

# “Hermeneutical Acrobatics”: A Critique of Shelina Janmohamed’s *Love in a Headscarf*

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**Abstract** In her memoir, *Love in a Headscarf*, Shelina Janmohamed embarks on a project of presenting a feminist view of Islam. She draws on her experience to claim that Islamic foundational principles essentially empower women but have been misappropriated so much so that they appear to be misogynistic. She borrows from various canonical Islamic sources to present what she believes to be true Islam, which is pro-women and far from being patriarchal. This article aims to provide a dissenting view to Janmohamed’s argument. It seeks to prove that the evidence the author provides to support this argument is far from being solid. Her text shows a clear misunderstanding of canonical Islamic sources in addition to unfamiliarity with other important sources. Additionally, she exhibits a clear confusion between Islamic and pre-Islamic history. In the same vein, the author supports her claim by misquoting some Islamic sources. By explaining these shortcomings in the author’s argument, the article aims at showing that Janmohamed fails to achieve her goal in this project.

**Keywords** Islamic feminism; Islamic patriarchy; progressive Muslim authors; Western Islam; Interpretive strategies

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## **Introduction: Janmohamed’s Project**

*Love in a Headscarf* by the award-winning Muslim Asian-British author, Shelina

Janmohamed, is a memoir of her life. In the book, the author narrates her journey towards finding prince-charming and includes an illuminating perspective on Muslim women in the West. In the process of her spouse hunt, she sheds light on the challenges faced by contemporary Muslim women in Europe. Named as one of the UK's hundred most influential Muslim women, Janmohamed, in narrating her quest for her dream prince-charming, is keen on presenting a vivid picture of Islam, especially in relation to women.

The memoir clearly shows that Janmohamed goes beyond the mere presentation of a memoir of her journey towards finding the one. She explains that her experience through marriage enabled her to locate a conflict between “what people say is Islam and what Islam actually is” (273). Janmohamed claims that she has found out that certain social rules, especially those related to women, do not necessarily subscribe to the “fundamentals” of Islam, and that is why she intends to contribute towards “extricating the faith of Islam from the cultures that had taken root in its practice” (250). For Janmohamed, certain areas in Islam, basically those related to gender norms, “had become fuzzy with culture, power, and misinterpretation,” and so, her work comes to “provoke the Muslim community to look into itself and wonder why these lazy stereotypes exist” (156).

To this end, Janmohamed sets out to study some Islamic cultural norms against Islamic fundamental principles arguing that the supposedly Muslim patriarchal agenda is not rooted in the fundamentals of Islam, but was appropriated by culture. So, she aims at achieving “a new gender reconstruction going back to the very roots of Islam” (452). Put simply, throughout her work, Janmohamed borrows from Islamic foundational sources (The Quran and Mohammad Tradition) to substantiate her claim that foundational Islam is far from the patriarchal claims attributed to it, and is actually supportive of women's equality and agency.

The majority of scholarship made on Janmohamed's work testifies to the author's success in her mission. For example, Mahmudul Hasan (2016) argues that Janmohamed manages to “locate differences between Muslim cultural practices and pristine Islamic teachings ... (and) ... accentuate (Islam's) potential to become a focal point of feminist resistance and to form the basis of Muslim women's identity” (97). For Hasan, the text does “eliminate gender discriminatory cultural notions from the teachings of Islam” and projects Islam as “an empowering force in women's life and belongingness” (99-101). In the same vein, Adrian Banting (2017) contends that Janmohamed's text calls on Muslim women in Muslim minority countries to change “what counts as religious practice from the inside particularly when it comes to gender norms and codes” (123). Lucinda Newns

(2018) also commends Janmohamed's employment of Islamic sources arguing that "for Janmohamed ... the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet prove a much more convincing "feminist" text than the gender regimes championed by contemporary media culture" (295), and that is why, for Newns, Janmohamed's work presents an alternative "to the perceived binary between Islam and the liberal values that have come to be associated with "the West", especially when it comes to women's agency" (296).

