The Movement for Feminist Interpretation of the Qur’an and Religion and its Threat to the Arabic Language and Tradition

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Abstract: The present study addresses the recent cultural and intellectual movement that works to adopt the Western “hermeneutics” methodology and apply it to the Noble Qur’an and Islamic religious texts in general, with complete indifference to the established principles of tafsīr (exegesis), rules of interpretation and related Prophetic clarification from the authenticated Sunnah. It also shows how this movement turns a blind eye to the accumulated experience of Islamic civilisation, based on the claim that the Islamic heritage has been patriarchal and chauvinistic against women. It further brings to light the fact that this movement consists of a number of academics educated in Western paradigms, but almost entirely lacking in authentic training in Islamic culture and religious sciences. Then it discusses the negative consequences of this movement for Muslim societies in terms of their connection with their civilisational heritage, and for the Arabic language, in that it poses a threat to the soundness of the Arab tongue. After this, it outlines the origins of hermeneutics and its development until its present form, as well as its highly subjective and biased approach to Arab and Islamic heritage. It concludes by discussing the requirements of constructing an Islamic hermeneutics that is appropriate to our heritage, language and unique historical experience.

Introduction

This paper aims to draw attention in the academic sphere to a cultural and intellectual movement that has become widespread in the contemporary Islamic world. This movement seeks to take the Western “hermeneutics” methodology and apply it to the Noble Qur’an and Islamic religious texts in general, with complete indifference to the principles of Qur’anic exegesis and rules of interpretation established in our Arabic-Islamic heritage, as well as the related Prophetic clarification contained in the authenticated Sunnah. Indeed, this indifference extends to the events of history and the entire accumulated experience of Islamic civilisation,

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based on a prior assumption and judgement that the Islamic tradition – in theory and practice – has been patriarchal and chauvinistic against women. Therefore, according to this view, the time has come to break intellectually from this tradition and re-establish the interpretation of the Qur'an and the religion based on this assumption, and in the light of Western Christian hermeneutics.

In recent times, since the second half of last century, this movement has been championed by a number of academics educated in Western institutions, and almost entirely lacking in rigorous, authentic learning and training in the fields of Islamic culture and religious sciences. Most of them reside in the West, where they studied and occupied research and teaching positions, particularly in Britain and the United States. However, a few live in the Muslim world after having received their education in Western universities. They promote the same direction of thought while engaging in this interpretative work; it is an active movement on the level of culture and research, but does not yet represent a general trend. It is possible for this movement to achieve results and effect change on Muslim societies in terms of their connection with their heritage, but not to the desired extent of a complete break with tradition. The effect would merely be to weaken these societies’ interaction with their cultural tradition, thereby possibly stunting their progress towards a sound awakening that would restore them to the path of history.

This movement has a linguistic aspect which – in my opinion – threatens the soundness of the Arabic tongue and its expressiveness, not to mention its religious and civilisational heritage. This is what has spurred me to present this topic to custodians of the Arabic language, thought and tradition. Its impact in our case is, unfortunately, negative, because it treats the rules of proper engagement and constructive cultural exchange with contempt, as I shall explain in the following three steps:

First: The origins of “hermeneutics” and its stages of development until its present form.

Second: The effect of these hermeneutics upon some of our men and women, and their attempts to apply them to the Arabic-Islamic tradition with acute subjectivity and bias. In addition, they display complete conformity to results of a cultural experiment that took place in a foreign environment, without any critical spirit or concern to adapt the process such as to accord with the nature of our heritage, language and civilisation.

Third: The linguistic, intellectual and methodological requirements of an “Islamic hermeneutics” – if this expression is appropriate – that suits our civilisation, our Arabic language and our distinct historical experience. In my view, we are in no need of this terminology, but I am employing it for the purposes of comparison. What we mean is: the scientific principles of interpreting Arabic religious texts, as they developed and took shape in the context of our culture and religious sciences, alongside their counterparts in contemporary knowledge and thought.
1. Western Hermeneutics

Before discussing this phenomenon, which is key to the study – in that it is the basis from which feminist interpretation of Islamic texts was born – I wish to affirm clearly that interaction and exchange between cultures, particularly between the contemporary Arab culture and others such as the Western culture, is both praiseworthy and desirable. Indeed, in the present circumstances, it is almost inevitable.

