



Asma Barlas' Criticism of Hadith as a Tool of Tafsir: Critical Analysis of Feminist's Predominant Narrative

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the hermeneutical methodology of Asma Barlas, in critiquing Muslims' intellectual traditions with a special reference to the Prophetic tradition, the Sunnah, and its relevance in understanding Islam. In Islamic orthodoxy, the Sunnah occupies the second position as a source of Islamic law. More importantly, it serves as practical explanation of the Qur'ān. Consequently, the Sunnah has become indispensable in understanding the Qur'ān. Conversely, Barlas uses her hermeneutical methodology to challenge the authenticity of the Sunnah and its role in understanding the Qur'ān.¹ Her central argument is that using the Sunnah to interpret the Qur'ān is problematic as it undercuts the doctrine of revelation's self-sufficiency and the interpretive flexibility inherent in it, putting a methodological closure on how the Qur'ān could "legitimately" be read.² Her criticism of hadith as a tool of *tafsīr* is specifically remarkable. This paper, therefore, critically analyzes Barlas' hermeneutical methodology in relation to her criticism of *hadith* as an important ingredient of *tafsīr*. It argues that *hadith* is an indispensable tool in making sound Qur'anic interpretation and in proper understanding of the Qur'ān as a source of guidance to humanity. It then analyses Barlas' arguments making references to her intellectual inadequacy. The paper concludes that Barlas' argument on the position of the Sunnah in Islam is simplistic; while not denying that a significant amount of *hadith* were forged and integrated into *tafsīr*, it must be stressed that this forgery was not allowed to go unchallenged.

Keywords: Asma Barlas, Criticism of Hadith, Feminist's, Predominant Narrative, Tafsir.

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Introduction

In Islamic orthodoxy, the Sunnah occupies the second position as a source of Islamic law. More importantly, it serves as practical explanation of the Qur'ān. For this reason, the Sunnah has become indispensable in understanding the Qur'ān. Conversely, Asma Barlas uses her hermeneutical methodology to challenge the authenticity of the Sunnah and its role in understanding the Qur'ān.³ Her argument is that using the Sunnah to read the Qur'ān undercuts the doctrine of revelation's self-sufficiency and the interpretive flexibility inherent in it, putting a methodological closure on how the Qur'ān could "legitimately" be read.⁴ The inter-textual nature of knowledge construction, she says, necessitates opening up the tafsīr to inquiry. This naturally will mean having to open up to similar critique of reconstructions of the Prophet's Sunnah (praxis) by the ahādith, on which classical tafsīr relies for its authority.⁵ This study evaluates the hermeneutical framework of Asma Barlas and critically analyses her stance vis a vis the position of Sunnah in Islam.

ASMA BARLAS' EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Asma Barlas was born in Pakistan in 1950. She attended the University of Pakistan, where she obtained a BA in English literature and philosophy. She begins her career as a diplomat (section officer) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, becoming the first female to be inducted into the Foreign Service. This diplomatic career, however, was soon ended upon her dismissal for criticizing the military regime of General Ziaul Haq. Thereafter, Barlas joined the newspaper *The Muslim* as an assistant editor, publishing poetry, short-stories and a weekly column in the paper. Finally, she relocated to the United States in 1983 for her safety, and later received political asylum.⁶

Barlas received an MA and a PhD in international studies from the University of Denver in Colorado. Her PhD dissertation, *Democracy, Nationalism and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia* (1995) examined the genealogy of Pakistan's chronic militarism to the political-economy of British colonial rule in India.

After graduate school, Barlas became understandably obsessed in studying Muslim sexual/textual politics, specifically the interconnectedness between patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān and how it justified violence against women. In the process, she offers what she considers to be a liberatory Qur'anic hermeneutics in her book "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'ān (2002). In this book, she analyses Muslims' methodology in their interpretation of religious texts, especially patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'ān.

