



## VOICING LIBERATION OF WOMEN; QASIM AMIN AND ASMA BARLAS

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### *Abstract*

**Keywords:**

Qasim Amin, Asma Barlas, Pembebasan Perempuan dan Islam

Apakah Islam mendukung ketidaksetaraan? Pertanyaan ini telah menjadi perhatian para cendekiawan Muslim dalam beberapa abad terakhir, terutama Qasim Amin dan Asma Barlas. Oleh karena itu, makalah ini bertujuan untuk membuat studi perbandingan pemikiran Amin dan Barlas tentang pembebasan perempuan. Data akan dianalisis melalui pendekatan deskriptif-analitik. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa Amin dan Barlas memiliki persamaan dan perbedaan dalam menyuarakan kebebasan perempuan. Mereka mengkritik dan merekonstruksi beberapa konsep yang dianggap mapan dalam tradisi Islam, seperti hijab dan poligami. Mereka dengan tegas menentang gagasan mapan tentang hijab, yang berarti menutupi seluruh tubuh perempuan kecuali mata, yang bertentangan dengan ajaran Islam. Namun, mereka tidak setuju bahwa jilbab harus menutupi bagian-bagian tubuh wanita. Lebih jauh lagi, Amin memperluas definisi hijab, yang mengacu pada pembatasan gerak perempuan (qasr al-mar'ah fi al-bait). Namun, dalam hal poligami, mereka secara kritis menilai pemahaman klasik tentang kebolehan poligami. Oleh karena itu, mereka memberikan syarat-syarat yang ketat terhadap kebolehan poligami. Namun demikian, Amin tampaknya menganjurkan bahwa poligami tidak diperbolehkan. Amin dan Barlas terinspirasi untuk mereformasi masyarakat Muslim, khususnya pembebasan perempuan, oleh konteks sosial dan pengalaman mereka. Terlepas dari niat baik mereka, ide-ide mereka telah menerima kritik dan pujian. Penerimaan yang beragam ini menekankan perjuangan yang terus berlanjut di dunia Muslim tentang gender, tradisi, dan modernisasi.

**Abstract****Keywords:**

Qasim Amin,  
Asma Barlas,  
Liberation of  
Women and Islam

*Does Islam advocate inequality? This question has been a concern of Muslim scholars in recent centuries, notably Qasim Amin and Asma Barlas. Hence, this paper aims to make a comparative study of Amin and Barlas's thoughts on the liberation of women. The data will be analyzed through a descriptive-analytic approach. The analysis finds that Amin and Barlas have similarities and differences in voicing women's freedom. They criticize and reconstruct some concepts that are considered established within the Islamic tradition, such as hijab and polygamy. They firmly oppose the established idea of hijab, which means covering women's entire bodies except for their eyes, which is contrary to Islamic teaching. They disagree, however, on which a hijab should cover parts of a woman's body. Furthermore, Amin broadens the definition of hijab, which refers to restricting women's movements (qasr al-mar'ah fi al-bait). In terms of polygamy, however, they critically assessed the classical understanding of the permissibility of polygamy. Therefore, they impose strict conditions on the permissibility of polygamy. Nevertheless, Amin seems to advocate that polygamy is not permissible. Amin and Barlas were inspired to reform Muslim society, specifically women's liberation, by their social context and experiences. Despite their good intentions, their ideas have received both criticism and praise. This mixed reception emphasizes the continuous struggle in the Muslim world about gender, tradition, and modernization.*

**Introduction**

The backwardness of Muslim countries from the West has compelled Muslim intellectuals to investigate the causes. Perhaps, patriarchal tradition is responsible for the current situation where Muslim women do not have the same status as men based on disregarding women's importance in Muslim majority or minority communities.<sup>1</sup> Women are regarded as the secondary social class, whereas men serve as rulers and overcome them. The patriarchal tradition has undoubtedly been cultivated in the Islamic world until the present day, as it occurs in Egypt, Pakistan, and other countries.

<sup>1</sup> A. Wadud, *Qur'an, and Woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). ix

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Egypt witnessed how women were treated as objects of men's lust and only responsible for kitchen tasks. Women are shunned and barred from participating in public activities. They hardly find a firm position in business, politics, or religious authority.<sup>2</sup> An Egyptian reformist figure, Qasim Amin, began to reform and liberate women from male dominance due to the given condition of women. He wrote "*Tabrir al-Mar'ah*,"<sup>3</sup> Expressing his idea of the liberation of women encountering the existing tradition. Backwardness in Egypt is rooted in considering women as the second social class. According to Amin, women cannot be separated from the development of a country. Elevating the status of women affects a country's development hence the civilization. On the other hand, the state's and civilization's weakness reflects the low status of women in the country.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is critical to highlight and examine Amin's notions on women's liberation.

The patriarchal tradition is inseparable from classic Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an. They have become the source of justification for the patriarchal tradition in the Muslim world. Hence, reinterpreting Qur'anic verses with gender biases understanding is necessary.<sup>5</sup> This condition compels Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud<sup>6</sup> and Fatima Mernisi to reread and reinterpret the Qur'an from women's perspectives. Barlas expresses her ideas in "Believing Women in Islam; Unreading Patriarchal

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<sup>2</sup> Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women and New Women*, trans. Samihah Sidhom Peterson (Cairo: The American University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Qasim Amin, *Tabrir Al-Mar'ah* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1899).