- This is because proper exchange flows from the nature of this Arabic-Islamic culture that believes in the unity of humanity and its common origins, and that the diversity of nations calls for mutual interaction and connection, not conflict and contempt.¹ These are constructive principles worthy of being taken as a basis for interaction and exchange on the human level.

- Indeed, the Islamic civilisation practised and benefited from such interactions, without hesitation and free of prejudice, during its most prosperous times. At the outset of this experiment, Abū Ya‘qūb al-Kindī stated: “We should be very grateful to whoever brings a small or great measure of truth, as they have made us party to the fruits of their thought and thus facilitated our goals. We ought not to be shy about appreciating truth and adopting it from wherever it comes, even from distant peoples or nations differing from us, because nothing is a higher consideration for the truth-seeker than truth itself.” Some centuries into the flowering of the experiment, Abū al-Walīd Ibn Rushd (Averroes) wrote: “In this project of ours, we must make use of the statements of our predecessors, whether they shared with us in religion or not; by the latter, I mean those who explored these questions before Islam. We should turn to their books and consult their opinions; whatever is correct, we accept, and whatever is mistaken, we point that out.”²

- As for this engagement being both necessary and a reality: the Information Revolution of the past few decades, with its constant stream of information via the various communication networks, makes an introverted approach impossible in today’s world. Yet the question remains: does the phenomenon we are analysing match that spirit expressed by Al-Kindī and Ibn Rushd, or does it take another route? The answer may become clear with the following brief historical account.

What is meant by hermeneutics is the rules of interpretation and understanding of religious texts; it is an old term from Christian theology, the sense of which widened and narrowed in response to developments in religious and philosophical thought and biblical studies in the Western context. We can summarise the various stages in its denotation as follows:

- The theoretical principles related to interpreting theological texts;
- The bases of explaining the Bible and their application;
- The theory and practice of interpreting ancient texts;
• The theory of understanding and interpreting religious, philosophical and literary texts;
• The theory and practice of understanding literary works and other texts;
• The principles of interpreting written compositions;
• Understanding and interpreting the forms of human existence. This is the broadest of definitions reached by modern philosophy at the hands of Martin Heidegger; it encompasses all the humanities and social sciences.

The modern philosopher with the greatest impact in giving life to this terminology and reviving its intellectual bases was Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, in his research on avoiding biased judgement. Further development and theorising were provided by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, along with the philosopher Heidegger as mentioned, such that it is said that hermeneutics was founded by the theologians and developed by the philosophers.3

Yet the story goes back much farther. The consideration of text began with the ancient Greeks, for whom the allegorical aspect was most prominent. Then hermeneutics reached the Hebrews, and Philo of Alexandria played a notable role in harmonising between the allegorical approach and Greek philosophy. The Talmud contains commentaries on the Old Testament spanning the eight centuries between the 2nd Century BC and the 6th Century CE. The Jews strove to devise rules of interpretation, and there emerged among them literalists – like the Sadducees and Karaites – yet the allegorical exegesis remained dominant; then the Rabbis worked to develop a path between the two ways. The Egyptian School played a significant role early on, as did the Andalusian School during the Islamic era. Just as Philo brought interpretation closer to Greek philosophy, Mūsā b. Maymūn (Maimonedes) did the same for Islamic philosophy and Kalām theology.4

Then hermeneutics proceeded to the Christian Church, where the allegorical method dominated again. However, the Fathers laid down some bases to understand and interpret the Bible, which came to be known as Augustine’s rules: (1) Exegesis by received teachings, or by related texts if possible: for such cannot contradict each other; (2) Metaphorical interpretation according to rules and relationships that point to significations beyond the literal meaning; (3) Exegesis using linguistic rules to determine the meanings of words and structures; and (4) Exegesis according to historical circumstances and events accompanying the text.

These rules represented a positive step in refining and structuring the process of interpretation to a certain extent; however, the allegorical method still retained its upper hand due to the influence of Gnosis on early interpretations of the New Testament. Like the Jews, and as with any religion, three groups emerged among them: (a) textual literalists; (b) allegorists and mystics; and (c) moderate centrists. Clement of Alexandria and the School of Antioch both played a role in developing the accommodating approach between absolute literalism and
excessive allegorism. Then came **Augustine of Hippo** with the aforementioned four rules.\(^5\) The Church treated the Bible as its property and considered its interpretation to be the Church’s exclusive right; in order to minimise disagreements, this authority was subsequently limited to the Pope alone. Along with other factors, this resulted in protest movements, including new scepticism, erupting around the middle of the 15\(^{th}\) Century.