In 1991, Barlas became the chair of the Department of Politics and founding Director of the Centre for the Study of Culture, Race and Ethnicity at Ithaca College,

New York. Similarly, in 2008, she held the Spinoza Chair in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Ever since, Barlas has generally focused her research on Islam, examining Western epistemic and polemical violence against it and Muslims. For example, she published a book on the effect of 9/11 on American's perception vis-a-vis Islam entitled *Islam, Muslims and the U.S.* (2004) and *Reunderstanding Islam* (2008). Similarly, she has relentlessly been offering articles and works on 'Qur'anic hermeneutics' that argue in favour of gender equality and patriarchal mentality within an Islamic framework.

Over the last few years, Barlas has worked on a number of different themes, such as *Qur'anic and Biblical Accounts of the Prophet Abraham's Sacrifice* (2011). Recently, she made a special contribution of a chapter on Islam to the *Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* to be published in 2014 (with online publication of completed chapters in 2013).

Barlas' work on the Qur'ān has been translated into several languages; Arabic, Bengali, Indonesian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and Urdu. She has also received several invitations to speak on gender and sexuality in Islam at a number of places in the United States. Similarly, she has visited several countries delivering lectures on gender related issues such as Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, Spain, Portugal, Canada, Germany, Finland, Iceland, Italy, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (<http://faculty.ithaca.edu/abarlas/>).

BARLAS' CRITICISM OF HADITH AS A TOOL OF TAFSIR

In Islamic orthodoxy, the Sunnah occupies the second position as a source of Islamic law. More importantly, it serves as practical explanation of the Qur'ān. For this reason, the Sunnah has become indispensable in understanding the Qur'ān. Conversely, Barlas uses her hermeneutical methodology to challenge the authenticity of the Sunnah and its role in understanding the Qur'ān.⁷ Her argument is that using the Sunnah to read the Qur'ān undercuts the doctrine of revelation's self-sufficiency and the interpretive flexibility inherent in it, putting a methodological closure on how the Qur'ān could "legitimately" be read.⁸ The inter-textual nature of knowledge construction, she says, necessitates opening up the tafsīr to inquiry. This naturally will mean having to open up to similar critique reconstructions of the Prophet's Sunnah (praxis) by the ahādith, on which classical tafsīr relies for its authority.⁹

Furthermore, the Qur'ān, as an inimitable sacred text, is both quintessential source of Divine Truth and the means of putting it into practice. However, its teachings,

contends Barlas, have become inaccessible without mediation by other religious and literary texts, especially, tafsir, and the ahādith as well as customary, state and legal practices. Consequently, it has become necessary to critically examine the extra textual contexts in which the Qur'ān is read by Muslims. 10.

Barlas based her argument on the assumption that the very nature of Islamic epistemology and the manner with which it was shaped by the state during the early years of Islamic era had led to the elevation of the Sunnah over the Qur'ān. This, she says, creates a couple of problems which subsequent generations of Muslims later had to combat regarding the status of the Sunnah. First, there exist inconsistencies and contradictions between the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, and reconciling between the two has become increasingly difficult. Second, acknowledging the status of the Sunnah seriously undermines the self-sufficiency of the wahy and the interpretive flexibility inherent in it, putting a methodological closure on how the Qur'ān could "legitimately" be read 11 Third, elevating the status of the Sunnah to that of the Qur'ān introduces "a lasting anomaly" into religious discourse which ultimately creates tensions between these two sources of religious authority. Fourth, the content of the Sunnah is largely fixed by the opinions of the interpreters. Thus, "by linking their own authority with that of the Sunnah, and the Sunnah's authority with that of the Qur'ān", classical commentators of the Qur'ān "became its architects instead, reducing, by a series of mediations, Divine Discourse to their own interpretations of it" 12

Furthermore, Barlas claims that among the confusions in Muslim religious discourse, one of the most detrimental is the failure to make distinction between the Qur'ān and the Prophet's Sunnah on the one hand, and between the Sunnah and the Ahadith on the other. This is because, while Muslims extremely venerate the Sunnah, most of its contents do not reflect the actual praxis of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.). Rather, it is a reflection of the free thinking activity of classical Islamic jurists who had made their analogical deductions from the existing Sunnah or practice largely derived from Byzantine, Arab, Jewish, and Persian sources. 13

