

Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading

by Nimat Hafez Barazangi, Publisher: University Press of Florida, 2004, 9780813030326, 2006, 192 pages, \$24.95

### In Light of Justice

by Leila Montour

Among the various scholarly Islamic works committed to paper over the last century that focus upon the subject of women in Islam and Muslim women, few turn their focus towards women's self-identities in relation to the Qur'an itself. As the Qur'an is the foremost and primary source for Muslims worldwide and throughout history, it is also the litmus test for any extrapolating discussions, being the basis upon which everything else rests.

Nimat Hafez Barazangi, a research fellow at Cornell University's Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality studies program, argues that women must have access to Islamic higher learning, but not necessarily in the traditional way. Rather than approach religious education from the *madrasah* technique or a Western-modeled Orientalist-style, she advocates women's direct engagement of the living text of the Qur'an. Direct engagement, she maintains, allows one to read and re-read the text in light of its universal principles of justice and the individual's religious identity and accountability towards God.

Dr. Barazangi makes the familiar claim that during the span of Islamic history, nearly all scholarship and jurisprudence in Islamic law and interpretation have been done by a minority of male elite religious members. She further adds that this narrow perspective has been a factor in today's unfriendly viewpoint of females in general; remarking upon this elitism as being contrary to the Islamic principle of community

consensus, or *shura*.

Dr. Barazangi goes further in examining the historical examples of early Muslim women who are often held up within the community as being ideal female archetypes for emulation. She argues that rather than viewing them as such, they should simply be viewed as examples of Muslim women, instead of definitive sources of protocol.

Since Islamic history has been filtered through an elite male point-of-view, most of our information about these early women has been reduced to a sort of proxy morality. Moreover, a woman's religious identity has been portrayed as secondary – or even defined by her relation to the males in her life, such as being a mother, daughter, or wife.

What is missing from the picture is the individual without these factors – the Muslim individual as she is *herself* and not as what she is in relation to the males of the community. With such a secondary status implied, Dr. Barazangi questions whether Muslim women end up developing a full Islamic identity as sole, private individuals.

Dr. Barazangi encourages individuals to re-find their Islamic identities through direct personal reading of the Qur'an and the use of the individual's own ability to reason. She spends several chapters in her work taking second looks at several current readings of the Qur'an, such as those given by Amina Wadud, A'isha Abd al-Rahman and Azizah al-Hibri. Through these explorations and criticisms of their works, Dr. Barazangi draws the fine line between what are Qur'anic apologetics and what are indeed new readings. In her work, she focuses

specifically upon three main subject matters: the topics of Muslim women's modesty in relation to morality, whether the Qur'an and gender are one of equity and complementary roles, or one of equality and *taqwa* – the person's individuality in balance with her or his environment, arguing for the latter.

The last section of this book deals primarily with the pragmatic implementation of woman's self-learning of Islam and her identity, its legitimacy as a valid method for knowledge and a catalyst for positive change within the Muslim world. Dr. Barazangi does not necessarily lay out any particular agenda in terms of changes she would like to see within the community itself. Instead, she states that when both women and men develop their full Islamic self-identities as a result of this higher learning, only then will Muslims gain their true *taqwa* and ability to balance their individualism with society at large, both in relation to the Divine. When this is reached, individual Muslims will then implement change, as self-worth and validity in one's identity is what later moves forward towards justice.

### Important, Inspiring and Idealistic

by Zabra Ayubi

Nimat Barazangi's book, *Women's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* is a pedagogical approach to reading the Qur'an centered on women's autonomy and the concept of *taqwa*. Dr. Barazangi's main premise is that women have historically been excluded from Islamic scholarship such as the formation of *tafsir* and

*fiqh*. She maintains that because of this, Muslim women have had an indirect relationship to the Qur'an, theology and Islamic studies in general, and were thereby exposed to centuries of living under men's biased interpretations of the sacred text. Her argument that women must exercise their spiritual autonomy and approach the Qur'an afresh, without prior interpretations and biases that men attribute to the text is well constructed. She states that the "female is an autonomous moral being who has direct relationship with God as her only Guardian" (Barazangi, p. 78). I was moved by her reminder about women's moral autonomy in the Qur'an, their independence to read and interpret the text for themselves.

In the first four chapters, Dr. Barazangi describes her pedagogical approach, a reading of how certain Qur'anic verses and terms took on potentially sexist meanings and drive dominant gender discourses today. She does this through explaining historical perspectives found in *tafsir* on the story of human creation, descriptors of morality and modesty. She centers her reading on some key words. For example, she uses her discussion on *'awrah*, *khimar* and *hijab*, to criticize male scholars' and jurists' preoccupation with women's appearance and clothing as unfounded.

