

# Book Reviews

Mary in the Qur'an: A Literary Reading  
by Hosn Abboud. London and New York:  
Routledge, 2014, 208 pages.

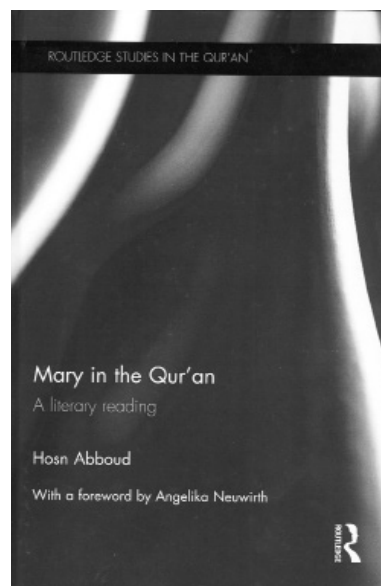
REVIEWED BY BILAL ORPHALI

The story of Mary (Mariam) occupies a considerable part of the Qur'an and is more elaborate than the stories of many prophets. Mary is also the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an and the only female exemplar that has a story devoted to herself. Despite this, few studies have been devoted to her narrative and image compared to the studies dedicated to her son Jesus ('Isa).

In this book/thesis study (University of Toronto) Hosn Abboud analyzes the story of Mary in the Qur'an in its liturgical, narrative, and rhetorical contexts combining for the first time in studying the Qur'anic text a number of theories and approaches, including the following: theory of intertextuality, feminist and gender analysis, studies on myths and archetypes, and typological and psychological analysis. She also employs classical Arabic literary theories, especially the theory of *naẓm* or "structure" as developed by 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī. This literary approach to sacred texts is well known in Biblical studies, The Great Code of Northrop Frye is a notable example which is rarely applied to Qur'anic studies. The book is based on a structural, stylistic, and syntactical analysis of two Qur'anic Suras (chapters) covering the whole story of Mary, from the recalling of her memory in surat Maryam (her dhikr) to the narrating of her infancy story in surat Al-Imran. The book treats these suras as a discourse in a communication process between the messenger of God and the (Muslim) Community, thus appreciating the story within the suras and within the Qur'an as a whole.

Thus, despite being fully aware of the Biblical intertexts, Abboud focuses on the final form of the *Qur'anic* text. The historical layers are uncovered only to highlight the depth, richness, craft, and aim of the text. Abboud shows that the Qur'anic narrative of Mary recoins older traditions to serve a Qur'anic and an Islamic world view that is different from that of the Bible. She pays special attention to the pre-Islamic Arabic intertexts, specifically the tri-partite pre-Islamic ode (*qaṣīda*) and the journey (*raḥīl*) section in it. Benefitting from the studies of Vladimir Propp, Northrop Frye, and Carl G. Jung, Abboud also devotes attention to the literary motifs and archetypes in the text that are rooted in Near Eastern culture and civilization.

An interesting discovery in Abboud's study is that the Qur'anic text furnishes more than one image of Mary. The study tracks the changes in these different images of Mary between the Meccan (Surat Maryam) and Medinian (*surat Āl 'Imrān*) periods, drawing links with the historical events in early Islam. The parallelism between Mary's and the Prophet Muhammad's experiences in carrying the Word of God is further discussed in the last chapter of the book where Abboud tackles the question of Mary's prophethood. Here Abboud resorts to a number of classical and



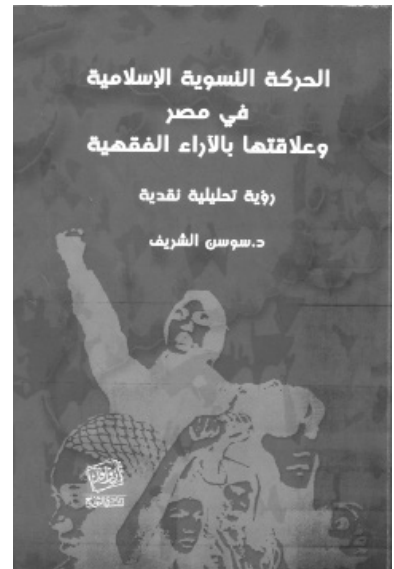
modern exegetes who addressed the question of Mary's prophet-hood, reading them critically and highlighting the role of the exegete in interpreting the text and bringing further textual proof of a Qur'anic vision of Mary's prophethood.