"Annals of prophetic praxis", contends Barlas (2002: 64), "thus became a repository of many pre-Islamic ideas, including abidingly misogynistic ones". Despite its problematic content, the Sunnah was ascribed to the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) in the 2nd and 3rd Islamic centuries. Consequently, existing practices, especially of the Arabs, were absorbed into Islam and came to be seen similar to the Prophet's Sunnah. In these circumstances, the Sunnah of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) was elevated over the Qur'ān itself and became integral components of Qur'anic exegesis and decisive in the formation of

Islamic jurisprudence. For this reason, boundary problems of a different sort arose between the Qur'ān and the Sunnah when scholars attempted in the classical/medieval period to standardize the sources of religious authority. Subsequently, these attempts culminated in reversing the authority of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah vis-a-vis one another, and influencing Qur'ān's exegesis. 14. For this reason, Barlas insists that Muslim feminist scholars must undertake a critical ijtihad to present fresh readings of the Qur'ān, analyzing the nature of inter-and extratextuality in Muslim religious discourse and the relationship that exists between them. Specifically, she focuses on the role of the Sunnah, the Shariah, the state and early interpretive communities in shaping Qur'anic exegesis as well as Islamic epistemology and methodology.

Framing her analysis on historical context, Barlas observes that tafsīr originally begins as an oral tradition of ahadith transmission, reflecting the opinions of exegetes to establish the relevance of the Qur'ān to every time and situation. As time goes by, however, the contents of tafsīr were largely influenced and shaped by those social contexts. Consequently, tafsīr, concludes 15. transcends its historical context and “came to be confused with the Qur'ān and thus also to be given a supra historical status”.

In the light of this development, it perhaps not surprising, contends Barlas, that tafsir, an interpretive activity later became a reflection of not only the training, concerns, and religious affiliation of the interpreters but also their knowledge, skills, imagination as well as their literary and sectarian inclinations (2002: 39). Similarly, Muslims were reluctant to critique the methodology adopted by classical exegetes in the interpretation of the Qur'ān because they regard it as an integral element of the process of the formation of tradition and its embodiment in sacred history as well as religious literature (2002: 42). Thus, for Muslims:

classical tafsīr is not only a commentary on the Qur'ān, it also is a historical record of the circumstances in which a community, or ummah, and a state claiming to have lawful authority over it, emerged and developed. Communal identities are thus inextricably bound up with the role of tafsīr in reconstructing history in ways that allow Muslims to experience psychically the unity they may lack at an existential level. 16

For these reasons, Barlas found it necessary to disentangle the Qur'ān from its tafsīr and from reconstructions of the Sunnah by the ahādith. In the process, she sets to separate normative from historical Islam, by reexamining the relationship between inter and extra-textuality.

In addition, Barlas claims that sexual politics and patriarchal interpretation are products of excessive reliance of exegetes on the ahadith to interpret the Qur'ān. Consequently, their restrictive reading of Qur'anic verses significantly shaped their conceptualization of the Prophet's life and praxis and eventually culminated in a reversal relationship between the Qur'an and the Sunnah. For her, this reversing of authority has continued to pose problems on how Muslims understand the Qur'an today. Furthermore, Middle Eastern ideologies and cultures, asserts Barlas, were incorporated into Islam in the 2nd and 3rd Islamic centuries as a result of emergence of dissent as well as growing complexity of religious and political life. In these circumstances, some jurists set up hierarchical impulses for evaluation of religious sources; this formed the basis of justification and dismissal of evidence. Nevertheless, the methodology adopted by these scholars in their engagement led to "undermining not only the doctrine of the self-sufficiency of the Qur'ān but also its unique status as revelation (waḳy)" 17 Thereafter, jurists elevated the authority of the Qur'ān with that of the Sunnah, and ended up according the Sunnah the status of waḳy, and then taking the Sunnah to abrogate the Qur'ān itself. Consequently, from being an exemplar of waḳy, the Sunnah "came to be regarded in and of itself as wahy, and then as even more consequential than Qur'ānic wahy" 18

