

# Islamic Feminist Interpretation: A Reformulation of the Universal-Particular

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the trend of Islamic Feminist interpretation by analysing the thought of two leading Muslim feminists i.e. Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas. The selection of Wadud and Barlas is based on the fact that their works articulate a full-blown theory of Islamic feminist hermeneutics, with bearings on theology, philosophy, experience, and more importantly, language. Additionally, both feminists have produced significant revisions of their earlier works on *Qur'anic* hermeneutics. Their revisions feature evolutions of their earlier ideas, as well as responses to critiques of their feminist readings of the Qur'ān. This article explores Wadud's and Barlas's reformulation of the hermeneutic binary of 'the universal and the particular' and the extent to which this binary is part of the formation of the two authors' hermeneutics. In this regard, the article aims to investigate their intellectual efforts in developing a hermeneutic theory centered on the Qur'an as God's speech. By studying the universal-particular binary in the works of both authors, this article argues that Wadud's and Barlas's ambivalent position on the sacredness of the Qur'ān has inhibited their hermeneutic enterprise from developing a sensitive approach to mainstream Muslim belief regarding the Qur'ān as God's unchanging word, hence carrying the stigma of an un-authoritative discourse among lay Muslims.

**Keywords:** Islamic feminist, Qur'an, hermeneutics, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas

## Introduction

Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas are two significant figures in the field of Islamic feminist hermeneutics. As *Qur'ānic* interpreters, Wadud and Barlas seek to derive religious authority from their recognition of the Qur'ān's sacredness (Wadud 2016). They also take a cautious approach to ideological positions which Muslim society would consider blasphemous or heretical, as far as the Qur'ān is concerned (Barlas 2006). This article aims to investigate Wadud's and Barlas's intellectual efforts in developing a hermeneutic theory which is centred on the Qur'ān as God's speech (Wadud 2019).

This article explores Wadud's and Barlas's reformulation of the hermeneutic binary of 'the universal and the particular' and the extent to which this binary is part of the formation of the two authors' hermeneutics. It attempts to draw correlations between Wadud's and Barlas's reformulation of the universal-particular binary and the traces of this binary in different epistemologies, including the classical Islamic tradition and modern hermeneutics. With these correlations, the article intends to show that Wadud and Barlas take a syncretic approach to different epistemologies in their accounts without adequate attention to the arguments through which such epistemologies are formed. This article attempts to demonstrate how such syncretism shapes and affects Wadud's and Barlas's position on the nature of the Qur'ān as divine speech.

By studying the universal-particular binary in Wadud's and Barlas's hermeneutics, this article attempts to explore the extent to which the deployment of this binary, by the two authors, is capable of maintaining the nature of the Qur'ān as a divine text, hence surmounting the challenge which this binary seems to pose to the authoritativeness of Islamic feminist hermeneutics in Muslim society. This challenge arises from the epistemological question of how to ascertain the relationship between text and its interpretation, accounting for not only the author and the reader of text, but also text and its linguistic particularities.

## Research's Scope

Historical contextualisation and holistic textual analysis constitute core principles for Wadud's and Barlas's hermeneutics. These two principles are mutually inclusive and interdependent, since both form the two ends/beginnings of the hermeneutic circle, where the historical/particular is formulated in reference to the universal (holistic), and the universal informs the historical/particular. The feminist application of the hermeneutic circle to the interpretation of the Qur'ān finds a distinctive articulation with Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and his double-movement theory, which Wadud and Barlas have utilised in constructing their interpretative principles (Wadud 2002; Barazangi 2004; Sonn 1998). According to Rahman's theory, the interpreter proceeds "from the present situation to

*Qur'ānic* times, then back to the present” (Rahman 1982). The interpreter starts her interpretation of a given verse by first studying the socio-historical context of the verse at the time of revelation, and then moves to explore the general moral principle which initially underpinned the injunction given in the verse (Rahman 1982). Secondly, the moral principle reached by the interpreter should guide/inform her reinterpretation of the verse in her current situation (Rahman 1982). The two steps for Rahman are interconnected; the first “implies and leads to” the second (Rahman 1982). It follows that the outcome of the second step becomes historical material to be later assessed against the general principles which have initially given rise to it. As Rahman puts it, the first movement moves from the specifics of the past to its general principles while the second movement starts from these general principles and moves to the specifics of the present (Rahman 1982).

This article attempts to investigate the reformulation of the universal-particular binary in the hermeneutics of Wadud and Barlas. My selection of Wadud and Barlas is based on the fact that their works articulate a full-blown theory of Islamic feminist hermeneutics, with bearings on theology, philosophy, experience, and more importantly, language. Additionally, both Wadud and Barlas have produced significant revisions of their earlier works on *Qur'ānic* hermeneutics; their revisions feature evolutions of their earlier ideas, as well as responses to critiques of their feminist readings of the *Qur'ān* (Wadud 2019). Despite my focus on Wadud and Barlas, the article will also refer to the views of other feminists as appropriately relevant to the argument.

Before proceeding, a caveat needs to be outlined regarding my reference to ‘Islamic feminist hermeneutics’. This article does not aim to set down a specific definition of ‘Islamic feminist hermeneutics’ or to offer a neat category of who could be named an ‘Islamic feminist interpreter’. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues, “It is difficult and perhaps futile to put the emerging feminist voices in Islam into neat categories and to try to generate a definition” (Mir-Hosseini 2006). Yet, the article recognises that Islamic ‘feminist hermeneutics’ is not monolithic, and Islamic feminist interpreters might show different trends particularly in the way they approach the sacred text and its interpretive tradition (Abou-Bakr 2015; Abou-Bakr and al-Sharmani 2020; Mubarak 2004; Mattson 2013; Mernissi and Jo 1991; Reda 2014; Ali 2006; Bauer 2015; Ibrahim 2020). That being said, when the article uses the term ‘Islamic feminist hermeneutics’, it refers to a specific trend which the reader encounters in the works of Wadud and Barlas, both being discussed here. Similarly, my reference to Wadud, Barlas, and other interpreters as ‘Islamic feminists’ is based on how these interpreters have come to be recognised in literature, regardless of whether or not they accept to be labelled as feminist “even with Muslim put in front of it” (Barlas 2008).

### **On the Positionalities of Wadud and Barlas**

This article explores Wadud's and Barlas's reformulation of the universal-particular binary and the extent to which this binary can be related to the classical Islamic tradition and modern and postmodern hermeneutics. The universal-particular binary discussed here is concerned with the relationship between the Qur'ān as a source of the universal/eternal ethical vision of God and the Qur'ān as a book with particular/historical expressions of this vision.

Debates over the nature of the Qur'ān are not new; the Qur'ān being created (i.e., particular and historical) or uncreated (i.e., universal and eternal) has been a question of controversy between the Mu'tazilite and the Ash'arite schools since the early period of Islam. The article attempts to explore correlations between the traditions of these two sects on one hand and Wadud's and Barlas's hermeneutics on the other, as far as the universal-particular binary within the Qur'ān is concerned.

