in front of it, Ricoeur's understanding of the interaction between the interpreter and the world of the text applies to the Qur'ān. There is no place in Qur'ānic interpretation for the 'narcissism of the reader'. Rather, the reader enters the world of the text in order to appropriate the text and its meaning. Such appropriation, of course, implies the interpreter 'letting go' and being 'carried off to the reference of the text'. Thus, the reader's interpretive exercise of the Qur'ān culminates in 'the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself.'

When Ricoeur's hermeneutic is merged with Rahman's, we arrive at an enhanced hermeneutical model for Qur'ānic interpretation. The nature of the Qur'ān allows its interpretation to

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[35] Jalaluddin Al-Suyuti, *Lubab al-'uqul fi asbab al-nuzul,* 4th edition, Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-'Ilm, 1984, 13 cited in Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* 93.

fit in comfortably with a hermeneutical model which includes the kinds of ideas Ricoeur proposes regarding the world of the text, distanciation of the author and appropriation, but requires a historicist approach as proposed by Rahman.

The Ḥadīth

Having dealt with a hermeneutical model for Qur'ānic interpretation, we now turn to the ḥadīth and the usefulness of Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' for ḥadīth interpretation. A hermeneutics of suspicion was, in fact, an essential tool used in the interrogation of aḥādīth from just after the death of Muhammad.

Unlike in the case of the Qur'ān, the aḥādīth were not presented by the author – Muhammad – with the intention of their becoming text. Indeed, aḥādīth have all the hallmarks of being speech that was intended to be only that. A quick reflection on the meaning and collection of aḥādīth will clarify this point. The aḥādīth are the traditions – sayings, actions and condonations – of Muhammad. Many of these might be answers to questions he was asked, observations he made or conversations he had had that were then remembered by his companions (often many years) later. He (as author or speaker) had no concern about his aḥādīth becoming text. Most of these narrations do not even have any sense of context attached to them. Thus the various collections of aḥādīth do not qualify to be text in the sense that Ricoeur describes text.

According to Ricoeur, text is only *really* a text when it is not restricted to transcribing anterior speech. Aḥādīth are exactly what Ricoeur says text cannot be – anterior speech transcribed. Thus his overall theory of texts does not apply to the ḥadīth collections. However, individual tools from Ricoeur can be employed in the task of ḥadīth interpretation. It must be noted that the aḥādīth in the various collections have been subjected to often rigorous criteria before the collectors decided they qualified to be classified

as '*sahīh*' (authentic). And even within this 'authentic' category there are grades depending on the number of narrators or chains of narrators, the quality of the chains, the meaning, etc. I propose applying some of Ricoeur's tools over and above the ones already applied by ḥadīth compilers like Malik, al-Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Daud, al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja and al-Nasa'i.

The most significant of Ricoeur's tools for ḥadīth interpretation is his 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. In a sense, all of the ḥadīth compilers employed a hermeneutics of suspicion. While it is not entirely certain what were the methodologies that each of them employed, it is certain that they approached the various narrations that they collected with a great deal of suspicion. Hence we find that Bukhari included in his collection only 7,275 of the over 600,000 narrations[36] that he had collected. Also, Malik refused to accept aḥādīth from people he regarded as untrustworthy or were known to have lied. In Madinah he came across 70 narrators that had heard aḥādīth directly from Muhammad's companions or their successors; yet he still applied such criteria.[37]

However, it was not just the ḥadīth compilers who lived at least a century after Muhammad that applied a hermeneutic of suspicion.

> After the Prophet's death, when people began to try and recall his words, several Companions were critical of some of the reporters, and rejected some of their reports… These criticisms show that the Companions themselves were not above criticism.[38]

Ṣiddīqī lists examples where Companions as prominent as 'A'isha, 'Umar and Ibn Abbās exercised a great deal of suspicion when

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[36] Muḥammad Zubayr Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development & Special Features*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993, 56.
[37] Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 37.
[38] Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 107-108.

dealing with narrators of aḥādīth.[39] Later, the science of *Asmā' al-rijāl* (biographies of the narrators) developed.[40] This involved the development of fairly detailed critical biographies of all narrators of aḥādīth.

