



Understanding Gender Justice: Asma Barlas Perspective on Women and the Qur'an

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Abstract: This research explores Asma Barlas perspective on gender justice in Islam, particularly in the context of Qur'anic interpretation. Barlas, through her work "Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an," offers a critical hermeneutic approach to traditional interpretations that tend to be patriarchal. A descriptive-analytical qualitative approach was used to analyze Barlas works and compare them with other interpretations. Data were collected through literature review and document analysis. Thematic analysis identifies and understands the main themes in Barlas interpretations, including the principles of gender justice she proposes. The results show that Barlas rejects the patriarchal view often found in traditional commentaries and asserts that the Qur'an, when read with a just and non-patriarchal approach, supports gender equality. The research also discusses the fundamental differences between Barlas' interpretation and traditional exegesis, as well as the potential impact of her thinking on the contemporary Islamic feminist movement. Challenges and criticisms of Barlas approach are analyzed to provide a balanced view of the strengths and limitations of her methodology. This research highlights the importance of an inclusive hermeneutic approach in Qur'anic exegesis and offers a new perspective for developing a more just understanding of gender in Islam.

Keywords: *Gender Justice, Qur'anic Interpretation, Islamic Feminism, Hermeneutics, Asma Barlas.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi perspektif Asma Barlas tentang keadilan gender dalam Islam, khususnya dalam konteks penafsiran Alquran. Barlas, melalui karyanya “Believing Women in Islam: Membongkar Penafsiran Patriarkis Al-Qur'an” menawarkan pendekatan hermeneutika kritis terhadap penafsiran tradisional yang cenderung patriarkis. Pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis digunakan untuk menganalisis karya-karya Barlas dan membandingkannya dengan tafsir-tafsir lain. Data dikumpulkan melalui tinjauan literatur dan analisis dokumen. Analisis tematik mengidentifikasi dan memahami tema-tema utama dalam penafsiran Barlas, termasuk prinsip-prinsip keadilan gender yang diusulkannya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Barlas menolak pandangan patriarkis yang sering ditemukan dalam tafsir tradisional dan menegaskan bahwa Al-Qur'an, ketika dibaca dengan pendekatan yang adil dan tidak patriarkis, mendukung kesetaraan gender. Penelitian ini juga membahas perbedaan mendasar antara penafsiran Barlas dan penafsiran tradisional, serta dampak potensial dari pemikirannya terhadap gerakan feminis Islam kontemporer. Tantangan dan kritik terhadap pendekatan Barlas dianalisis untuk memberikan pandangan yang seimbang tentang kekuatan dan keterbatasan metodologinya. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya pendekatan hermeneutika inklusif dalam penafsiran Alquran dan menawarkan perspektif baru untuk mengembangkan pemahaman yang lebih adil tentang gender dalam Islam.

Kata Kunci: *Keadilan Gender, Tafsir Al-Qur'an, Feminisme Islam, Hermeneutika, Asma Barlas.*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender justice in Islam is often a complex and nuanced debate. For centuries, traditional interpretations of Islam's sacred texts, especially the Qur'an, have provided justification for a gender hierarchy that places women in an inferior position to men.¹ These views are not only

¹ L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Veritas Paperbacks, 2021).

maintained by social and cultural norms, but also reinforced through dominant religious interpretations.

In this context, the emergence of critical thinkers who offer reinterpretations of religious texts is crucial. One of the leading figures in this field is Asma Barlas, a Muslim scholar who has made significant contributions in understanding gender justice from a Qur'anic perspective. Through her acclaimed work, *“Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an”*, Barlas invites readers to re-evaluate conventional understandings of women in Islam.²

Barlas argues that the Qur'an, when read through a critical and fair lens, does not support patriarchal views that demean women. Instead, she emphasizes that many interpretations that are detrimental to women actually stem from specific social and cultural contexts that do not fully reflect the essence of Islamic teachings. With a careful hermeneutic approach, Barlas shows that the Qur'an contains principles of justice and equality that can liberate women from oppression.³

Gender justice is necessary to address women's issues in the context of the Qur'an because long-entrenched patriarchal interpretations often lead to discrimination and injustice against women. Gender justice in the Qur'an aims to eradicate this discrimination and ensure women are treated fairly in various aspects of life. Asma Barlas, in her work, asserts that the Qur'an, when interpreted with a critical and fair lens, supports gender equality. Many

² A Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (books.google.com, 2019), <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en%5C&lr=%5C&id=8cSFDwAAQBAJ%5C&oi=fnd%5C&pg=PR9%5C&dq=%22asma+barlas%22%5C&ots=3ZvZFua9cw%5C&sig=ocl6rHKg5QPIMxt9puyGBLN3AOE>.