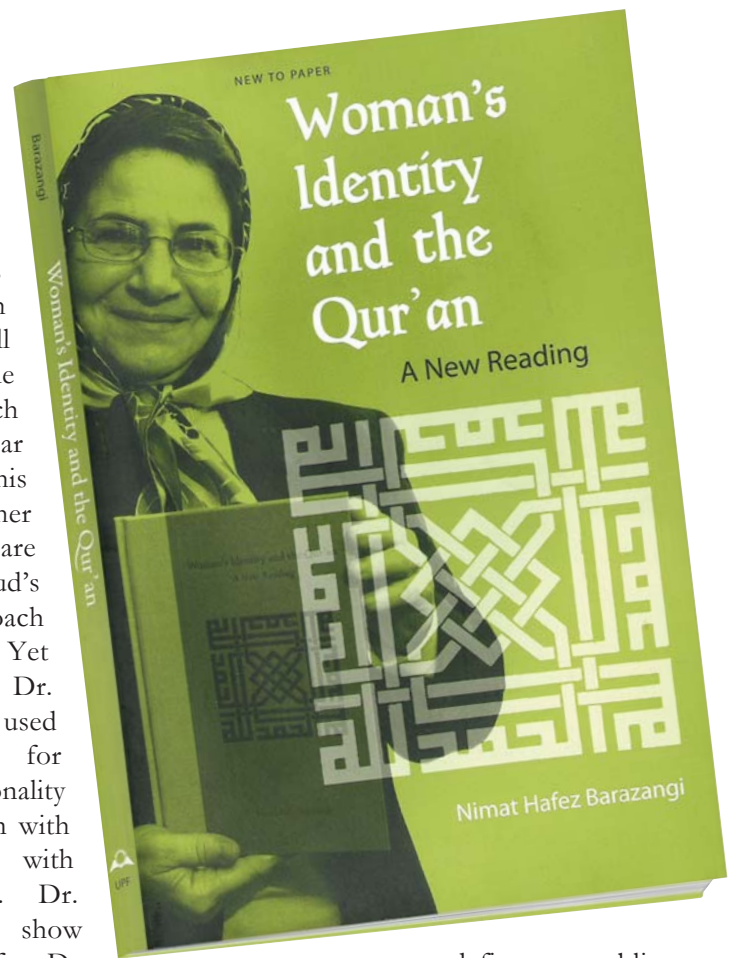
Despite these well-intentioned arguments, a disheartening mistake Dr. Barazangi makes is not acknowledging enough the work of Muslim women scholars. By minimizing accomplishments of women who *have* offered feminist readings of the Qur'an such as Riffat Hasan, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas – whom she does not even mention, Dr. Barazangi alienates her

contemporaries and discredits their work. Part of Dr. Barazangi's pedagogical approach is consideration of all of the multiple contexts in which particular terms appear in the Qur'an. This method and other arguments she poses are similar to Dr. Wadud's hermeneutical approach in *Qur'an and Woman*. Yet Dr. Barazangi says Dr. Wadud has "not used [her] capacity for autonomous intentionality in [her] identification with the Qur'an and with Islam..." (p. 75). Dr. Barazangi should show more appreciation for Dr. Wadud's reading of the Qur'an – the very exercise that Dr. Barazangi's book calls women to do.

After painstakingly outlining her position on women's identification with the Qur'an and her reading of the text, Dr. Barazangi finally outlines a curriculum in the fifth chapter, called Self-Learning of Islam, and describes several determinants to its success and failure. Self-Learning of Islam is "the use of critical thinking and problem-solving skills within the Islamic worldview..." (p. 99). This is consistent with her belief that the Qur'an is a revolution against all injustices such as those against gender and race, and the concept of *taqwa* within it must inform policy and curriculum. While it may be true that believers are inclined to apply Qur'anic principles in many aspects of life, her instance on using an undefined Islamic Worldview to

define public policy and law makes way for slippery slope arguments that can later transform into literalist interpretation and implementation of the Qur'an. It is naïve to think that everyone in favor of women's education believes the Qur'an is egalitarian. Using the Qur'an to establish legitimacy for gender justice may be a powerful tool to inspire change, but who controls which "Islamic Worldview" would determine policy?

Dr. Barazangi's book is powerful and inspiring for Muslim women who would like to establish a personal relationship with the Qur'an and for those who ascribe gender justice to Islam to pursue activism. However, on the level of practical policy reform towards equitable laws, curricular and educational change for Muslim women, motivation from Qur'anic justice may not be enough.



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