

De/Gendering the God of the Qur'an: Between Arabic, English, and Patriarchy

I've been asked to provide an Islamic perspective on women's erasure in scriptural translation. That's a bit challenging, since there isn't an authoritative translation tradition in Islam, as there is in Christianity. For Muslims, the Qur'an is viewed, in the original Arabic, as the actual Word of God (*kalamallah*). That's not some conservative or niche understanding: that's a universal tenet of Islam, notwithstanding the rich diversity of Muslim beliefs and practices. So while many Muslims do engage the Qur'an in translation, those translations aren't seen as being the actual Qur'an itself.

This is why Muslims, even non-Arab Muslims such as myself, are exposed to Qur'anic Arabic from a very early age. As a child, I remember learning the correct forms of pronunciation (*makhraj*) and rules of recitation (*tajwid*). I recall reciting short Qur'anic chapters to my parents, as they tucked me into bed. And my personal experience wasn't exceptional or particularly religious; that performative, oral engagement with the Qur'an – as a lived, Arabic text – is the norm for most Muslims across the world. Furthermore, when Muslims want to learn more about their religion, and not necessarily as professional scholars or academics but simply to increase their knowledge, they often invest great efforts to learn Arabic.

So that's the place of Qur'anic Arabic in Muslim contexts. It's not comparable, in any way, to the place of ancient Greek or Aramaic or Latin in Christian contexts. This is not to imply that Muslims don't engage the Qur'an through its translations. They certainly do. But in an interreligious forum such as this, it is important to appreciate the theological distinction between the Qur'an and the Bible. Due to the Qur'an's unique theological status in Islam, translations simply don't carry the authority, the sacred weight that they do in Christian contexts; there is no Muslim equivalent to the King James Bible. And with this opening

caveat, I would like to engage the gendered problematics of Qur’anic translation into English, focussing on one specific issue: how God is referenced in the third person.

In English translations of the Qur’an, God is invariably referred to with the upper-case “He.”¹ That would be the literal translation of the Arabic pronoun *huwa*. Gender egalitarian interpreters of the Qur’an, such as the Pakistani-American scholar Asma Barlas, have pointed out that translating *huwa* as “He” is problematic because there is no neuter in the Arabic language: there is no gender-neutral, third-person singular.² In Arabic, every word is either grammatically masculine or grammatically feminine. So, for example, the word for “sun” (*shams*) is feminine, whereas the word for “moon” (*qamr*) is masculine. The word “soul” (*nafs*) is feminine, while the word for “spouse” or “partner” (*zawj*) is masculine. These words are linguistically masculine or feminine, but they do not necessarily carry any social meaning or role: that is, they are not *socially* masculine or feminine.

And it just so happens that the Arabic word for God (Allah)³ is linguistically masculine, and it doesn’t mean anything more than that. Indeed, from a theological perspective it *cannot* mean anything beyond that, because in the Qur’an God is not simply One – the One God cannot be represented in any human form. The Biblical notion of humankind being created in God’s image (Genesis 1: 26-27)⁴ is not only non-existent in the Qur’an; it is outright sacrilegious. From a Muslim perspective, this would entail reducing the

¹ As examples, see Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2002; originally published in 1934); Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003; originally published in 1984); Ali Quli Qara’i, *The Qur’an, with a Phrase-by-Phrase Translation* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2004); Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996; originally published in 1955); Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an: Text and Explanatory Translation* (Delhi: Taj, 1983; originally published in 1930); Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an* (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003; originally published in 1980).

² Asma Barlas, “The Qur’an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur’an’s Opposition to Patriarchy,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 3 (2001): 15-38.

³ *Allah* is a contracted form of *al-ila* (literally, “the God”).

⁴ Genesis 1:26-27 reads: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This translation is taken from *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (London: Collins, 2007).

transcendence of God to the image, the limited horizons of one particular creation of God. Herein lies the problem with translating *huwa* in an English context, which gets reduced to an androcentric “He.” It is this gendered neutrality of the Qur’anic divine which is lost in translation.

How have gender egalitarian readers of the Qur’an wrestled with this problem? To my knowledge, no-one has taken the English neuter “It” seriously, since “It” conveys a sense of distance, even alienation, as if one is addressing an inanimate “thing” as opposed to a living deity. While the Qur’an describes God as all-powerful, it also describes this deity as an intimate friend who is closer than one’s own “jugular vein” (*habl al-warid*; Q. 50:16). At the same time, gender egalitarian Muslim readers have avoided a categoric “Her.” In contrast to other feminist theologies, there has not been a reclamation of God *as* Goddess.⁵ This is intuitive, given the particularity of Islamic monotheism: recasting God as Goddess wouldn’t work theologically, since God is (and must remain) socially genderless. So what alternatives have gender egalitarian readers turned to? How else can *huwa* be progressively engaged? This brings us to the African American scholar Amina Wadud.

Wadud has resisted any specific English word for *huwa*, alternating between different pronouns in a very conscious and explicit way. In her theological writings, she alternates between “His”, “Her”, and “It”; she might use all three words at once (“He/She/It”); and sometimes she simply translates *huwa* as “God.”⁶ I think the idea here is not so much about presenting an authoritative alternative: it is not about arriving at a fixed, definitive “solution.” No single English word can faithfully capture the meaning of *huwa*, as both gender neutral and manifestly animate. Rather, the idea is to negate, to bracket the dominant translation by shifting between a variety of (inadequate) translations, including the dominant one itself. In

⁵ For a feminist critique of the Goddess paradigm, see Asma Barlas, *Islam, Muslims, and the US: Essays on Religion and Politics* (New Delhi: Global Media Publications, 2004), 119-120.

⁶ See the diverse usage of personal and possessive pronouns in Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), such as in 24-32 and 249-252.

sum, this is less about suggesting what *huwa* can be; it is about underlining what *huwa* cannot be. In a sense, Wadud's shifting between various translations reflects the failure of translation itself.

I would like to end with a note about the mainstream. By and large, such gender egalitarian approaches to *huwa* have not caught on in mainstream Muslim circles. An upper-case "He" remains the dominant English translation, and gender egalitarian readers have been criticized as doing violence to the text, as mistranslating the text, as reading into the Qur'an something that's not there.

The example of *huwa* demonstrates vividly that mainstreaming gender equality in Islamic theology is not just about unearthing women figures and women's stories in the Qur'an or critiquing patriarchal discourses in the text. These are very important areas and there has been excellent scholarship on them.⁷ But there is also a lack of popular awareness about the complexity of the task of translation: translation continues to be seen as an objective and neutral science, as opposed to what it actually is: a form of *interpretation* which is deeply influenced by social context. This includes the social world of the original language (Arabic). This includes the social world of the target language (in this case, English). And perhaps most importantly, this includes the social baggage of the translators within the target language, which have invariably been men. With regard to *huwa*, so long as we fail to draw a critical connection between the "He" for God, and the fact that the translators themselves are socially privileged "he's" in an unequal society, we will continue to do translative violence to the Qur'anic text.

⁷ Wadud and Barlas have produced two classics in the field. See Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Asma Barlas, *'Believing Women' in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019; originally published in 2002). For a comparative study of liberationist readings of the Qur'an, see Shadaab Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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