Similarly, modern hermeneutics offers a conceptualisation of the universal-particular binary, by which Wadud's and Barlas's hermeneutics seem to be highly inspired. Therefore, the article also attempts to draw correlations between Wadud's and Barlas's hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), insofar as both types of hermeneutics ground the relationship between the universal and the particular in the believer's/interpreter's consciousness of the divine. The article also attempts to explore the extent to which Wadud's and Barlas's treatment of language finds expression in Heidegger's existential hermeneutics, despite the latter's emphasis on the infeasibility of understanding the world, or text for that matter, beyond itself.

This article does not claim that Wadud and Barlas consciously intended to appropriate and amalgamate any of the views referred to above, from either Islamic tradition or modern and postmodern hermeneutics; particularly because Wadud and Barlas do not explicitly cite the authors of these views. Drawing on disparate traditions to develop new approaches towards understanding is not surprising or blameworthy in itself. Yet, the question of how one's thought is shaped is always an interesting question to probe. This article does not probe deeply into the ethnography of Wadud's and Barlas's thoughts, rather, it attempts to understand Wadud's and Barlas's arguments and to explore the extent to which the hermeneutics of the two authors shows influences from and biases towards "Western perspectives and methodologies," while paying inadequate attention to the intellectual roots of their ideas in classical Islamic thought (Gökkir 2005). Wadud and Barlas acknowledge this Western effect in many ways. They explicitly ground their Islamic feminist hermeneutics in Rahman's double-movement theory; the latter being based — according to Rahman himself — on E. Betti's theory of interpretation, which echoes Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's emphasis on the authorial intent to realise the truth of interpretation (Rahman 1969). In their

writings, Wadud (2006) and Barlas (2002) acknowledge their positionalities within Islam and feminism; yet, they see their thoughts as outcomes of a philosophical trajectory which, utilising Western methodologies, traces its origin and structure in Islamic reformist discourse emerging at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wadud 2006; Barlas 2002).

## **Islamic Feminist Hermeneutics:**

### **Recentring Islamic Ethics within the Qur'ān**

The feminist interpreters cited here keep the Qur'ān at the centre of their hermeneutics, as the main source of Islamic ethics. To many feminist interpreters, a liberatory reading of the Qur'ān is basically facilitated through the traditional principle of *ijtihād* (analogical reasoning). However, the feminist reconfiguration of *ijtihād* is facile and wanting in adequate engagement with the complexities of the term and its specific configurations in classical Islamic tradition. For example, the Islamic feminists referred to here — unlike traditional scholars — extend *ijtihād* to every single believer, hence “bypassing” the traditional requirement of “specialised training” in Islamic knowledge, which an *ijtihād* practitioner needs to meet before practicing *ijtihād* (Moll 2009). This feminist approach to *ijtihād* aims to ground Islamic feminist hermeneutics in what Barlas terms as “ethical individualism”, which “is predicated on the idea that every human, whether male or female, can [equally] aspire to faith ...and that every individual, whether woman or man, is responsible for her/himself” (Barlas 2002).

With such a focus on personal *ijtihād* or ethical individualism, the ethical reading of the Qur'ān becomes contingent upon two principles: historical contextualisation and intra-textual analysis, whereby the feminist interpreter first sees *Qur'ānic* injunctions in their historical context and second reinterprets them holistically in connection with the values of justice, compassion, love, harmony, diversity, and equality, all of which permeate the *Qur'ānic* discourse and constitute the ethical worldview of the *Qur'ānic* text (Hibri 2006). Wadud and Barlas expound these two exegetical principles, using Rahman's double movement theory. Quoted in Rahman, Barlas writes:

Recognising the historical contexts and specificity of the Qur'ān's teachings does not mean assuming that their *moral purpose* was limited to Arab society, or that we cannot derive universal norms or laws from these teachings. Indeed, the Qur'ān itself “provides, either explicitly or implicitly, the rationales behind [its] solutions and rulings, from which one *can deduce general principles*” (Rahman 1982; Barlas 2002).

Historical contextualisation and principle-extraction provide the ethical dimensions of Islamic feminist hermeneutics. According to Wadud, the *Qur'ānic* verses pertaining to women are considered particular expressions of the universal ethical

spirit of the text; every verse is then analysed: “1. in its context; 2. in the context of discussions on similar topics in the Qur’ān; 3. in the light of similar language and syntactical structures used elsewhere in the Qur’ān; 4. in the light of overriding *Qur’ānic* principles; and 5. within the context of the *Qur’ānic Weltanschauung*, or world-view” (Wadud 1999). Implied in this account is an acknowledgement of the patriarchal nature of the *Qur’ānic* text, an acknowledgement which Wadud and Barlas come later to assert (Wadud 2006; Barlas 2002). While Wadud (2006) describes some *Qur’ānic* injunctions as pointing to “ethical standards of human actions that are archaic and barbaric”, Barlas (2008) acknowledges the limitations of her earlier views “in exonerating the *Qur’ānic* text itself from charges of being anti-women”.

A move towards the critical interrogation of the *Qur’ānic* text still intends to maintain its ethical vision. As Barlas sums it up:

My argument so far has not been that we *cannot* read the Qur’ān in patriarchal or oppressive modes, but that such readings typically result from reading the text in a piecemeal and decontextualized way.... In other words, a restrictive and oppressive exegesis results from the failure to historicize the Qur’ān’s teachings and to read the text as “a whole, a totality.” Accordingly, I read the Qur’ān holistically and also try to distinguish between its stated intent and the unintended outcomes of (mis) reading some of its *āyāt*. I also attempt to differentiate between teachings that I believe were specific to the Arabs and the universal principles that these teachings mean to convey. Throughout this exercise, I focus on retrieving the Qur’ān’s ethical vision and its egalitarianism (Barlas 2002; 2019).

Integral to the ethical framework of Islamic feminist hermeneutics is to condemn the medieval exegesis for treating the Qur’ān as piecemeal units and not going beyond its literal meanings, hence failing to capture its holistic ethical worldview (Wadud 1999; Barlas 2019; Abou-Bakr and al-Sharmani 2020). To retrieve the ethical vision of the *Qur’ānic* text, feminist interpreters generally decry the excluding of women from the field of interpretation in history and emphasise the necessity of interpreting the Qur’ān by women for women. With their personal reading of the Qur’ān, the feminist interpreters discussed here and others fuse classical and modern idioms, as they utilise strategies such as *ijtihād*, women’s self-identification with the Qur’ān, ethical individualism, and recognition of prior text (Hibri 1992; Rahman 1982; Barazangi 2008; Wadud 2019). The feminist interpreters discussed here seem to obviously acknowledge this moral subjectivity that underpins their hermeneutics, and through which the ethical becomes personal. “No exegete is able to remove the significance of the personal reading and the force of the prior text from interpretation,” as Wadud (1999) argues.

To avoid moral relativism, the Qur’ān is to be (re)interpreted in connection with the moral principles which undergird its text as a whole, regardless of what text itself

says in a particular situation. To interpret a text, extratextual factors become more important in determining meaning than the text itself (Wadud 2006). Barlas sums up this methodology as she expresses her interest, to read the Qur'ān as a text, as well as to read behind it and in front of it. When I say I read the Qur'ān as text, I mean that I read it to discover what God may have intended. .... To read behind the text means to reconstruct the historical context from which the text emerged. .... To read in front of the text, ..., means to recontextualize it in the light of present needs (Barlas 2002).

