

Women's Mosque Attendance: Reading through Body and Text

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Abstract

For much of Islamic history and the present, Muslim women have largely been excluded from mosques evoking arguments of text and Muslim legal tradition which presumably discourage women from attending mosques. The exclusion of women from mosques serves as an index of their status in society, moreover, highlights the normative assumptions about gender. This paper is an attempt to discuss the status of women in Islam, particularly with reference to women's access and attendance in mosques. At the onset, the paper offers a brief overview of status of women in the early years of emergence of Islam. The central argument that this paper attempts to put forward is that the dynamics of hegemony, body and text govern the issue of women's mosque attendance. This paper would weave in discussions of Quranic exegesis, notion of *fitna* which have come to play a pivotal role in the debate over women's mosque attendance.

Key words: Women, Mosque, Quranic exegesis

Introduction

For much of Islamic history and the present, Muslim women have not had a significant presence in mosques. This is often attributed to Muslim legal tradition which presumably discourages women from attending mosques. This has not only led to lack of space for women in the mosques but also leads one to question the status of women in Islam.

More often than not, mosques are unaccommodating of women and even when they are, there is an inevitable separation by walls, screens, etc. and women are relegated to the peripheral area of the mosque, while men have the prerogative in accessing the mosque. The mosque or the prayer space, the supposedly sacred space is turned into socially produced space reinforcing the divine separation between men and women. Lefebvre (1991) idea of socially produced space is evident in the case of mosques, which come to reinforce the predominant social and gender relations.

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The issue of women's mosque attendance has been addressed from different perspectives like – gender, architectural and theological. This paper is not attempt to verify the authenticity of any one perspective. This paper is an attempt to discuss the status of women in Islam, particularly with reference to women's access and attendance in mosques. The issue of women's mosque attendance in this paper shall be discussed with reference to notions of hegemony, body and text.

Women and Early Islam

Women played an important role in the years of early Islam. Women had much influence over establishing and spreading the new faith. There are several examples of influential women of the period. An example par excellence is Khadijah, Mohammed's first and staunchest convert. Another woman who negates the idea of low status of women in the early years of the new faith is that of Umm Waraqah who acted as an imam for both men and women (Abbot 1942: 112). During this period, woman enjoyed full religious liberty (ibid.: 107) She could accept or reject the new faith independent of what her father, brother, husband, or suitors. “The participation of Arab women, singly or in groups, in the battles of Islam is in itself is significant of their independent position” (ibid.: 118).

From a historical view, it can be said that women had access to the major mosques during the Makkan and Madinan periods. At the two earliest and most important Muslim shrines, there were no barriers separating women from men and no separate entrances (Reda 2004: 85). “The first mosque established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina (Saudi Arabia) in 610 C.E., was alive with the presence of women,”² and men and women both had equal access to this space. Abbot (1942) noted that “there are other sufficient indications that Mohammed generally took for granted and sanctioned the public participation of women in the religious life of the new Moslem community. They attended the mosque; they participated in the religious services on feast days” (Abbot 1942: 111). There is evidence that no separation or partitioning of gender occurred within the mosque, and no separate entrance for women existed. However, Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph, sought to exclude women from mosque (Katz 2014: 2). In the following years, women faced exclusion from mosques and furthermore inequality.

Ahmed (1992) argued that much of what is conceptualised as Islamic ideas of gender are not intrinsically Islamic, rather they were an impact on Islam of the practices of the time in the Middle East.

“It is also clear that conceptions, assumptions, and social customs and institutions relating to women and to the social meaning of gender that derived from the traditions in place in the Middle East at the time of the Islamic conquests entered into and helped to shape the very foundations of Islamic concepts and social practice as they developed during the first centuries of Islam. All these facts emphasize the importance of considering Islamic

² Mattson, Ingrid.(2006). “*Women, Islam, and Mosques*”Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America.

formulations of gender in relation to the changing codes and practices in the broader Middle East. They suggest, too, that the contributions of the contemporary conquered societies to the formation of Islamic institutions and mores concerning women need to be taken into account, even with respect to mores that have come to be considered intrinsically Islamic” (1992: 5).

Hegemony, Body and Text

This issue of women’s access to mosques can be studied within the framework of cultural hegemony given by Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci developed the notion of hegemony in the *Prison Writings* (1971). The idea came as part of his critique of the economist interpretation of history; of “mechanical historical materialism.” Hegemony, to Gramsci, is the “cultural, moral and ideological” leadership of a group over allied and subaltern groups.³ According to Gramsci, hegemonic system rests upon the ideological consensus of other social classes, which means “predominance obtained by consent”. Here intellectuals play a crucial role in creating hegemony by extending the world view of the rulers to the ruled, and thereby secure the "free" consent of the masses to the law and order of the land (Bates 1975: 353). In other words it points to how ideology serves a hegemonic function.