³ A Barlas, “Secular and Feminist Critiques of the Qur'an: Anti-Hermeneutics as Liberation?,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.18>.

traditional interpretations that place women in subordinate positions come from specific social and cultural contexts, not from the actual teachings of Islam. Gender justice is also an important foundation for contemporary Islamic feminism movements that seek to reinterpret Islamic texts in a more inclusive and egalitarian way.

Previous research has shown significant differences between traditional interpretations and critical interpretations as proposed by Barlas, which seek to expose and correct patriarchal biases in the interpretation of the Qur'an. This research provides an in-depth analysis of how Barlas' critical hermeneutics approach can be applied in a contemporary context, emphasizing the importance of gender justice to create a more inclusive and just society in Islam.⁴ This study aims to delve deeper into Asma Barlas thoughts on gender justice and the role of women in Islam. By understanding Barlas views, we can explore how a just and non-patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an can contribute towards improving the social and spiritual status of Muslim women. In addition, this study will also highlight how Barlas interpretation of gender justice can serve as a foundation for contemporary Islamic feminist movements that seek to create a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

METHOD

The research method used in examining Asma Barlas perspective on gender justice in Islam involves several concrete and operational steps. This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to explore Asma Barlas thoughts on gender justice in Islam. Data were collected through literature review and document analysis. The first step is to conduct

⁴ Amina Wadud, "Reflections on Islamic Feminist Exegesis of the Qur'an," *Religions* (2021).

a literature review which includes collecting primary sources such as Barlas' works, especially "*Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*", as well as articles, essays, and relevant literature sources. In addition, the researcher also examined Qur'anic commentaries that are often referred to in discussions on gender to compare Barlas interpretation with other commentaries. This research is expected to provide a comprehensive and critical insight into Asma Barlas contribution to the discourse of gender justice in Islam, as well as offer a new perspective for the development of a more inclusive and egalitarian interpretation of the Qur'an.

In drawing conclusions, the researcher used thematic analysis that involved initial coding to identify emerging themes, grouping themes into main themes and subthemes, and in-depth analysis to understand how Barlas constructed the concept of gender justice in Islam. In addition, the researcher also compared and contrasted with other traditional and contemporary commentaries to identify methodological and ideological differences. Conclusions are also drawn through contextual interpretation, which interprets the results of the analysis in a broader context, including the impact of Barlas thought on the contemporary Islamic feminism movement and its implications for social and religious reform. With this method, researchers can comprehensively and critically explore Asma Barlas contribution to the discourse of gender justice in Islam, as well as offer new perspectives for the development of a more inclusive and egalitarian interpretation of the Qur'an.

RESULT

Asma Barlas reinterprets the concept of gender justice in the Qur'an by challenging patriarchal readings and emphasizing gender equality as inherent in the Qur'anic message. Barlas advocates for a re-reading of Qur'anic texts to liberate women from patriarchal ideologies and promote an egalitarian

perspective⁵. She argues that the Qur'an is not inherently patriarchal but rather antipatriarchal, advocating for a reinterpretation that upholds gender equality.⁶ Barlas focuses on women's rights as wives and parents, highlighting the importance of equality and justice within marital relationships.⁷

Barlas approach aligns with the broader Islamic feminist movement, which emphasizes gender justice principles in the Qur'an and supports the idea of separate but equal roles for men and women before God.⁸ Her anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'an is part of a larger effort within progressive Muslim thinking to promote justice, gender equality, and plurality.⁹ Barlas interpretation is characterized by a commitment to social justice, human rights, and individual autonomy, reflecting core Islamic teachings.¹⁰

In her work,¹¹ Barlas challenges traditional interpretations of the Qur'an that center around men's experiences and argues for a more inclusive and egalitarian approach that considers lived realities and diverse perspectives.¹² By re-examining Qur'anic verses through an anti-patriarchal lens, Barlas contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and justice

⁵ Abdul Wasik, "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Dalam Perspektif Kaum Feminis (Pemikiran Asma Barlas Dan Kontribusinya Terhadap Perkembangan Hukum Islam)," *Al-Adillah* (2023).

