



RESEARCH PAPER

Quran and Gender equality: Interpretation in the light of Molana Ayyub Dehlvi's work

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ABSTRACT

The concept of equality is very abstract and broad in its nature. Different definitions of equality exist in the history of human knowledge. In the postmodern age, the idea of a universal definition of equality has become like a myth. Religious metaphysics draws its theorization on revelation. After the feminist intellectual resistance against patriarchy, it became more complicated and controversial. Many feminist thinkers revisit history through women's perspective. In the tradition of Islam, many Islamic feminist thinkers like Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud and Liela Ahmed present the particular theorization by women on gender equality. From the gender's perspective, Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud reinterpret the holy Quran. Their hermeneutical works are an important attempt to prove gender equality from the Qur'an. This article would focus on the work of Molana Ayyub Dehlvi (herein after Molana) and his interpretation of gender equality, being an orthodox religious scholar, Molana's interpretation is important and has not been discussed previously in the mainstream literature on Islamic feminism. The researchers used textual analysis with special reference to Molana Ayyub Dehlvi's work. The paper explains the prophetic status of women in the context of gender equality. This prophetic status strengthens the role of women and also breaks the stereotypes which exist in the contemporary intellectual world against Islam. The paper contributes to the discourse on gender equality in Islam. Moreover, it also sheds light on this discussion within the Islamic tradition of the sub-continent by a male religious scholar.

KEYWORDS Gender inequality, Islamic feminism, Religious text, Pakistan, Interpretation

Introduction

The idea of equality is vague and all-encompassing. Over the course of human understanding, equality has been defined in a variety of ways. It becomes spatio-temporal when it enters the context of human history. The ideal of an all-encompassing concept of equality has turned into a myth. Men and women having same existential status, according to Islam (Raftari, Bahrami, 2011). Men and women are treated equally in Islam in terms of humanity and human rights, but they are obviously distinct from one another. As a result, their duties, rights, rewards, and punishments are necessarily varied (Mottahari, 2001). Men and women are two distinct groups of the same species, as shown by the "gender" discussion (Dabbagh, 2009). In Islam, men and women are treated equally in terms of obligation and reward, education, obedience to God and the obligation to worship Him and follow His commands in daily life, in addition to regards to property rights, freedom of expression, marital rights, and equality in treatment, employment, and political sphere (Balla, 2010). In an Islamic framework, many Islamic feminists reinterpret the holy text, to interpret equal rights for women. They all question the traditional patriarchal interpretation of the divine text (Mirza, 2008). Two prominent Islamic feminists in the context of gender equality, Asma Barlas and Amina have reinterpreted the sacred text. These two academics have

written extensively on the idea of equality in Islam from a feminist perspective. Barlas contends that the Qur'an, the fundamental text of Islam, supports the notion of gender equality and that male interpreters of the book have neglected or misrepresented this idea (Barlas, 2019). Wadud, on the other hand, argues that in order to promote gender equality, the Qur'an must be interpreted from a feminist perspective as the previous interpretations are patriarchal (Wadud, 1999). Both experts agree that Muslims should recover and reinterpret their religious traditions in ways that are in line with this idea since Islam has the potential to promote gender equality. There is a hermeneutical gap in the Barlas and Wadud's feminist interpretation of the Quran regarding the prophetic status of women in the Holy Qur'an. This hermeneutical gap undermines the debate on gender equality in Islam. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, such sensitive and logical hermeneutical debates have always existed. These debates not only strengthen the position of Islam in the face of contemporary criticism but also prove that Islam is very broad in its intellectual sphere. Giving women the status of prophethood proves that Islam is the guardian of gender equality, and Muslim scholars have written openly on this. Islam has a rich theological intellectual tradition. Muslim theologians have always written openly on every sensitive topic in the domain of religion. They have a lot of "singularities" in their particular religious domains. The concept of singularity or *تفرد* of Islam has a great significance in contemporary modern world. The reason behind this concept is that it allows the scholars to think separately from the rest of the tradition within Islam. The goal of this research paper is to identify the debate in the Muslim theological tradition about women's prophetic status, as well as the Quran's unique arguments to support gender equality in this context in contemporary modern intellectual debates. Another goal is to clarify the debate whether women can be prophets.