Furthermore, the hermeneutics of suspicion which has been applied and which needs to be continually reapplied to aḥādīth relates not only to the narrators but also to the *matn* (meaning) of the aḥādīth. With political upheaval in the Muslim community from the Caliphate of 'Ali, aḥādīth proliferated supporting one or other political group. Many of these were fabricated – sometimes attached to valid chains of narrators. It was therefore important that the meaning of the ḥadīth also be examined. Such an examination generally focussed on a few important criteria. According to Suyuti: 'If you encounter a ḥadīth contrary to reason, or principles, then you should know that it is forged.'[41] Some of the factors used to reject aḥādīth (on the basis of their meanings) included: inconsistency with the Qur'ān and with other aḥādīth; inconsistency with the dictates of reason, the laws of nature or common experience; mention of the superior virtue of persons, tribes and places; violation of the basic rules of Arabic grammar and style.[42] On the basis of such criteria, classical Muslim scholars often criticised even aḥādīth reported in Bukhari's collection – which is regarded as the most authentic.[43] But, as pointed out

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[39] Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 21, 38, 107 and Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* 75-80.

[40] Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 93.

[41] Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Tadrib al-Rawi,* Cairo, 1307 quoted in Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 113.

[42] Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 114 and M.M. Azami, *Studies in Ḥadīth methodology and Literature,* Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, (undated, although originally published Washington: American Trust Publications in 1977), 72.

[43] For examples of such criticism of Bukhari, see Ṣiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 115.

earlier, some of these aḥādīth were already criticised and rejected by Companions. An example is this disagreement between 'A'isha and Abu Hurairah:

> They told 'A'isha that Abu Hurayra was asserting that the Messenger of God said: 'There are three things which bring bad luck: house, woman and horse.' 'A'isha responded: 'Abu Hurayra learned his lessons very badly. He came into our house when the Prophet was in the middle of a sentence. He only heard the end of it. What the Prophet said was: "May Allah refute the Jews; they say three things bring bad luck: house, woman and horse."'[44]

Apart from – but allied to – his hermeneutics of suspicion, another of Ricoeur's theories that is useful in interpreting aḥādīth is his contention that all symbols (and text is a symbol according to Ricoeur) contain 'phantasms, that is, traces of archaic myths expressing degrees of false consciousness'.[45] For Ricoeur then, texts should be read with a suspicion of the existence of phantasms. These phantasms could be a range of such 'archaic myths'. When examining some of the core Qur'ānic concepts in the next section I will illustrate how misogyny and patriarchy may be understood as phantasms in Ricoeur's terms.

Towards an Islamic Feminist Hermeneutic

It is clear, then, that the Qur'ān and ḥadīth cannot be examined using the same hermeneutical model. Thus, in attempting to develop an Islamic feminist hermeneutic, these scriptures have to be dealt with separately and separate models developed for each of them. In this section I will discuss ways in which some of the above hermeneutical tools may be used in the case of both the

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[44] Imam Zarkashi, *Al-Ijaba,* 113 cited in Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* 76.
[45] Erin White, "Religion and the Hermeneutics of Gender: An Examination of the Work of Paul Ricoeur", in (ed) Ursula King, *Religion and Gender*, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995, 88.

Qur'ān and the ḥadīth in developing an Islamic feminist hermeneutic. First, however, I want to highlight a few important theological and hermeneutical keys that will be useful in interpreting Islamic texts from a feminist perspective.

Hermeneutical, Theological Keys

I use the term 'hermeneutical keys' to refer to Qur'ānic concepts that are critical values by which to measure any interpretation of the Qur'ān or ḥadīth. While there could be many such 'keys', I intend discussing only three that I believe are essential in the development of an Islamic feminist hermeneutic. These are: *Tawhīd*, *Taqwā* and Justice. These keys are the lenses which help shape interpretations to Islamic scriptures.

Tawhīd

Tawhīd means 'one' or an 'integrated unity'. It is the most basic concept for a Muslim, the rejection of which would mean the rejection of Islam itself. The term is mostly used in the sense of the one-ness of God. The opposite of *tawḥīd* is *shirk* (associating partners – or *ilāh*s – with God). However, the term *tawḥīd* has become understood to mean more than just that. The concept of *tawḥīd* is also seen as providing the imperative for the unity of humankind and – in a broader sense – it is used to refer to an integrated understanding of all aspects of life. Thus *tawḥīd* implies that there is no separation between sacred and profane or between religious or secular or priesthood and laity.[46] Islam – in a sense – posits a bi-polar world with *tawḥīd* (as the unity of God, people and life) on the one hand and *shirk* on the other. Thus, if *tawḥīd* has a comprehensive meaning of unity, then *shirk* does as well. The *ilāh*s that would be associated with God would then range from idols for ritual worship to notions of racial superiority to the separation of life into different aspects where only certain ones are

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[46] Ismā'īl Rājī al Farūqī, *Tawhīd: Its Relevance for Thought and Life,* IIFSO, 1983, 143.

important and necessary and others are not (for example, the notion that Islam is concerned only with religious rituals and not with socio-political issues goes against the concept of *tawḥīd* and is thus *shirk*). The *ilāh*s that are created by human beings are the same as Ricoeur's 'phantasms'. The relevance of the key of *tawḥīd* (and its opposite, *shirk*) to hermeneutics is that the Qur'ān is also to be recognised as a complete whole which cannot be interpreted without reference to its wholeness and its overall values.