In their appeal to extratextual factors, Wadud and Barlas go beyond the utterances of the *Qur'ānic* text and see such utterances as limitations on the interpreter's capacity to reach ethical conclusions. Wadud argues, "The text is silent..... We make it speak for us by asking of it. If we are narrow, we will get a narrow response or answer. If we are open, it will open us to even greater possibilities" Wadud (2006) focuses on "what is left unsaid" in the Qur'ān and whether there could be ways to fill in the gaps ensuing from this unsaid (Wadud 1999). Similarly, Barlas (2002) explains that she is more focused "not only on what the Qur'ān says but also on what it does not say". What God intends from a text is not necessarily bound to or mentioned in the text. As Wadud (2006) states, "The text is not the only representative of the divine".

One extratextual source to realise God's intent is one's intuition. Wadud (2006) asserts the crucial role of intuition in interpretation by her appeal to Khaled Abou El-Fadl's notion of 'conscientious pause', according to which if a Muslim's consciousness feels embarrassed about the literal implications of text, "the least a Muslim can do is to pause to reflect about the place and the implications of these traditions". Perhaps, the Muslim may hold such texts in suspense, as far as their literal implications are concerned. Having applied this 'conscientious pause, Wadud developed a categorical no to Qur'ān 4:34, often cited as the wife-beating verse (Wadud 2006).

Text alone is too limited to fully disclose God's intent. Wadud (2006) argues, "God's disclosure through text in the fallible human language medium can never completely disclose that which is also disclosed through countless other mediums, signs, or [ayāt]". Apart from language, the interpreter needs to discover God's intent through the way He discloses Himself to us. To Barlas (2002), God's disclosure is attained through three ethical principles which must guide any act of interpretation; i.e., God's unity (*tawhīd*), God's warning against injustice, and God's incomparability. These principles should shape our ethical interpretations of text, regardless of its literal meanings. Extratextual indicators should supersede the language of text. Text itself is any but an indicator that points beyond its letter towards "ultimate meanings for transformations" (Wadud 2006). Text provides different paths towards the attainment of ethical life (Wadud 2006). "Each path

[offered by the text] towards ethical development is never complete; it needs continuous change and alteration” (Wadud 2006). To Wadud (2006) and Barlas (2002), this is not to abandon text, but to utilise the polysemous nature of Arabic in making text speak meanings, not only “more reflective of the principles of the [*Qur’ānic*] message”, but also to “suit “ ourselves. This ethical framework derives from what Barlas calls “the Qur’ān’s antipatriarchal episteme”, which does not inherently privilege males over females or treats the nature of human being or even the nature of God in gendered terms (Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002).

So far, Wadud’s and Barlas’s hermeneutics is still grounded in Islamic idioms. Both authors demonstrate that their critical engagement with the interpretive Islamic tradition is from within this tradition itself, particularly by focusing on the Qur’ān as the primary source of its own interpretation. Such an appeal to Islamic tradition is however contested for reasons, not least of which is the fact that feminist hermeneutics and the Islamic classical knowledge are formed of different conditions and operate within different, opposite epistemes (Moll 2009). Other related criticisms of Islamic feminist hermeneutics include the following: 1) while feminist interpreters employ ‘modern hermeneutics’ and ‘Western rationality’ uncritically, they develop “an intrinsic aversion towards the classical Muslim tradition” rather than engaging with it constructively or showing solid knowledge of its methodologies (Moll 2009; Naguib 2009), 2) feminist interpreters appeal to Islamic tradition eclectically and only insofar as they invoke authority (Moll 2014), 3) feminist interpreters impose modern ideas on the Qur’ān which the Qur’ān does not support (Hidayatullah 2014), 4) feminist interpreters ignore the question of to what extent the Qur’ān is responsible for determining its plain sense (Chaudhry 2008; 2014), and 5) feminist interpreters essentialise their “critical literary and historical approach to the text” by arguing that this approach is the foundational method of uncovering the universal ethical message of the Qur’ān (Moll 2009).

These criticisms pose an epistemological challenge to Islamic feminist hermeneutics; that is, how to ascertain the interrelationships between text, its interpretation, its interpreter, its author, and the social circumstances in which text emerged and is interpreted. How can one assure that what the interpreter has grasped is what God has intended? (Mattson 2013) Given the ambivalence of what exactly constitutes Islamic ethics for the feminist interpreters discussed here, one wonders whether the mere appeal to the universal ethical view of the Qur’ān is methodologically adequate to address this epistemological question. By subordinating the *Qur’ānic* text to what a feminist interpreter takes to be God’s intent, feminist interpreters deconstruct the particular interpretations of the text in the past and reconstruct the universal vision of the divine in the present (Abou-Bakr and al-Sharmani 2020). However, this dialect between the universal and the



particular still lacks in constructive engagement with what makes the relationship between both meaningful; i.e., the text.

### ***Al-Āmm* and *Al-Khāṣṣ* vs. the Universal and the Particular**

From a traditional point of view, *al-āmm* (general) of the Qur'ān refers to verses conveying content of general language although these verses were revealed in response to specific contexts (al-Zarkashī 1984; al-Siyūṭī 2005). *Al-khāṣṣ* (the particular) refers to verses particularising/qualifying other verses of general purport (al-Rumi 2003). For example, one verse explains: all the believers are required to perform pilgrimage if they can afford the journey (Qur'ān 3:97). The general language of the verse establishes the *āmm* (general) obligation of pilgrimage on all the believers. Exempted are those who cannot afford the journey; this exemption is a (*khāṣṣ*) particular condition particularised from the general obligation. The implications of *al-khāṣṣ* are not constrained by its socio-historical particularity; when a verse is said to be *khāṣṣ* this means the verse addresses a specific situation within the general context which the text addresses and the verse is part of. Whenever and wherever the specific situation exists, the verse addressing it must be applicable across time and space (al-Zarkashī 1984).

In *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadūd seems circumspect about collapsing the general (*al-āmm*) into the Universal. Wadud attempts not only to shun the traditional understanding of the general, according to which verses of linguistic general content are held of general implication, but also to introduce the Universal as a modern progressive construct that the traditional interpreters failed to capture, due to the particularities of their context that was yet to develop “human philosophical understanding” (Wadud 2006: 193 – 4). Wadud (2006) revisits the traditional dichotomy of *al-āmm* and *al-khāṣṣ* and reshapes its contours in connection with the Universal. While Wadud acknowledges the linguistic generality of *al-āmm* verses, she argues that such generality is conditioned to the general context of seventh century Arabia and must be consequently “re-examined against general contexts outside” the time of revelation. According to this definition of *al-āmm*, Wadud particularises all the *Qur'ānic* verses of general language to the context of seventh century Arabia, in which case the entire Qur'ān becomes particular.

Wadud then proceeds to define the Universal within the Qur'ān as a utopian/metaphysical blueprint that permeates the entire Qur'ān. What Wadud considers to be the universal in,

Qur'anic statements can only be understood in light of the [T]ranscendent. Transcendence does not adhere to mundane limits. .... The multiplicity of human responses to the idea of the sacred or the [U]ltimate have been and continue to be expressed in terms relative to [how we come to understand God differently

in different situations]. [I]f Allah has ninety-nine names, characteristics, or *sifāt* (attributes), then focusing on any particular one of these is neither separate from Allah's *tawhīdic* (unitary) totality nor the same as Allah's comprehensive reality which embraces all ninety-nine without mutual contradiction. To accept Allah's mercy requires acceptance of Allah's wrath. To focus on that mercy is not a negation of the wrath, it is a human predilection influenced by very mundane, and not transcendent, universal or ultimate potentialities.