This article sets out to argue against the above-mentioned claims. The article contends that Janmohamed fails to achieve her mission due to shortcomings in her methodology. On the one hand, a deep insight into the foundational Islamic sources she uses to support her claims deconstructs her argument. On the other hand, Janmohamed frequently exhibits a deep misunderstanding of the material she uses as well as a lack of knowledge in other seminal Islamic sources significant to achieve complete understanding. Similarly, she clearly confuses Islamic history with pre-Islamic one. Most importantly, the author frequently misquotes certain excerpts and foregoes certain Islamic accounts that contradict her argument. The article will dwell on showing this failure in three areas of the author's thesis; namely, women in Islamic marriage, gender equality in Islam and women empowerment in Islam

### **Women in Islamic Marriage**

A great bulk of Janmohamed's argument is dedicated to examining the status of women within Islamic marriage. In this respect, Janmohamed bases her understanding of Islamic marriage on the verse (30:21): "And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought." The author employs this verse to argue that Islamic marriage is based on love and mercy. Although this is a valid verse to rely on in discussing Islamic marriage, Islamic marriage law is based on other more relevant verses that pinpoint the rights and duties of husbands and wives as discussed below. Janmohamed's selectivity is paramount here. Kecia Ali critiques this tendency describing it as "fundamentally dishonest":

Progressive approaches to the Qur'anic text cannot be limited to selective presentation of egalitarian verses in isolation from their broader scriptural context. Such an approach is both fundamentally dishonest and ultimately futile; arguments about male/female equality built on the systematic avoidance of inconvenient verses will flounder at the first confrontation with something

that endorses the hierarchical and gender-differentiated regulations for males and females that so many reformers would like to wish away. (Ali 153-154)

Another misunderstanding on the part of Janmohamed is represented in her false conception of the Islamic dower (*mahr*). The author claims that the *mahr* is intended to be “a gift to the bride ... a token of the groom’s affection” (124). However, a critical look at the foundational Islamic sources reveals that *mahr* is far from being a gift, but rather a return for the sexual pleasure the wife provides to the husband. In instructing husbands to pay the financial obligations due to wives, the Quran puts it clearly: “If you wish to enjoy them, then give them their dowry—a legal obligation” (4: 24). Accordingly, Muslim classical jurists have based their definition of Islamic marriage on the above verse in addition to other similar verses and authentic Mohammad tradition. They defined marriage as a contract that has been put by the Islamic authorities so that the husband may “make use of the wife’s vagina as well as the rest of her body for the pleasure of sex” (Al Jaziri, 2003). In return for this “use,” the husband should provide his wife with *mahr*, maintenance and shelter. Put in more particular terms, in classical Islamic law, *mahr* is in return for the woman’s surrendering her sexual self to the man at the start of the marriage, while the support functions as a return for her continuous sexual availability within marriage.

In light of this, all jurists agree that the gift is essentially separate from the *mahr*; otherwise it might be considered as part of the dower only if agreed upon beforehand. For example, the 14<sup>th</sup> century renowned Hanbali Muslim scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah, famously known as Shaykh al-Islam, establishes that if the gift is presented before the contract is signed with their (woman’s family) promise of marriage ... he (the groom) can get it back. On the other hand, the cash provided to the woman is part of the dower (n.d, p. 472). In the same vein, the *Hanafi* jurists distinguish between what the husband gives to his wife or her *wali* (guardian) as a dower or part of the dower on the one hand and what he gives as a gift on the other. For them, the dower and its parts are reclaimable if they have not been consumed, otherwise, the husband is entitled to reclaim their value. On the other hand, although the gift is similarly reclaimable if not consumed, its value is not reclaimable otherwise (Al Omrani, p. 307).

Janmohamed goes on to argue that Islamic marriage has privileged women in that it does not enforce housework duties and financial maintenance on them. Although this is true for most Islamic schools of law, the rationale for this rule is far from being a privileging of women. Based on the above-mentioned traditional Islamic conception of marriage, the wife’s primary task is represented in providing

sexual pleasure in return for *mahr*, maintenance and shelter. The Islamic marriage contract does not include service as a duty on the woman, and that is simply why she is not obliged to do the housekeeping. Al Shirazi, the major jurist of Al Shafi'i school of law, enunciated this rule as he stated that doing the housework is not a must for the woman because the marriage contract entails providing sexual pleasure on her side, not service to the husband (482).

It is for the same reason that women do not have to provide for the family. Based on the fact that Mohammad did not support Aisha until after he consummated their marriage, Muslim jurists stipulated that financial support and shelter are only provided if the woman provides continuous sexual availability. That is why, in traditional Islamic law, it is the duty of the husband to provide maintenance and shelter for the wife in return for this availability. So, simply, the wife does not have to provide what she is originally entitled to by virtue of the contract. As Quraishi (2013) contends, the fact that, in traditional Islamic jurisprudence, Muslim women are not required to do the housework substantiates the maintenance—for sex equation. This is because the wife's maintenance is not essentially presented as a return for her housework, but for the sexual access she provides to the husband.