Further, *tawḥīd* is extremely important for feminist hermeneutics. The implication of a unity of humankind also implies an equality in responsibility and rights of component parts of that unity. Notions of gender inequality, of misogyny or patriarchy all militate against the concept of *tawḥīd*. Such notions, then, while being the phantasms that Ricoeur warns against, are also the *ilāh*s that the Qur'ān warns against. The Qur'ān's question: 'Do you see such a one who takes for his *ilāh* his own desires?' (25:43) can thus be easily answered with reference to the patriarch or misogynist. *Tawḥīd*, then, is an important and useful hermeneutical key in the development of an Islamic feminist hermeneutic.[47]

Taqwā

Rahman calls *taqwā* the 'most central ethical concept of the Qur'ān'.[48] Esack relates it directly to hermeneutics and refers to it as a hermeneutical key. Esack, however, uses it as a key to focus

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[47] Azizah Y. Al-Hibri makes a similar argument as mine regarding the importance of the notion of *tawḥīd* to the understanding of the 'fundamental metaphysical sameness of all humans as creatures of God" and the implication of this understanding for a feminist interpretation of the Qur'ān. See Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, "An Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights" in (ed) Gizela Webb, *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar Activists in North America*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000, 51-54.

[48] Fazlur Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts in the Qur'ān", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, 1983, 176.

on the interpreter rather than the text, saying that it 'facilitates an aesthetic and spiritual balance in the life of the engaged interpreter'.[49] This is understandable considering that Esack regards the reader/interpreter as primary in the hermeneutical process. For me, affording primacy to the text (as per Ricouer's argument), the question is not how *taqwā* is useful as a hermeneutical key if applied in the life of the interpreter but rather how it is useful as a central value pervading the text.

    Taqwā is usually translated as 'fearing God' or 'piety'. However, the root for *taqwā* means 'to protect', 'to save from destruction' or 'to preserve'. Rahman says its standard use in the Qur'ān is in the moral sense of 'guarding against moral peril'. [50] The word occurs on numerous occasions in the Qur'ān and is often presented as the ultimate state of consciousness for the believer. It refers to the kind of closeness achieved by the believer so that, as God says in an ḥadīth qudsī:[51] 'When I love him [my servant] I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it.'[52] The importance of this concept as a hermeneutical key for feminist interpretation is that, according to the Qur'ān, it is also the only distinguishing factor in determining the 'worth' of a person. The Qur'ān states:

> O humankind! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who has most *taqwā* [is most deeply conscious of Him] (49:13).

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[49] Esack, *Qur'ān Liberation and Pluralism*, 89.
[50] Rahman, "Ethical Concepts", 176.
[51] An ḥadīth qudsī is a tradition of Muhammad which reports the direct speech of God.
[52] Reported in Bukhari.

Although this verse does not mention gender but explicitly mentions 'nations and tribes', the interpretation of many Qur'ān commentators is that it creates a level playing field for all people and that this verse makes it clear that no differences between people are relevant except that of *taqwā*. Sayyid Qutb shows how the value of equality contained in this verse played itself out in the first generation of Muslims and how, for Muhammad, *taqwā* trumped class, ethnicity, lineage and physical disability.[53] The use of *taqwā* as a hermeneutical key for feminist interpretations of scripture should now be obvious. If it is used as a basic standard against which interpretative strategies are measured, then the interpretations that result cannot but conform to a reading based on gender equality.

Justice

Two words in the Qur'ān are often translated as justice (or equity): *'adl* and *qist*.[54] The Qur'ān talks about justice and injustice in various situations. Justice emanates from God Himself. He created human beings and the heavens and the earth 'for just ends';[55] He is not unjust 'in the least degree'.[56] The Qur'ān itself – the Word of God – 'finds its fulfilment in truth and in justice'.[57] And human beings are called upon to establish justice and fight against its

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[53] See Sayyid Qutb, *In The Shade of the Qur'ān,* London: MWH, 1979, 45-53.

