“American Muslim women convert’s and the reinterpretation of Islam: A study of American women converts’ writings”

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Islam is a growing religion all over the world, we constantly witness the conversion of many people especially from Europe and the United state of America. When we shed lights on that latter (USA), we find an increased number of Americans are choosing Islam. The appeal of this religion to Americans is particularly surprising when one considers the dichotomy and the conflict between the West and Islam. What is more surprising is the fact that a significant number of women are embracing Islam, not only that but, they go further to examine its teachings and evaluate the already provided interpretations of its sources.

Recently, more converts have become active participants in the production of the Islamic knowledge mainly through their academic writings. Within a short period of time, a wide range of women converts’ writings about Islam and the rereading of its texts have appeared in the academic arena.

The foremost aim of this article is the analysis of American women converts’ writings about the representation of Islam. I will discuss the interest of academic women converts in the interpretation of the authoritative religious texts (the Qur’an and hadith) as well as the way they read Islamic sources. I will take many examples, among which I can mention: [*Qurʼan and Woman: Rereading The Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*](http://books.google.fr/books?id=BC97lcIBAncC&dq=amina+wadud&hl=fr&ei=X3H9TL-JFcL7lwfR2IWRBQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAQ)by the American convert Amina Wadud as well as Rabia Terri Harris’ article “Reading the Signs Unfolding Truth and The Transformation of Authority”. I will try also to uncover the way American women converts believe in women’s right in the reinterpretation of religious texts.

I have divided this study into two main sections. The first one will sheds lights on Islam in the writings of American Muslim women converts, and how they are interested in the reinterpretation of the religious texts. While the second section will be devoted to the analysis of the interpretation of the Islamic sources in American women converts writings, and the way American women converts consider rereading the Islamic texts as a woman’s rights.

1. Islam in American women converts’ writings: Transmission or Reproduction.

In the case of intellectual women, conversion does not stop at the act of embracing Islam, rather the process has continued to find expression through literature in which they try to assert their independence and freedom of choice. The American women converts’ literature may be seen in three main categories; literature that reflects their conversion experiences, where they narrate their story of embracing Islam. The second category is where they promote women’s rights and discuss gender issues that are still negotiated in the Islamic world. While the last category is where the focus is on Islam and the interpretation of its texts, and this is the one that I will be analyzing in this article.

If we consider the works of the American converts, it becomes apparent that an interesting number of American women converts try to introduce their new faith and negotiate its teachings through their writings. When we have a close look at their prolific literature we come across titles such as: [*Qurʼan and Woman: Rereading The Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*](http://books.google.fr/books?id=BC97lcIBAncC&dq=amina+wadud&hl=fr&ei=X3H9TL-JFcL7lwfR2IWRBQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAQ), *Inside The Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam, Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qu’ran, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* as well as “Reading the Signs Unfolding Truth and The Transformation of Authority” and we have many other examples.

The interest of American women converts in rereading the Islamic sources is shown in the prolific literature they produce. These women have not only introduce the teaching of their new religion, but instead they express a great interest in the reinterpretation of the Islamic sources in their writings. American women converts’ challenge to the already existing interpretations, and the act of providing new readings to the Quran and Hadiths pushes me to investigate the reasons behind the American women converts great concern in the reproduction of their new religion.

The investigation of American Muslim women converts’ writings demonstrates that

the main motive that drives these converts to reread the Islamic texts is that most of the American women intellectual converts find it hard to blindly accept the existing interpretations within the Islamic tradition. Therefore, they start to examine the Islamic sources, especially those that deal with women’s rights. Most of these intellectual converts argue that the Muslim traditional interpretations are affected by their patriarchal cultures and therefore, they are misogynistic interpretations. Their dissatisfaction with these interpretations leads some American women converts to try to find alternative sources or readings and to correct what has been already taken for granted as Islamic. It has been mentioned by different converts that Muslim males used to interpret Islamic sources in a way that served their needs and allowed themselves the right to control and oppress women in the name of Islam. Hence, these intellectual convert women refuse what they see as negative and narrow-minded interpretations within the Islamic tradition.