<sup>4</sup> Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women and New Women*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam; Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (The United States of America: University of Texas Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*; Siti Majidah and Rizki Firmansyah, "Menggagas Tafsir Emansipatoris Ddalam Al-Qur'an (Perspektif Pemikiran Aminah Wadud Dalam Buku Al-Qur'an Wal Mar'ah)," *Academic Journal of Islamic Principles and Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (January 5, 2022): 215–38, <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajipp.v2i2.4064>.

Interpretations of the Qur'an".<sup>7</sup> Barlas's ideas on women's liberation are very significant for a study and comparison to Amin's thoughts, who speak up for the same thing since Amin is among the early Muslim scholars who voiced gender equality, while Barlas is among the recent Muslim scholars who echoed the same idea. It becomes interesting to discuss these two scholars' perspectives in order to examine the development of women's liberation discourse among Muslim scholars from its inception until the latest edition.

Thus, this article seeks to comparatively study Amin and Barlas on the liberation of women. Their treaties will be analyzed through a descriptive-analytic approach to examine their thoughts and see differences and similarities in their views regarding the issue of women's liberation. Many studies have discussed Amin and Asma Barlas's thoughts, but all are concerned with particular ideas of Amin or Barlas.<sup>8</sup> Few attempted to study both. Before examining their thoughts, it is significant to highlight their socio-political background to enable understanding of circumstances, leading them to the discussion on women's liberation. Thus, this investigation begins with a discussion of their biography.

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<sup>7</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam; Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*.

<sup>8</sup> Some studies have discussed this topic, especially in Indonesia, such as Muhammad Haramain, "Dakwah Pemberdayaan Perempuan: Telaah Pemikiran Qasim Amin Tentang Kesetaraan Gender," *Zawiyah; Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 5, no. 2 (2019): 218–35, <http://dx.doi.org/10.31332/zjpi.v5i2.1403>; Achmad Tohari and Dian Pramodya Cahyani, "Evaluasi Pemikiran Qasim Amin Tentang Emansipasi Wanita Dalam Islam," *EL-BANAT: Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 2 (December 31, 2021): 201–16, <https://doi.org/10.54180/elbanat.2021.11.2.201-216>; Nuril Fajri, "Asma Barlas Dan Gender Perspektif Dalam Pembacaan Ulang QS. Al-Nisa/4:34," *AL-QALAM; Journal of Islam and Plurality* 4, no. 2 (2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.30984/ajip.v4i2.1016>; Muhammad Imdad Ilhami Khalil and Ahmad Khalil Tahrir, "Hijab Dan Jilbab Perspektif Asma Barlas Dan Posisinya Dalam Tipologi Tafsir Kontemporer Sahiron Syamsuddin," *QAF; Jurnal Studi al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 5, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.30762/qof.v5i1.3730>.

## Qasim Amin and Asma Barlas; A Biographic Review

Qasim Amin is one of the Egyptian reformers who was born on December 1, 1863 in Turra, the suburbs of Cairo. His father is Muhammad Bey Amin Khan,<sup>9</sup> a Turkish and from a prince's family,<sup>10</sup> while his mother came from Egypt. His father served as a trustee (*wali*) of Kurdistan. After the Kurdish uprising against the Ottomans, he was given the faedol lands in Egypt. He lived there and was promoted to lieutenant general.<sup>11</sup> While Asma Barlas, a Pakistani feminist, was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1956. Iqbal Barlas was his father, and Anwar Barlas was his mother. She got married to Ulises Ali. They were blessed with a son named D Emir Mikael. Asma Barlas spent her childhood studying in her hometown. She graduated from Kinnaird College for Women University in Lahore, Pakistan, with a B.A. in English Literature and Philosophy in 1969. She received an M.A. in Journalism from the University of Punjab in Pakistan in 1971. She became a critical thinker and activist in her country due to the higher education provision.<sup>12</sup>

Like Barlas, Amin also received his higher education in his country, Egypt. Amin attended Alexandria Elementary Schools (*Madrasah al-Iskandariyah al-Ibtidaiyyah*) and the Cairo Preparatory Schools (*al-madrasah al-tajhibiyyah*), letter named the Khedivial School. Amin was a shy child and more into books. His interests were general history and literature, social studies, and secular and religious law.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, he pursued his studies

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<sup>9</sup> Juan Ricardo Cole, "Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, no. 4 (1981): 394, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/162906>.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Flounders Arnett, *Qasim Amin and the Beginnings of the Feminist Movement in Egypt*, Dropsie College Theses (USA: University of Pennsylvania, 1965), 1, <https://repository.upenn.edu/dropsietheses/143>.

<sup>11</sup> Amin, *The Liberation of Women and New Women*, p xii.

<sup>12</sup> Umi Wasilatul Firdausiyah, "Gender Equality in Religion in Principles and Methods of Interpretation Asma Barlas," n.d., 71.