[54] Some commentators – e.g. Yusuf Ali – translate both *'adl* and *qist* as 'justice'. Esack (*Qur'ān Liberation and Pluralism*, 103) also uses them interchangeably. Others, however – e.g. Muhammad Asad, prefer to translate *'adl* as 'justice' and *qist* as 'equity'. I have decided to use the English 'justice' rather than either of the Arabic terms because it is not important for the purposes of this discussion to distinguish between *'adl* and *qist.*

[55] Qur'ān 44:29, 45:22, 15:85.

[56] Qur'ān 2:272, 4:40.

[57] Qur'ān 6:115.

opposite – oppression.[58] Justice is 'next to *taqwā*'[59] and the believers need to

> stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor; for God can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you swerve, and if you distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily God is well-acquainted with all that you do.[60]

This verse indicates the revolutionary nature of the concept of justice. Further, while the Qur'ān asks that human beings do not practise injustice against themselves,[61] this verse also commands the doing of justice 'even as against yourselves'.

Justice is such an important pillar of Islamic mission that Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah said it was the *raison d'etre* of religion:

> God has sent His messengers and revealed His books so that people may establish *qist* upon which the heavens and the earth stand. And when the signs of justice appear in any manner, then that is the reflection of the *shari'āh* and the religion of God.[62]

The opposite of justice and that which justice seeks to overcome in this world is *zulm* – oppression, wrong-doing, injustice. *Zulm* may take many forms, often manifesting itself in various phantasms. There are many verses of the Qur'ān attacking the blind allegiance to phantasms; for example:

> When it is said to them: 'Follow what God has revealed.' They say: 'No! we shall follow the ways of our fathers.'

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[58] Qur'ān 2:193.
[59] Qur'ān 5:8.
[60] Qur'ān 4:135.
[61] Qur'ān 8:50-51.
[62] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Al-Turuq al-Hukmiyyah fi al-Siyasat al-Shar'iyyah*, Cairo: np, 1953, 14-16 cited in Esack, *Qur'ān Liberation and Pluralism*, 104.

> What! Even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance?[63]

Justice, then, is the end-point reached after the liberation from all phantasms. Just as the rejection of God's revelations in the verse above is a result of the phantasm of tribal or ancestral loyalty, the oppression of women is a result of the phantasms of misogyny and patriarchy. Thus justice becomes an important key for developing a feminist hermeneutic of Islamic scripture.

There are many other important hermeneutical keys that may be extracted from the Qur'ān and that can serve as critical lenses through which Islamic scripture must be approached in order to produce feminist readings.

Qur'ān

The combination – as I have proposed above – of Ricoeur's hermeneutical method and Rahman's historicist approach is the first step in the attempt to arrive at a feminist reading of the Qur'ān. The primacy of the text, an understanding of the distanciation of the author and the reference and the appropriation of the text, together with the consideration for the historical contexts of revelation and the Rahmanian two-stage approach to interpretation are all useful in placing the Qur'ān in its proper perspective as 'guidance unto humankind' (2:185) as far as the issues of women and gender are concerned. Clearly, the Qur'ān was revealed and responded to a patriarchal (and misogynistic) society. It is no surprise then that a large part of the Qur'ān is actually androcentric in that it addresses mainly men and women through men. This fact is important to note if one wants to achieve a feminist reading of the Qur'ān.

One of the most important strategies for a feminist reading is to read what's in the text rather than through the perspectives of earlier interpreters. This means that the feminist interpreter needs to examine the text in its original language – Arabic – in order to

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[63] Qur'ān 2:170.

arrive at meanings untainted by translation-interpretations. Amina Wadud-Muhsin attempted just that in *Qur'an and Woman.*[64] She is particularly keen to explore the reasons why the Qur'ān uses gendered words differently – sometime referring to males only, sometimes to females only and at other times referring to both females and males. This is one aspect of the strategy of reading the Qur'ān 'as it is'. Another aspect is to read individual verses (or parts of verses) as parts of a holistic text rather than in an 'atomistic' manner whereby verses are taken in isolation without due regard for the overall morality of the Qur'ān. While internal consistency is not a new concept in Qur'ānic interpretation,[65] this concept has not been adequately employed in feminist readings. Further, often fragments of verses are used to imply a general principle when, in fact, the fragments are parts of verses that relate to specific questions.