Amina Wadud is one example of the American women converts who actively works on rereading the Islamic sources. She comes up with new methods that can provide comprehensive interpretations and in the same time can guarantee women’s rights.

In her book *Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, she states that:

A significant part of the motivation behind my consideration of this subject was to challenge some of the attitudes and the resulting interpretations given with regard to the subject of women and the Qur’an. I explicitly challenge the arrogance of those men who require a level of human dignity and respect for themselves while denying that level to another human, for whatever reason including simply because she is a woman. In particular, I reject the false justification of such arrogance through narrow interpretations or misinterpretations of the Qur’anic text, namely interpretations which ignore the basic social principles of justice, equality and common humanity.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Wadud argues that women’s absence in the interpretation of the religion which create the need of the reexamination of the primarily Islamic texts. She believes that women’s experiences and worldviews should be included in the reexamination of the primarily sources of Islamic thoughts, showing that is the only way that can lead to comprehensive and legitimate interpretations. Amina Wadud critically discusses women’s exclusion in the participation in the Islamic sciences and she calls for including women’s voice in the reinterpretation of the religion to promote gender justice and to eradicate all forms of discrimination.

Kecia Ali is another American woman convert who shows that the existing interpretations are misogynist, she mentioned that:

Muslims have often been self-congratulatory about the heritage of explicit discussions of sex in legal and literary works, without recognizing the pervasive nature of andocentric and even misogynist

assumption in those texts.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Investigating the constructed Muslim ethical thoughts about sexuality, Kesia Ali comes to the conclusion that there is a need to rethink about the views and the interpretations of classical Muslim jurists. In her book *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence* she calls for a serious reconsideration of religious texts to show the way females’ sexuality is also valued and should be taken into consideration.

The American convert Aisha Bewley also questions the absence of women in the Islamic sciences and how they are ignored and silenced, she declares that:

Reading historical sources throughout the centuries of Islamic history, we find lots and lots of women active in all areas of life, and then suddenly it stops. What happened? How and why have things changed in the last three hundred years the extent that it is unusual to find women involved in Islamic sciences and, unlike in the past, very few Muslim men would even consider being taught by a Muslim woman? This is a phenomenon which requires in-depth research. It seems that it stems from various factors, some of which originated from out-side the Muslim community and some from within[[3]](#footnote-3)

Aisha [Bewley](http://www.google.fr/search?tbs=bks:1&tbo=p&q=+inauthor:%22Aisha+Abdurrahman+Bewley%22&source=gbs_metadata_r&cad=4) in this passage compares the situation of women in the early Islamic period and in the contemporary world. She makes it clear that nowadays, Muslim women’s mobility is more restricted to the extent that they are not allowed to participate in the Islamic sciences. She shows the way women’s views and experiences are denied in the making of the Islamic laws.

American women converts believe that Islam ensure women’s rights and therefore the existing misogynistic interpretations should be reexamined to uncover the authentic teachings of the religion of Islam. The already mentioned passages demonstrate the aim of the American women converts in calling for the reinterpretation of the religious texts in a way that can include women’s perspectives.

 2- The Interpretation of the Religion as a Woman’s Right in American Muslim Women Converts’ Writings

Women’s issues were primarily discussed and interpreted by males, it was unusual to find women involved in Islamic sciences. Nowadays, women start to think critically about their marginalization in this field, and works have been authored by some female Muslim scholars in this field, among which I can mentioned the book of the Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi; *The veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam,* where she reinterprets some well known *hadiths* (prophet’s sayings) to challenge the male traditional perceptions about women’s right in Islam. Another female Muslim scholar based in the United States, whose writings advocate Muslim women’s rights in this field is the Pakistani American Riffat Hassan. She is one of the pioneers in the reinterpretation of Qur’anic verses and she challenges male domination in the interpretations of Islamic sources. But, in general the works of Muslim women in this field remain very limited to rethinking what has been already presented by males, and to correct the misogynistic ideas that have been perpetuated in terms of women being weak and unable to perform some social and religious activities.