<sup>13</sup> Arnett, *Qasim Amin and the Beginnings of the Feminist Movement in Egypt*, 5.

at the law and administration school (*madrasah al-hukum wa al-idarah*) since he was more interested in law. He was a brilliant and talented student at his school, where he was ranked first in his class. He was licensed to practice law on October 24, 1881. He went abroad to Montpellier, France, in 1882 to continue studying with a full scholarship from governance.<sup>14</sup> Amin returned to Egypt in 1885 after finishing his education in France.

Like Amin, Barlas also pursued her master's degree abroad. However, before continuing her studies abroad, Barlas worked in Pakistan's foreign service in 1976. She was the first woman in her country to serve and hold this position. Even though working at a government institution, she was very vocal against the patriarchal tradition in Pakistan, which General Ziyaul Haq ruled. She criticized court decisions that oppressed women and left them feeling unjust. She was fired from her job and deported from Pakistan in 1983 due to her protests. She then traveled to America after she was granted political asylum in this country. She continued her education in America and obtained an M.A. in international studies from the University of Denver in 1986. She received PhD in the same field from the same university<sup>15</sup> after successfully defending her dissertation, "State, Class, and Democracy: A Comparative Analysis of Politics in Hinduism and Muslim Society in Colonial India, 1885-1947".

Barlas's education in Pakistan and America has shaped her into a critical and mature scientist. Besides, the political situation in Pakistan, as well as gender inequality, prompted her to advocate for women's liberation. Later, in several of his works, she expressed her views on women's liberation. Among her works are *Believing Women in Islam*; *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qur'an*, *Confronting Qur'anic Patriarchy*, *Re-Understanding Islam: A Double Critique*, *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations*

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<sup>14</sup> Arnett, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Juliane Hammer, "Identity, Authority, and Activism: American Muslim Women Approach the Qur'an," *The Muslim World* 98, no. 4 (October 2008): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2008.00239.x>.

of *The Qur'an: Beyond the Binaries of Tradition and Modernity*, *Secular and Feminist Critiques of The Qur'an: Anti-Hermeneutics as Liberation?*<sup>16</sup> *Muslim Women and Sexual Oppression: Reading Liberation from the Quran*, *Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing feminism as a master narrative*, *The Qur'an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's Opposition to Patriarchy*,<sup>17</sup> *Uncrossed bridges: Islam, feminism and secular democracy*,<sup>18</sup> *Reviving Islamic Universalism: Easts, Wests, and Coexistence*,<sup>19</sup> and many others.

A hundred years before Barlas voiced her critical views on Islam and gender equality, Amin had already begun to do so. Growing up in a military family with direct contact with politics, Amin was deeply concerned about the socio-political conditions surrounding him. He witnessed Ottoman dominance and Western colonialism at the time. Amin, like Muhammad Abduh, became involved in Egypt's nationalist reforms. In addition to deteriorating political conditions, Amin faced damaging Western accusations about Egypt's decline, precisely the low status of women, as written by 'The Due d'Harcourt' in his book *L'Égypte et Les Égyptiens* published in 1893. Then, in response to the work, Amin wrote *Les Égyptiens* in French.<sup>20</sup> The publication of 'The Due d'Harcourt' has opened Amin's eyes, prompting him to look into the causes of Egypt's backwardness. He concluded that the low status of women caused Egypt's decline. Hence,

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<sup>16</sup> Asma Barlas, "Secular and Feminist Critiques of the Qur'an: Anti-Hermeneutics as Liberation?," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 111, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.18>.

<sup>17</sup> Asma Barlas, "The Qur'an and Hermeneutics: Reading the Qur'an's Opposition to Patriarchy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 3, no. 2 (October 2001): 15–38, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2001.3.2.15>.

<sup>18</sup> Asma Barlas, "Uncrossed Bridges: Islam, Feminism and Secular Democracy," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 39, no. 4–5 (May 2013): 417–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453713477346>.

<sup>19</sup> Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, and Meena Sharify-Funk, eds., *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Amin, *The Liberation of Women and New Women*, p. xiii.



he began the reformation by voicing the liberation of Egyptian women. Through his work *Tabrir al-Mar'ah* which he wrote in 1899, he expressed the idea of women's liberation.<sup>21</sup> Besides, Qasim Amin also wrote some other works such as *Akhlak wa mawa'iz* (1895/1898), *Asbab wa nata'ig* {*Reasons and Consequences*}, *Tabrir al-mar'ah/ The Liberation of Women* (1899), *Al-Mar'a al-jadida /The New Woman* (1900), *Al- 'Imam Muhammad 'Abdub, Insba' al-jami'a* {*Establishing the University*}, *Kalimat* {*Words*}.<sup>22</sup> Since this paper will discuss his thoughts on liberation of women, *Tabrir al-mar'ah/ The Liberation of Women* (1899), *Al-Mar'ah al-jadidah /The New Woman* (1900) will be discussed more. Qasim Amin died in 1908.

The preceding review highlights that Amin and Barlas' life paths share several similarities. First, they both witnessed and lived in a country that was hostile to women which prompted them to reform by echoing the idea of women's liberation. Second, Both of them lacked extensive training in religious knowledge research. It is obvious from their biography, that the writer does not locate a thick religious experience that both of them undergone. It is interesting, as they advocate for women's liberation through revisiting the interpretations of Qur'anic verses which are generally accepted and well-established in the Muslim community. However, other scholars take this as a chance to critique their thoughts which will be discussed later in this article. Third, they have both studied in the West, which has influenced their perspectives to carry out a transformation against patriarchal traditions and to advocate for women's liberation. The following section will elaborate on their thoughts on women's liberation. How is the concept of women's liberation echoed by these two scholars? Their perspectives could be beneficial to study since they represent the earliest and most recent Muslim scholars to address this issue and also represent different regions of the world, Egypt and Pakistan.