An example of such use of verse fragments is the *darajāh* question. The word *darajāh* refers to a degree or a level and is used in different contexts in the Qur'ān. For example, one striving in the way of God with one's wealth and person obtains a *darajāh* (4:95) above others. Similar is the case of one migrating for the sake of God (9:20). The word becomes contentious in the context of 2:228 – 'men have a degree over them (women)'. This fragment is often used to argue that men are superior to women and have been granted more – intellectually, physically, morally, etc – by God than women. However, the meaning of the fragment becomes clearer when it is placed within the context of the whole verse:

> Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what God has created in their wombs, if they have faith in God and the Last Day. And their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period, if they wish for

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[64] Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman,* Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., 1992.
[65] This is called *tafsir al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān* or exegesis of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān.

reconciliation. And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (or advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.

Clearly, the verse is not making a general statement about the relative position of men to women but is referring to a particular instance in the context of divorce. Sayyid Qutb explains it thus:

> This advantage… is in no way absolute but is contingent, within the present context, upon the fact that it is the man who initiates the divorce and would, therefore, have the prerogative to take his wife back, a decision that could not be left to her to take. This advantage, indeed a useful and proper one, is by no means universal, as some have erroneously concluded, but is simply dictated by the nature and circumstances of the dispute.[66]

Employing Rahman's historicist approach is at once part of the theory of the nature of the Qur'ān as text and a strategy within a feminist method. The case of women's witness in credit transactions (2:282) is a good example of how his approach is useful in arriving at meaning for the Qur'ān in new contexts and how this can be useful for a feminist hermeneutic.

Ḥadīth

As I have already argued, a hermeneutic of suspicion has always been used and is still necessary when interpreting aḥādīth. This is especially true when examining aḥādīth relating to women. This does not imply, of course, a wholesale or arbitrary rejection of aḥādīth. Rather, it is an expression of the need to continually review the validity of aḥādīth and, furthermore, the review of the criteria for authentication of aḥādīth. The suspicion needs to include both issues connected with the reliability of the narrators

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[66] Sayyid Qutb, *In The Shade of The Qur'ān, Volume 1,* Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1999, 279.

as well as with the *matn* (meaning) of the aḥādīth. I have given an example of how a hermeneutic of suspicion can apply even to a well-known ḥadīth narrator like Abu Hurairah. I want to give more examples here of aḥādīth that relate specifically to women and fall under three categories of suspicion: *matn*, consistency with Qur'ān and narrators.

'In every woman there sleeps a traitor like the lover of Joseph,' the Prophet is reported to have said from his deathbed to his wife 'A'isha.[67] The statement has assumed, according to Mernissi, 'the harshness of a veritable condemnation of the female sex'.[68] The statement was uttered by Muhammad (I am assuming for this discussion that it is an authentic statement) after an incident in which 'A'isha deceived him regarding the leading of the prayer in the mosque. Muhammad had asked her to send for Abu Bakr (her father) to lead the prayer. Instead, 'A'isha called upon 'Umar to fulfil the task. The reason, she later explained, was that her father was too prone to cry while reciting the Qur'ān. The Prophet heard 'Umar leading the prayer and became upset. 'A'isha told him she had asked 'Umar because his voice carried far. It was then that Muhammad said these words which Mernissi describes as an 'offhand observation, which even at its worst seems tinged with tenderness'.[69] It is not difficult to imagine that the statement could easily be taken out of context (or without context) and be used to imply that women are unreliable, untrustworthy and traitorous. Without a hermeneutic of suspicion, such a ḥadīth can easily help create an anti-woman atmosphere.

Consistency with the Qur'ān has always been a fundamental criterion for the validation of aḥādīth. Yet, some of the aḥādīth regarding women seem to militate against the Qur'ānic spirit rather

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[67] Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* 111.

[68] Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* 111.

[69] Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* 111. Other versions of the story have Muhammad saying simply: "You (women) are the companions of Joseph." See Bukhari, Chapter 39, Ḥadīth 664.

than being consonant with it. One of the most blatant examples of this is the ḥadīth that: 'If I were to command anyone to prostrate before another I would command women to prostrate themselves before their husbands.'[70] In a version attributed to 'A'isha, the quote continues thus: '… and if a man commands his wife to carry (stones) from a red mountain to a black mountain or from a black mountain to a red mountain her duty is to comply with (his command).'[71] In most of these reports, the prostration sentence follows a statement where the Prophet reportedly says that no one should prostrate to him or his grave. This enhances the implausibility if we consider that Muhammad is referred to by the Qur'ān as the 'best of creation', a 'mercy unto all the worlds' and (along with all other prophets) is regarded as *masoom* (pure, sinless). Why such a person would deny his followers from prostrating to him but virtually command that half of his followers prostrate to the other half is inexplicable.