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Al-Haraka al-Niswiyya al-Islamiyya fi Misr, By Sawsan el-Sherif, Cairo, Egypt: Rawafed, 2015. Print.

REVIEWED BY SHERIN DARWISH

Sawsan el-Sherif has produced a study which aims to highlight a recent tangential issue of human rights within the Islamic discourse on women's rights. El-Sherif argues that it is important to capitalize on the recent debate between shari'a scholars and feminist groups because the more light is shed on the issue, the more it will positively affect women's personal status within Muslim societies. She shows how the basic rights and tenets given to women by the Qur'an have been re-interpreted to suit a more male-dominated discourse which has evolved and led to a widespread cultural neglect of those very rights. Four chapters frame this discourse: from background to ideology to the relationship with Islamic feminism and the current legal point of view. Although the initial proposal of el-Sherif's thesis is more clearly stated in the introduction to her book, she does present an organized overview of how and why, in this day and age, Muslim women are not getting their God-given rights in regards to personal status issues related to marriage and marital rights and duties.



El-Sherif makes an in-depth review of the current situation of Islamic feminism. It is interesting to know that the emergence of this new Islamic tradition of feminism as an independent movement is actually Iranian and not Egyptian. Among the pioneers of Islamic feminism in Iran, the country that witnessed the first emergence of Islamic feminism in the 1990s, are scholars Ziba Mir Hosseini and Afsaneh Najmabadi. However, as history attests and Margot Badran reminds us, Egyptian feminism being Egyptian, not Western, made it easy for the term nisswiyya (or feminism in Arabic) to establish itself since the 1920s (Badran, 2002). Although some background is provided in the first chapter, the new-comer to the issue of nisswiyya may encounter gaps in his/her knowledge regarding the concepts of qiwana for example, but this is explained in Chapter III, which fully develops the issues pertaining to the Muslim woman's status both within the private arena and in the context of reformist efforts and modern jurisprudence. The issues discussed are essentially the following: the concept of qiwama; the evaluation and tradition of the dowry

within the marriage contract; the intimate dealings between husband and wife and how these are interpreted by men in a one-sided, religiously incorrect way supported by the shari'a; the issue of polygamy and how the Qur'anic edict only allows it in certain situations whereas the shari'a may seem to be condoning it, indeed even encouraging it, for no other reason than it being a legitimate way for the man to take his pleasure from more than one women.

While el-Sherif discusses these issues from several perspectives, always supporting her arguments with varied valid sources as well as Qu'ranic verses, her argument would have gained in cohesion and would have been easier to grasp if her research and analysis of each of the major issues had been grouped under one section with various sub-sections instead of being dispersed throughout the chapter. However, one comes away with a clear identification of the problem as delineated by el-Sherif, who makes a strong case for the need to ultimately modify shari'a laws to safeguard the rights of women in Arab societies. She supports her claims with up-to date sources and interviews with prominent experts in the field. At times, however, one feels that the study might have benefited from the inclusion of an official report justifying their anti-feminist take on the issues according to their reading of the shari'a. This might constitute a gap in the literature review that actually emphasizes the need for the re-interpretation of the jurisprudential tradition that el-Sherif and her sources are calling for. Nonetheless, considering the nature of the problem, this proved to be a difficult obstacle to overcome, because those in whose hands lie the solutions were very resistant to the idea of debating these issues anyway.

The conclusion to Chapter III acknowledges the difficulty in adhering to a formal empirical methodology in obtaining coherent primary data. El-Sherif argues, correctly, that the diversity of valid Islamic sources in this debate, between the Qur'an, the Sunna, the Hadith, and the different trends followed by Muslim communities, is not at all helped by the fact that there are no lines of communication among the different "teams"; each entrenched as they are within the confines of their own comfort or interest zones. At times, it seems that el-Sherif's argument is unclear to those who might not have a good grasp of the multiple written and orally transmitted Islamic sources and inherent contradictions as well as controversies generated by them. As el-Sherif puts it: "Some criticize Islamic feminism for not using a specific theoretic(al) approach and for not seeking to reach knowledge on a systematic basis. At the same time, it adapts the approaches to serve...its objectives and not to prove the validation or error of the ideas it calls for" (el-Sherif, 2012, translated from the Arabic). Chapter IV proposes suggested solutions to unlock discussion between the two main opposing parties of this religious and legal tug-of-war.