Barlas (2002: 66) specifically criticizes al-Shafi'i for establishing the status of the Sunnah as wahy by ruling that "the command of the Prophet is the command of God" and that the Prophet's behaviour was also a form of wahy, albeit of a different order than the Qur'ān. Like other aspects of religious knowledge, asserts Barlas, this methodology of the Qur'ānic interpretation "began as the opposite" of what it eventually became. Indeed, the whole idea, she continues, "originated in attempts by "the ubiquitous al-Shafi'i" in the early Islamic history to make the Sunnah "paradigmatic" but ended up generating "a paradigm that enabled its users to further their own hegemony instead" 19. Barlas' argument was earlier advanced by Goldziher (1971: 236) who claimed that the "canonical authority" of the ahādith, including those of the Sahih has less to do with the accuracy of their content than with "the unanimous collective consciousness of the Islamic community ... which elevated these works to the heights which they have attained".

Critical examination of Barlas' argument on the position of the Sunnah in Islam reveals that it is simplistic. While not denying that a significant amount of ahadith were forged and integrated into tafsir, it must be stressed that this forgery was not allowed to go unchallenged. It seems possible that Barlas' judgment stems from her superficial reading of historical evolution of hadith literature and the effort of scholars in preserving

it. Indeed, scholars of hadith applied stringent criteria for critical evaluation of the biography, honesty, moral integrity and memory strength of the narrators of the ahadith before accepting their narrations.

It must be acknowledged that the Sunnah is indispensable in proper understanding of the Qur'ān as a source of guidance to humanity. As far as interpretation of the Qur'ān is concerned, Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) was the best interpreter. This is something confirmed by the Qur'ān:

[We sent them] with clear proofs and written ordinances. And We revealed to you the al-Dhikr (the reminder) that you may clearly explain to the people what was revealed to them and that perhaps they may reflect. **20**

In his commentary on this verse, Ibn Kathir observed that the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) was divinely chosen for this noble career because he knew the Qur'ān more than any other person, and he understood it and adhered to its teachings. For this reason, he was obliged to explain in detail what has been mentioned and explained what was not clear to them. **21**

Indeed, the Qur'ān has made several references to the necessity of following the Prophet's (P.B.U.H.) footsteps in his lifetime and adhering to his Sunnah after his death. For instance, in Surah (al-Nisa":80) Allah the Almighty says:

He who obeys the Messenger has obeyed Allah; but those who turn away, We have not sent you over them as a guardian. **22**

This verse clearly indicates that full allegiance to the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) is necessary because he conveyed God's command and whatever he said or did was in line with God's command. Hence, following his Sunnah is compulsory upon all Muslims (Abu Hayyan, 2001: 317). In another relevant verse, Allah the Almighty strongly enjoined Muslims to strictly follow His Messenger and follow to his Sunnah:

O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result. **23**

According to Ibn Ashur (2001), Allah the Almighty repeats the phrase "wa ati 'ur-rasul" (and follow the Messenger) instead of just using harf al-ataf (conjunction) "wa" (and) to indicate the necessity of following the Prophet (P.B.U.H.), his sayings and deeds

and the gravity of disobeying him in anyway. (Ibn Ashur, 2001: 165). His ta'ah comes next to that of Allah the Almighty. Similarly, Abu Hayyan mentions that one has to refer to Allah and to His Messenger during his lifetime. After his death, one must refer to his Sunnah for guidance. 24

In a tradition recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim and narrated by Abu Hurairah, the Messenger of Allah said, "Whoever obeys me, obeys Allah and whoever disobeys me disobeys Allah". Mujahid and several others among the salaf said that the interpretation of the verse (4: 59) means refer to the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger. Thus, this is a command from Allah that whatever areas the people dispute about, whether major or minor in their religion, they are obliged to refer to the guidance of the Qur'an and Sunnah 25

Similarly, Allah the Almighty strongly warns against rejecting the Prophet's judgement and his Sunnah.

Have you not seen those who claim to have believed in what was revealed to you, [O Muhammad], and what was revealed before you? They wish to refer legislation to Taghut, while they were commanded to reject it; and Satan wishes to lead them far astray. 26

This verse clearly shows that referring to other than the Qur'an and Sunnah for judgement is one of the characteristics of non-Muslims. Allah castigates those who claim to believe in what He has sent down to His Messenger and to the earlier Prophets, yet they refer to other than the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger for judgement in various disputes.

