

# Versions and Subversions of Islamic Cultures in the Film *The Stoning of Soraya M*

# Khatija Bibi Khan

## Summary

The aim of this article is to explore the idea of versions and subversions of narrative constructions and reinterpretation of Islamness or Muslim cultures from an analysis of the film *The Stoning of Soraya M.* This will be done by focusing on the narratives authorised by men in comparison to those narratives of Islam created by women in the film. It will be demonstrated that male-authored narratives are anchored in the dastardly law of the stoning/lapidation of women as found in the Hadith. In the fictional world of the film *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, the stoning/lapidation of women is depicted as a gross distortion of the Qur'an. In short, it will be revealed that women can create their own narratives that shun and complicate the Qur'an and critique men, most of whom are the interpreters of the Qur'an. If male narratives in the film incline towards violent actions against women, women's response to these forms of violent narrative of Islamness is uneven. The film benefits narrative versions of women who reinterpret the Sunnah and its support of the practice of the stoning/lapidation of women. Through the character of Zahra, women in the film create alternative frameworks for self-help and the call to stop the abhorrent practices of the physical and spiritual stoning/lapidation of women. The film suggests that this action by women in the film, as in real life, is fundamental to the survival of the most democratic versions of Islam that are threatened by orthodox and inflexible interpretation of the Qur'an. The attempt at retrieving contesting narrative versions of Islamness means engaging with multiple re-evaluations of received histories of Islam imagined from a privileged cultural site of the film.

## Opsomming

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die idee van weergawes en subweergawes van verhalende konstruksies en hervertolking van Islamheid of Moslemkulture uit 'n ontleding van die film *The Stoning of Soraya M* te ondersoek. Dit sal gedemonstreer word dat verhale deur mans geskryf, geanker is in die lafhartige wet van steniging van vroue soos in die Hadith gevind word. In die fiktiewe wêreld van die film *The Stoning of Soraya M*, word die steniging van vroue as 'n bose verdraaiing van die Koran uitgebeeld. Kortliks, dit sal aantoon dat vroue hul eie verhale kan skep wat die Koran ontwyk en kompliseer, en mans, waarvan die meeste vertolkers van die Koran

is, kritiseer. Indien manlike verhale in die film na geweld teen vroue neig, is vroue se reaksie op hierdie vorme van gewelddadige verhale van Islamheid ongelyk. Dit bevoordeel verhalende weergawes van vroue wat die Sunnah en sy ondersteuning van die praktyk om vroue te stenig hervertolk. Deur die karakter van Zahra, skep vroue in die film alternatiewe raamwerke vir selfhelp en die oproep om die afskuwelike praktyke van fisiese en geestelike steniging van vroue te stop. Die film beweer dat hierdie optrede deur vroue in die film, soos in die werklike lewe, fundamenteel is vir die oorlewing van die meeste demokratiese weergawes van Islam wat deur ortodokse en onaanpasbare vertolking van die Koran bedreig word. Die poging om teenstrydige verhalende weergawes van Islamheid te herwin, beteken om met veelvuldige her-evaluerings van ontvangde geskiedenis van Islam, vanuit 'n bevoorregte kultuurterrein van die film, om te gaan.

## **Introduction: Theorising Marginality**

Since 9/11, certainly, the world has become more conscious of Arabness, arising from the targeting of Muslims resident not only in the West but in the Arab homelands wherever they are, be it in Aghanistan, Iraq, and as close to South Africa as in Egypt. This targeting is performed by a coalition of Western countries and by The United States military as well as through the calculated production and circulation of images of being Muslim that are slanted towards policing the boundaries of what it should mean not only to be Arab, Muslim but also to be Islam in religious orientation. The symbolic violence embedded in the Western perceptions of Islam derives its power to reproduce from a cache of symbols that emphasises homogeneity for Muslims and rationalist heterogeneity for Western views of Islam (Hagopian 2004). This collapsing of cultural and symbolical boundaries in thought is a form of epistemicide (Wadud 2006), and achieves for the West the performance and re-enactment of stereotypes characterised by excess signification that threatens to inhibit the production of expanded frames of Islamic cultures. However, the grand Western narration of what is and might constitute Islamness in the era of the so-called fight against terrorism also threatens to occlude the existence of versions of Islamic cultures that have known themselves as patriarchal, chauvinistic and demeaning to images of Muslim women (Murray 2004: 24-70). If the arrogant Western narrative version of Islamic culture is pervasive for its imperialising gaze, this version of Islamness is coterminous with and often resorts to the plunder of negative cultural images of Muslimness already in circulation within Muslim communities so that the idea of orientalism (Said 1979) is also a convergence of Western and Islamic thought about how to live as or be Muslim.

The parallel existence of patriarchal-borne Muslim cultures provides what Nancy Murray (in Hagopian 2004) describes as the enemy within Islamic culture whose influence on Muslim women is debilitating. Existing as a subnarration within Islamic globalectics (wa Thiong'o 2012), the patriarchal



version of Islam is virulent and far more systematic in its cultural assault on the figure of the Muslim woman. In some versions of the Sura An-Nur (The Light) the question of stoning of women is clarified:

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, – flog each of them with a hundred stripes: Let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment.

(Quran 2009: 336)

In this version of the Sura, no stoning of women is mentioned.