Not only did el-Sherif provide an extensive review of literature from articles, books, and online links, but over the course of nine months, she also attended several seminars, conferences, and workshops on women's rights and Islamic feminism. In-depth interviews and correspondence with no less than twelve feminist scholars, as well as three professors of Jurisprudence at al-Azhar University allowed her to broach the debate and force a much-needed connection between the conflicting parties. The main limitation faced by el-Sherif was finding male professors of that University willing to discuss these issues in the first place. This shows the widespread resistance to the exploration of the idea of re-assessing women rights in the modern Islamic world. It was one of el-Sherif's goals to compel a debate between the Egyptian Islamic feminists and the men of al-Azhar who have a say in laying down the law in those matters. El-Sherif's study is also based on an extensive number of interviews with eminent specialists in the field of religious, legal, and anthropological studies, and was thus able to provide qualitative data to support the need for re-instating, and sometimes simply applying, the rights provided to women by Qu'ranic

sources. Most of these interviews were conducted with women very active in the Human Rights sphere, while the few men who were interviewed were affiliated with the Law department of al-Azhar and included one representative of the Musawah (Equality) Movement. It would have been useful to have more perspective from the opposing party to see why and how they justify male authoritarian “supremacy” interpretation of qiwama which, as el-Sherif argues, is neither the original meaning nor the original intent behind this Qur’anic concept.

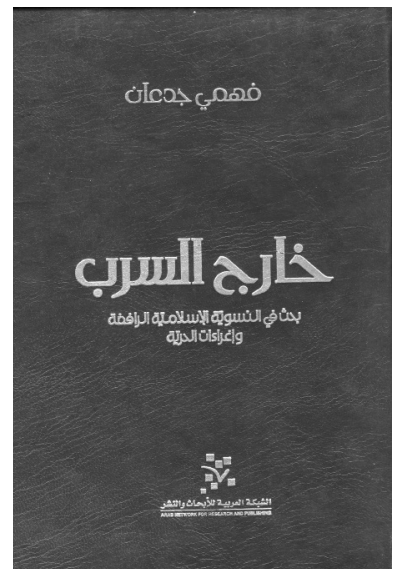
The implications of this study are clear: many more opportunities for debate and negotiation of women’s rights are needed in Egypt. El-Sherif reports on one such opportunity which brought together in discussion scholars and ‘ulamas of the al-Azhar in October of 2012, under the name “Jurisprudence and its Functions within Islamic Feminism”. She concludes that the demands of modern Islamic feminists are actually reasonable and compatible with the frameworks of both the shari’a and the legal system in Egypt, provided that a fair and contextual interpretation of Islam and its tradition is adopted, and that men also comply with the teachings of the Qur’an. These teachings actually require of men the same commitment to respect, fairness, harmony, and responsibility within the couple required of women. One of the main conclusions that el-Sherif reaches is that it is of utmost importance to specifically address Egyptian men through a targeted religious discourse to try and crack open the rigid mental attitudes of established ‘machismo’ traditions: this, then, will be el-Sherif’s next target.

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Kharij al-Sirb: Bahth fi-n-Niswiya al-islamiya al-Rafida wa ighra’at al-Hurriya, by Fahmi Jadaan. Beirut, al-shabaka al-arabiyya lil-abhath wa-l-nashr 280 ,2010 pages.

REVIEWED BY HOSN ABOUD

In his book *Kharij al-sirb: bahth fi an-niswiya al-islamiya al-rafida wa ighra’at al-hurriya* (i.e. Outside the flock: A study in rejectionist Islamic feminism and the appeal of freedom), Fehmi Jadaan is mostly concerned with the writings and activities of a group of Muslim feminists who migrated from Asian and African countries to settle either in Europe or in Canada. This group has come to promote a globalized Muslim feminist discourse which he refers to as “rejectionist” (niswiyya islamiyya rafida) because it blames Islam for all the hardships that



befell them and other women in their countries of origin, through “male oppression” and the existing “Islamic judicial system” dealing with women issues.