It was reported that the reason behind revealing this verse (4: 60) was that an Ansar man and a Jew had a dispute, and the Jew said, "Let us refer to Muhammad to judge between us". However, the Muslim said no, "let us refer to Ka'ab bin al-Ashraf (a Jew) to judge between us". Other reasons were also reported behind the revelation of the verse. However, the verse has a general meaning, as it chastises all those who refrain from referring to the Qur'an and Sunnah for judgement and prefer the judgement of whoever they chose of falsehood, which befits the description of tagut here. 27

Ibn Ashur notes that this verse is very clear in that rejecting the Prophet's judgment leads to kufr: No one denies/rejects his judgment except a disbeliever or hypocrite. This is because the Prophet's judgement is always just and fair. Similarly, Abu Hayyan confirms that rejecting the Prophet's decision is hypocrisy based on this verse

(Abu Hayyan, 2001: 292; Ibn Ashur, 2001: 176-177). This is confirmed by another relevant passage:

The only statement of the [true] believers when they are called to Allah and His Messenger to judge between them is that they say, "We hear and we obey." And those are the successful.²⁸

By the same token, the danger of going against the Prophet's judgement and disregarding his Sunnah is manifested in the following verse:

But no, by your Lord, they will not [truly] believe until they make you, [O Muhammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in [full, willing] submission.²⁹

Allah the Almighty swears by His Glorious, Most Honorable Self, that no one shall attain faith until he refers to the Messenger for judgment in all matters. Thereafter, whatever the Messenger commands is the plain truth that must be submitted to, inwardly and outwardly. And once judgement is made, Muslims must find in themselves no resistance against the decisions and accept them with full submission.

Abu Hayyan (2001: 296) notes that the verb "la yu'minuna" clearly shows that rejecting the Prophet's judgement in his lifetime or rejecting his Sunnah after his death is a sign of hypocrisy and disbelief. Any person who does that is either a hypocrite or a disbeliever. Both al-Bukhari and Muslim recorded that Urwah said, his father al-Zubair had quarreled with a man about a stream which both of them used for irrigation. Thereupon, Allah's Messenger commanded al-Zubair to irrigate his garden first, and then let the water flow to his neighbour's. The man became angry and accused the Prophet of injustice saying "is it because he is your cousin?" These words made the Prophet furious and subsequently changed his judgment, asking al-Zubair to irrigate his garden first and withhold the water until it reaches the walls surrounding the palms. Then, he may release the water to his neighbour. Al-Zubair said, "I think this verse was revealed for this reason"³⁰

Another relevant verse stresses the significance of following the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) and his Sunnah:

Say, "Obey Allah and obey the Messenger; but if you turn away - then upon him is only that [duty] with which he has been charged, and upon you is that with which you

have been charged. And if you obey him, you will be [rightly] guided. And there is not upon the Messenger except the [responsibility for] clear notification 31

In his interpretation of the verse, Ibn Kathir notes that this verse is a clear evidence that those who claim to love Allah, yet do not follow the way of His Prophet (P.B.U.H.) are not true in their claim. That is why, he says: if you really love Allah then follow me, Allah will love you". "Obey Allah and the Messenger" says the Qur'ān, but if they turn away by defying the Prophet (P.B.U.H.), then "Allah does not like the disbelievers" (Qur'ān: al-Imran, 3: 32). This is clear testimony that defiance of the Messenger's way/command constitutes kufr: 32

It must be remembered that when the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) was alive his companions used to refer to him for clarifications of the meaning of various ambiguous verses. Whatever he said was later codified in the form of the ahadith. Commentators of the Qur'ān among the sahabah, tabi'in and their successors largely quoted these ahadith to explain the meaning of the Qur'anic verses. These contributions constitute the vast literature of tafsir in the codification era of tafsir. Subsequent exegetes relied heavily on the earlier tafasir and hardly added anything new. This is because they believed that it was not sufficient to take the Qur'ān and the Sunnah and to interpret their text based on one's independent thinking, no matter how knowledgeable one may appear to be, without referring to the explanation of the Prophet (PBU.H.), his companions, their successors and subsequent generations of righteous scholars. The Qur'ān (al-Nisa': 4: 115) beautifully confirms that disregarding the understanding of the first Muslim generation only leads to deviation, misguidance, intellectual chaos and eternal destruction as well as heresy:

And whoever contradicts and opposes the Messenger after the right path has been shown clearly to him. And follows other than the believers' way, we shall keep him in the path he has chosen, and burn him in Hell, what an evil destination. 33

According to Ibn Kathir (1968), the first segment of the verse refers to whoever intentionally deviates from the path of the law revealed to the Messenger; after the truth has been made clear, apparent and plain to him, whereas the last portion of the passage is a reference to "a type of conduct that is closely related to contradicting the Messenger {of Allah}". This contradiction, he continues, could be in the form of contradicting a text (from the Qur'ān or Sunnah) or contradicting what the Ummah of Muhammad has agreed on. This is because, added Ibn Kathir (1968), the Ummah of MuhIammad (P.B.U.H.) is immune from error when they all agree on something, a miracle that serves to increase their honor; due to the greatness of their Prophet (P.B.U.H.) 34

This argument was also advanced by Ibn Ashur, who highlighted the danger of contradicting and opposing the Messenger and following a path other than that of the Believers of the past. In his commentary on the passage, Ibn Ashur notes that it is absolutely illegal to deviate against the path of Muslim community. Hence, following their way is wajib (compulsory) 35

Moreover, the Qur'ān clearly explains that the content of the Sunnah, even though not divinely revealed, is an inspiration from God. Its authority therefore rests in the fact that Prophet Muhammad's (P.B.U.H.) persona is practical embodiment of the Qur'ān. As once observed by his wife, Aisha, "Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) in his person virtually embodied the Qur'ān". The Prophet was also reported to have said, "I had received the inspiration of the Qur'ān and its similitude". Hadith expert explained that "its similitude" refers to his Sunnah. 36

Given the fact that the Sunnah is inspired by God it is considered as a secondary source of Islamic law since it explains and complements the Qur'ān. But this is not to suggest however, that it derogates or abrogates the Qur'ān. Should there be any contradiction between the two, the Qur'ān would always supersede the Sunnah, never the reverse. In case of such a conflict, it should be assumed that the hadith in question had been fabricated, misunderstood or read out of context. Indeed, it is true that for some time, the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) had warned against writing his Sunnah in order to forestall any confusion between the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Consequently, there were relatively few hadith written during the Prophetic era. On the whole, the Sunnah was recorded sometime after death of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) but this should not be a justification for challenging its authenticity, though 37 Having said that, it appears that no one –no matter how knowledgeable- can understand Islam properly on the basis of the Qur'ān alone. This is because the Sunnah is indispensable for proper understanding of the Qur'ānic text itself as many essential components of Islamic teachings, including its moral codes and rituals are mainly if not entirely based on the Sunnah.

In the light of this position, Barlas' criticism of the Sunnah is at best confusing as she fails to make a distinction between authentic and forged ahadith. While it is true that a significant amount of ahadith were forged, many thousands of them have been collected, sifted and canonized from the fourth post-prophetic era. Among these voluminous hadith collections are six canonized books of ahadith which enjoyed the highest prestige; Sahih al-Bukhari (d. 870), Sahih Muslim (d. 875), Sunan Abu Dawud (d. 888) Sunan al-Tirmidhi (d.892), Sunan al-Nasa'i, (d. 915) and Sunan Ibn Majah (d. 892). These six

canonical works, contain much of what the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) said (sunnah qawliyyah), did (sunnah fiiliyyah) or silently approved (sunnah taqririyyah). Hence, it is unfair to reject the Sunnah outrightly.