⁶ Anshuman A Mondal, "Islam and Controversy" (2014).

⁷ Arina Haque et al., "The DOMESTIC RIGHTS OF THE WIFE (Viewed From KH. Husein Muhammad's Thoughts)," *Egalita* (2022).

⁸ Amanda Keddie, "Giving Muslim Girls 'A Voice': The Possibilities and Limits to Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations of Islam in One English Community," *Pedagogy Culture and Society* (2009).

⁹ Siti Amallia, "Multiple Critiques as a Method of Progressive Muslim Thinking Confronting Plurality," *Lisan Al-Hal Jurnal Pengembangan Pemikiran Dan Kebudayaan* (2022).

¹⁰ Puspita Lestari, Syamsul Hidayat, and Muthoifin Muthoifin, "The Values of Humanist Education in the Qur'an (Study of Tafsir Al-Azhar and Tafsir an-Nur)" (2022).

¹¹ Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*.

¹² Wadud, "Reflections On Islamic Feminist Exegesis of the Qur'An."

within Islam¹³. Her egalitarianism influences scholars like Alimatul Qibtiyah, who further explore concepts like *sakinah* in line with Barlas perspectives.¹⁴

To understand the main differences between Asma Barlas interpretation and traditional interpretations that are often considered patriarchal, it is essential to highlight the methodological and ideological distinctions. Barlas challenges views that place women in a subordinate position by offering a more egalitarian perspective rooted in her anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'an.¹⁵ Traditional interpretations often uphold patriarchal values, leading to the subordination of women within Islamic contexts¹⁶. Barlas approach involves re-reading Qur'anic texts to emphasize gender equality and justice, contrasting with traditional commentaries that may perpetuate patriarchal norms.¹⁷

Barlas interpretation diverges from traditional views by questioning the patriarchal foundations of some Islamic teachings, advocating for a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of gender roles.¹⁸ While traditional interpretations may project sexual inequality and discrimination onto the Qur'an, Barlas asserts that the text considers women equal to men, challenging prevailing patriarchal readings.¹⁹ This contrast underscores the ideological shift Barlas introduces through her anti-patriarchal lens, aiming to restore gender equality within Islamic discourse.²⁰

¹³ Irma Riyani and Ecep Ismail, "QGOD IS BEYOND SEX/GENDERq MUSLIM FEMINIST HERMENEUTICAL METHOD TO THE QUR'An" (2018).

¹⁴ Muhammad Caesar Arfa'in, "Analisis Egalitarianisme Asma Barlas Dalam Konsep 'Sakinah' Alimatul Qibtiyah," *Jurnal Riset Agama* (2023).

¹⁵ Karen Bauer, "The Male Is Not Like the Female (Q 3:36): The Question of Gender Egalitarianism in the Qur'N," *Religion Compass* 3 (2009): 637–654.

¹⁶ Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*.

¹⁷ Bauer, "The Male Is Not Like the Female (Q 3:36): The Question of Gender Egalitarianism in the Qur'an."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Moreover, Barlas interpretation challenges the notion that Islam is inherently patriarchal, offering a critical perspective on how gender equality unfolds within Islamic teachings²¹. Traditional interpretations often align with dominant patriarchal values, reinforcing gender norms that limit women's agency and position within society²². Barlas re-interpretation seeks to liberate women from these constraints by highlighting the Qur'an's message of justice and equality²³. This contrast underscores the transformative potential of Barlas approach in reshaping gender dynamics within Islamic contexts.

Asma Barlas perspectives on gender justice have the potential to significantly impact the contemporary Islamic feminist movement by inspiring and reinforcing feminist efforts to advocate for women's rights in Muslim societies. Barlas challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings and promotes a more egalitarian understanding of gender roles within an Islamic framework²⁴. Her interpretation of the Qur'an emphasizes principles of fairness and justice, countering traditional views that limit women's rights through patriarchal norms.²⁵

Barlas influence on the Islamic feminist movement stems from her critical analysis of religious texts to advance gender equality and justice, aligning with the movement's objectives of challenging oppressive gender norms and empowering women.²⁶ By examining gender justice and its

²¹ Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, "Controlling the Body: Muslim Feminists Debating Women's Rights in Indonesia," *Religion Compass* (2008).