We are much indebted to Jadaan for his useful contribution to the field of Islamic feminism in this book. His intelligent discussion of “rejectionist feminism” as an introduction to globalized Islam and the examination of concepts and terms in order to promote an enlightened discourse on the topic make this work a reference on the issue of Islamic Feminism in the Arab world and Europe. Jadaan comes up with three major categories of Islamic feminists, showcasing their different perspectives on reform and gender equality within Islamic societies. He classifies these Islamic feminists along a spectrum occupied on the right by what he refers to as “reformist feminism” (an-niswiyya al-islahiyya), in the center by feminists who apply hermeneutics to Scriptures (an-niswiyya at-ta’wilyyya), and on the left by what he refers to as “rejectionist feminism” (an-niswiyya ar-rafida). In all three types of Islamic feminisms, Islam plays a central role in identifying and explaining gender (in)equality and women’s rights. Explaining their differences, he contends that reformist Islamic feminists are traditional and conservative in their approach to gender equality and Islam. They do not question Muslim Scriptures and their interpretations. They try instead to identify sexist or discriminatory practices and rulings that offend modern consciousness, and attempt to reconcile them with modern sensibilities. By contrast, feminists who use a hermeneutical approach in their understanding of gender equality in Islam do not shy away from examining, questioning, and re-interpreting Scriptures in ways that sometimes contradict traditional interpretations, in order to find a basis for gender equality and justice in Islam.

Jadaan’s main focus, however, is on the third type of Islamic feminism, what he refers to as “rejectionist Islamic feminism” (an-niswiyya al-islamiyya ar-rafida). He chose to concentrate on rejectionist Islamic feminists because their brand of feminism departs clearly from the other types of Islamic feminism which accept and place Islam at the heart of their quest for gender equality. Rejectionist Islamic feminism, he argues, is premised on the rejection of canonical Islamic thought and doctrines. Not only that, its discourse is often marked by the use of anti-Islamic rhetoric that goes beyond biting criticism of Islam by adopting bold and even rude language at times.

What is this rejectionist Islamic feminism which has captured the author’s attention?

In answering this question, Jadaan presented four women whom he chose to represent this brand of feminism: Taslima Nasreen, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, and Necla Kelek. He allocated a full chapter to each, in order to cover their literary work, thoughts, and activism. He began each chapter with a selection of key sentences and quotes which introduce each of these feminists. The women he chose are part of a group of Muslim-born women who either willingly left their (Muslim) countries of origin, or were forced to migrate to another European or North American country. According to the author, these women were able to express their radical, highly critical views about gender inequality in Islam in their new homeland.

For instance, in the second chapter, Jadaan tackled the case of the Bengali Taslima Nasreen (b. 1962), who was dissatisfied with being a doctor and went on to become a literary figure. She took to writing in local newspapers, focusing on women’s issues and their suffering in the Bengali society. Yet, what made her the target of fanatical Muslims was her open criticism of Islam in Bengali life. Consequently, a legal ruling (fatwa) was issued against her, declaring her an apostate. Moreover her book, which denounces the persecution of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh at the hands of Islamic religious communities and defends secularism, played a prominent role in creating strong opposition against her and her activities. It is no wonder that she found in India,

Germany, and finally Sweden a suitable environment in which she could express her liberal thoughts and anger against Islam and Muslim cultures.

In another example in chapter 3, Jadaan dealt with the Somali Ayaan Hirsi Ali Majan (b. 1969), who migrated to Holland. Her short film *Submission*, the English rendering of the Arabic word "Islam", led to the assassination of its producer, her Dutch colleague Theo van Gogh, in Amsterdam on November 2, 2004. The assassination took place as a result of the way in which she tackled the relationship between the individual and God in Islam – an issue that provoked an immigrant young man from Morocco to kill van Gogh. In the film, she criticized this relationship by likening it to the relationship of obedience that exists between master and slave. Ayaan was active in the Dutch political life, and since she was supported by her political party, she succeeded in becoming a member in the Dutch parliament. She also became the center of attention of all political and social powers in Holland, because of her boldness, frankness, her ideas which oppose multiculturalism and the teaching of religion in schools, and because of her radical thoughts against Islam, the religion she was born into. After the assassination of the film's producer, and the way in which he was slain, the Dutch government could no longer guarantee the safety of Hirsi Ali. Consequently she left for the United States, where she was well received by the right-wing parties and by the Neo-Conservatives. There, she received a special treatment from the "American Enterprise Institute" and founded the women's rights organization, the AHA Foundation. She became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2013 and that year she was made a fellow at the Kennedy Government School at Harvard University. After the events of September 11, Ayaan said: "My mind was enlightened after September 11, and I stopped considering the Qur'an a holy book. I came to consider it as a historical document written by human beings. The Qur'an was a formula [...] for men who wrote it one hundred years after the Prophet's death. It was an Arabic expression of a hard and brutal culture—a fanatical culture obsessed with controlling women... I am positive that Islam is a totalitarian religion; every detail in life is determined by the Qur'an. There is no freedom [...] I began my personal revolution. I succeeded in accepting the Qur'an as a relative document, and that it did not contain the precise words that God had spoken, and that it was a book like any other book" (p. 132).