Prophet and Revelation

A prophet (Nabi) is a person of higher spiritual perfection who is inspired through revelation. Usmani argued about the definition of the prophet, saying that a prophet is a man toward whom Allah delivers revelation (Usmani, 2007). Molana Ayyub dehlvi defines the same definition of the prophet (Dehlvi, n .d). Yousaf adds further explanation to this definition, he argued that "Prophet" is one to whom revelation comes, whether he brings a new law (*شريعة*) or preaches an old law (*شريعة*). He has direct contact with God through revelation. His acts are directly guided by the will of God. Through this definition, it can be deduced that, for a prophet, "revelation" is a necessary condition. To follow this argument, it is necessary to define revelation. In this perspective, Zaki defines revelation as, God's self-disclosure to His own creation as its creator (Zaki, 1983). This self-disclosure transforms into revelation in the religious realm when it comes to the human being.

There is a lot of difference between the definitions of prophet (Nabi) and messenger (Rasool). In religious tradition, a messenger is one who has a divine text and a new sharia reveal from God. As we all know, four messengers, or rasools, have been proven throughout the history of Islam i.e.... Christ, Moses, David, and Muhammad (PBUH). They are not only messengers but also prophets. Because a messenger is also a prophet, it might be possible that a prophet cannot be a messenger. Sometimes He just follows the previous sharia. Here again is necessary to mention that, revelation is a compulsory condition for both of them. The Quran mentions and proves the status of women as prophets, but it does not mention or prove the status of messengers. It can be argued that God chose men as messengers for a reason. Is He biased? Or did God create gender differences and inequalities? Is this inequality and disparity inherent? How does the religious intelligentsia respond to and respond to such criticism? How does Molana handle it? But in this paper, I just tried to prove the prophetic status of women in the Quran with special reference to Molana Ayyub Dehlvi.

Types and Forms of Revelation

It is necessary to mention that how many forms and types of revelation exists and acceptable in the Islamic tradition. It is because the whole argument based on the forms of revelation. In Islam, there are two types of revelation, one is Matlou (وحى متلو) and the second is non-matlou (غير متلو) (Yousaf, 2021). The former comes directly from Allah the Almighty, while the latter was revealed indirectly to the blessed heart of the holy prophet (PBUH) in the form of meanings and articles (Usmani, 2009). As Allah Almighty always directly leads the prophet, indirect revelation is also a revelation. Due to the prophet's innocence in terms of religious tradition, his words and deeds are also revelation. . In the light of these types of revelation, there are eight forms of revelation that are mentioned in the Holy Quran described as follows (Qadri, 2017):

1. True dreams
2. Put in heart (القاء فى القلب)
3. Sound like a bell (صلصلته الجرس)
4. The coming of an angel in the form of a man
5. The appearance of an angel in his true form
6. Revelation of night ascension
7. The direct and veiled revelation of Allah
8. Revelation from behind the curtain

Molana Ayub Dehlvi was a Pakistani orthodox theologian. He is considered to be the last classical theologian of the Indo-Pak Muslim tradition (Arshad, 2015). He was trained in classical Muslim philosophy and theology. In his Maqalaat, Molana logically and argumentatively established the existence of women as prophets. He maintained that the Quran's approach of women clearly accords with the prophecy's parameters. He argues that prophet hood is a characteristic shared by all people, not only men (Dehlvi, n.d).