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *Dictionary of African Biography*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 216, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195382075.001.0001>.

<sup>22</sup> Amin, *The Liberation of Women and New Women*, xiv.



## Confronting Patriarchy and Voicing the Liberation of Women

This sub-term theme's "confronting" was inspired by one of Asma Barlas's writings.<sup>23</sup> This word was chosen to represent the ideas of Amin and Barlas, who attempted to challenge established traditions in Egypt and Pakistan.

The reality of Egyptian women at the time was precarious. In contrast to men, they were shackled in the house and had limited access. They were only concerned with household matters and did not have access to education, so they became underdeveloped. In fact, according to Amin, women and men are both human beings with the same limbs and obligations; there is no distinction between men and women.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Amin invited Egyptians to discuss the issue of women that they witnessed. He firmly believed that if the Egyptians had wanted to discuss together the status of women in Egypt at the time, they would have concluded that there was a need for women's reform.<sup>25</sup>

Inequality and injustice toward women persisted in other Muslim countries, particularly Pakistan, nearly a century later. In the 1970s, the Ziaul Haq regime ruled Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country. The regime of Ziaul Haq established Islamic law as the official state law. Many court decisions were negatively impacted against women. Asma Barlas cites several instances of injustice in court decisions affecting women. For instance, the case of rape resulted in a woman becoming pregnant. The court determined that the woman was guilty of adultery and sentenced her to get "rajam". Meanwhile, the male rapist was not prosecuted because the victim was blind and did not recognize the rapist. Furthermore, even women who were not blind would face difficulties because two female witnesses must prove a rapist.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Asma Barlas, *Confronting Qur'anic Patriarchy, Re-Understanding Islam: A Double Critique* (USA: The University of Texas Press, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Amin, *Tabrir Al-Mar'ah*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Amin, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, "Membaca Quran dengan Semangat Pembebasan: Sebuah Pengantar," dalam Asma Barlas, *Cara Quran Membebaskan Perempuan*, trans. Cecep Lukman

The way women are treated, such as women must stay at home and serve their husbands and women must wear the hijab in both Egypt and Pakistan, is a legacy of traditions. This legacy is rooted in the interpretation/understanding of classical scholars of the Qur'an and Sunnah, who read the Qur'an as a misogynistic and "uncompromising and overtly paternalistic" religion that allegedly advocated for sexual inequality and discrimination against women.<sup>27</sup> These interpretations then become references, even sacred, as the only opinion that must be followed, justifying discriminatory acts against women. Therefore, Barlas believes that the previously established understandings should be revised and reviewed, even reinterpreted.<sup>28</sup> Hence, reinterpretation of the Qur'an is necessary.

As a result, Barlas and Amin reread the Qur'an's narratives on women to determine how the Qur'an views women. Because of the broad discussion on women, this paper will observe Amin and Barlas' perspectives on hijab and polygamy. Both topics were carefully chosen given that the issue of hijab is related to gender roles and identities in society, while polygamy is a discourse that has been the subject of intense debate and strong criticism from feminist scholars, including Amin and Barlas. It is expected that this analysis will capture the similarities and differences between Amin's and Barlas' views on promoting women's liberation. Moreover, this analysis aims to reveal how these discourses have developed within Muslim feminist scholars since its inception until the present day.

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Yasin and Kurniawan Abdullah (Jakarta: Serambi, 2005), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam; Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Barlas, 4.

## Revisiting the Concept of Hijāb

Hijab is derived from the Arabic word *hajaba-yahjubu-hijab*, which means “covering” (al-sitru). According to Q.S. Fussilat/41:5, hijab is a tool for covering and a barrier between two things.<sup>29</sup> Recently, the hijab has become more popular with identical clothing for Muslim women. Hijab is a head veil that exposes the face. In addition to hijab, another term for women’s clothing is *burqa*. *Burqa* is a head-to-toe shroud that conceals even the feet; some models even wear gloves to conceal their hands.<sup>30</sup>

Muslim scholars generally agree that the command to wear *hijab* (veil) for women is based on Q.S. Al-Ahzab/33: 59-60<sup>31</sup> and QS. Al-Nur/24: 30-31.<sup>32</sup>

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لَأَزُوجِكُمْ وَبَنَاتِكُمْ وَنِسَاءَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلْبَابِهِنَّ  
 ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿٥٩﴾ لَئِن لَّمْ يَنْتَهِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ  
 لَئِن لَّمْ يَنْتَهِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَّرَضٌ وَالْمُرْجِفُونَ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ  
 غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴿٦٠﴾ لَئِن لَّمْ يَنْتَهِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَّرَضٌ وَالْمُرْجِفُونَ  
 فِي الْمَدِينَةِ لَنُغْرِبَنَّكَ بِهِمْ ثُمَّ لَا يُجَاوِرُونَكَ فِيهَا إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

“Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them<sup>a</sup> so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful. If the hypocrites, the sick at heart, and those who spread lies in the city do not desist, We shall rouse you [Prophet] against them, and then they will only be your neighbours in this city for a short while.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibnu Manzur, *Lisan Al-'Arab*, vol. Jilid 1 (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1990), 298.