Thus new interpretations emerged, free from the authority of the Catholic Church, even if they had not broken free from the same hermeneutics. The revolution led to toughening on the part of the Church, until Protestant interpretations arrived with **Martin Luther** and **John Calvin** in the early 16\(^{th}\) Century. We can compare between the two figures, in that Luther: (a) rejected the interpretative authority of the Pope and the Church; (b) rejected unrestricted allegorical interpretation; (c) believed it necessary for the exegete to make use of history; and most importantly, (d) saw that the text ought to be interpreted on its own grounds, i.e. by linguistic analysis and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Calvin concurred, but with greater conservatism regarding the allegorical-inspirational aspect, as follows: (a) rejection of papal authority; (b) consideration of the text’s historical context; (c) consideration of linguistic rules; (d) rejection of Allegorism. These successive attempts sought to develop the discipline of interpretation, or to turn hermeneutics into a structured technique rather than a loose process without boundaries and limits. However, this was not to close the door of interpretation to all but the Pope, as did the Catholics – who were forced to say that, while individual interpretation is possible, it must conform to the official interpretation relied upon by the Church.

Then came the Modern Era when intellects were set free from their reins, and thinkers went to great lengths in subjecting the Bible to historical criticism and free linguistic analysis, throughout the 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) Centuries. Enlightenment philosophy had a great impact and heavily shook belief in the sanctity of the scripture and its contents. It was helped in this by the Greek heritage revival movement, which had begun prior to this time and carried on with its programme of editing and interpreting the texts. Cartesian Rationalism, as promoted by **Thomas Hobbes** and **Baruch Spinoza**, also had a role in the movement of free interpretation of religious texts. There was a negative effect from Humanism and its call to subject religious scripture to the same standards of critique as other ancient texts. The result was the emergence of various forms of Deism, and rebellion against not only the Church but religion as a whole, during the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) Centuries. Strong voices emerged calling for the abandonment of subjective interpretation and to follow a rationalistic and objective approach.\(^6\)

In the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) Centuries, hermeneutics developed in the manner previously summarised. If the spirit of liberation dominated all Western thinkers at the time, some of them went to the excesses of atheism and scepticism concerning anything religious or sacred. Thus, modern hermeneutics was born in the midst of rationalist, Enlightenment and humanist philosophies.

**Friedrich Schleiermacher** (18\(^{th}\) Century) contributed to developing a hermeneutic theory that was firmly knowledge-based; likewise, Husserl exerted his efforts in distancing bias
from judgements and getting closer to the voice and pulse of reality. The latter’s student Heidegger (1889-1967), along with many other contemporaries, made a manifest impact on hermeneutical theory and generalising it to other fields of philosophy and the humanities.\(^7\)

From the preceding outline, we see how hermeneutics developed in Western thought, and how it progressed from the time of the Greeks until the present day in response to genuine factors within that context: most significantly, the requirements of interpreting the Bible and the complications stemming, on the one hand, from the nature of the subject and the challenges of comprehension; and on the other hand, from the stances of Church and power.

Nobody can claim that we must follow the same programme in differing contexts and circumstances simply for the sake of imitation, and to develop hermeneutics as they did before us.\(^8\) Rather, the process of authentication and criticism began with the very start of the Islamic era, in an open environment with scientific techniques, as indeed non-Muslim specialists testify. Therefore, if there must be imitation, let it be within the scope of our culture and using resources and aspects from our scientific experience. Let it proceed with objectivity and structure, and work to offset the limitations which any human effort necessarily contains.

### 2. Feminist Hermeneutics

As mentioned earlier, the most active part of this movement is a group of female writers who were raised and received their education in the West and continue to work within those institutions. A few returned to their original homelands to participate in the movement’s activities. In addition, some writers in various parts of the Muslim world have contributed in one way or another to this type of academic work. It is important to acknowledge that there are differences between the respective discourses and outputs from the various members of this movement, which bases its statements upon re-readings of religious texts and deriving new interpretations in the light of hermeneutical methodology.

