

The Perplexity of a Muslim Woman: Over Inheritance, Marriage, and Homosexuality

Olfa Youssef

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Olfa Youssef's *The Perplexity of a Muslim Woman: Over Inheritance, Marriage, and Homosexuality* addresses some of the practical and conceptual inconsistencies in traditional, male-centric interpretations of inheritance, marriage, and homosexuality. Youssef analyzes relevant questions, assumptions, and sub-themes on each topic in separate chapters. A brief introduction challenges common claims treated as truths. The conclusion emphasizes that to uncritically follow past scholars' views is idolatry and that no one, no matter how knowledgeable, possesses an absolute reading of the Qur'an. The book closes with an appendix on relevant Qur'anic verses and an appendix on relevant hadiths and historical accounts.

The preface describes the origins of the translation project, offers an intellectual biography of Olfa Youssef, and discusses the reception of Youssef and her ideas across North Africa. It also situates Youssef's scholarship between the postcolonial milieu of North Africa and patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Recognizing the political role of translation, Lamia Benyoussef hopes that through the translation she can show Muslim women as agents of change, contributing to the religious and other discourses taking place about them.

Chapter One surveys relevant sub-topics of inheritance, such as whether the male indeed receives twice the share of the female, grandparents' and grandchildren's inheritance, disinheritance, and agnatic inheritance. Youssef reviews the Qur'anic verses on inheritance and investigates in detail "truths" that are attributed to the Qur'an, noting exegetes' disagreements among themselves (e.g., 27). Remarkably, while the Qur'an explicitly ascribes a portion of the inheritance to blood kindred relatives, some commentators claimed that consensus does not afford inheritance for kinfolk. This is one of the many moments in which the explicit word of the Qur'an remains subject to disregard by scholars so as to accommodate their wishes through consensus (*ijmā'*).

That consensus frequently trumps the Qur'an is a recurrent point in the book. In Chapter Two, on marriage, Youssef addresses several marriage-related issues, including *mahr* (dower), wifely obedience, *mut'a* (temporary

marriage), anal intercourse, the waiting period, and even masturbation. Youssef shows that the Qur'an does not stipulate *mahr* as a requirement for a valid marriage and that instead it is merely a form of donation to the bride by the groom, which the bride is not obligated to accept. She convincingly argues that the verses on *sidāq* simply permit giving the wife a dower and are similar to those that permit certain actions without requiring them (e.g., Q 5:10 on the meat of female donkeys, or 2:187 on sex during fasting). The reason the dower was set as a requirement was to sanctify the scholars' approach to marriage as a sale contract in which the dower was the price for the bride's "goods" (52). In her discussion on child marriage, Youssef states that the Qur'an permits the marriage of prepubescents because it was a historical reality. Q 65:4 speaks of the divorce of women "who have not menstruated (yet)" (*wallātī lam yaḥiḍna*). Youssef does not consider the possibility that *wallātī lam yaḥiḍna* refers to those who do not menstruate. Nonetheless, if the phrase does refer to prepubescent wives, Youssef questions why many scholars still support child marriage while opposing slavery, when the Qur'an recognizes both.

The final chapter, on homosexuality, explores sexual duality (masculinity and femininity inherent in all individuals), female and male homosexuality (*liwāt* and *siḥāq*, respectively) and the punishment for both, the position of Lot's wife, and the Qur'anic references to *ghilmān* (young boys purportedly available to men in heaven for sexual services). Youssef argues that the word *fāḥisha* in Q 4:15 is not a reference to homosexuality but to a general word for an abhorrent action. She questions this silence on *siḥāq* and suggests that it may be because female homosexuality "does not threaten the established social order built on patrilineal lineage" (106).

Youssef argues that in these verses, the statement "Do you lust after men of all people and leave your wives [*azwāj*] [whom] God created for you?" in fact follows the linguistic rules of coordinating conjunctions (e.g., Q 26:165-166) or conditional clauses (e.g., Q 7:80-81). That is, "the condemnation of lusting after men is linked to the condemnation of leaving [their] spouses" (113). To support her reading, Youssef references other verses where these linguistic rules apply (e.g., Q. 2:44: "You command people to be righteous and yourself you forget while reciting the Book?").

The book raises two noteworthy points for further discussion. The first, implicitly, concerns what appears to be a divide, a lack of dialogue, between Muslim feminist scholarship produced in English and that produced in Arabic. This divide has implications for Youssef's study. She does not acknowledge or cite any of the vast Islamic feminist scholarship that addresses the

issues she does. Had she access to Muslim feminist scholarship in English, her discussion particularly on marriage and homosexuality would have been enriched by scholarship in both languages, such as through an engagement with the works of Kecia Ali, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and other feminists who have written extensively on gender and *fiqh*. Given that the audiences for, languages in, and contexts in which North African and Western Muslim feminists write, Youssef's not citing English-writing Muslim feminists speaks to the divide between the two. However, while she lacks access to this scholarship because of language gaps, it is unclear why she does not cite Fatima Mernissi, whose scholarship on similar issues is available in Arabic, French, and English.

The second point is Youssef's critical assessment of exegetical and legal scholarship, where she observes that consensus often dominates the Qur'an. She consistently shows that the male scholars of Islam who are perceived as representatives and spokesmen of God (e.g., Tabari, Abu Bakr Ibn 'Arabi, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Ibn 'Ashur, and others) willfully read their assumptions and preferences into the Qur'an to accommodate patriarchal notions of gender.

Benyoussef's translation is an immense service to several disciplines and fields, especially Islamic Studies and Gender Studies. An introduction to Olfa Youssef's scholarship disrupts portrayals of Muslim women as victims of their historical, textual traditions. The translation also helps to push language boundaries in Islamic feminist scholarship by making accessible the work of Tunisian Muslim feminist Olfa Youssef to the rest of the world. The book benefits not just academics researching Muslims and gendered concerns, but also practicing Muslims interested in studying their religion from insider perspectives that challenge conventional wisdoms. Youssef's scholarship also counters the view that Muslim women's critiques of their male-dominated religious tradition are inspired by Islamophobia or orientalism. Instead, Youssef reclaims her access to the Qur'an and the right to critically evaluate particularly those parts of her tradition that adversely impact marginalized Muslims.

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