More importantly, the ḥadīth contradicts Qur'ānic principles in two respects. Firstly, the most important principle in the Qur'ān is that of *tawḥīd*. Any person adhering to the notion of *tawḥīd* would find such a ḥadīth repugnant.[72] Secondly, God never in the Qur'ān gives husbands the kind of status this ḥadīth does. Indeed, the closest the Qur'ān comes to suggesting that one group of people should have this kind of reverential status to another is when it talks about offspring and parents. In many of these instances, the command to be kind or revere parents follows immediately on the command to worship God. Consider Surah 4 verse 1:

> O humankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, Who

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[70] This has been quoted in Abu Dawud, Ibn Majah and Tirmidhi and the different reports are attributed to different narrators, including 'A'isha.

[71] Ibn Majah, Ḥadīth 1852.

[72] As examples, see Qur'ān 16:51, 59:22-24, 109:1-6, 6:14-15 where God almost jealously asserts His one-ness, at the same time condemning those who associate partners with him.

created you from a single person; created, of like nature, a mate, and from them twain scattered countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you.

The Qur'ān 'enjoined on human being goodness to parents'.[73] It evens places goodness to parents immediately after duty to God. 'Worship none but Allah; treat with kindness your parents',[74] 'Join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your parents'[75] and 'Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents'.[76] It is amazing that in the light of such verses and no similar verses concerning husbands, that Muhammad would then encourage the kind of reverence to husbands as is suggested by the ḥadīth. A hermeneutic of suspicion must thus include the classical criterion for ḥadīth – that of consistency with the Qur'ān.

My final example concerns the need for interrogation of the biographies of the narrators. This aspect has been the focus for most of the compilers in their task of ḥadīth authentication. Yet, it is a process that needs to continue.

'Never will succeed such a nation which makes a woman their ruler,' is a ḥadīth that is often used to halt any discussion about the role of women in society. The ḥadīth was narrated by a companion of Muhammad – Abu Bakra. Mernissi devotes many pages to analysing Abu Bakra and examining his biography from classical Muslim sources such as Tabari.[77] I will mention just two points of note. During the caliphate of 'Umar, Abu Bakra had been lashed (80 lashes) for giving false witness. This followed the Qur'ānic

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[73] Qur'ān, 29:8, 31:14, 46:15.
[74] Qur'ān, 2:83.
[75] Qur'ān, 6:151.
[76] Qur'ān, 17:23.
[77] Mernissi, *Women and Islam,* 49-54, 56-58, 60-61.

injunction that for a charge of adultery there must be four witnesses produced. If not, the charge is regarded as being false witness and the culprits given 80 lashes (24:4). Abu Bakra had been one of four people who had accused a prominent Companion – Mughira ibn Shu'ba – of adultery. When another of the four witnesses withdrew his testimony on the grounds that he had not actually seen the act, Abu Bakra and the other two were lashed. Most ḥadīth compilers would not accept aḥādīth from a narrator with such a blight in his past. More importantly, the Qur'ān says of people that have given false witness: 'and ever after refuse to accept from them any testimony, since it is they, they that are truly depraved'.[78] Bukhari, however, included Abu Bakra's aḥādīth – including the one under question – in his compilation. Further, on more than one occasion, Abu Bakra narrated aḥādīth that were politically expedient. This particular ḥadīth was reported by him after 'A'isha had lost the Battle of the Camel which was fought between her army and that of the Caliph 'Ali. Abu Bakra narrated this ḥadīth as the reason he had not joined her in the battle after being invited by her to do so. (He had decided to remain neutral in the conflict.). During the battle he advised at least one person not to join 'Ali because, he said, Muhammad had said: 'If two Muslims meet each other with their swords then (both) the killer and the killed are in the (Hell) Fire'.[79] After the death of 'Ali when 'Ali's son (and the Prophet's grandson) Hassan was forced to give up the caliphate to Mu'awiyah in the interest of the peace in the community, Abu Bakra 'remembered' the Prophet having said: 'This son of mine (Hassan) is a Chief and Allah may make peace between two groups of Muslims through him.' This was more than a quarter century after Muhammad's death. While the biographies of all the ḥadīth narrators have been scrupulously written up by

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[78] Qur'ān, 24:4.
[79] Bukhari, Ḥadīth 6875, 7083.

scholars, from an attitude of suspicion these must be revisited in the attempt to re-examine the aḥādīth.