In this case, ideology of the conservative Muslim intelligentsia who have indulged in patriarchal readings of Quran come to dominate the masses. The focal point in this debate is the text. Interpretations of Quran and Hadith are used as norms which discourage women from attending mosques. Amina Wadud in her work ‘*Quran and Women*’ discusses about the interpretations of Quran and notes three types of interpretation – traditional, reactive and holistic. The first category of Qur'anic interpretation she refers to is 'traditional'. Traditional *tafasir* (exegetical works) give interpretations of the entire Qur'an, with certain objectives in mind and they were exclusively written by males (Wadud 1999: 1). This means that men and men's experiences were included and women and women's experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective” (ibid.: 2). The second category of Qur'anic interpretation deals with the modern scholars' reactions to severe handicaps for woman which have been attributed to the text. These reactions have also failed to draw a distinction between the interpretation and the text. The third set of interpretations reconsider the whole method of Qur'anic exegesis with regard to various modern social, moral, economic, and political concerns—including the issue of woman (ibid.: 3). Similarly, Barlas (2002) points to oppressive misreadings of religious text. She argues that often misogyny is read into the Qur'an by conservative Muslims. These misogynistic readings of the Qur'an have gained authoritative status which has led to the disappearance of the line between the text itself and the commentators' interpretations. It needs to be recognised that Qur'an is a historical text imbedded in the contexts in which revelation was made.

Muslim legal tradition is also a source of contention. In fact, Islamic legal texts have often been studied as a proxy for social history (Katz 2014).

³<https://notevenpast.org/gramsci-on-hegemony/>

“Muslim legal tradition does not treat men and women equally. At the root of this discrimination lies the assumption that men are and should be in charge of women, expressed in the concepts of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* that place women under men’s guardianship. *Qiwamah* generally denotes a husband’s authority over his wife and his financial responsibility towards her. *Wilayah* generally denotes the right and duty of male family members to exercise guardianship over female members (e.g. fathers over daughters when entering into marriage contracts) and grants fathers priority over mothers in guardianship of their children. These two concepts underlie the logic of most contemporary Muslim family laws and are manifested in legal provisions that regulate spousal and parental duties and rights. In some Muslim contexts, the two concepts have also been the basis for placing legal and/or social restrictions on women’s participation in the public sphere and their undertaking leadership positions.” (Mir-Hosseini 2015: 16).

Mir-Hosseini et al. (2015) argue that these two concepts have long been misunderstood as, *wilayah* can be understood as shared responsibility of men and women and *qiwamah* as management of public and private space by men and women (ibid.: 118).

“One crucial, unequivocal verse in the Qur’an lays the ground for the concept of equality between men and women: The believers, men and women, are *awliya*’ [allies] of one another. They enjoin al-*ma’ruf* [the good] and forbid al-munkar [the bad], they observe *salat* [prayers] and give *zakat* [charitable alms] and obey God and His Prophet. (9:71)” (Mir-Hosseini 2015: 126).

Such texts which exhort equality between men and women, have often been marginalized in Islamic thought.

Katz (2014) in the book ‘Women in the Mosque’ looks at the question of women’s mosque attendance, whether they are encouraged or discouraged to attend mosques. She looks at legal texts associated with four classical schools of Sunni law.

While the Malikis relied on the report which stated “Do not forbid the maidservants of God from [going to] the mosques of God” (ibid.: 18). The Shafi’I authority ‘Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi (d.450/1058) writes:

As for women, whoever possesses [attractive] appearance and beauty should be prevented from going out to Friday prayers for her own protection (*siyanatanlaha*), and out of fear that she will be a source of temptation. As for those who do not possess [attractive] appearances, they should not be prevented; they should go out unadorned and unperfumed, because of [the Prophet’s] statement, ‘Do not prevent God’s maidservants from [going to] God’s mosques, and let them go out unperfumed’ (Katz 2014: 49).

A discussion of different schools of Sunni law over women’s mosque access revealed that it was negotiated on the basis of old and younger women, day and night. By the fifth/eleventh century this distinction was often interpreted in terms of sexual allure rather than of life cycle (Katz 2014: 100). The notion of *fitna* pertaining to sexual temptation was connected to women’s mosque attendance.

In relation to this comes to fore – the notion of body, here referring to a woman’s body. The interpretations of theological texts against women’s mosque attendance centre around the issue of body and sexuality. It is argued in one Hadith that –

“The better rows for men are the front ones, and the worst are the last ones. The better rows for women are the last ones and the worst are the front ones.”⁴

The rationale for this arrangement is that, men would be unable to see the body of women when performing the prayer. It is presupposed that a woman’s body would act as a source of distraction for men and hence they should pray at home. It was this that led to the unified disapproval of attendance of young women by different Sunni law schools as noted by Katz(2014). On the other hand, the mosque going of elderly women has much more positive reactions.

“Provocation of sexual desire was central to the shaping of discourse over the legitimacy of female leadership in mosques. The general belief was that the men are easily moved to sexual desire when interacting with women. Women were thus viewed as more likely to stimulate sexual desires than to be able to promote spiritual enlightenment. In such a discourse, women seemed reduced to the bodily, and deprived of a spiritual capacity, while men were projected as overtly sexual beings with little control over their sexual desires” (Bano and Kalmbach 2012:500).

The whole notion of a luring woman is normalised and used as an explanation to bar women from entering mosques.

Conclusion

The preceding pages have pointed out that the misogynist interpretations of Quran and Hadith have come to exercise hegemony and identified as Islamic prescriptions. The dynamics between text, body and hegemony have to come govern women’s mosque attendance. Misinterpretations or patriarchal interpretations of the text are rationalized around the criterion of sexual temptation (*fitna*) to discourage women’s access to mosques.

Although there are now increasing opportunities for women to serve as mosque preacher, female leadership of mixed-gender communal prayer, these are but rare instances and mostly frowned upon. The issue of women’s mosque attendance needs to be contextualised culturally rather than theologically.

⁴Al-Banna, *Fath*, vol. 5, 7:1475-1480.

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