To Wadud (2006), the Universal within the Qur'ān cannot be fully realised or expressed in any human language; yet, the Universal must be the Ultimate against which the *Qur'ānic* text must be (re)evaluated. To Wadud (2006), the Universal constitutes God's intent which the interpreter should pursue as she interprets God's words. Although God's intent behind His words is infinite, unified, and indivisible, the understanding of it can yield multiple interpretations, insofar as the interpreter is constrained by a specific context in which she responds to a specific human praxis (Wadud 2006). The interpretation ensuing from interpreting a verse through God's attribute of mercy must be different from the interpretation ensuing from interpreting the same verse through God's attribute of wrath. Despite being based on two contradictory attributes of the Divine, the two interpretations are by no means contradictory but mutually correlated through the Universal Reality of God in which different but contradictory parts make a coherent whole. Wadud (2006) holds such apparent contradiction as a matter of human predilection for one interpretation over another, with each interpretation constituting an expression of the "free-willed" human agency that God invests in every human in order to understand His words.

The free selection from multiple meanings of a verse – explains Barlas – is grounded in Qur'ān 39:18, which describes believers as, "those who listen to the word and follow the best (meaning) of it." To Barlas, Qur'ān 39:18 "confirms" that the same verse can yield multiple readings, some of which are better than others, hence dubbing the best reading as the best to follow (Barlas 2002; 2019). The criterion for identifying the best meaning is "our idea of a Just God and of the Qur'ān's concern for justice (Barlas 2002)."

Another more precise criterion to ascertain the meaning of a verse is to reject any meaning "that is not appropriate" or "contextually legitimated" (Barlas 2002). As Wadud (2006) argues, the interpreter can identify the Universal "by focusing on what the sacred or the divine is not." That is to say, if a specific interpretation involves injustice, this interpretation must be rejected because the divine is never unjust. After all, our interpretations which are based on our ideas of what God is are mundane because they are influenced by our human historical context. An interpretation expresses the Universal/Transcendental but it is not it; the Universal/Transcendental cannot be fully disclosed because – Wadud (2006)

argues – “it cannot be discussed in the boundaries of human language.” It follows that the Universal cannot be identified through the language of text alone. What matters – as Barlas (2019) explains, is not so much the language in which the Qur’ān’s teachings are conveyed as the need for us “to discover” its meanings by exercising our own reason and intellect. This account by Barlas however leaves unanswered the following epistemological question: As the interpreter intuits the Universal, how can she ascertain the relationship between language as language (a system of grammatical and semantic rules) and language as use (as an act of communication)? In Gadamarian (1977) terms, can a person determine what language means metaphysically at freewill, or shall language correspond to what it is in the world?

To Wadud, *Qur’ānic* interpretation is a quest for God’s meaning, without being limited by the boundaries of text and its language. She explains:

[*Qur’ānic*] interpretation is about the human search for the meaning of God. It is not just in our most fundamental belief in the [Qur’ān] as the word of Allah, or God’s Self-disclosure, but in the sense that Allah is and always was and therefore cannot be contained or constrained by text.... The [Qur’ān] is, as it were, a window to look *through*, a doorway with a threshold one must pass *over* toward the infinite possibilities that point humanity toward a continuum of spiritual and social development (Wadud 2006).

According to Wadud’s (2006) explanation, the Universal does not exist in text and can be reached rationally rather than textually by seeing text as a window pointing towards what the interpreter expects/needs from God; such expectations derive from the relationship between the interpreter and her understanding of the Divine. This rational – more apparently romantic – process of understanding text should involve the interpreter in the examination of human praxis not only in the context of revelation but also the context of present reality. (Islamic feminist hermeneutics is, however, contested on the ground that it pays little – if any – attention to the lived realities of Muslim women, particularly as far as the issue of domestic violence is concerned, just to give one example) (Abu-Lughod 2013).

To Wadud, the Universal remains sacred and untouched, while its different expressions through history must be approached as historical interpretations. Given Wadud’s argument that the Universal is not expressed in the *Qur’ānic* text, one is led to conclude that the *Qur’ānic* text in its plain sense constitutes an expression of the Universal. This conclusion historicises the content of the *Qur’ānic* text whose language expresses the Universal at one particular moment; that is, seventh century Arabia. This historicisation of the *Qur’ānic* text extends even to the category of verses considered by Islamic tradition to be of *‘āmm* (general) content. As Wadud (2006) concludes, “Because ‘general’ can be relative to the general context of its revelation, there is space

to re-examine those verses considered *'amm* against general contexts outside seventh-century Arabia. [S]ome verses classified as general are relative to the revelatory context". In line with the theory of progress, Wadud (2006) goes further to see some of the *Qur'ānic* verses – whose content used to be accepted in the particular context of seventh century Arabia – as reflecting now “an ethical standard of archaic and barbaric human actions”. To Wadud, describing the content of a *Qur'ānic* verse as archaic and barbaric is by no means to desacralise the *Qur'ānic* text but the language of the text instead. Since the *Qur'ānic* text was revealed to Arabs in seventh century Arabia, its language must be constrained by this context; what the interpreter is required to look into is not text qua language but the Universal, against which text was initially produced. The *Qur'ānic* text hitherto remains sacred and transcendent only to the extent it works as a window to the Universal.

The relationship between the Universal and the particular are explored further in Barlas' *Believing Women*. To Barlas (2019), the *Qur'ān* as divine speech is the Universal while the human realisation of the *Qur'ān* is particular. Barlas draws a distinction between the *Qur'ān* as text and the *Qur'ān* as revelation; she states:

Although the *Qur'ān* refers to itself as the fairest divine discourse sent down as a book, it also clarifies that the real, or archetypal, *Qur'ān* remains with God, thus rendering problematic....the confusion of the *muṣḥaf* with divine speech and the archetypal *Qur'ān*. .... This distinction, which emerged from the doctrine of the uncreatedness of God's speech, recognises not only the limitations of human understanding but also the interpretive nature of “sacred writings” .... It thus entertains the possibility that interpreting God's words means adapting “in varying degrees, [God's] message”. .... As such, belief “in the suprahistoricity of the [Qur'ān] . . . does not preclude its role as a historical Scripture” (Barlas 2019).