Some of these female researchers are relatively moderate and: (a) accept the Qur’anic text while seeking to interpret it in the way mentioned; (b) reject anything from the Sunnah which they consider antithetical to women’s rights; and (c) affirm their affiliation to Islam. However, there are also some who have gone to the extremes of rejecting all prophetic hadiths, and even questioning the authenticity and divine origin of certain verses of the Qur’an. These people call for a neo-Islam or a new Islamic theology via subjecting the texts of Qur’an and Sunnah – and the entire contents of Islamic tradition – to historical and academic critique along the lines of what occurred in the West.\(^9\)

Therefore, the examples I present here are not all the same in the ideas they promote, their extent of involvement in hermeneutical interpretation, or the cultural background against which this interpretation or analysis arises.
A. Harun Nasution

Harun Nasution was born in 1919 in Indonesia, the far east of the Islamic world, where dominance belongs to the Shāfi‘ī school in fiqh, to Sufism in spirituality and to Ash‘arism in thought and creed. His early development was within this environment, and then his father sent him to Al-Azhar in Egypt, where he attained a bachelor’s degree in Philosophy and Creed. He then travelled to the United States and received a second degree in Education. He later worked in Indonesian diplomacy, and then travelled to Canada, where he received his doctorate from McGill University. Upon his return, he worked to modernise Islamic thought for the sake of modernising Islamic life in his country. He chose to work in education, training researchers in the light of Western modernity. Like other modernisers, he participated in the Pancasila movement (the five principles of Indonesian democracy) as a middle way between fundamentalism and secularism. Through his educational activities, he exercised a tangible influence on Islamic thought in his homeland according to a modernist and critical methodology.¹⁰

In the beginning, Dr. Nasution called for the revival of the rationalist Mu‘tazilī approach to Islamic thought, then shifted to a form of free ijtihād. In these two, there was an obvious encroachment upon two of the pillars of received religious tradition in Indonesia, namely the Ash‘arī and Shafi‘ī schools, yet it remained within the context of Islamic observance. However, he then added an esoteric Bāṭinī approach inspired by the Muslim philosophers’ concept of “emanation” (faydh) which conflicted with both the rationalist approach and the received heritage of Sunnī tasawwuf; indeed, it is closer to Neo-Platonism. Thus the critique extended to all three pillars of the taqlīdī intellectual establishment, in the interests of a modernist thought conducive to development, and loyal to the fixed Islamic principles from the Qur’an and Sunnah to the exclusion of all other dimensions of Islamic heritage which are – according to this view – open to change, and indeed must be changed.

The strange thing is that this advocate of rationalistic Mu‘tazilism did not stop at this Neo-Platonic emanation concept, which he justified as being the rational methodology most likely to lead to diversity among schools of thought, belief and jurisprudence, thus enriching the society in accordance with the Islamic “dynamic”. Rather, he began to adopt the hermeneutical method – which he learned from Toshihiko Izutsu at McGill, as well as his Pakistani colleague Fazlur Rahman – in interpreting the Qur’an thematically and at variance with the traditional methodology.

Although Nasution never abandoned, throughout his career, either his rationalistic nature or his complete and uncritical acceptance of modern Western civilisation, he did comprehend and represent the spirit of academic research within that civilisation, and seek to pass it on to his students in the postgraduate field and the leadership cadres of society in a composed manner that accepted all interpretations and positions. This laid the ground for a gradual process that would lead after some time to more extreme stages of modernist liberalism, which would abandon its Mu‘tazilite roots and go to excesses in re-reading the religious heritage from an entirely Western secular perspective.¹¹
B. Riffat Hassan

Riffat Hassan was born in the 1940s to a Shi‘ite family in Pakistan; her grandfather was a poet and playwright and the family was known for its creativity and patronage of music and dance. She now holds American nationality and teaches Religious Studies at Louisville University. Her earlier studies were at a Christian missionary school in Lahore, the cultural capital of Pakistan. Then she went to Durham University in England to receive an Honours degree in English and Philosophy in 1964, then a doctorate in 1968 on the philosophy of Iqbal, maintaining excellence throughout her studies. Before outlining some of her theories as expressed in a number of articles on “feminist theology” (she uses “theology” in its broad Christian sense, not limited to belief; rather, it means all religious thought concerning women), as well as in her three books about Muhammad Iqbal, it may be appropriate to give an account of a Pakistani intellectual previously mentioned in his role as a professor at McGill University.

