

*WOMAN'S IDENTITY AND THE QUR'AN: A
NEW READING.* NIMAT HAFEZ BARAZANGI.
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With *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an*, prolific author Nimat Hafez Barazangi has provided another contribution to the burgeoning Muslim neo-feminist literature (for a list of useful references see <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/islamandwomen/tp/aatpislam.htm>). Her analysis of women's status and role in the Qur'an follows similar works by Barlas, Hekmat, Wadud, and others. In that sense, Barazangi's manuscript is not as "dramatically different" as claimed in the preface, and her call for using Islam as a vehicle for changing the status of Muslim women echoes that of writers such as Fatima Mernissi (Hafez Barazangi, 2007, p. ix).

The book rests on the proposition that all Muslims are called to read and interpret the Qur'an, and key themes include the determination of moral authority and the gendering of scriptural access and interpretation among Muslims. Barazangi critiques what she sees as the excessive reliance on accepted Qur'anic interpretations and calls for a continual interpretation of the holy text by each individual Muslim. That is the most novel aspect of the work, and it certainly represents a fruitful pedagogical approach as it would encourage critical thinking.

Muslim women, Barazangi argues, should use the Qur'an as the basis for self-identity, but they should generate their own interpretive framework rather than accede to notions propounded by men (or non-Muslim feminists). She takes issue with the view that women's education is only necessary for preparing them for motherhood, seeing that as inimical to foundational Islamic precepts. According to Barazangi, Islam requires active participation and engagement from all of its adherents. The improper marginalization of women came about as women were denied direct access to the Qur'an and males assumed exclusive control of scriptural authority. Every Muslim woman should independently read and interpret the Qur'an and integrate her understanding of the holy text into her worldview, life, and actions.

The book is weakened by an unfortunate tendency towards sweeping statements that can be jarring for readers aware of counter-examples. Ba-

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Barazangi juxtaposes her approach to Qur'anic pedagogy against what she often describes as a single, hegemonic, and androcentric ideological framework. Although she acknowledges the heterogeneity of Islam, Barazangi does not substantively engage that tremendous diversity. Overlooking the multiplicity and multivocality of Islamic perspectives may make it easier to pithily present a clear theoretical argument, but it does not accord with the data gathered by this researcher and others. While an ethnographic survey is outside the intended range of the volume, the overgeneralizations weaken the argument and produce questionable assertions such as "everything is 'modernized' in postcolonial Muslim societies except the personal laws that affect familial and social relations, ranging from marriage to inheritance" (Hafez Barazangi, 2007, p. 128).

For this reader, the most interesting parts of the book consist of two somewhat tangential components. First, the idea that Islam requires ongoing interpretation by all Muslims is a highly controversial assertion that contravenes some prominent Islamic views. That argument is Barazangi's integration of the Islamic faith and modernity with its emphasis on the autonomous individual. Others are following a similar conceptual path, and the resulting discussions are central to the debates on the nature of Islam and its role in the contemporary world.

In addition, it was fascinating to read Barazangi's own analyses of Qur'anic verses and *hadiths* regarding the Prophet Mohammed's wives and other early Muslim women. These were only offered as examples -- a necessity given the author's condemnation of relying on others' interpretations -- but were quite thought-provoking.

In summation, this (admittedly particular) reader found the work promising but in need of further editing and reworking. The prose can be fairly opaque with much use of jargon, and there are multiple arguments interspersed in the text without adequate introduction and integration. The tome does, however, contain some interesting points, and the central argument is worth further examination and development. *Women's Identity and the Qur'an* will be of interest to a select audience, notably specialists in Qur'anic exegesis and pedagogy and female Muslim educators.