Barlas seems here to reduce the *Qur'ānic* text to an interpretive representation of a transcendental principle whose archetype is found only with God. It follows that the *Qur'ān* is of two types: the archetypal *Qur'ān* which is never fully realised in language, and the *muṣḥaf* or the *Qur'ānic* text as text between two covers. The *Qur'ānic* text as text is therefore one linguistic manifestation of the archetypal *Qur'ān*. Yet, the *Qur'ānic* text cannot speak for itself and it is imagined, only as far as the reader understands it in relation to her realisation of God's intent on the one hand and her present context on the other. Two points are at stake here: First Barlas seems to obviate the semantics of the *Qur'ānic* text; i.e., to dismiss the possibility of reaching meanings based on how words and sentences are related to one another in a text, regardless of the authorial intent and the reader's context. This means that the *Qur'ānic* text is intelligible only to the extent that the interpreter can relate it to her own world and to the world of the author, regardless of linguistic semantics. Given that text can speak only through us, then text qua text does not

exist as a thing in the world. Yet, if text exists only through us, then would this mean a text and its interpretations are identical? As far as the Qur'ān is concerned, is the *Qur'ānic* text as equally valuable and (in)authentic as its interpretations, particularly considering that both text and its interpretations – according to Barlas and Wadud – are incomplete mundane representations of the archetypal Qur'ān (i.e., the Universal)?

In her attempt to further clarify the distinction between the archetypal Qur'ān and the Qur'ān as text, Barlas refers to the traditional doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Qur'ān. To Barlas, what is uncreated is the archetypal Qur'ān rather than the *Qur'ānic* text which rather represents “a historical Scripture”, hence being limited by its “interpretive nature”. Adeptly, Barlas is able here to demonstrate that the Qur'ān is both uncreated and created, sacred and mundane, hence straddling respectively both the Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite theologies about the nature of the Qur'ān. The way Barlas interpolates the doctrine of the (un)createdness of the Qur'ān into her account is, however, bizarre, not only because she attempts to straddle two opposite views with little attention to the complexities and specific configurations of each view, but also because she does so by modelling the universal-particular binary in idioms of modern hermeneutics. What is problematic about Barlas's reformulation of the relationship between the universal and the particular is not that she amalgamates concepts from Islamic tradition and modern hermeneutics, but that she is positioning herself in two types of knowledge, each of which operates within a different historical and cultural episteme, thus entrapping herself in problems of incommensurability and anachronism.

In her quest for the Universal which fully resides in the archetypal Qur'ān, the interpreter should be aided by the *Qur'ānic* text. Text provides a window to the Universal not only through what text says but also through what is left unsaid. Barlas broadens the category of the Universal by approaching the Qur'ān as a document silent about many issues in our modern world, and its silence must be decoded in light of its general ethical principles. As Barlas explains,

I concentrate not only on what the Qur'ān says but also on what it does not say..... “the silences in any discourse provide . . .the backdrop against which meaning is established.... Of course, what one makes of the Qur'ān's silences depends on ..the context. Thus, I interpret the Qur'ān's silences in light of its expressed teachings (Barlas 2002).

I take Barlas's argument here about the Qur'ān's silence to mean as follows: the Qur'ān is already silent about all the issues we face in our modern context. Even if an issue is tackled in the Qur'ān, the specifications/descriptions of the issue as configured in the *Qur'ānic* text are asymmetrical/incommensurable to the specifications/descriptions of the same issue as configured in present context. While the Qur'ān provides legal injunctions in areas like family and business, the

context of these issues in seventh century Arabia was different from their context in today's world. Consequently, a *Qur'ānic* injunction expresses the particular context in and for which it was revealed, and; therefore, the injunction should be reinterpreted in light of the Qur'ān's universal ethical worldview, so that it can respond to our present needs.

Through the Universal, the interpreter reformulates text according to her understanding of God's intent in relation to her human context; since human context develops towards a progressive state, so does our conception of God's nature (Wadud 2006). Accordingly, interpretation is based on how the interpreter intimately and psychologically understands the Universal. To Wadud (2006), the Universal is where the interpreter gleans "the spiritual inspiration of the Qur'ān" that has been "lost in textual analysis". As Barlas (2019) puts it, what the interpreter needs to do is to "connect God to God's speech," making God rather than text as the locus of meaning.

### **The Universal-Particular Binary in Islamic Tradition and Modern Hermeneutics**

As mentioned earlier, Wadud's and Barlas's reformulation of the universal-particular binary find expressions in both Islamic tradition and modern hermeneutics.

The binary — as explained by Wadud and Barlas — can be traced in the traditional doctrines of both the Mu'tazilite and the Ash'arite schools regarding the question of whether the Qur'ān is created or uncreated respectively. The controversy about the nature of the Qur'ān is a consequence of the disagreement between the two schools about the nature of God. For the Ash'arites, God's sovereignty requires Him to pre-determine everything including human actions, which means that the Qur'ān as God's speech existed before it was revealed to the Prophet in seventh century Arabia. For the Mu'tazilites, God's Justice requires Him to imbue humans with free will to create their own actions, which means that God speaks to humans in time and space as context requires. As far as the nature of the Qur'ān is concerned, the Ash'arites make a distinction between the Qur'ān as God's psych Word (*kalam nafsī*) which inheres in God's Essence, and the Qur'ān as a book whose expressions are made of sounds and words (Al-Shahrastānī 1980). To the Ash'arites, the former type of the Qur'ān is eternal while the latter is '*ḥādīth*' temporal (Al-Juwaynī 1950). Some Ash'arites go as far as to claim that the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet through Gabriel's mind and in his own words, and it was then revealed to us in the Prophet's own words, while God's archetypal speech itself was not conveyed but remained with God (Al-Juwaynī 1950; al-Bayjūrī 2002). It should be, however, noted that this distinction by the Ash'arites does not negate that the Qur'ān as a book is still from God; nor does it obviate the atemporal role which the *Qur'ānic* text and its semantic particularities plays in mediating the meaning of God's

speech as contained in the archetypal Qur'ān. This explains why the majority view of the Ash'arites maintains that the Qur'ān as God's psycho word (*ma'nā nafsi*) and the Qur'ān as a book (*ma'nā lafẓi*) are both from God (al-Bayjūrī 2002). This point also dovetails with the Ash'arite doctrine of Divine Command, according to which a historical incident was bound to happen before it happened; consequently, a *Qur'ānic* text existed with God before the existence of the historical context in which this text emerged. It follows that a person is bound to follow *Qur'ānic* injunctions, regardless of their historical contexts, because these injunctions express God's speech, which exists in/with God even before creation. This sort of argument obviously limits the flexibility of going beyond the text and its linguistic interrelations as far as the act of interpretation is concerned.

In contrast, the Mu'tazilites do not acknowledge the existence of a God's speech that precedes the moment God speaks. To say that God speaks in eternity, if He speaks as such at all, is tantamount to saying that God's speech subsists in His essence. Since God's speech, like the Qur'ān, is composed of letters and sounds which change, are subjected to different grammatical and structural arrangements, and are understood differently in different minds, then saying that God's speech is part of God's essence is like saying God's eternal essence changes, is divisible, and consequently has multiple eternals; all these conclusions violate the concept of God's unity and indivisibility (Abdul Jabbār 1996). This exposition has led the Mu'tazilites to adopt the doctrine that the Qur'ān is God's speech created by God the very moment it was revealed to the Prophet in response to historical incidents (Abdul Jabbār 1996). To the Mu'tazilites, while the Qur'ān is created in time and space, its text continues to provide indications for the formulations of law (Abdul Jabbār 1996).