While the above strategies for ḥadīth interpretation do not deviate substantially from classical ḥadīth authentication methodology, they are here placed firmly within Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. Furthermore, they have been discussed here as a means of uncovering the true approach of Islam to women and in a manner that attempts to discard the phantasms of patriarchy and misogyny.

I will now discuss a few strategies that may be applied to both the Qur'ān and ḥadīth in order to develop a feminist reading of these scriptures.

Other Strategies

In attempting to develop critical interpretations of Islamic scripture there are other interpretive strategies that are available to the feminist reader.

Language is important in the interpreting of any text. It becomes even more critical when the text is many centuries old, as are the Qur'ān and aḥādīth. While it is true that the Qur'ān spoke mainly to men, the gendered nature of the Arabic language needs consideration when deciding on whether the scripture is speaking about men or women. As an example, while the feminine plural form refers to many females, the masculine plural refers a group of people where at least one is male. According to Wadud-Muhsin, in the Qur'ān, 'every usage of the masculine plural form is intended to include males and females, *equally,* unless it includes specific indication for its exclusive application to males.'[80] A good example is the phrase '*Yā ayyuhal ladhinā āmanū*' – Oh you who believe – which occurs on numerous occasions in the Qur'ān. This phrase is in the masculine plural form but it always refers to males

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[80] Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 4.

and females. This gendered nature of the Arabic language is important to consider when reading Islamic scriptures; it allows a reading that is more inclusive of both genders. Further, Arabic possesses no neuter – everything is either masculine or feminine. It does not, however, follow that every use of either of these forms is limited to the mentioned gender. Wadud-Muhsin argues that since the Qur'ān's intention is universal guidance it overcomes the 'inherent flaw' of the lack of a neuter.[81]

Constant recourse to the moral-ethical framework of the Qur'ān is an important strategy for feminist interpretations of Islamic scripture. Using the theological keys discussed above and developing an understanding of the moral-ethical imperatives of the Qur'ān must be important guides in the interpretation of any Islamic scripture or the understanding of any Muslim problem. That these imperatives encouraged towards gender equality is clear. According to Leila Ahmed,[82] the Qur'ān displays a tension between 'pragmatic' and 'ethical' perspectives as far as the position of women is concerned. She argues that the pragmatic perspective was context-bound and the ethical perspective is the one that should persist and determine gender relations.

With the passing of time, through the expansion of the Muslim empire and the assimilation of various other cultural perspectives into what became the Muslim norm, the position and role of women in Muslim society suffered major setbacks.[83] It is thus inevitable that Islamic scriptures – the Qur'ān and ḥadīth – are usually viewed through the lenses of women's inferiority that has formed over the period of more than a millennium. The need,

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[81] Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 7.
[82] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 63.
[83] See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. Ahmed argues that the original Muslim community was one that was based much more on gender equality than later ones; the reason being the cultural assimilation that followed the expansion of the Muslim empire.

therefore, is to look back at the scriptures with a view to deconstruct and then reconstruct the role of women within them. Studies similar to what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has done in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* ,[84] where she attempts to extract women from the 'historical darkness'[85] shrouding the early history of Christianity, are necessary with regard to Islamic scripture as well. While I would warn against the kind of extreme embellishment of women that Schüssler Fiorenza sometimes engages in,[86] I believe the retelling of women's stories from the Qur'ān and Sunnāh is necessary. Some critical research has already been published in this regard. Particularly useful is the work of Barbara Stowasser[87] who looks at the stories of prominent women in the Qur'ān as well as in the life of Muhammad. Nabia Abbot[88] and Denise Spelberg[89] both wrote about Muhammad's wife 'A'isha and the importance of her story to the notion of a feminine ideal. The deconstruction and reconstruction of the lives of the many other prominent women in the Qur'ān (such as the Queen of Sheba; the wife of the Mosaic Pharaoh and Umm Waraqa, who was instructed by Muhammad to lead the prayers) still remain to be researched and written about.

Finally, it is significant that the majority of the interpretations of Islamic scripture have developed in Muslim majority contexts or contexts of significantly large Muslim minorities. It follows that in these cases the scriptures were obviously – and correctly – read for those contexts. Such interpretations are heavily influenced by

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[84] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press, 1983.

[85] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 160.

[86] See, for example, her 'historical re-imagination' of the story of Herodias in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, 48-50.

[87] Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'ān, Traditions, and Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

[88] Nabia Abbott, *Aishah the Beloved of Mohammed*, London: Saqi, 1985.