### **Gender Equality**

Janmohamed confidently draws on foundational Islamic sources to argue that gender equality is indeed rooted in foundational Islam. For her, "Islam talks about equal value and worth for both genders, both equal as creations" (320). However, it is so clear that her understanding of these sources is rather simplistic. For example, she refers to the Qur'anic verse, "created you from a single soul" (321) as an indication of gender equality. For Janmohamed, this verse substantiates the facts that there are "No left ribs, no second status. Men and women were from a single soul, equal in creation and worth" (ibid). She is so moved by the verse that she argues that "Our understanding as Muslims had to be in the spirit of "created from a single soul" (ibid).

However, a thorough look at the verse yields an opposite understanding to the one claimed by the author. The full verse reads: "He created you from one soul. Then He made from it its mate" (39:6). As the majority of the Quran commentators provided, the "single soul" indicated in the verse is actually Adam. In turn, the "mate" is Eve, who was created after Adam, basically from his rib. (Al-Tabari, 2001). So, in opposition to Janmohamed's claim, Adam and Eve were not created together, but rather Adam was the origin of creation, and Eve came out of him. Thus, no argument for equality as creation can be deduced from this verse.

Furthermore, the author relies on the verse, "men and women were created

in pairs” (410) to authenticate her claim of Islamic gender equality. However, as illustrated above, in classical Islamic texts, Adam and Eve were not created as pairs together, but rather Eve was created from Adam, who is the origin. In addition, according to the majority of Muslim commentators, the verse mentioned is not put in the context of highlighting gender equality, but rather as a celebration of God’s power of creation: “Did We not make the earth a cradle? And the mountains pegs? And created you in pairs? And made your sleep for rest?” (78:6-9). Contrary to Janmohamed’s argument, notable commentators illustrate that God mentioned this to show his blessing of creating males and females so that they get married and breed in order for the human race to survive (Ibn Katheer, 2000). In a nutshell, no implication of gender equality is indicated here either.

Indeed, Janmohamed’s excessive reliance on such verses that may suggest gender equality undermines her argument. In the language of Ebrahim Moosa (2003), what Janmohamed is doing nothing but “hermeneutics of wishful thinking”:

Modern Muslim interpreters, especially Muslim feminists, make too much of a few verses of the Qur’an that suggest reciprocal rights and duties between unequal spouses and then hasten to suggest that the Qur’an advocates egalitarianism as norm. In order to accept this one must pretend to be blind to the welter of evidence that suggests an outright patriarchy as the “textual” norm. Generations of Muslim scholars have correctly stated that the Qur’an advocates patriarchal norms, since that was the historical condition in which the Qur’an was revealed. By privileging a few verses and then suggesting that these isolated and singular verses should control the meaning and interpretation of numerous other verses, using the adage that “part of the Qur’an explains other parts” (al-qur’an yufassiru ba’duhu ba’dan) is nothing short of hermeneutical acrobatics or a hermeneutics of wishful thinking. (125)

Similarly, the author’s commendation of the Islamic rule that prohibits women from marrying a non-Muslim man fails to acknowledge the gender-discriminatory rationale behind it. She says: “This was crucial to me. I couldn’t imagine marrying someone who wasn’t a Muslim. I felt that this way I would be able to share my values and goals with my life partner ... Being a Muslim confirmed that scope and allowed this wish of mine to come true” (ref). The mentioned Islamic stipulation is rooted in Quranic discourse: “And give not (your daughters) in marriage to idolaters till they believe in Allah Alone and verily, a believing slave is better than a free idolater, even though he pleases you. Those idolaters invite to the Fire” (2:221). A

critical look at classical Islamic sources shows that the rule perpetuates the Islamic belief in the superiority of husbands over wives dictated by the Quran: “Men are in charge of women by right of what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend for maintenance from their wealth” (4:34). In light of this verse, the famous classical jurist, Ibn Qudama, author of one of the standard classical Islamic law sources, *Al Mughni*, said that the reason behind the mentioned rule is that no non-Muslim man shall be superior to a Muslim woman whatsoever (1997). Al Qardawi, one of the most important contemporary Islamic theologians, and leader of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, put it more clearly as he contended that the rationale behind this rule is that “because the man is the lord at home, and in charge of the woman, and his position is superior to her... (so) it is impossible for the woman to maintain her freedom of faith and follow her creed while the man who is in charge of her denies it” (177-178).