Jadaan describes the discourse of Ayaan Hirsi Ali as being provocative, uncompromising, sharp, rigid, impertinent, violent, and sarcastic, despite her assertion that everything is fine in discussion, except verbal and physical violence. According to the author, her feminism does not really mean "re-reading Islam", or exerting effort in interpreting its texts. It is a feminism produced by a weary consciousness that deals with Islamic culture instead of the spiritual or rational in Islam. Such feminism has as its basis the centrality of the concept of individual freedom, accepts relativism, and denounces God and blames Islam for the woes that befall women in Muslim societies. It accepts the idea that Islam does not comply with human rights and liberal philosophy, and fosters a medieval way of thinking based on the importance of the tribe and the concepts of honor, disgrace, purity, sin and fear, instead of the concepts of forgiveness and peace (p. 132).

While not all four "rejectionist" feminists that Jadaan dealt with have publicly expressed their rejection of Islam or have admitted to losing the faith altogether (Manji openly calls for a reconciliation of faith in Islam and freedom in her reformist project), what they have in common is their very vocal, scathing criticism of Islam, its main figures, and the prevalent Islamic cultures. Not only that, they tend to reduce the religion to its cultural manifestations, or to collapse the religion with culture. Moreover, according to this reductionist, monolithic view of Islam, the Islamic religion is restricted to what was practiced early on in Hijaz in Saudi Arabia (i.e. Wahhabi



brand of Islam). To them, this is the only Islam that exists: it is inherently and essentially opposed to enlightenment, it is not subject to explanation or interpretation, and is unable to undergo any internal criticism. By doing so, the author argues, these “rejectionist” feminists fell in the trap of fundamentalism, just like the Salafis whom they so vehemently criticize.

In sum, the discourse of the “rejectionist feminists”, while a main aspect of the ongoing Islamic Reform process, is considered by the author to be exclusionist, reductionist, and a result of a shallow understanding of the Islamic religion. This discourse is also oblivious to the importance of hermeneutics and of re-interpreting Scriptures and is expressed in language that is purposefully provocative (p. 240).

In his last chapter titled “The Battle for Enlightenment”, Jadaan dealt with the problems and deficiencies in a situation where men dominate women. His analysis of this relationship is carried out from a gender perspective, and reflects the author’s awareness of the importance of modernizing the discourse on women and gender in Islam, especially with respect to the following topics which have been influenced by antiquated jurisprudence on women: polygamy, court witnessing, the harshness of punishments in the Wahhabi school of thought, men’s leadership in political and religious affairs, veiling of women (and not men), forced marriages, and emphasizing women’s sinful nature while being silent on the sins committed by men.

The author pointed out to the differences between the different types of Islamic feminists he discussed in his book, and the different ways in which they relate to Islamic Scriptures and women’s rights and issues. The reformist Islamic feminists, for instance, consider the deplorable state of being a result of a “mistake” in reading religious texts which need to be explained. Such feminists try to “reconcile”, with limited success, Scriptures with modernity and the demands of contemporary life. Muslim feminists who are hermeneutically-minded, by contrast, recognize the need to re-read and re-interpret Scriptures in their historical context, in order to understand them from a feminist perspective, without questioning the credibility of the religious texts and the philosophical and spiritual foundations of these texts, using what Jad’an refers to as “the rationality of faith”. However, the “rejectionist” feminists, according to Jad’an, place themselves outside all of the above perspectives that engage with Islam, despite the claim by some of them that they aim at re-interpreting Islam.

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