Hazrat Maryam as a Prophet

This research's first and foremost aim is In the light of above definition, it is proved in Quran that Hazrat Mariam was a prophet. In Quran when Allah says:

فَاتَّخَذَتْ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ حِجَابًا فَأَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهَا رُوحَنَا فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا ١٤

قَالَتْ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ مِنْكَ إِنْ كُنْتَ تَقِيًّا ١٨

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَنَا رَسُولُ رَبِّكِ لِأَهَبَ لَكِ غُلَامًا زَكِيًّا ١٩

“we sent” Rooh ul ameen” (The Gabriel) to the Mariam’ and “Then she put a screen away from them, then we sent our spiritual towards her, and he appeared before her in the shape of healthy man. She said, 'I beg refuge of the Most Affectionate from you if you are afraid of God'. He said, 'I am only a messenger of your Lord. That I may give you a pure son” (Al-Maryam).

The conversation between Hazrat Mariam and Gabriel proves that she was a prophet because an angel didn't comes on a non-prophet (Dehlvi, n.d). It is also a form of revelation that an angel comes with the orders of Allah and speaks with the special person, which is appointed by God. Above verse also proves that the son of a Mariam was a miracle.

As we all know that the miracles are the specialty of prophets and it is also a sign of God. Molana argues that Quran addressed both male and female prophet in the same way like; ya Adam, ya Dawood, ya Mariam (Dehlvi, n.d). To strengthen his argument, he argues that the Quran uses the term "واذكر" for both male and female prophets (Dehlvi, n.d). Like Quran says for Mariam:

وَأَذْكُرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ مَرْيَمَ إِذِ اتَّخَذَتْ مِنْ أَهْلِهَا مَكَانًا شَرْفِيًّا

"And mention in the Book, O Prophet, the story of Mary when she withdrew from her family to a place in the east" (Al-Maryam).

And for male prophets:

وَأَذْكُرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صَادِقَ الْوَعْدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا

"And mention in the Book O Prophet, the story of Ishmael. He was truly a man of his word, and was a messenger and a prophet" (Al-Maryam).

وَأَذْكُرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا

"And mention in the Book O Prophet, the story of Abraham. He was surely a man of truth and a prophet". (Al-Maryam)

Quran address the both, in a same way and it is proved that the Hazrat Mariam was a prophet.

Um- e- Musa as a Prophet

The most used language on Another woman whose prophetic status is proven to in the Holy Quran is Um-e-Musa. Quran mentioned in Surah Al- Qasa's:

وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أَرْضِعِيهِ فَإِذَا خَفْتِ عَلَيْهِ فَأَلْقِيهِ فِي الْيَمِّ وَلَا تَخَافِي وَلَا تَحْزَنِي إِنَّا رَادُّوهُ إِلَيْكَ وَجَاعِلُوهُ مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ

"And we inspired the mother of Musa, suckle him, when you may have fear for him, then cast him into river and fear not and nor grieve; undoubtedly, We shall return him to you and shall make him Messenger". (Al-Qasas)

In this verse, Molana argues that it was not intuition but revelation, because intuition is suspicious and observational reasoning is experiential (Dehlvi, n.d). Intuition and observation tell her that Musa's death was definite; if she throws up Musa into the river or if he would have survived, then the pharaoh of Egypt would have killed him. Despite that, she throws up into the river because she believes in God's order. This blind faith comes through revelation, not intuition or observation which shows that the mother of Musa was a revealer, and it proves her status as a prophet.

Mother of Isaac and Jacob as a Prophet

Molana argues and proves in the light of the Quran that the wife of Ibrahim was also a prophet. He quotes the following verses from the Quran:

وَأَمْرًا أَنْ تَقَامِي فَصَحَّكَتِ فَبَشَّرْنَاهَا بِإِسْحَاقَ وَمِنْ وَرَاءِ إِسْحَاقَ يَعْقُوبَ.

قَالَتْ يَوُؤَيْلتى ءأألد وأنا عَجُوزٌ وَهَلْأَا بَعْلِى شَيْخًا ءإِن هَذَا لَشَىءٌ عَجِيبٌ.