Fazlur Rahman Malik (1919-1988) prepared the ground for Dr. Riffat and those she influenced, even if unwittingly. He received his training from Izutsu at McGill, then challenged the traditional definition of the Qur’an in its conception as recited revelation from Archangel to Prophet (peace be upon them). He claimed that there was a subjective aspect to the revelation on the part of its recipient, and that this aspect was what Muslim academic research had thus far failed to appreciate. He lived an active academic life, and was forced to abandon Pakistan after heading its Central Institute of Islamic Research. He was considered a leading authority in Islamic and Qur’anic studies in the West, despite his criticism of many Orientalists.

Professor Fazlur Rahman was perhaps the first to apply the hermeneutical method to the Qur’an, and ended up at his theory of Muhammadan subjectivity or externality and duality in the concept of revelation – even if he did not go to the extent of Mohammed Arkoun in the latter’s application of the same method.

As for Riffat Hassan: she proceeds from a prior assumption of the low regard for women in traditional Islamic thought, and attempts to explain the Qur’an using hermeneutics from a purely feminist perspective. Thus she attempts to uncover its rulings related to women and restore the Islamic perception of women based on the primary source of the religion, using free thought and removing from the Qur’anic text the effects of hadiths, which she criticises using her own techniques, and eventually rejects on the basis of their conflict with the right of women to absolute equality with men. For example, she refutes the hadith of the “curved rib”, considering this idea to have been taken by Muslims from the Torah rather than the Qur’an. In her feminist theology, she virtually abstains from prophetic hadiths, even though many exhort to proper treatment of women and urge respect for them.

She has claimed that: (1) religious thought and narrations in the three revealed religions assume that God’s primary creation was man, in that woman came from his rib; (2) that woman was created not only from him, but for him; and (3) that she is responsible for the descent from Paradise.
It appears that – despite her numerous qualifications in Christian theology – Dr. Hassan is unaware of a fact known to any beginner in Islamic studies: the fact that these three beliefs are foreign to Islam. She exerts great effort at numerous junctures, such as with her strained interpretations of the opening verse of Sūrat al-Nisā’ and her conclusion that “Adam” does not refer to a particular human being, but to the human race. As for the “spouse” (zawj), she claims that as a masculine word it does not refer to the woman. Therefore, there is no primacy in the creation of either gender, and the two origins of the human race are equal.  

She continues this painstaking effort – in vain, as the problem is itself fabricated with respect to the Islamic texts – to conclude that the hadiths are falsely attributed to a Prophet known to be fair towards women and to recognise their rights. All of this reveals an extremely shallow acquaintance with the Arabic language, and obvious weakness in knowledge of Islamic sciences and religious facts, particularly in the sciences of ḥadīth, tafsīr and ṣūl al-fiqh.

C. Amina Wadud

Amina Wadud embraced Islam in 1972, and has long worked hard on feminist interpretation of Islamic texts, based on a complete belief in the absolute equality between men and women. She stayed for a year in Cairo during the 1970s, after receiving her first degree from the University of Pennsylvania. She then completed an MA in Near Eastern Studies and a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Michigan in 1988. She worked as assistant professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia from 1989-1992, then professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University until 2008.

Dr. Wadud carries out her activities through her position as a successful university lecturer, and she has received a number of prizes. Her first book, entitled Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective, has been translated into many languages. She follows Riffat Hassan’s approach in focusing upon the Qur’an and prophetic narrations, interpreting them from a feminist hermeneutical perspective, whereas other female activists within this movement focus on history and subjecting the entire Islamic enterprise to critique. Also, despite her extreme conception of gender equality, she affirms her commitment to Islam according to the understanding she embraces.

In the aforementioned book, Wadud highlights her dependence upon the Qur’an alone, such that if the Sunnah contradicts her understanding of the former, she rejects the latter. In what she calls her “progressive” understanding of the Qur’an, she rejects its divorce laws and approval of polygyny, considering both to be examples of a mistaken, regressive understanding of Islam and the Qur’an. She calls for a cultural break from these backward interpretations, while referring in her discussions only to one work of tafsīr, namely the Kashshāf of Al-Zamakhsharī, without explaining the reason for her choice.

Wadud’s level of Arabic seems, despite her qualifications, to be comparable to that of Riffat Hassan. She calls for interpreting the Qur’an in a variety of cultural contexts and environments, rather than being restricted to one. Like Dr. Hassan, she re-visits the question of creation and the “zawj” in order to establish complete equality between the two origins of
the human race – as well as discussing the concepts of *afdalyya* (preference), *qiwāma* (guardianship) and *nushūc* (marital discord) – ignoring, in the process, the requirements of Qur’ānic context and linguistic signification.16

**D. Fatema Mernissi**

She is the first of our two examples from North Africa, the heart of the Muslim world. Leila Ahmed has an Egyptian background but her education was in Britain and the USA, where she continues to reside. As for Fatema Mernissi, she returned to her homeland after studying in the West.