<sup>30</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam; Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Amin, *Tahrir Al-Mar'ah*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> A. Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 56.

<sup>33</sup> M. A. Abdel Haleem, ed., *The Qur'an*, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 271.

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ ۗ  
 إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ (٣٠) وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ  
 فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا ۗ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ ۗ  
 وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَائِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِ  
 بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنَىٰ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنَىٰ أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ  
 أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوْ التَّالِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولَىٰ الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا  
 عَلَىٰ عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ ۗ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ ۗ  
 وَتَوْبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ (٣١)

“[Prophet], tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do. And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal;<sup>a</sup> they should let their headscarves fall to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons, their sisters’ sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women’s nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper.”<sup>34</sup>

However, Muslim scholars differed on how to dress women per the verse’s instructions. The difference is due to the limitations of women’s private parts. According to Barlas, the command of wearing a veil for women is based on classical exegesis, which shows that such a view of women’s bodies emerged gradually. Imam al-Tabari explained that both men and women could show non-pudendal parts of the body, al-Baydawi ruled that a free woman’s entire body was pudendal. Al-Khafafi had

<sup>34</sup> Abdel Haleem, ed., *The Qur’an*, 222.

decreed “even face and hands” pudendal by the seventeenth century. Such claims eventually led not only to forms of veiling that covered the head, face, hands, and feet but also to domestic segregation.<sup>35</sup>

What Barlas says is partially correct. According to the author, Imam al-Tabari recorded several opinions stating that women must cover their faces except for the right eye. This implies that the view of the hijab to cover the whole woman’s body was formed earlier than Asma Barlas suspected. Imam al-Tabari quoted Ibn Abbas and Ibn Aun’s opinion, which said that hijab is to cover the head and face except for the right eye.<sup>36</sup> What Ibn Abbas said about what women to cover from their bodies was followed by Ibnu katsir.<sup>37</sup> Al-Qurthubi quoted other information. He stated that Sa’id Ibnu Jubair, ‘Atha’, and Al-Auza’I said that women’s faces and hands are not pudendal.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, Barlas was correct when she stated that the concept of hijab, which restricts women today, is a legacy of classical scholars. Hence, she considers it critical to reread Q.S. Al-Ahzab/33: 59-60 and Q.S. Al-Nur/24: 30-31.

Barlas explains that the context of both verses is addressed only to the Prophet. It is not a universal mandate for all Muslim men to force women to obey them. Furthermore, she argues that the form, purpose, and content of “the veil” in these two verses are not the same, and its function is also not the one proposed by classical commentators. Barlas observes the terms used by the Qur’an concerning the command of hijab.

<sup>35</sup> Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an, 57.

<sup>36</sup> يَقُولُ تَعَالَى ذِكْرُهُ لِنَبِيِّهِ مُحَمَّدٍ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِأَزْوَاجِكُمْ وَبَنَاتِكُمْ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ، لَا يَتَّبِعْنَهُنَّ بِالْإِمَاءِ فِي لِبَاسِهِنَّ إِذَا هُنَّ خَرَجْنَ مِنْ بُيُوتِهِنَّ لِحَاجَتِهِنَّ، فَكَشَفْنَ شُعُورَهُنَّ وَوَجُوهُهُنَّ، وَلَكِنْ لِيَذْنِبْنَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَابِيْبِهِنَّ، لِئَلَّا يَغْرَضَ لَهُنَّ فَاسِقٌ، إِذَا عَلِمَ أَنَّهُنَّ خَرَايِرَ بِأَدَى هُوَ أَنْ يَعْطِينَ وَجُوهُهُنَّ وَرُءُوسَهُنَّ، فَلَا يُبَدِينَ مِنْهُنَّ إِلَّا عَيْنًا وَاحِدَةً: مِنْ قَوْلِ تَمَّ اخْتَلَفَ أَهْلُ التَّأْوِيلِ فِي صِفَةِ الْإِنْتَاءِ الَّذِي أَمَرَهُنَّ اللَّهُ بِهِ، فَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمْ

Al-thabari, juz 19, p. 180-181

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Kasir, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Azim*, ed. Sami Ibn Muhammad al-Salamah, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1419), 425.

<sup>38</sup> al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami’ Li Ahkam al-Qur’an*, vol. 16 (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Araby, 1967), 243.

She finds that the Qur'an employs the terms *jilbab* (cloak) and *kebumiir* (shawl), both of which cover the bosom (*jujub*) and neck but not the face, head, hands, or feet. In any case, the Qur'an does not require this type of veiling. Women prayed in mosques unveiled until the third/ninth century and performed the *Haj* (pilgrim) with their faces exposed. In the first set, the *jilbab* is not intended to conceal free Muslim women from Muslim men but rather to make them visible, and thus recognizable, to Jahil men as a means of protecting the women.<sup>39</sup> It is significant to note that Barlas tends to argue that hijab/jilbab should cover the bosom and neck, not the face, hands, and feet. Barlas is shown here as being courageous in understanding the verse about the hijab following the spirit she carries, namely opposing patriarchal recitation of the Quranic verses.