Based on the Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite views about the Qur'ān and God's speech, one can draw few points that Wadud and Barlas amalgamated in their reformulation of the universal-particular binary. With the Ash'arite doctrine, the interpretation of the Qur'ān must attend to the language of text and its internal relations, while attempting to connect the outcomes of this textual analysis to God's essence in which God's speech subsists. This is akin to Wadud's and Barlas's conceptualisation of the universal, except that the two authors allow the human realisation of the universal to supersede and redefine the language of the *Qur'ānic* text. In contrast, the Mu'tazilites would allow interpreting the Qur'ān based on the indications (principles) which the *Qur'ānic* text provides in the process of realising what is right and what is wrong, while keeping in mind that the Qur'ān is God's speech created in history. The createdness of the Qur'ān provides the interpreter with a leeway to privilege reason over text, which is also a core doctrine of the Mu'tazilite school (Abdul Jabbār 1996; al-Duayhi 1995). This is again taken by Wadud and Barlas both of whom emphasise the historicity of

the Qur'ān and treat the text as one indicator towards the achievement of ethical development. That, as it may be, shows how Wadud and Barlas adeptly come to articulate views from both the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites. While Wadud and Barlas furiously embrace the Ash'arite distinction between the Qur'ān as a text and the archetypal universal Qur'ān/God's intent/God's *nafsī* speech, they also subscribe to the Mu'tazilite doctrine of reason, whereby reason is held an arbiter over the *Qur'ānic* text, particularly regarding the determination of the ethical value of *Qur'ānic* legal injunctions.

The correlation between Wadud's and Barlas's conceptualisation of the universal on the one hand and the traditional arguments about the nature of the Qur'ān on the other echoes not only rationalism but also romanticism, particularly when considering the distinction made by the two authors between the Qur'ān as a text and the Qur'ān as God's intent or — as Barlas calls it — God's archetypal speech. With God as the Author of the Qur'ān at the centre of their hermeneutics, Wadud and Barlas attempt to ground the relationship between the universal and the particular in the interpreter's consciousness of God, thus eschewing rationality in favour of romantic idealisation. This position is very much in line with the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834). According to Schleiermacher's universal hermeneutics, the interpreter reasons, intuitively understands, and progressively reconstructs traditional texts in relation to present reality, such that the historical becomes a part of holistic truth (Harrisville and Sundberg 1995). Schleiermacher also appeals to human experience and feeling to make perfect sense of what true understanding is. In his *Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher introduces his concept of "the Feeling of Absolute Dependence," according to which one develops two reactions in the way one behaves towards a specific object (this could be a text). The first reaction is a universal feeling mediated through the original revelation or God-consciousness, which immediately exists in self-consciousness. The second reaction is carried through one's particular expression or interpretation of the respective object. One's expression is particular insofar as it is affected by one's historical conditions (Stanford 2016; Dole 2010; Jorgenson 2007; Wyman 1998). Schleiermacher allows multiple interpretations of a text as context changes; however, he approaches the different interpretations of a text in terms of historicity. Regarding the Qur'ān, as we read a *Qur'ānic* text we need not rely on its previous historical interpretations; rather we must transcend such historical interpretations to their universal basis, which undergirded them initially. The essence of the content and not the content itself is what matters. This is what Schleiermacher calls 'divination,' whereby the interpreter has a double task: first the interpreter is to "gain an immediate comprehension of the Author as an individual," and second, the interpreter should be able to move from the particularity of the Author's context and use of language to the universal and broader realm of the language area itself (Gjesdal 2006). To Wadud and Barlas, the process of interpretation is grounded in one's deep *imān* (faith) in God (God's consciousness),



which empowers the interpreter to develop an interpretation that she believes to better capture the Divine Will. It follows that the interpreter may further disqualify a previous interpretation of a text and even the plain sense of that text in case either one betrays the interpreter's conviction-based relationship with God. Wadud and Barlas are very assertive of this psycho-linguistic element in the interpretation of the Qur'ān.

### **The Universal Transcends Text and Its Language**

To Wadud and Barlas, the process of interpreting the Qur'ān involves three elements: a Universal, a text, and a particular. The Universal is God's intent that is never fully disclosed in text. The *Qur'ānic* text is the human language that expressed the Universal in seventh century Arabia. The particular refers to the interpretation of the text, expressing the Universal over different contexts.

In the interpretive process, the feminist interpreter formulates their interpretation according to their understanding of the Universal, regardless of the language of the *Qur'ānic* text. The *Qur'ānic* text is not more than a window from which the interpreter proceeds towards the Universal. Accordingly, only the Universal is divine while the text and its historical interpretants are not. That said, one becomes trapped in questions like: Is there any epistemological difference between the *Qur'ānic* text and its different interpretations, apart from each being formulated in a different language? Is there any specific merit for the *Qur'ānic* text in this case; what makes the *Qur'ānic* text special at all? Do we need the text after all if our projections on the Universal are what really counts? To Wadud (2006), the language of the Qur'ān is limited inasmuch as it basically intended to make the message accessible to Arabs in seventh century Arabia. Yet, the divine source from which the text emerged is not constrained by the language of the text, because the divine source goes beyond any human language (Wadud 2006). It is the divine source which is to be sought upon interpreting the *Qur'ānic* text. The text serves only as the primary indicator leading to the knowledge of God (Wadud 2006). However, "A person develops the knowledge of God, *not through textual indicators alone*, but through" other avenues which exist apart from the text, such as prayer, experience, history, and other extratextual factors (Wadud 2006). Through extratextual avenues, the interpreter can reach the evidence of God's intent. As Wadud (2006) argues, "When ... frictions occur between textual utterances and collateral Evidences [arising from extratextual avenues], one must assert a "diligent and comprehensive" investigation of the text". Such investigation enables the interpreter to develop an outright rejection of a *Qur'ānic* text, just as Wadud did with 4:34. To Barlas, what is interpreted is not the Arabic word of the Qur'ān but the Author of this word and His never-fully determined intent.

To Barlas (2019) and Wadud (2006), God's intent is not mentioned in the text; nor can it be completely disclosed in language. Wadud considers the universal

of the *Qur'ānic* text as part of the Unseen/supernatural world that language “is intrinsically unfitted to discuss”. She continues, “Words about God and the Unseen must be used analogically because these matters transcend all symbol-systems. Therefore, I have never been locked into a literal meaning of [*Qur'ānic*] text when I explore the [*Qur'ānic*] intent of universal guidance” (Wadud 1999; 2006). Being an expression of the Unseen, the text has the potential to be infused with as much of multiple meanings as humans have different worlds with ever-changing contexts. This proposition renders the entire *Qur'ānic* text into allegorical fancies, with as many multiple interpretations as a human being might feel the need for. Regardless of whether or not allegorical interpretation is a sustainable legitimate hermeneutic tool, the methodological question that persists here is: how can we define the relationship between the seen (text) and the Unseen (its meaning), if the interpreter makes a text speak something that the text does not say? Equally important is the question of what if the interpreter identifies no linguistic nexus whatsoever between the language of a text and the coveted analogical meaning, other than clutching at the general ethical universals of the Qur'ān?