Dr. Mernissi had a traditional upbringing in Morocco, and studied political science at Mohammed V University and the Sorbonne before travelling to America and attaining a doctorate in sociology from Brandeis University in 1974. Upon her return, she began to lecture in sociology at the Mohammed V University of Rabat and is nowadays a research scholar acclaimed in Western circles in the field of Qur’ānic and Islamic studies. In 2003, she was granted an award for her contribution to feminist literature. She has numerous published studies concerning the *ḥijāb*, Islam and democracy, certain aspects of Islamic history, women and Islam, and other topics.

Before summarising her opinions and contributions to the feminist interpretative movement, I wish to mention two well-known names in the field of hermeneutics in the North African environment. The first is the late Professor Arkoun17, who was mentioned earlier in the context of his efforts to “deconstruct” the verses of the Qur’an in search of the “real Qur’an” whose text had, he claimed, become mixed with myths which ought to be separated from it. He called for the light of investigation to be directed at the project of compiling the Qur’an – which was flawed in his opinion – putting aside the supposed historical sanctity and authenticity of its text, so that the original text could be purified of the mythical contents contained in the *Muṣḥaf* in the hands of the Muslims.18

These are the boldest claims to surface against the *mutawātir* text of the Qur’an throughout the centuries, across the regions of the Muslim world and among all strata of society – scholars and laymen, old and young, women and men – but they were echoed subtly by another Moroccan writer, ʿAbd al-Ḥāḍī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, particularly in his book *Sulṭat al-Naṣṣ* (“The Authority of Text”).

In his introduction, Professor ʿAbd al-Raḥmān speaks about “historicism” concerning the event of Islam’s emergence, and its content and use. He attempts to specify a methodology to study the Qur’an and other texts based on a break from traditional methodologies, which ought to be replaced by a method of deconstruction and reconstruction, with the standards used to critique the Greek tradition. He admits that one inevitable attribute of this methodology is “subjectivity”, then states that there needs to be a linguistic instrument to analyse the Qur’ānic text, which “could be structural, philological, expressive, grammatical, or a combination of all these.” He moves from Noam Chomsky to Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, objecting to the latter’s conclusions about the famous hadith concerning innovations
(“Kullu muḥdathatin bid’a...”). He suggests in response that “bid’a” is genitive, as is “dalāla” in the next phrase. As for the statement “Every misguidance is in the Fire”: he claims that this is the predicate – or, in his novel phraseology, the “result”. We must ask what analytical method this is, and what novel grammar this researcher is applying. ‘Abd al-Rahmān calls people to consider the psychological aspect of the Qur’an – given that the Qur’an is in a human language – and to remove the aura of sanctity from it and employ every methodology “whether linguistic, psychological, historical or dialectical”. He applies the method of “reasons of revelation” to Sūrat al-Nisā’, deconstructing and interpreting, concluding with nothing but doubts cast upon the text, and the charge of wrongdoing against women either by its contents, or via its application by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him)."

It was in this environment that Fatema Mernissi’s views developed. Her books presented her bold opinions based on a feminist worldview and using thematic and historical analysis: not only on religious texts, but indeed on the entire Islamic historical experience. In *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she explores prophetic hadiths concerning women in terms of their *mattn* and *isnād*, with critique based upon the assumption that traditional research is unable to reach the proper position on women and must be corrected. She believes that politics has affected religious texts, particularly hadiths, which she discusses under the title: “Sacred Text as a Political Weapon” – this being behind their negative attitude towards females. In the second part, she discusses the first three years of the Mādīnan state from a historical angle to prove that the rulings applied to women there, including segregation and *ḥijāb*, were temporary measures limited to a particular historical context. In the final chapter, she concludes that the oppression faced by the Muslim woman is not due to Islam, the Qur’an or the Sunnah, but rather to the society and male interests.