The fact that Janmohamed blindly accepts this gender-biased Islamic rule contradicts her own call for questioning Islamic history. In fact, Janmohamed clearly expresses her admiration of established gender construction informed by Islam as she declares:

In the gender blueprint that Islam offered, there was one thing I loved above all else—and that was the value that it placed on “*womanly*” things. I felt that these needed more status and more recognition: being a wife, being a mum, being a carer, a nurturer. Even though feminism had gone a long way to rebalancing gender equality, it seemed that in many cases it was by opening doors for women to do traditionally masculine things. It needed now to put back value into the *inherently feminine things*. (352-353, italics mine)

Janmohamed’s yearning for “inherently feminine things” is essentially the antithesis of mainstream feminist argument that seeks to obliterate the supposedly inherent, otherwise cultural, gender differences. The famous Islamic theologian and Quran exegete, Amina Wadud, criticizes such acceptance of gender rules among Quran interpreters stressing that it facilitates the oppression imposed on women. In her, *Qur’an and Woman. Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, she proclaims:

I hope to demonstrate the negative effects of interpretations which place an inherent distinction between males and females and then give values to those distinctions ... Such interpretations encourage the stereotypes about women

and men which severely hamper the potential of each. In addition, these interpretations justify the restrictions placed on the woman's right to pursue personal happiness within the context of Islam. (35)

In her *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), Wadud goes on to lambast such a tendency of interpretative strategy altogether as insufficient by itself to create the desired change. She argues that "the idea of alternative interpretation of the Qur'an from a female-inclusive perspective is by itself insufficient to bring about all gender reform necessary for the multiple dimensions of Muslim men and women's lives" (188). Janmohamed's argument does encourage such a stereotype so much so that Chambers et al. (2018) argues that the memoir is "hardly a feminist text" and goes on to assert that it "often reinforce(s) traditional gender binaries ... (and) ... may also be responsible for feeding patriarchal discourses" (81).

### **Women Empowerment**

Janmohamed moves on to borrow from Islamic classical sources and history to argue that Islam endows women with power and agency. In this regard, a frequently cited story in Janmohamed's text is that of Khadija, Mohammad's first wife. The author mentions the fact that it was Khadija who had the initiative to propose to Mohammad, who delightedly accepted the proposal. For Janmohamed, Khadijah's proposal and marriage to Mohammad is a prime example of "the rights of women in Islam" (271) and "is hailed as very liberated and empowered by many Muslim men and women" (272). However, this story cannot stand as a case for women's empowerment in Islam, simply because the mentioned proposal and marriage took place almost fifteen years before the Muhammadiyah mission (Ibn Hisham, 2004). In other words, Khadija's empowering behaviour cannot be taken as proof of Islam's empowerment of women because she was not a Muslim then, nor had Mohammad been named a prophet of Islam.

Janmohamed's misunderstanding of the details of Khadija's story drives her to the false conclusion that Muslim women are given complete freedom in choosing their husbands. She asserts that in Islam, "the choice is yours. No one can force you to marry anyone, and if there is no valid reason to refuse, then no one can veto it either" (130). However, investigating the foundational sources of this claim yields a totally opposing truth. Theoretically, it is true that the Muslim woman may not be forced to marry a man she does not desire, however, by virtue of the role of the male guardian (*wali*), she is not totally free to choose the one she desires. In traditional Islamic law, the virgin woman may not get married without the approval



of her male guardian (a father, a brother, an uncle ...etc). This has been stipulated by Mohammad's teaching: "Whichever woman married without the permission of her *Wali*, her marriage is invalid" (Al-Tirmidhi, n.d, no. 14). In this context, Islamic jurisprudence puts no restrictions on the guardian's decision, hence, contrary to Janmohamed's claim, the guardian may simply "veto" the marriage without having to explain the reason. So, the question here is not whether the woman may be forced to marry or not, but whether the woman is fully free to choose the husband regardless of the consent of others.

Along these lines, the story the author mentions of her mother's marriage further validates the inaccuracy of her claim of woman's agency in marriage. The fact that her mother was married off at the age of fifteen is not merely societal norm that is irrelevant to Islamic teachings as the author seems to claim. It is widely known for the vast majority of Muslims that Mohammad married Aisha, his second wife, when she was at the age of six, and consummated when she was nine (Al-Bukhari, n.d. no. 44). That is why traditional Islamic jurisprudence allows, under some restrictions, marrying girls underage. Marrying off a girl of that age surely subverts the agency claim, as the girl is not of an age to give consent in the first place.