[89] D.A. Spelberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: the Legacy of `A'isha Bint Abi Bakr*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

the traditions, customs and imperatives of those societies. And while Muslims have been living in the West in minority contexts for a long while, it has been the interpretations done in majority contexts that have held the sway in the West as well. Any feminist approach needs to use a contextual reading as a strategy of interpretation. And for those interpretations being done in Muslim minority situations, that minority context and its relationship to the dominant culture need to influence the reading.

Conclusion

It is a pity that the hermeneutical perspectives developed by Paul Ricoeur remain unused as far as Islamic scriptural interpretation is concerned. He brings to the debate viewpoints about the nature of the text, the relative position of the reader and author to the text that could resonate well with those attempting to develop hermeneutical models for Qur'ān and ḥadīth. These viewpoints of Ricoeur need further exploration to make them part of the generally used models of Islamic hermeneutics. Recent hermeneutical theories have focused – unduly, in my opinion – on the role of the reader[90] and the intention of the author[91] in the hermeneutical circle. I have used Ricoeur to argue, rather, for the primacy of the text. This might be interpreted as implying a rejection of the author and the reader. This is not the case. The author is important for every text and much more so with regard to sacred texts believed to be authored by God. It might be argued that the notion of the primacy of the text implies that there is no arbiter to the text and its meanings and that, in fact, according to

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[90] See, for example, the importance placed on 'the baggage of the reader', 'prior text' and the context of the interpreter in Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 5-7 and Esack, *Qur'ān Liberation and Pluralism*, 1-5, 75.

[91] See, for example, the focus on 'the mind of the author' in Esack, *Qur'ān Liberation and Pluralism*, 73-75.

the Qur'ān God will ultimately mediate (on a Day of Judgement). Again, the Ricoeurian theory not only does not deny this possibility, it does not consider it as relevant. What is relevant is not what would ultimately be mediated in another life but rather what is interpreted in this world. And the reader is the one that is responsible for the interpretation; the text is dead without interpreters. However, once the reading commences, the important factor is not the 'prior text' of the reader but the 'world of the text' that the text creates in front of itself. The interpreter interacts with that world to produce meaning. The number of meanings thus produced could be limitless, yet it is not the reader that creates meaning. Meaning is created by the interpreter 'appropriating' (read 'letting go to') the text and immersing her/himself in the world of the text in order to allow the text to create self-understanding. The major problem with applying Ricoeur to Qur'ānic interpretation is his ahistorical approach – especially relating to the question of distanciation. I have argued that a combination of Rahman's historical approach with Ricoeur's theories of the text and interpretation provide an ideal model for a Qur'ānic hermeneutic.

As much as this hermeneutical model is applicable to the Qur'ān, so is it inapplicable to the ḥadīth. I have argued that, in fact, aḥādīth do not constitute text as Ricoeur explains the nature of text. Hence the approach to the aḥādīth needs to be different from that to the Qur'ān. However, this does not make Ricoeur redundant; the Ricoeurian 'hermeneutic of suspicion' offers a useful tool in framing some of the feminist engagement with ḥadīth. In ḥadīth criticism such a hermeneutic should be applied to the narrators of aḥādīth, the meaning of the ḥadīth, the context of the narration and its consistency with the Qur'ān.

Ricoeur's model, while being extremely useful in understanding the nature of text and in gleaning hermeneutical tools, is, however, insufficient to provide a feminist – much less an

Islamic feminist – reading of Islamic scripture. But Ricoeur's model can be used to develop some ideas for an Islamic feminist hermeneutic. Such a hermeneutic will also need to consider critical hermeneutical and theological keys – like *tawḥīd, taqwā* and justice. Beyond these, issues of language, reconstruction of women's stories in the text, recourse to the ethical perspectives of the Qur'ān and interpretation for the Muslim minority context are necessary strategies in the development of an Islamic feminist hermeneutic.

While hermeneutics within Islamic discourse is not new terrain, it is completely untouched terrain when one considers an Islamic hermeneutic based on Ricoeur's theories. This is a direction for Qur'ānic interpretation that can be substantially developed. And the idea of developing an Islamic *feminist* hermeneutic is fairly uncharted terrain that needs much more thinking and writing before clearly usable strategies can be developed. But while such development is ongoing, the task of feminist interpretation itself needs to continue from the seminal stages that it is. And within such a mode of interpretation is required many more women interpreters so that interpretations of Islamic scripture can be not just 'about' or 'for' women but also 'by' women, thus enabling the articulation of the woman's voice.