In *Beyond the Veil*, she does the same sort of historical analysis, attaching great significance to political considerations and discussing the various hadiths about women. She claims that the narration of Al-Bukhārī from Abū Bakra concerning female leadership – when news reached the Prophet (on whom be peace) of the Persians appointing a woman as their leader – was nothing more than a weapon in the political stance taken by its narrator, justifying his seclusion from the strife. She accuses the same Companion over the narration of Al-Ḥasan’s conciliation between the warring parties, accusing him of having a memory that shifts for the sake of convenience: a crude form of ridicule. No less crude are her comments about Abū Hurayra, whose allegedly misogynistic attitude was due to his displeasure at being so nicknamed rather than as “Abū Hirr” (a masculine word). It is by such “academic” standards that hadiths are rejected or accepted in the feminist interpretative movement.

Even if Mernissi’s explanation of the historical circumstances behind the “temporary” obligation of *ḥijāb* in Madīna is accepted, what is she to do – after critiquing the Sunnah – with Qur’anic verses like Al-Ahzab 33:53? The response is the same: historical context, specifically the military threat in the year 5 AH and the burden of many visitors coming to the Prophet’s home – all of which brought about the ruling which is comparable in her eyes to the Original Sin in Christianity. Consequently, Mernissi presents the ruling as *temporary* in
nature, in response to a situation that ceased to exist: this is historicism as applied to Qur'anic texts and their meanings and spheres of application.

She also discusses the inheritance rulings in terms of their historical connections, also with a measure of ridicule. Her analysis of numerous Qur'anic verses is in terms of cause (historical circumstances) and effect (the revelation), in language that expresses grievances or criticisms against the Companions and the Prophet himself concerning any revelation sent down against what Dr. Mernissi considers to be the interests of women.\(^{20}\)

**E. Leila Ahmed**

If the prolific Mernissi was something of a pioneer in this type of historical critique, then Dr. Leila Ahmed has taken on her mantle. She received all her university education from the UK’s Cambridge University and became a professor at the Harvard Divinity School.

She has published a number of books: some about women and others on academic, professional and personal interests, but her primary work is *Women and Gender in Islam*. In it, she uses a historical method to present the origins of the contemporary struggle between these three elements, as well as detailing the position of woman from the early days of Islam up to its major eras. Then she outlines feminist discourse in the modern period in various Muslim regions including Egypt, and its relation to issues of *ḥijāb*, divorce, polygyny and so on. She concurs almost completely with Mernissi’s opinions and the evidences she presents, but with a comparative style and attention to cultural influences. As for the “curved rib”, she sees in it the influence of Byzantine culture. She also contrasts African conservatism with Egyptian libertarianism with respect to women. She attacks the term “*Jāhiliyya*” for its negative effect, while stating that Islam restricted the Arab woman’s sexual freedom. She makes a distinction between – on the one hand – the technical or juristic understanding of prophetic directives, which transforms them into lasting rulings of permission and prohibition, and – on the other – an ethical interpretation that focuses on values and addresses the conscience. She considers the former to be the most serious error into which Islamic orthodoxy has fallen.

Turning to the Qur’an, Dr. Ahmed challenges the Muslims’ belief in the authenticity of its text established by *tawātur* (successive multiple narration), opining that what is in people’s hands today is different from what was revealed upon the Prophet (blessings and peace be upon him). I do not know what is behind this enthusiasm, by which she – as an educated Muslim woman – challenges the core beliefs of every Muslim.\(^{21}\)
Conclusions

After looking at these examples distributed in various parts of the world, we can summarise the key points of this movement’s discourse while noting that its members vary in the extent to which they adopt some of these points:

1. **Historicism concerning religious texts** including the Qur’an, subjecting them to historical context which could lead to abrogation and replacement, or reduction to purely ethical values. Indeed, casting doubt on the authenticity and perfection of the Qur’anic text.

2. **Biased analysis** that turns a blind eye to: the nature of Arabic texts and Arabic linguistic rules, usages and idioms; the significance of the Qur’an declaring its “Arabic” nature; and the conclusions of contemporary phonological studies, particularly semantics, concerning interpretation.

3. **Under-qualification**, to various extents, for the job of interpretation. Approaching the Qur’anic text with preconceived notions born of a methodology that materialised and thrived in a different culture for reasons that may not exist in the Islamic environment.

4. **Denigrating the Islamic sciences** that were compiled and developed in service of religious texts – to verify, understand and derive rulings from them – with the claim that these represent regressive traditionalism from which we need a decisive break. This, despite the fact that it is these sciences – along with literary, phonological and rhetorical studies – that can form an authentic “hermeneutics”. In other words, they can be taken as a suitable methodology for interpreting Arabic texts scientifically, objectively and according to set rules.