Wadud's and Barlas's position on language leaves us with an ineluctable question: i.e., what is the difference between the *Qur'ānic* text and its interpretation, if both are formulated in a language that does not fully capture/represent God's intent? Stated otherwise, we are left with a perplexing distinction between the Qur'ān consisting of words and sounds and the Qur'ān as a world of nebulous symbols expressed in these words and sounds over different contexts. What makes the *Qur'ānic* text *Qur'ānic* after all? These questions arise from both Wadud's and Barlas's emphasis on the active presence of the human physical aspect in the event of revelation. To Wadud (2006), the Qur'ān — as a realm of universals — is mediated through the mind, and the language for that matter, of the Prophet being the recipient of revelation. Similarly, Barlas (2019) takes the *Qur'ānic* text to be a historical document revealed through the Prophet's mind as a response to “a social historical background” and in “linguistic terms specific to Arabic society”. “[W]hat it means that the Qur'ān is the literal word of God” is debateable, according to Wadud (2016).

### **Towards an Existential Understanding of Language**

Wadud's and Barlas's treatment of language finds expressions in the existential hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger (d. 1976). According to Heidegger in Mulhall (2005), language in the form of statements is made of assertions with irrelevant fore-conceptions about them in our minds; i.e., although assertions have immediate meanings in our understanding, these meanings constitute our fore-conceptions which might not necessarily express the actual meaning of an assertion at the moment the assertion is being said in reality.

To Heidegger, the fore-conceptions (immediate meanings) about an assertion cover up and restrict us from realising its actual meaning in relation to the context in which the assertion is being used (here and now) (Mulhall 2005). The understanding of an assertion (a statement) through its associated fore-conceptions (its immediate but literal meaning independent of present context) renders this assertion into what Heidegger calls an “unready-to-hand” object; i.e., a de-contextualised/dysfunctional object, just like a defective tool needing repair (Mulhall 2005). In order to repair (reformulate) an assertion that seems to be at odds with an existing reality, we need another assertion that can modify (reconstruct) the interpretation of the previous assertion (Mulhall 2005). Yet, “the field of significance from which” different meanings with different assertions are derived remains the ultimate source of all meaning (Mulhall 2005). The field of significance is the field that exists in the Dasein and in which the Dasein exists (Mulhall 2005). The Dasein can be defined as a process of self-interpretation which permeates all aspects of human existence (Mulhall 2005). The Dasein can be contrasted here to the Universal in feminist hermeneutics; however, while the Universal seemingly stays with God for the feminist authors discussed here, the Dasein exists in the Being of human for Heidegger. Yet, the outcomes of both are subjective.

To Heidegger, the process of disclosing meaning within the Dasein is mediated by discourse. Discourse is the aggregate of the existing conditions which enable the Dasein to understand and communicate the object to the world the way it understands it (Mulhall 2005). Heidegger’s position on language and interpretation is by all means existential, insofar as an assertion (a text) has no meaning unless it is being existent in the world (*existentiale*). Discourse and its linguistic expressions constitute a unified entity through a process in which the object and its significance in the world appropriate (possess) each other (Heidegger 1972). This process of appropriation is mediated by language, which connects our articulation of the meaning of the object (Being) to this object in the world (being-in-the world) (Heidegger 1972). It follows that the assertion which comes out of this process becomes attached and restricted to its now explicit manifestation in the world, hence forming a (fore)-conception which will restrict our ability to understand it later in connection to a different being in the world (Mulhall 2005). It also follows that assertions or what Heidegger calls *Apophantic* stand in discontinuity with one another, insofar as one assertion remains particular to the specific object that it has expressed at the very same moment both came to appropriate each other (Heidegger 1972). In other words, assertions disappear, are lost in history, and are created anew each time we attempt to discover the field of significance for beings in the world. To Heidegger (1972), “after the meaning of Being had been clarified, the whole analytic of Dasein was to be more originally repeated in a completely different way”. As the Dasein works out and self-identifies the significance of an

object, it produces a new language that remains particular to the historical event of connecting the object with its significance.

Yet, Heidegger (2019) avers that language speaks. In the process of understanding an object (a text), the author is of irrelevance since what matters is the text itself and its language. In Heidegger's terms, a text calls to things in our world, thus "bringing the presence of that was previously uncalled into a nearness". This means that a text is relevant to the extent its words have presence in and can say something about our world; otherwise, such a text remains uncalled but concealed until discovered. Based on Heidegger's perspective on language, the interpretation of a traditional text requires the deliberate dismissal of all the authorial enterprise that evolved around it through history. The interpreter only allows text to speak for itself here and now; it is to understand a text in its own terms and what it stands for in our existing reality. This existential interpretation conspicuously reduces a text to the context of its reader, regardless of the intent of its author. While Wadud and Barlas emphasise the reader's subjective understanding of the *Qur'ānic* text, they locate such understanding in the authorial intent of the text not the text itself as 'being in the world'. Instead of letting text speak for itself, Wadud and Barlas make text speak what the interpreter thinks to be God's intent.

The article is not arguing here that Wadud's and Barlas's account on language is existential *par excellence*, since God and the *Qur'ān* are at the centre of their hermeneutics. However, one can highlight few points, where an argument for existentialism within Islamic feminist hermeneutics is not necessarily specious. As explained earlier, Wadud and Barlas treat the *Qur'ānic* text as an expression of God's intent in a language that is human, cultural, and particular to seventh century Arabia. Given the cultural constraints of language, the *Qur'ānic* text needs to be interpreted according to what the feminist reader thinks to be God's intent, regardless of what the text says. Text serves only as a window to the significance which has initially underpinned it, just as Heidegger's assertion is grounded in the *Dasein* and its field of significance. Somehow, Heideggerian assertions can be contrasted to the *Qur'ānic* text as well as its different interpretations over history. Wadud and Barlas seem to treat the *Qur'ānic* literal text as a Heideggerian assertion only insofar as the *Qur'ānic* text is surrendered to how the interpreter sees it in the world. Using Heidegger's terminology, the *Qur'ānic* text becomes an "un-ready-to-hand" assertion, which needs to be repaired (reformulated) so that it becomes relevant to how we currently see it in the world. While a Heideggerian assertion disappears in history, the *Qur'ānic* text does not, but remains there as a window to the Divine intent, only to the extent it indicates the significance that has first underpinned its revelation. The field of significance for Heidegger and the feminist interpreters discussed here is associated with the reader's self-interpretation vis-à-vis their own world. Yet, while Heidegger grounds this process

of self-interpretation in the Dasein (the reader's being), Wadud and Barlas ground it in the Divine intent. One can, however, argue that the Divine intent for Wadud and Barlas is reduced to what they expect from God regarding how they see things in the world.

Based on feminist hermeneutics, the historical interpretations of the *Qur'ānic* text can be held fully congruent with Heidegger's assertions, since both are lost in history and consequently created anew. Wadud and Barlas demonstrate this existential bent towards the *Qur'ānic* text, which – according to them – consists of cultural expressions of patriarchal Arab society. Equally important is the starting point for both Heidegger and the two authors discussed here; both start from how they see things in the world then proceed to determine and articulate the meaning of the object accordingly. It is true that Wadud and Barlas keep the *Qur'ānic* text at the centre of their endeavour; yet, one wonders what this exactly means, when they focus on the allegorical ideals of the text, while dismissing the text itself as a cultural statement. More significantly, one sees no difference between considering a text as a cultural expression that is no longer relevant to present context and considering the same text as non-existent or absent, to use Heidegger's terminology.