قَالُوا أَتَعْجَبِينَ مِنْ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ ءرَحْمَتُ اللَّهِ وَبَرَكَتُهُ عَلَيْكُمْ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ ءإِنَّهُ حَمِيدٌ مَجِيدٌ.

“And his wife, standing by laughed when We gave her good tidings (of the birth) of Isaac, and, after Isaac, of Jacob. She said, 'Oh; Woe is me. Shall I bear a child' and I am old, and this is my husband, an old The angels said Do you wonder at Allah's Command? The mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you, O people of the house! No doubt, it is He Who is All Praise-Worthy, Honorable. Man? No doubt, this is strange thing. The angels said Do you wonder at Allah's Command? The mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you, O people of the house! No doubt, it is He Who is All Praise-Worthy, Honorable”. (Hood, verse 71, 72, 73)

Molana argues that this dialogue between the wife of Ibrahim and the angel proves her as a revealer (Dehlvi, n.d). Because angels talk only with prophets and not with non-prophets. As we know, in Islam, angels are the innocent creatures, and they act with the order of God. These three women are proven to be "prophets" in the Quran. Here, it is very important to keep in mind that only the prophethood of women is proven. The status of "messenger" is proven only for males because only males fulfill the conditions of messenger according to the holy Quran.

Response to Objections to Women's Prophet Hood

There is another perspective, which does not accept the status of a woman being a prophet. Those who believe in this perspective use the following verse of the Qur'an as an argument:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِي إِلَيْهِمْ فَسَلُّوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ (43)

“ And We sent men before you to whom We revealed, O people! If you do not know, then ask those of knowledge”. (An-Nahl)

From this verse, their claims is that the only men were the prophets. This is very strong, dominant perspective and interpretation within the tradition of Islam. They argue that, it is very clear in this verse that only men remain messengers and prophets throughout the religious history of Islam. The hermeneutical interpretation of Abu Saleh clearly indicates the dominant stance on this verse. He (Abu Saleh, 2018) wrote in his hermeneutical text "صراط الجنان في تفسير القرآن" that

“ They were told that the Divine Sunnah continues in the same way; He has always sent men from among men as messengers.”

In this interpretation, he only insist upon men's prophet hood. It is very important to be noted here that he bound and restrict God's will. He is putting the absolute judgment of human intellect on the will of God. That is, this is the Sunnah of God, and it is absolute. The absolute understanding of the divine text cannot be achieved by any non-prophet. Such an interpretation makes the divine text bound to reason, which clearly means that revelation is subject to reason. Such a kind of interpretation also bounds and restricts the possibilities of diverse meaning and diverse understanding. It makes the divine text historical within spatio-temporal boundaries. Molana engages with this interpretation in a very unique and different way. He is not stagnant in his interpretation; he just interprets and argues in a logical and rational way.

He argues that (Dehlvi, n.d :

“ Now if you say that the destiny of the Messenger and the Prophet to be one is as the Mu'tazila say, just like this verse (وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِي إِلَيْهِمْ فَسَلُّوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ) The woman's prophethood is being negated, and similarly, the woman's prophethood was also negated. I say that first of all, this fate is assumed. If it is true, i.e., prophethood and risaala'h are the same thing, then this verse will make a woman suspicious, and the meaning of the verse will be that mostly men are messengers and prophets; not every messenger and prophet is a

man and not a woman. As it is in this verse, 38- *وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَذُرِّيَّةً*, We sent messengers before you and gave them wives and children. Although Isa (AS) and Yahya (AS) had neither wives nor children, and the meaning of the verse is that most of the apostles had wives and children. Similarly, most of the apostles were men. This whole speech is about destiny—that the Messenger and the Prophet are one and the same thing.”