Amin, unlike Barlas, has a different perspective on the concept of hijab for women. According to Amin, QS. Al-Ahzab/33: 59-60 allows women to expose certain parts of their bodies. He explains that the priests (imam) of the madhhab agreed on the face and palms as the only parts of the body that women could show, but they disagreed on the arms and two heels. A free woman's pudenda is her entire body except for her face, hands, and feet, as stated in the book of Ibn Abidin. Amin says it was strange for women to cover their entire bodies except for their eyes when interacting with men from behind doors or walls/barriers.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, wearing the hijab, for Amin, is an *adab* that must be maintained and preserved. Wearing a hijab that covers the entire body except for the eyes, on the other hand, is not a Shari'ah teaching. As a result, it is an excessive attitude toward practicing Islamic teachings. Amin also chastises Western women for overemphasizing their bodies.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 58.

<sup>40</sup> Amin, *Tabrir al-Mar'ah*, 39-44.

<sup>41</sup> Amin, 36.

Thus, Amin's viewpoint differs from that of Barlas, who believes that the hijab should only cover the chest and neck and not the head; however, Amin believes that the hijab should not cover the face and palms. Both of them, however, harshly criticized women who were required to cover their entire bodies except for their eyes. However, Amin divides the meaning of hijab into two parts, which it marks his unique opinion from Barlas.

To begin, hijab covers the entire body except for the face and hands. Second, the hijab restricts women's movements at home (*qasr al-mar'ab fi al-bait*), and concerns about women are mixed with those of men. According to Amin, there are two types of restrictions on women: special orders for the Prophet's wives and general orders for women other than the Prophet's wives. Regarding special orders for the Prophet's wives, see Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 53 and Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 32. Amin firmly states that all Imams and commentators agree that these two verses are specific to the Prophet's wife and not to women in general. The second limitation stems from the Prophet's hadith, which prohibits interacting with foreign men (*khalwah*). Qasim Amin noted Abu Yusuf's opinion that the Prophet's prohibition in this hadith is not haram.<sup>42</sup>

Amin's explanation of the two meanings of the hijab is intended to criticize Egypt's culture of female restraint. Women restrained and restricted in their movements at home become backward people. They should be allowed to attend school. In other words, women should be educated.<sup>43</sup> Because a woman's education is critical and has ramifications for herself, her family, and the social life around her, Amin claimed that the restraint on women was to blame for Egyptian Muslims' weakness and backwardness.<sup>44</sup> Women cannot educate their children effectively if they do not have a good education. A well-educated mother will raise a sound and intelligent child.

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<sup>42</sup> Amin, *Tabrir al-Mar'ab*, 44-45.

<sup>43</sup> Cole, "Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt," 398.

<sup>44</sup> Amin, *Tabrir Al-Mar'ab*, 47.



Regarding the hijab, we can conclude that Amin and Barlas have similarities and differences. They both criticize the hijab's meaning, which requires women to cover their entire bodies and only show their eyes. Both agreed that this was not a teaching of Islam. However, Barlas appears to be more courageous than Amin. For Asma Barlas, the hijab is worn to cover the chest and neck rather than the head. However, Barlas only considers the physical meaning of the hijab. Meanwhile, Amin expands on the meaning of the hijab, not only in terms of clothing for women but also in terms of restricting women's movements. This is understandable given the social context of Amin in Egypt when men had complete power over women confined at home to do household chores and serve their husbands' desires.

### **Opposing and Evaluating the Concept of Polygamy**

Other than the hijāb, polygamy is a discourse that feminist scholars, including Amin and Barlas, are keen to criticize. It refers to the practice of marriage in which a man marries more than one woman at the same time. Within Islam, however, the notion of polygamy is most commonly referenced in Q. 4:3 below;

“If you fear that you will not deal fairly with orphan girls, you may marry whichever (other) women seem good to you, two, three, or four. If you fear that you cannot be equitable [to them], then marry only one, or your slave(s): that is more likely to make you avoid bias.”<sup>45</sup>

Most classical Muslim scholars argue that this verse justifies the permissibility of polygamy. Muqātil ibn Sulaiman (d. 150 AH) in his *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, describes that during the time of the Prophet Muhammad polygamy was commonly practiced. He further mentions the story of Ibn Hārith, a Companion, who married eight women. Then the Prophet told him to choose only four wives and divorce the others. Hence, Muqātil

<sup>45</sup> Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 50.

argues that the verse clarifies the legal limit for a man to marry, which is a maximum of four wives. Yet, Muqatil still emphasizes that polygamy is only permitted if the man can treat his wives equally in terms of financial support and time-sharing.<sup>46</sup> This interpretation was widely followed and adopted by later Muslim tafsir scholars, such as al-Thabari, al-Qurthubī, ibn Kathir, and others. Thus, it comes as no wonder why polygamy has long been a tradition in Muslim communities.