In the same vein, the recommendation given to Janmohamed by her grandmother in relation to the treatment of the husbands also undermines any instance of female empowerment. "Being the embodiment of Islam", the grandmother teaches Janmohamed:

You must look after your husband. I know people have different ideas today, but if you look after him, then he will look after you, remember that, even when it feels hard, even when you don't get what you want. Once you get married, then comes the difficult part. Remember to say sorry, even if it is not your fault. Men are different from women. When we are upset we hold it inside, men get it out of their system and then forget. In fifty years' time, who will remember if it was your mistake or his? You're on the same side, so does it matter if you apologize and he made the mistake? What he will remember is that he had a wife who loved him, and who he still cares about after so many years. (276-277)

Janmohamed claims that this was an old-fashioned patriarchal view that is not representative of Islam. However, it turns out that this very idea is seminal to Mohammad's teaching. It is reported that he once mentioned the characteristics of a

good wife, among which is that she is “so friendly that if she gets upset or annoyed, or if her husband gets upset, she says to him: here is my hand ( I am all yours), I would never sleep until you are fine” (Al-Mundhiri, 2016, no.3017). Whether the author is unfamiliar with such stories or simply ignores them is indicative of the shortcoming of her argument. As Chambers et al. (2018) observes, this “neglect of stories that do not tessellate with her approach suggests that there are limitations to Janmohamed’s purview” (79).

On the other hand, within the frame of her false understanding of Islam’s empowerment of women, the author mentions that in Islam “Women were not items of property that belonged to men” (274). Although foundational Islamic sources do not stipulate that women are the property of men, a deep investigation of certain authentic sayings by Mohammad proves that Janmohamed’s claim is rather inaccurate. It is reported that Mohammad said: “I order you to treat women well, for they are but like captives with you, you have no sovereignty beyond this over them, unless they manifest lewdness” (Al-Tirmidhi, n.d, n.p). As the renowned Muslim scholar, Al Ghazzali, said, God made the man possess the woman, so he should be followed by the woman, not a follower of her (56). It should be noted, however, that classical Islamic jurisprudence differentiates between possessing a female slave and possessing a wife. Possessing a female slave entails possessing all her “benefits,” including sexual pleasure, and the right to sell and present her to others. On the other hand, possessing a wife entails only the possession of one of her benefits, which is sexual pleasure.

In addition to this foregoing of seminal Islamic teachings that contradicts her claims, Janmohamed frequently misquotes parts of Islamic history and law. For example, some of the sayings she attributes to Mohammad are totally inauthentic. For example, in her claim of Islam’s privileging of women, she mentions the saying attributed to Mohammad “Paradise lies beneath the feet of the mother” (353). Similarly, the author substantiates her claim of Islam’s call for the education of women by referring to a falsely attributed saying by Mohammad: “Educate yourself, even if you have to travel to China” (84). According to scholars of Mohammad’s tradition, these two hadiths are totally unauthentic (Al-Albani 2010, no. 906). On the other hand, the author often misquotes certain sayings by Mohammad. For example, she quotes Mohammad saying: “Do not look for wealth or beauty as these will last only a short time, and then you will be left with nothing. Look for piety and faith and you will get everything, including beauty and wealth with it” (111-112). However, the exact wording of the hadith is “A woman is married for four things, i.e., her wealth, her family status, her beauty and her religion. So you should marry the

religious woman (otherwise) you will be a losers” (Al-Bukhari, n.d. no. 15).

### Conclusion

As established earlier, Janmohamed clearly fails to achieve the message that she sets for her work. The lack of knowledge she exhibits in Islamic discourse shows that her memoir might well appeal to non-Muslims as well as Muslims who are not well-familiar with the details of Islamic law and history; however, for those well-informed in Islamic Sharia, Janmohamed’s account is far from convincing. As Sara F. notes in her review of Janmohamed’s work, “the book had tangents into discussions about Islam and womanhood that seemed a bit elementary and intended for non-Muslim audiences who are not familiar with Islam” (n.p). On the other hand, the author’s excessive sentimentality toward Islam has compromised the objective presentation of her argument. Janmohamed fails to exhibit a solid and objective position, whereby she could have addressed more problematic areas regarding women in Islam. Rather than drawing on conventional, inauthentic and misquoted accounts of Islamic history and law, Janmohamed could have destabilized some evidently patriarchal roots in Islam. As Kecia Ali (2006) argues: “we must neither romanticize the tradition as it stands nor be blindly optimistic about prospects for transformation within it. Most importantly, as we expose reductive and misogynist understandings of the Qur’an and hadith, refusing to see medieval interpretations as coextensive with revelation, must not arrogate to our own readings the same absolutist conviction we criticize in others. We must accept responsibility for making particular choices—and must acknowledge that they *are* interpretive choices, not merely straightforward reiterations of ‘what Islam says’” (153).

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