Women in Islam: The Western Experience

Anne Sofie Roald
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Anne Sofie Roald, a Norwegian convert to Islam and associate professor of the history of religion at Malmo University (Sweden), devotes her book to two major themes: Examining what the interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah in the Arab cultural sphere "say" on various women's issues, and how this interpretation tends to change during the cultural encounter with the West. The cover picture exemplifies these themes: two young happy Muslim women wearing headscarves while biking, illustrating Muslim women well integrated into western society but without giving up their Islamic identity. The book is divided into two parts: theoretical and methodological reflections, and empirical issues.

Roald's approach involves exact textual citation. Her emphasis on text is explained, as Islam is a scriptural religion, as "what can be termed Islamic is what can be linked to the text." Further, she analyses how classical and contemporary scholars have interpreted the text, in addition to the results of her fieldwork among Arab Sunni Muslim activists living in the West. This methodology allows her to avoid the reification of Islam – the apprehension of Islam as separated from its social context. She chooses to emphasize the opinions of the Muslim Brotherhood *(ikhwan)* and the post-*ikhwan* trend, or an "independent Islamist trend" of Islamists who go beyond the *ikhwan's* thought and who are not linked to its organization. Being an Arabic-speaking Muslim herself, Roald plays both roles of being an "insider" and an "outsider."

Her analysis builds basically on two theories: the "basket metaphor" combined with the idea of "normative fields." The "basket," defined as the set-up of traditions in a specific religion or ideology, is a metaphor that comes from the idea that a basket leaks from the inside and absorbs from the outside. In other words, concepts might leak out and new ones might get absorbed. Further, even though all of its contents are latently present, what is needed in different times and spaces is subjected to the processes of selection. Roald explains that Muslims might consider such a metaphor blasphemous, but the selection from "the basket" is what actually happens. The text's function, how it is being interpreted and applied, is superior to the text's very existence.

The "normative field" in which the scriptures are interpreted is the tension between two poles: the "Arab cultural base pattern" with patriarchal

gender structures, and the "western cultural base pattern" associated with gender equality structures. These categories are used as typologies in a Weberian sense. As the analysis of the empirical material depends heavily on these categories, perhaps an elaboration on the two poles is necessary to avoid the critique of cultural essentialism. Although gender equality is the West's prevailing norm due to its particular history, gender equality is not in any *essential* sense western. Furthermore, as Roald emphasizes, norms differ from practice and the actual behavior in the West toward women is not necessarily characterized by gender equality. It also should be stressed that her investigation of the Islam–West encounter situates the West as the powerful majority society versus "Islam," represented by an immigrant minority in Europe.

For an outsider, Roald's study might give the impression of dealing with textual trifles. But as an insider, she is aware of the utmost importance that these wordings have for Muslim women's daily practice in terms of gender relations. If change is to come, it is bound to start with a new understanding of the texts. Roald gives a short but insightful introduction to the Shari'ah. Of particular interest is her elaboration on *'urf* (custom) as "these regional customs compatible with Islamic principles became part of legislation." Another form of the same root *(ma>ruf)* is mentioned 38 times in the Qur'an to denote what is "good" and "accepted." Roald discusses what happens if the notion of what is "accepted" changes over time and space, suggesting a possibility for more flexible legislation within the Shari'ah.

The chapter dealing with gender relations lays particular emphasis on the interpretation of Qur'an 4:34, which states that men are the caretakers of women *(qiwama)*. Roald identifies a shift in this verse's interpretation from the idea that "men are in charge of women" to the more equitable idea that "men have responsibility for women." An even more liberal interpretation is offered by the Sudanese Islamist Hassan at-Turabi, who told Roald: "*Qiwama* is just like this: a man has to stand up to serve his wife." Roald points out that the word's Arabic root *q-w-m* literally means to "stand up." She further elaborates how, in the early interpretation of the Qur'an, the concept of *nushuz*, which is mentioned in the same verse, denoted female sexual immorality, but later in Islamic history it came to encompass all female opposition to men. Islamists, in their quest to reproduce the past in the present, seek to return to the term's earliest understanding.

Chapter 10 elaborates issues of divorce and child custody. Roald explains the forms of divorce and their legal standings in the Shari'ah. This part is illuminating, especially in regard to the misconceptions of Muslims

and non-Muslims alike regarding women's right to divorce. When it comes to child custody, Roald identifies four relevant *ahadith* and a story about 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. In these five texts, women are given child custody. However, this is restricted in one hadith: "if you [the woman] do not remarry." This injunction's traditional interpretation has been that a woman automatically looses custody rights upon remarriage. However, Roald observes that the Egyptian Sheikh Darsh changed his opinion while in Britain. He stated that a child could remain with the mother in spite of a new marriage, based on the superiority of the Islamic principle of the child's best interest. Roald interprets this shift in attitude as a non-deliberate process of how the sources actually lend themselves to different interpretations, as suggested by the basket metaphor.

The sensitive issue of female circumcision is dealt with in chapter 11. Roald investigates why some traditional legal schools have encouraged the practice and even labeled it obligatory. Such conclusions are based on a weak hadith classifying the custom as "noble" for women. Post-*ikhwan* Islamists are reinterpreting another hadith, in which the Prophet said to "remove only a little" if the operation is performed to discourage female circumcision. Another hadith mentions a man who refused to eat a meal served to celebrate a female circumcision, saying: "We did not see this thing during the Prophet's time." This text has traditionally been interpreted as supporting the act of female circumcision but not its celebration, and not in the more obvious literal interpretation: That it was completely unknown during the Prophet's lifetime.

Chapter 12 deals with Islamic female dress, a controversial issue that evokes strong emotions. Muslims often call their head-scarf hijab (curtain). Found in Qur'an 33:53, this word refers to the separation of the Prophet's wives from the public space. This has caused some confusion in the debate. Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist, argues that veiling is a specific ruling applicable only for the Prophet's wives due to particular historical circumstances. Roald discloses how Mernissi bases her conclusion, particularly on Qur'an 33:53 and by omitting other verses, either by a deliberate selectivity or by a complete misunderstanding. Mernissi's argument has spread widely in the West. In contrast to this approach, Roald shows the terminology of female Islamic dress used in the Qur'an: *khimar* (24:31), *thawb* (24:60), *jilbab* (33:59). Both traditional and contemporary scholars interpret *khimar* as a covering of the head. The female activists in Roald's study stated that their mode of dressing Islamically manifested religiosity and "distinction." One informant stated that it gave her a "tough look."

Roald's work shows some interesting examples of how changes in gender issues are afoot. However, we should not forget that conservatism, represented by the *salafi* and other movements, is another reaction to this cultural encounter. Perhaps the book's most important contribution is that it brings together several discourses: traditional and contemporary Muslim scholars, Islamists in Europe, Muslim feminists, and academic (western) writings. In addition, Roald gives an informative list of classical and contemporary Muslim scholars. Her book deserves attention and is a model for all researchers on Islam. Her provision of exact hadith references, focus on the Muslim emic perspective, and linguistic emphasis on various Arabic concepts and their interpretation is to be praised.

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