Such interpretations have shaken the hearts and furrowed foreheads of Qasim Amin and Asma Barlas. Hence, they reconstructed and revisited the understanding of the interpretation of this verse. To begin with, Amin argues that polygamy is a legacy of ancient traditions that still puts women on an equal status with animals. However, he further says that this tradition would not be practiced by men with perfect intellect because they would recognize the worth of their wives and would be satisfied with one instead of the other. This means that only men who do not have perfect intellect and refinement of soul practice polygamy. Amin further adds that no woman would want to share her husband with another woman, nor would a man be willing to share his wife's love with someone else.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, Amin states that polygamy is not a legitimate way to fulfill animalistic lust; rather, it is a mark of moral decay, dysfunction of reason, and ravenous pursuit of pleasure. Therefore, Amin aims to re-interpret Q.4:3, which is commonly taken as the basis for legitimizing polygamy. He writes,

“Based on these verses, it is obvious that the Shari’ah requires one wife as a response to the fear of not being able to do justice, and emphasizes that justice is impossible, so who would fear not doing justice because justice is impossible, and why should people fear not doing the impossible?”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Muqātil Ibn Sulaimān, *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir*, ed. Abdullah Mahmud Shahatah, vol. 1 (Beirut: Muassasah al-Tarikh al-‘Arabiyy, 1423), 357.

<sup>47</sup> Amin, *Tabrir Al-Mar’ah*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Amin, 81.

Amin, on another occasion, asserts that for a man there is no reason to marry more than one woman, except in cases of emergency, such as if his first wife suffers from an illness that makes it impossible for her to fulfill her marriage rights. However, Amin still discourages a man from marrying another woman in such or similar circumstances, since the woman is innocent.<sup>49</sup> It demonstrates that Amin strongly opposed the practice of polygamy, due to its impact on family stability and family harmony.

In the same way as Amin, Asma Barlas also reconstructs the popular understanding of Q.4:3, which is commonly used to legalize polygamy. In doing so, she aims to advance women's equality. Her main premise is that the Qur'an does not privilege men, but it treats men and women equally.<sup>50</sup> According to Barlas, Q.4:3 is closely related to Q.3:2 in which the Qur'an grants women the privilege, in which the Qur'an orders men to marriage to protect orphans. Barlas further notes that this verse is often freely interpreted by Muslim scholars as a legal basis for polygamy. In contrast, according to Barlas, this verse provides strict conditions for doing so. Barlas concludes,

“Even if one does not accept his translation, the point is that this *āyah* mentions polygyny only in reference *to wards and orphans*. In this context, two points are in order. One is that the Qur'an is not giving all Muslim men the right to marry multiple wives, but only *those* guardians of female orphans who fear they may not be able to treat their wards justly outside of the marriage tie. To me this implies, second, that polygyny is being restricted *to* the female orphans, a reading that is also supported by the only other verse on the subject, 4:127.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Amin, 80.

<sup>50</sup> Barlas, “*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, 222.

<sup>51</sup> Barlas, 223.

Therefore, polygamy, according to Barlas, is permissible but not applicable in a general context for all Muslims, only guardians of orphans because of the fear of not being fair outside of marriage. Moreover, Barlas emphasizes the permissibility of polygamy in cases of fairness on the part of the guardian. Amin and Barlas both stress the compulsion of justice in the permissibility of polygamy. However, Barlas also imposes another restriction, which is that polygamy only applies to guardians of orphans who aim to protect them, not merely to fulfill their sexual desires.

Although Barlas is fairly strict in terms of the permissibility of polygamy, Amin seems to be even more strict and even seems to not allow polygamy. For him, polygamy is permissible in cases of emergency, for example, in situations of long-term illness of the wife and inability to fulfill her obligations. However, Amin reveals that practicing polygamy in these circumstances is inappropriate, as the wife is innocent. Amin further argues that polygamy shall not be practiced by those men who have moral perfection and emotional gentleness. Amin's assertion to prohibit polygamy is reasonable. Due to that era, Amin was deeply concerned about the stability and harmony of the family which had a major impact on the development of his country.

### **Responses to Qasim Amin and Asma Barlas's Thoughts**

It is impossible to deny that the ideas of Qasim Amin and Asma Barlas have significantly contributed to Islamic scholarship. Some scholars expressed their appreciation and compliments. On the other hand, many others have also criticized their thoughts. Thus, this part will describe both appreciation and criticism of their thoughts on women's liberation.

Ellen McLarney stated that Qasim Amin's ideas on women's liberation influenced subsequent generations. In state discourse and reformist Islamic writings, Amin's ideas were revived. This is evident from holding a conference on women's liberation in Cairo at the turn

of the twenty-first century. Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi of al-Azhar, famous preacher Sheikh al-Shaarawi, revivalist Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali, and famous intellectuals Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Muhammad Imara all attended the conference.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, Amin's views on women's emancipation drew harsh criticism. Al-Azhar scholars and traditional Egyptian Islamic educational institutions condemned Amin's thinking as heresy. They contended that women should not be taught to read or write according to the Prophet's hadith. In response to Qasim Amin's criticism of the veil and women staying at home, Rida stated that only 10% of Egyptian women wore the veil in 1899. Only 1% were sequestered in their homes, noting that they were all upper and middle class, and only women of the upper class went as far as not talking to men who were not related by blood or marriage. In addition, Muhammad Tal'at Harb, a crucial Egyptian financier who was instrumental in establishing Bank Misr, the country's first national bank, slammed Qasim Amin. Harb published two books opposing Qasim Amin's viewpoint in 1899 and 1900. His second book, *Fasl al-khitab fi al-mar'ah wa al-hijab*, contains lengthy excerpts from Amin's response to the Duc d'Harcourt, in which he took a conservative stance on women's issues.<sup>53</sup>

In line with what Qasim Amin accepted, Asma Barlas' ideas received both praise and criticism from scholars. Scholars from various backgrounds appreciated Asma Barlas' ideas. This can be proven by the many scholars interested in studying her perspectives on women's liberation.<sup>54</sup> However, criticism of Asma Barlas's thoughts is unavoidable.