The American convert Aminah Wadud made a unique initiatives in her writings about women’s rights in the Islamic sciences. She goes beyond the ongoing debate about Muslim women to advocate and insist on the right of women to take their place in the making of Islamic law and the participation in Islamic affairs.

Amina Wadud confirms that women’s experiences and worldviews should be included in the reinterpretation of the Islamic sources. In her works, she calls women to re-read the Qur’an and interpret it from their own perspective, to be able to abolish the stereotypes, that are created out of males’ interpretations that have been always based on mainly their own desires and needs. She points that

The attempts to address the question of Muslim women’s autonomous agency and authentic Islamic identity in the context of Islam and modernity can only be successful when a complete reexamination of the primary sources of Islamic thought, praxis, and worldview is made that intentionally includes female perspectives on these sources and that validates female experiences. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Believing in women’s right to participate in the discussion about Islam and the Islamic law, the American women convert Amina Wadud tries to confirm women’s rights to be active agents in the making of Islamic law to meet the needs of Muslim women in the present time, and this is what was unique in the writings of this American woman.

Amina Wadud cogently criticizes male domination in the making of Islamic law and finds an alternative solution to create gender justice in this field which is to give women the right to participate in the process of the making of Islamic law to help them eradicate all forms of discrimination within the religious field. She gives women a voice and an opportunity to share their experiences, their opinions and their perspectives within the Islamic law.

From the writings of the American woman convert Amina Wadud, we can deduce her interest in the development of Muslim women’s situation. Muslim males’ perception of women’s incapacity to perform some religious tasks pushes Aminah Wadud to think about alternative ways to help Muslim women’s intervene in the making of the Islamic law and to positively influence women’s rights and women’s position in Islam in general.

Conclusion

In the united states, a new Islamic movement has come to birth recently and it is leaded by American converts. A general interest in Islam has been shown especially by women. What is more interesting is the active role that these women play not only in the transmission of the religion of Islam, but also in the reproduction of the already existing readings of its texts. Many Muslim women converts’ voices are being raised in the heart of America calling for women’s right to participate in the making of Islamic affairs.

This article comes to uncover the way these Muslim women converts shape Islam in their writingsconverted muslim women contribution to wht is callled islamic feminism in the west converted muslim women contribution to wht is callled islamic feminism in the west , and show their contribution to this religion and its teachings in the west through their prolific literature. Not only that, but how the American women converts contribute to the open debate about women’s rights in interpreting the Islamic sources.

The academic writings of American women converts prove their interest in the examination of the religious sources in Islam. They lead a movement that calls for including women’s experiences in the mission of the interpretation of religious sources. Not only that but, American women converts believe in Muslim women’s rights in the participation of the making the Islamic laws.

In this article, we have seen the way American women converts challenge the patriarchal interpretations, and they reread the classical Islamic sources to uplift Muslim women’s situation from the oppression of the inherited misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations.

The American Muslim women converts demonstrate that Islam is an important aspect of their lives, this has been deduced from their religious involvement and the active role they play in the making of the Islamic law and also from their participation in the reinterpretation of the Islamic sources. I think today, we should be equally aware of the fact that these female convert writers play a significant role in the production of Islamic knowledge.

Today, It becomes unfair to ignore the prolific writings and the hard work of these new Muslims in establishing a positive image about the religion of Islam through giving women an equal right in the making of Islamic law. Their belonging to a non -Muslim country, helps them evaluate the interpretation of the Islamic texts and give them an opportunity as free and intellectual women to reread the religious sources and uncover the authentic message of Islam.

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