His argument logically shows that there is a clear difference between “only male messengers or prophets” and “mostly male messengers or prophets. This Holy verse should be read as “mostly male messengers or prophets”. This does not prove at all that a woman cannot be a prophet, and this is the argument of the Maulana. He makes another argument in response to this interpretation. He argues that (Dehlvi, n.d):

“ Those who are not convinced of the prophethood of a woman have also said that a woman has a poor intellect and a poor religion, and a poor intellect cannot be a prophet. During the days of menstruation, the prayer falls on them. Tell these people that now you are perfect in religion and perfect in intellect, and based on this theory of yours, now you are Hazrat Fatima, Hazrat Aisha, Hazrat Khadija, Hazrat Maryam, and Hazrat. They became better than Umm Ishaq and Umm Musa. These people did not understand that the loss of a woman's intellect is half of the testimony, and her loss of religion is not performing the prayer in the state of menstruation. Similarly, the loss of martyrdom of a woman does not want the loss of a woman.”

This argumentation and interpretation also prove that the dominant interpretation, which is against the prophetic status of women, is biased and is against the diverse nature of the meaning of the divine text. It also indicates that just as one action of any human being cannot determine the entire personality of that human being, in the same way, no “absolute judgment” can be imposed on this human being based on this action. This argument also applies to women; that is, on the basis of one woman's action, it cannot be determined and delineated that she cannot be a prophet. Another argument he (Dehlvi, n.d) gives for the prophetic status of women is:

“ There is no rational or religious problem with a woman being a prophet. In addition, one of the signs of a woman being a prophet is that no non-prophet has entered Paradise in this world, i.e., in good deeds, and the fruit of Paradise is a non-prophet.” Couldn't eat. Hazrat Hawa is a woman who entered Paradise before the Day of Judgment and ate the fruits of Paradise, and this nobility and honor are not conceivable for a non-prophet.”

With all these arguments, Mulana dismantles the inferior vs. superior distinction between women and men. He argues about the equality of women, which, of course, presents a clearer picture of Islam in the contemporary world. He says (Dehlvi, n.d) this, arguing with reason:

“ Because both men and women are equal in the matter of reward and in the matter of closeness to God. If a woman works better than a man, she will be better in the sight of Allah. In summary, just as the prophets (انبياء) are better than the non-prophets (غير انبياء), the righteous (صديقين) are better than the unbelievers (غير صد يقين), the followers (متبعين) are better than the followers (تابعين), and the believers (مومنين) are better than the polytheists (مشركين). In this way, it is not a matter of men being better than women. Rather, they are better in the sight of Allah.” He is the one who is pious, and he deserves more reward. Whether it is a woman or a man, if a woman's action is good, then she is better than an inactive man; if a man's action is good, then he is better than an inactive woman. Man and woman are like two hands, one hand has no priority over the other.”

In the above paragraph, he is not only talking about equality but also about the distinction that is based on masculinity. Masculinity is not the measure of all inequality. These arguments are very strong within the boundaries of the discourse of Islam.

Perfection is exclusively dependent on piety in God's eyes (Barazangi, 1994). All people, regardless of gender or sex, are dealt with equally in this span of time and space.

Discussion

The identification of this argumentative position is a new addition to Islamic feminism. Even when Asma Barlas reinterprets the Quran through a feminist lens, she ignores this very basic and important interpretive perspective. This research article is an effort to abolish the patriarchal religious interpretation that women cannot be prophets or all prophets in the history of Islam were men. Asma Barlas argues in her article that Muslim exegetical or hermeneutical tradition has always remained patriarchal and possessed the male supremacy over women (Barlas, 2016). This tradition projects this as an ideology that gives certain rights to men (Barlas, 2016). The identification of this debate is also an effort to break all the patriarchal superstition within Islam. She also argues for and supports the subjective interpretation of the holy text, which is obviously problematic within the 1400-year tradition of Islam. She writes:

"Our intent was to show that the Quran's position on women cannot be delimited to the "anti-women" verses, which we had also reread as a way to illustrate that meaning is contingent on our own interpretive methods and choice." (Barlas, 2016)

Above lines shows her methodological approach towards Quran. This methodological approach is very protestant or Lutheran in its essence. In the Reformation movement, Martin Luther emphasized the subjective interpretation of the Bible and challenged the authority of the Pope to make the interpretation of the Bible public. The result of which was that Christianity became a personal issue of every person and Christianity was limited to churches. This ends with postmodernity. The intellectual and theoretical journey from west, modernism, to postmodernism can be seen easily now a days. The theoretical result of postmodernity is nihilism (Woodward, 2002). This nihilistic result of postmodernity is actually opposite to the spirit of Islam because, in the end, Islam talks about salvation. It is also opposite to the core claim of "Hidayat, which is for all and objective. According to Ahmadi, the new generation of Islamic feminists uses the methodologies and tools of sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, history, and important postmodern concepts in parallel with the classical methodology of 'tafsir" (Ahmadi, 2006). He also writes that, in this whole process of interpretation, they also include their personal experiences and questions as women. These questions can be debatable in a particular context. The amalgamation of these classical and modern tools and methodologies is not possible because, epistemologically and ontologically, they are different. The same argument is also apparent in the Barlas method. This Barlas lens may not be accepted in the religious tradition due to the modern method of research behind it. It simply means she tries to interpret a discourse by ignoring its methodology through the methodological perspective of another discourse. It is important to point out here that Maulana's arguments and interpretations remain in the 1400-year religious tradition. His stance and arguments are also orthodox and rational. He does not use any modern research lens for this interpretation. In this context Maulana is stronger and unusual in his position than Barlas.

The modern religious discourse also criticize that why women cannot be prophets? This emphasis and criticism is based on Eurocentric epistemology. So all this discussion might be a defensive answer even for the modern discourse as well. It is because the discourse of modernity is so powerful and intellectually hegemonic. The critical theorization and world of view of modernity against all classical Meta narratives including all religions, presents himself as an alternative reality (Joris, Jonker, Ruberg, Segal, 2013). The appeal of modernity and enlightenment has its roots in reason and scientific method (Mlačo, A., Mlačo, N., Begić, E., Mekić, M., & Džubur, A. 2023). Although there were many political and social factors involved in the disappearances of all classical Meta narratives but the appealing rational and scientific nature of modernity control and replace the others with the help of

visible power (Gordon, 2002). In this regard, Molana's interpretation has a significant presence in the contemporary intellectual world. It also indicates that, there is a huge space within the Islamic intellectual tradition to deal with the notion of gender inequality. In the premises of orthodox tradition, Islam supports gender equality without violating itself, other discourses, or their methodologies.

Conclusion

This article is an attempt to provide reasoning that Islam gives equal status to women and shows respect and deals with a broader picture. Asma Barlas mentioned in her book that inequality and the inferior status of men are actually the consequences of a particular patriarchal interpretation of the Holy Quran (Barlas, 2019). It is a hermeneutical and somehow historic political misinterpretation. Male superiority does not intrinsically exist in the Quran. Molana's interpretation is actually a new addition to Islamic feminism and religious studies. There are a lot of biased opinions regarding the status of women in Islam. Molana's interpretation is actually a counter-answer to all those who have been biased towards the Quran and Islam. It shows that Islam has a very diverse and discursive intellectual tradition. It also proves that the Quran can be interpreted from a pure orthodox position. Molana does not know the modern disciplines of knowledge as he was not trained in the modern educational system, but his work represents postcolonial and indigenous intellect. His argumentation and interpretation tell us that the Quran has a very large space for its interpretation in contemporary debates. It can also encompass and theorize contemporary academic, moral, political, and chaotic issues. We must reinterpret the holy Quran in the light of new tools but with the authenticity of God and tradition.

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