## Conclusion

What conclusion would the arguments discussed-above lead to, other than investigating the *Qur'ānic* text apart from being divine and as a product of culture? Ironically, Barlas criticises Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's (2014) humanistic hermeneutics for depicting the *Qur'ān* as a cultural product and as a “discourse involving divine and human communication rather than a text” that is completely revealed by God to all humanity, regardless of context or history (Barlas 2016a, 115).

To Barlas, reading the *Qur'ān* as a product of history or as a text involving a human voice is an act of heresy which violates the sacredness of the *Qur'ān*. However, Wadud's and Barlas's hermeneutics create a paradox, where they attempt to maintain the sacredness of the *Qur'ān* by historicising it and letting it speak through human experience. I argue that although Abu Zayd and the feminist interpreters analysed here tread different methodological paths, they aim to reach the same conclusions. Yet, while Barlas and Wadud locate the meaning of the *Qur'ān* in God, Abu Zayd delineates the role of human praxis and culture in shaping the text in seventh century Arabia and reshaping it in the modern-day world. Apart from such a delicate distinction about the locus of meaning, Barlas (Wadud and other feminist interpreters) and Abu Zayd make the following points: 1) the *Qur'ānic* text is constrained by seventh century Arab culture and its Arabic language, being a human language whose semantics evolve contextually over time, 2) they allow the multiplicity of meaning as context changes, 3) they ask the text to speak for our

needs which the text is silent about, and 4) finally they see the Qur'ān as God's speech conveyed to the Prophet through a system of symbols, and these symbols were revealed through the Prophet's mind (Abu Zayd 1994). Like Wadud and Barlas, Abu Zayd (1994) upholds the importance of interpreting the *Qur'ānic* text from within itself and in connection with its holistic orientation within its language and culture, in order that the interpreter can disclose its concealed significance. Abu Zayd (2018) also acknowledges the universal-particular binary; yet, he reformulates this binary in terms of 'meaning and significance', a binary which he has borrowed from Hirsch (1967). It is nevertheless obvious that Abu Zayd's treatment of all these points takes root in a much deeper systematic and philosophical analysis.

Yet, Barlas's contention with Abu Zayd and others regarding the divinity/sacredness of the Qur'ān showcases her arduous keenness to position her interpretive feminist project as a reformative movement within mainstream Islam (Wadud 2016). To strengthen such a position, Wadud and Barlas (2016) locate their interpretation in their faithfulness to the Qur'ān as the unchanging verbatim word of God. However, it is worth reiterating that as the question of "what the Qur'ān exactly is" evolves in their writings, Wadud and Barlas tend to differentiate between the Qur'ān as a pathway to God's intent and the Qur'ān as a verbatim textual speech leading us through this pathway. Such a bewildering distinction does not provide a definitive answer to the question whether or not the *Qur'ānic* text is a purely sacred document. For example, while they are assertive about the limitation of Arabic to contain God's self-disclosure in full terms, they blame their critics for questioning the divine nature of the *Qur'ānic* Arabic text (Wadud 2016). Furthermore, Wadud's and Barlas's position on language leads us to wonder: Do we after all have access to what God has revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad other than a lattice of ethical human values dubbed as the *Qur'ānic* worldview? What is exactly the *Qur'ānic* worldview, who can determine it, and how can it be determined? Equally important is the epistemological challenge ensuing from these questions: i.e., how to ascertain that our understanding of God is what God has intended?

This article argues that Wadud's (2016) and Barlas's ambivalent position on the sacredness of the Qur'ān has inhibited their hermeneutic enterprise from developing a sensitive approach to mainstream Muslim belief regarding the Qur'ān as God's unchanging word, hence carrying the stigma of an un-authoritative discourse among lay Muslims. This has consequently stymied the most important goal of transforming the politics of gender within Muslim communities, the goal which Wadud has lately come to recognise and embrace as a priority shift from her incipient intellectual "utopian" work.

The article has attempted to show that a more bitter challenge to the authoritativeness of Islamic feminist hermeneutics arises from its appropriation

of different epistemologies, without adequate attention to the arguments of which these epistemologies are made. While there is nothing awry about being influenced by different epistemologies regarding the pursuit of knowledge, Wadud's and Barlas's accounts reveal a great deal of syncretism, as they both straddle variegated but opposite standpoints in the course of developing their own hermeneutics. The universal-particular binary is one example of syncretism, where the presentation of the binary within Islamic feminist hermeneutics shows correlations with Schleiermacher's romanticism and Heidegger's existentialism. Another example of syncretism occurs when Barlas amalgamates the views of Ricoeur and Wolterstroff in order to assert the multiplicity of meaning and the interpreter's authority to choose what she thinks to be the true meaning from among the multiple meanings of a text. However, not only is Barlas silent about how to ascertain and where to locate what the interpreter thinks to be the true meaning of a text; but also, she avoids highlighting how differently Ricoeur and Wolterstroff would approach the meaning-making process; i.e., while Ricoeur (2016) liberates the text from the author and empowers it to speak for itself, Wolterstroff (1995) defends the "legitimacy of authorial discourse" against Ricoeur's thesis. Barlas also applies syncretism to her reformulation of the classical doctrine of the (un) createdness of the Qur'ān, where she seems to straddle both the Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite theologies on the matter. Similarly, Wadud (2006) makes the possibility open for judging the Qur'ān to be both created and uncreated at the same time. Straddling different perspectives in understanding a text is — explains Abu Zayd (2018) — a process of haphazard colouring rather than interpretation, as the interpreter amalgamates different ideas without being adequately attentive to their socio-historical arguments and their deep structure formations. The end result of such syncretism is the development of arbitrary readings of the *Qur'ānic* text.

Arbitrary readings of the *Qur'ānic* text arise from the feminist syncretism-based reformulation of the universal-particular binary. The universal-particular binary has imbued the Islamic feminist interpreters analysed here with a liberal theology, wherewith they approach *Qur'ānic* verses "as empty general images that can be filled with whatever content" the interpreter demands and likes to impose on the text (Abu Zayd 2018). Wadud (2006) recognises the subjectivity of this approach explaining that "[n]o method of *Qur'ānic* exegesis is fully objective," and this is why "[n]o interpretation is definitive". This approach has, however, prevented Wadud and Barlas from seeing the distinction between subjectivity and arbitrariness as far as the process of interpretation is concerned. The subjective reading of a text remains bound to the particularities of text including its language, grammatical structure, and semantics, in addition to its historical world. In contrast, the arbitrary reading of a text arises from aggressively rupturing the text from such particularities, hence either twisting the meaning of the text or dismissing the

text as archaic in case it does not respond to our present needs. Not only has feminist hermeneutics ruptured the *Qur'ānic* text from its continuous movement in history but it has also dealt with the *Qur'ānic* text apart from the reality of Muslim women in different localities. As Lila Abu Lughod (2013) argues, the mere focus of Islamic feminist hermeneutics on textual analysis has turned the field into a merely theoretical, cognitive, and imaginative enterprise relating little – if at all – to Muslim women's experiences. As Wadud (2016) herself came to recognise, the mere engagement with theoretical interpretation from “positions of privilege” hardly produces “impact where it really matters”. This point begs the important question of to what extent the realisation of gender justice in Islam lie in hermeneutics after all (Ibrahim, 4:34).

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