Another possible explanation for Barlas' criticism may be due to her failure to appreciate the meticulous effort of scholars to weed out possible forgeries in the process of collecting, sifting and preserving the ahadith. Specifically, ahadith experts and Muslim historians painstakingly scrutinized the chain of narrators (isnad), evaluating the biographical details of narrators, assessing their characters, theological affiliation and their mental capacity. For instance, they would verify whether the narrators had really met, had the chain ended with a companion of the Prophet, if there were any reporter missing in the chain, had any of the transmitters ever shown moral weakness and could their memories remain intact. Ahadith scholars made this scrutiny on the basis of acceptance and reliability of narrations. If for any reason, they discovered a defect, weak links, in theory, they outrightly rejected the report. These formed the basis of specific genre in Hadith Science called *Ilm al-Rijal* (biographical evaluation). It is also synonymous with what is commonly referred to as *al-Jarh wa al-Ta'adil* (discrediting and accrediting).³⁸

Certainly, it is correct that most of the transmitters/narrators of ahadith in classical period tended to focus on scrutinizing the chain of transmitters (al-isnad) rather than the transmitted materials (al-matn) except, of course, in cases where the content of a ahadith was apparently forged. For them, there was absolutely no reason to play judge concerning anything the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) might have said or done. In addition, forging ahadith in favour of particular political or theological trend had not been critical during the Prophet's era. Based on this, they took cross examination of al-matn for granted. Perhaps, it was for this reason, occidental orientalists like Ignaz Goldziher and Schacht (the mentor of Fazlur Rahman) felt justified to reject Sunnah and ahadith entirely, concluding that they were largely forged.³⁹

However, the weakness of Goldziher's and Schacht's arguments lies in their failure to appreciate the oral culture of 7th century Arabia. Orientalists overlook the fact that most Arabs in those days possessed extraordinary strength of memory which made it easy for them to memorize anything they would hear outrightly. For this reason, whenever a certain portion of the Qur'an is revealed the companions would memorize it, understand it and instantly translate it into practice.⁴⁰

Similarly, "orientalists" as Hoffman observed "under estimated the religious awe of the early Muslims that would have prevented them from committing the atrocity of fabricating a lie against the Allah or their Prophet"⁴¹ This is not to suggest however, that

all traditions are authentic and sound hence it should not be challenged today. Of course, modern scholars are free to apply the same methodology/critical tools of the past to assess ahadith which appear more or less questionable. But that takes more knowledge than any of the Muslim feminists or Western orientalists ever possess.

CONCLUSION

In Islamic orthodoxy, the Sunnah occupies a center stage; it is the second source of Islamic law and more importantly, it serves as practical explanation of the Qur'ān. Consequently, it became indispensable in understanding Qur'anic message. Barlas, however, uses her hermeneutical methodology to challenge the authenticity of the Sunnah and its role in understanding the Qur'ān. It is apparent from the discussion above that Barlas' argument on the position of the Sunnah in Islam is simplistic; while not denying that a significant amount of ahadith were forged and integrated into tafsir, it must be stressed that this forgery was not allowed to go unchallenged. Barlas and other critics of classical jurists/exegetes may not be correct in their assumption that the Sunnah was forged in its entirety because the methodology adopted by classical exegetes, ahadith experts and medieval jurists in preserving Islamic literature including the ahadith were understandably strict and stringent. Thus, while on the one hand it is essential to appreciate the fact that genuine traditions in the classical commentaries are relatively few, on the other hand it is equally important not to neglect or reject them altogether, because as far as Islamic orthodoxy is concerned, authentic ahadith is the second most important source of Islam; thus, using rational/feminist approach to reject authentic traditions is more or less erroneous.

Having said that, it would be safe to conclude that the criticisms of Barlas and other orientalists vis-a-vis the authenticity of the Sunnah has no relevance to the modern world as well as the way Islam is understood in the Western epistemology. Whether, Western Islamologues are happy with the Sunnah traditions or not, their criticisms are methodologically immaterial and intellectually/academically irrelevant to change a tradition that has thoroughly been coined and stamped for over 1,400 years. Again, it is difficult if not impossible to change a genre that had penetrated into poetry, folklore, proverbial wisdom and permeated every sphere of family life, child education and history. Thus, the Sunnah has remained an important ingredient of tafsīr and an indispensable tool of authentic Qur'anic interpretation and proper understanding of the Qur'an as a source of guidance to humanity.

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