²⁴ Tamer Koburtay, Jawad Syed, and Radi Haloub, "Implications of Religion, Culture, and Legislation for Gender Equality at Work: Qualitative Insights From Jordan," *Journal of Business Ethics* (2018).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Vincenza Priola and Shafaq Chaudhry, "Unveiling Modest Femininities: Sexuality, Gender (In)Equality and Gender Justice," *British Journal of Management* (2020).

connection to gender equality, Barlas contributes to the theoretical progress of Islamic feminism, providing fresh perspectives on how Islamic teachings can uphold women's rights in various aspects of life.²⁷

Furthermore, Barlas focus on justice and equality within Islamic theology resonates with the broader Islamic feminist dialogue, aiming to harmonize religious principles with contemporary gender issues.²⁸ Her work encourages Muslim feminists to question entrenched patriarchal interpretations rooted in cultural and religious traditions, fostering a more inclusive and egalitarian comprehension of gender within Muslim communities.²⁹

Barlas ideas on gender justice also have the potential to reshape interpretations of Islamic texts and challenge prevailing gender stereotypes perpetuated by traditional educational systems³⁰. By advocating for a reinterpretation of sacred texts that promotes gender equality, Barlas contributes to the ongoing endeavors to advance social justice and gender equity within Islamic contexts.³¹

Challenges and Criticisms of Asma Barlas Approach to Interpreting the Qur'ān in Relation to Gender Justice

First, Theological Challenges. Barlas reinterpretation of Qur'anic texts to promote gender justice faces theological challenges from more conservative or traditional interpretations within Islam. Critics argue that her approach

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Tamer Koburtay, "Misconceptions and Misunderstandings: An Exploration of the Interplay of Religion, Culture and Gender From Muslim Scholars and Clerics," *Career Development International* (2023).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ M Niaz Asadullah, Sajeda Amin, and Nazmul Chaudhury, "Support for Gender Stereotypes: Does Madrasah Education Matter?," *The Journal of Development Studies* (2018).

³¹ Ibid.

deviates from established theological norms and may be seen as a departure from the traditional understanding of Islamic teachings.³²

Second, Social and Cultural Challenges. Barlas advocacy for gender equality and justice may face resistance from societal and cultural norms prevalent in Muslim-majority societies. Deeply ingrained patriarchal structures and cultural practices could hinder the acceptance and implementation of her egalitarian perspectives.³³

Third, Critiques from Other Perspectives. Some scholars, like Amina, present contrasting views on the gender formulations in the Qur'an. While Barlas asserts an "antipatriarchal" stance, others may argue for a more neutral interpretation, leading to debates within Islamic feminist circles regarding the extent of gender justice within the Qur'anic text.³⁴

Fourth, Interpretational Disputes. Barlas emphasis on re-reading Qur'anic verses through an anti-patriarchal lens may be critiqued for subjective interpretations that deviate from established exegetical traditions. Some critics may question the validity and consistency of her hermeneutical methods in deriving gender justice principles from the Qur'an.³⁵

Fifth, Cultural Contextualization. Barlas approach to gender justice in the Qur'an may face challenges in adapting her interpretations to diverse cultural contexts. The applicability and relevance of her ideas in varying cultural settings could be a point of contention, especially in societies where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched.³⁶

³² Aysha A Hidayatullah, "Feminist Edges of the Qur'an" (2014).

³³ Mondal, "Islam and Controversy."

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Hidayatullah, "Feminist Edges of the Qur'an."

³⁶ Keddie, "Giving Muslim Girls 'A Voice': The Possibilities and Limits to Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations of Islam in One English Community."

Sixth, Rejection of Traditional Jurisprudence. Barlas rejection of traditional jurisprudential methods in favor of a more feminist and egalitarian approach may be criticized for disregarding established legal frameworks and interpretations within Islamic jurisprudence.³⁷

Seventh, Interpretive Boundaries. Critics may argue that Barlas interpretations, while aiming for gender justice, could potentially overlook certain nuances or complexities within the Qur'anic text, leading to oversimplifications or selective readings that may not fully capture the intended meanings of the verses.³⁸

To apply Asma Barlas hermeneutic principles in the context of a more inclusive and egalitarian interpretation of the Qur'an, it is essential to consider practical implications that can help build a more just and equal understanding of gender in Islam. Barlas approach emphasizes critical re-readings of Qur'anic texts to challenge patriarchal interpretations and promote gender equality³⁹. Here are ways in which her hermeneutical principles can be practically applied:

First, Critical Engagement with Texts. Barlas encourages a critical engagement with the Qur'an to uncover its egalitarian messages. By applying her hermeneutic principles, scholars and interpreters can analyze verses in their historical and social contexts to reveal gender-just interpretations that promote equality between men and women.⁴⁰

Second, Promotion of Gender Equality. Barlas approach advocates for the promotion of gender equality within Islamic discourse. By applying her

³⁷ Niamh Reilly, "Seeking Gender Justice in Post-Conflict Transitions: Towards a Transformative Women's Human Rights Approach," *International Journal of Law in Context* (2007).

³⁸ Keddie, "Giving Muslim Girls 'A Voice': The Possibilities and Limits to Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations of Islam in One English Community."

³⁹ Riyani and Ismail, "QGOD IS BEYOND SEX/GENDERq MUSLIM FEMINIST HERMENEUTICAL METHOD TO THE QUR'An."

⁴⁰ Ibid.

principles, scholars can highlight the Qur'an's teachings on justice, fairness, and equality, emphasizing the equal worth and rights of all individuals regardless of gender.⁴¹

Third, Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations. Barlas hermeneutic principles can be used to challenge patriarchal interpretations that have historically marginalized women in Islamic societies. By re-examining traditional readings through an anti-patriarchal lens, interpreters can offer more inclusive and empowering interpretations that affirm the dignity and agency of women.⁴²

Fourth, Empowering Women. Applying Barlas principles can lead to the empowerment of women within religious spaces. By highlighting Qur'anic verses that support gender equality and justice, women can be encouraged to take on leadership roles, participate in religious discussions, and contribute to the production of Islamic knowledge.⁴³

Fifth, Educational Initiatives. Barlas approach can inform educational initiatives aimed at promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender in Islam. By incorporating her hermeneutic principles into curricula and teaching materials, educators can foster critical thinking skills and encourage students to question traditional interpretations that perpetuate gender inequalities.⁴⁴

Sixth, Interfaith Dialogue. Barlas principles can also be applied in interfaith dialogue to promote a more just and equal understanding of gender across religious traditions. By engaging in conversations that highlight

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Miriam D Ezzani and Melanie C Brooks, "Culturally Relevant Leadership: Advancing Critical Consciousness in American Muslim Students," *Educational Administration Quarterly* (2019).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

inclusive interpretations of the Qur'an, individuals from diverse backgrounds can work towards gender justice and equality in broader societal contexts.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Asma Barlas interpretation of gender justice in the Qur'an represents a significant contribution to Islamic feminist thought, advocating for a re-examination of traditional patriarchal readings to promote gender equality, justice, and liberation for women within an Islamic framework. Asma Barlas interpretation stands out for its anti-patriarchal stance, challenging traditional patriarchal readings of the Qur'an to promote gender equality and justice. By offering a more egalitarian perspective rooted in critical re-readings of Islamic texts, Barlas contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality within Islam, advocating for a more inclusive and empowering understanding of women's roles and rights. Asma Barlas thoughts on gender justice can act as a catalyst for transformative change within the contemporary Islamic feminist movement. By providing a critical viewpoint on patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings and advocating for a more egalitarian understanding of gender roles, Barlas inspires feminist initiatives to progress women's rights, confront oppressive norms, and foster justice and equality in Muslim societies. While Asma Barlas approach to interpreting the Qur'an in relation to gender justice offers a fresh perspective that challenges patriarchal norms, it also faces challenges and criticisms from theological, social, and cultural standpoints, as well as from other perspectives within Islamic and gender studies. Understanding and addressing these critiques is essential for a nuanced evaluation of the strengths and limitations of Barlas approach in promoting

⁴⁵ Muhammad Yusuf et al., "The Dialogue of Multicultural Education and Harmony in Prosperity Based on the Qur'an," *International Journal on Advanced Science Education and Religion* (2020).

gender justice within Islamic discourse. The practical application of Asma Barlas hermeneutic principles involves critically engaging with Qur'anic texts, promoting gender equality, challenging patriarchal interpretations, empowering women, fostering educational initiatives, and engaging in interfaith dialogue. By implementing these principles, individuals and communities can work towards building a more just and equal understanding of gender within Islamic discourse.

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