Towards an Arabic Hermeneutics

I believe that we are now in need of constructing a theory or a complete intellectual structure for interacting with Arabic religious texts – including the Qur’an and Sunnah – and interpreting them in a way that accords with its nature and respects its unique characteristics. In this way, we can deflect from our heritage, language, civilisation and intellectual existence, the negative trends that find intelligent men and women from among us to participate, thus destroying the edifice of their own people and depriving them of their identity: language, tradition, culture and religion.

We need not invent something new to match what others have produced: all that is required is to gather the elements of interaction with tradition and its scientific and cultural phenomena from our original sciences and our historical experience. In this way, those sciences will continue their service to this tradition and make it incumbent on anyone who wishes to study, evaluate and interpret the tradition to master the sciences, and, in addition, be trained in their implementation and how to carry out objective research within their scope. This is the proper
alternative to wandering in the wilderness citing “insurmountable subjectivity”; such is nothing but intellectual idleness and blameworthy imitation.

The aptitude of the researcher is a basic prerequisite to any research activity. We saw how some people speak at length about things of which they have no knowledge – armed with nothing but unrestrained guesswork and embellishment – from among the most crucial issues of life and existence. The dangers of this phenomenon may not be obvious today; but as this “intellectual” output continues, the cultural environment will become polluted by its by-products until future generations are left unable to breathe clean air. It will no longer be straightforward to gain knowledge and search for the reality of our civilisational existence.

I wished to shed some light on the efforts of Uṣūl scholars in particular in confronting this powerful wave, and in developing and enriching the language. Phonological research, which had been unengaged with this dimension, has now begun to include it in the study of language and its sciences and methodologies. The means and tools are abundant, and all that remains is to apply careful consideration and thorough scrutiny. Therefore, I shall suffice with a brief outline of the elements that can form the basis of the desired Arabic theory of interpretation, in the hope that I shall have another opportunity to elaborate thoroughly on these elements, particularly the efforts of the Uṣūl scholars:

1. Sciences of the Arabic language including its traditional branches – nahw, šarf, balāgha, ‘arūḍ, naqd and adab – alongside their counterparts in modern phonology, especially semantics.

2. Principles and rules of tafsīr, along with types and examples, methods and techniques; appreciating the contributions of our predecessors to understanding its meanings and objectives; related subjects in the Qur’anic sciences.

3. Principles of hadīth, methods of authentication and critiquing both matn and sanad, accompanied by modern methodologies of critiquing and editing texts and historical criticism – both internal and external.

4. Uṣūl al-fiqh and the means by which the jurists extract rulings from their sources; the linguistic and jurisprudential axioms underpinning this process; related studies of the nature and objectives of the source-texts, supported by methods of analysis and law-drafting in contemporary legal philosophy.

These are the primary issues that may require further categorisation, in addition to knowledge of the text’s field of relevance, such that it is possible to interact with it with certainty and clarify, interpret and explain it. I ask Allah – Most High – to bring these bright minds back to the vastness of their culture and heritage, and the origins and reality of their existence.
NOTES

1 These meanings are expressed by the Qur’an (4:1 and 49:13).

2 Faṣl al-maqāl (Italy, undated), p.3.

3 See: Kirby, David, Dictionary of Contemporary Thought (London, MacMillan)

4 See: Al-Shāfī‘ī, Ḥasan, Al-madkhal ilā dirāsat ‘ilm al- kalām (Cairo, 2nd edition, Wahba), p.251 onwards


6 Ibid, p.67-76

7 Ibid, p.87-103. See also: Grondin, Jean, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, (New Haven, Yale University Press), p.1-3

8 Maḥmūd, p.105

9 Ibid, p.3-4. See also: Arkoun, Mohammed, Rethinking Islam: (Western Press, 1994) p.36-37

10 Geertz, Clifford, “Modernization in Muslim Society”, Religion and Progress in Modern Asia, (New York, Free Press), p.95


12 Mahmood, p.129

13 See: Al-Bahī, Muḥammad, Al-fikr al-islāmī al-ḥadīth (1st ed.)

14 Mahmood, p.194-270 and p.206 onwards

15 Some of the biographical information was inaccurate and has been adjusted as necessary – Trans.

16 Ibid, p.210-222

17 Arkoun passed away some time after the paper was originally published.

18 Ibid, p.129-131


20 Mahmood, p.131-158.