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<sup>52</sup> Ellen Anne McLarney, *The Redemption of Women's Liberation*, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 2017), 262, <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691158488.003.0003>.

<sup>53</sup> Cole, "Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt," 393 and 402.

<sup>54</sup> Some studies have discussed Asma Barlas's thoughts are Aisha Mohamed Rashad's "Feminism in the Discourse of Asma Barlas: An Analysis From an Islamic Academic Journal of Islamic Principles and Philosophy | Vol. 5, No. 1, November - April 2024

If the criticism addressed to Qasim Amin was likely more traditionalist, the criticism against Asma Barlas tends to be more academic.

Kecia Ali criticizes Asma Barlas in her article “On critique and careful reading.” She stated that Barlas “mischaracterizes others’ arguments by weaving together decontextualized snippets and misconstruing specific phrases. Furthermore, she accuses Barlas of not engaging in exegetical debate with others and instead portraying “herself as speaking from within the bounds of religious orthodoxy.”<sup>55</sup> In addition, Karen Bauer offers another critique in her article “In Defense of Historical-Critical Analysis of the Qur’an.” Bauer refutes Barlas’ claim that the methodology of other Muslim feminists calls the Qur’an into question as God’s Word. Bauer claims that Barlas’s liberatory approach ignores “the full scope of justice and ethics in the text.”<sup>56</sup>

As a result, Asma Barlas and Qasim Amin have received praise and criticism. Criticism of their thinking demonstrates that feminism, gender equality, and women’s liberation will adorn scholars’ past, present, and future debates since this discussion will be relevant wherever and whenever it occurs. As a result, ideas of women’s liberation are unique but rather diverse. One idea reinforces and complements another, or that one idea criticizes another. This phenomenon is expected because the academic debate is open to criticism. Nonetheless, their perspectives on women’s liberation have colored the treasures of contemporary Islamic thought.

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Perspective,” t.t., 24; Norma Kassim, “The Influence of Feminist Movement and Establishing of Women’s Rights in Islam,” dalam *Muslim Women in Contemporary Societies*, ed. oleh Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim dan Zaleha Kamaruddin (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Rashad, “Feminism in the Discourse of Asma Barlas: An Analysis From an Islamic Perspective,” 8; Kecia Ali, “On Critique and Careful Reading,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 121–216, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.19>.

<sup>56</sup> Rashad, “Feminism in the Discourse of Asma Barlas: An Analysis From an Islamic Perspective,” 8; Karen Bauer, “In Defense of Historical-Critical Analysis of the Qur’an,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 126–30, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.20>.

Many parties have been inspired by their idea to advocate for women's equality in Muslim society. Qasim Amin carved his brilliant concept. Even though some criticize him, he deserves to be recognized. He was an Egyptian feminist of the nineteenth century who inspired other Egyptian feminists. Asma Barlas felt the same way.

## Conclusion

Qasim Amin and Asma Barlas advocate for women's liberation by reinterpreting the idea of hijāb, which has similarities and contrasts. Both experts opposed the traditional concept of hijab, which requires a woman to cover her complete body except for her eyes, claiming that it violates Islamic principles. This critique reflects their larger commitment to opposing traditions that they see as repressive and incompatible with the real spirit of Islam, which they say advocates for gender equality.

However, Amin and Barlas have different perspectives on the appropriate coverage imposed by the hijab. Asma Barlas believes that the hijab should only cover the bosom and neck, emphasizing a narrower range of physical modesty. In contrast, Qasim Amin believes that the hijab should cover the head, advocating for a slightly more extensive level of coverage. Despite their differences, both experts believe that traditional, more stringent interpretations of the hijab are not supported by Islamic teachings and impede women's social and personal liberties. Furthermore, Qasim Amin broadens the meaning of hijāb to include broader concerns of women's mobility and societal duties, characterizing hijāb as a constraint on women's movements (*qasr al-mar'ah fī al-bait*).

Besides, regarding the concept of polygamy, they critically reassessed the traditional interpretations regarding its permissibility, ultimately advocating for stringent conditions under which polygamy could be considered acceptable. Despite this, Amin appears to take a more definitive stance, arguing against the permissibility of polygamy altogether.



Amin and Barlas were both heavily impacted by their social circumstances and personal experiences, which motivated their efforts to reform Muslim culture and promote women's liberation. Their ideas, while well-intentioned and revolutionary, have drawn both criticism and admiration. Traditionalists frequently accused them of heresy, while progressives applauded their daring attempts to reinterpret Islamic principles in favor of women's equality. This mixed reception emphasizes the continuous struggle in the Muslim world about gender, tradition, and modernization.

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