The religious crime here is Zina, which can be best defined as any unlawful sexual act, including adultery and fornication. It is a term that has different meanings under the various Islamic schools of law. Islamic intellectuals do not agree on the role of the Qur'an in authorising stoning as a befitting punishment for adulterous women. Yet other Islamic scholars have started questioning the authority of the Qur'an and by extension of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) for ever passing a law such as death by stoning, which is viewed as disproportionate to the crime. In view of the fact that there are specific offences and sanctions prescribed in the primary sources of Islamic jurisprudence, the Qur'an and Sunna, proponents of sharia tend to argue that there is no justification for suspending regulations that were specifically outlined in these divine sources. Thus the criminal justice system has become the obvious province for experimentation with sharia enforcement in contemporary Muslim societies (Sidahmed 2010, Rejali 2001).

*Hudud* (prevention), *qisas* (hindrance) and *tazir* (prohibition) are three main areas that are covered by Islamic jurisprudence in the criminal justice system (Ahmed 1992). During the last quarter of the twentieth century, many Muslim countries that had experienced various degrees of secularisation of their legal systems took steps to re-Islamise by introducing Islamic criminal offences and sanctions in their codified laws. The promulgation of this legislation in the criminal justice system sparked heated political and ideological debates. The imposition of these laws “tends to blur” the real practical implications involved. To put it in the words of An-Naim, “numerous problems of substantive law, evidence, and procedure are raised by the prospects of implementing this branch of the *Sharia*” (An-Naim 1990: 105).

The *Hudud* which is embedded in the sharia, as stated above, is derived primarily from the Qur'an which is not a book of law, and about “eighty verses deal with legal issues” (Rejali: 73). By implication the sharia law draws on the Sunna, which is the tradition of the Prophet and other important figures in the Islamic society, thus making it difficult to determine whether these events actually happened. According to Rejali,



[c]ompilers in all legal traditions of Islam work hard at determining the veracity of different stories through a complex genealogical structure, but there is great debate among them about the veracity of these stories. Most Muslims recognise as authentic, the six compilations of traditions all written in 870 AD and 915 AD, which is about two and a half centuries after the Hijra. Complicating this Sunna is the fact that it too is not a code of laws any more than is the Quran.

(Rejali 2001: 73)

According to one compiler of the Hadith, Aufa, when asked whether Muhammad (PBUH) prescribed stoning before or after the Sura of Light, which clearly endorses 100 lashes for the adulterer, he replied he did not know. Thus it should be noted that even the early Muslim community was uncertain exactly which of the contradictory laws applied to Zina.

There are different jurisprudence schools of law, namely the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, Hanbali (these belong to the Sunni schools of law or Madhahib) and the ImamiShia (which belongs to the Shiite school of law). Flogging is prescribed for fornicators on the strength of the Qur'anic injunction (Sura 24: 2) which says:

The woman or man found guilty of sexual intercourse – lash them with a hundred lashes, and do not be taken by pity for them in the religion of Allah, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a group of the believers witness their punishment.

(Quran 2009)

The ulama Muslim scholars or jurists, however, restricted the jurisdiction of this verse to unmarried fornicators and, with the exception of the Kharijite sect, unanimously prescribed lapidation (execution by stoning) for a married adulterer. A number of Prophetic traditions were quoted by the ulama in support of the stoning penalty. They also disagreed on whether stoning of a married adulterer should be combined with flogging. The majority opinion amongst them was that there should be no flogging with lapidation. They also disagreed on the issue of banishment. The Hanafi school agreed that there should be no banishment, the Shafi school that both male and female should be banished, the Hanbalis were in agreement with the Shafi that the woman should be accompanied by a mahram (a male relative whom she could not lawfully marry) (Glasse 1989).

With regard to adultery, the jurists were unanimous that either voluntary confession of the offender or the testimony of four trustworthy (male) eyewitnesses was required to lay a charge. The Imamiyya opined that the testimony of three men and two women or two men and four women was acceptable, and that the penalty should be flogging rather than stoning. The ulama also agreed that four witnesses unanimously and explicitly testifying that they have seen the act of penetration between the two offenders would be required (Baroody 1979, Safwat 1982).



If these conditions were meant to render it impossible to execute the stoning of women, this condition is undermined in the Qur'an by the fact that women cannot interpret the Qur'an in public or in ways that are supposed to influence public discourses on Islam, the Qur'an and the regimented Muslim cultures. This reality means that the Qur'an (male-authored) is interpreted by men, which allows them to manipulate it. In other words, the narrative of violence in Islam on the matter of the stoning of women must be said to begin and end with the misinterpretation of Sura An-Nur in the Qur'an.

Al-Bhukari, one of two authentic compilers (my view), reported that Umar claimed God ordered rajm/stoning in the Qur'an, that it was originally recorded but then struck from the Qur'an. This is considered unreliable because it is based on one witness, and if true it raises theological problems among the schools of law. Finally, on the issue of rajm/stoning/lapidation, it would seem that its source is solely in the Hadith, and not very reliable ones, thus conflicting not "only with specific references in the Qur'an, but also with the very concept of the Quran" (Mersini & Lakeland 1991: 142).

To put it this way is not at all to disparage the Qur'an, the result of which is now predictable violent acts of demonstration against the West even when such interpretation is performed by freedom-loving Muslim women. The interpreters of the Qur'an are men, most of whom have not allowed the rethinking of the terms by which women are described in the Quran. This is another instance of how violent narratives are installed in the Qur'an. And yet, the irony is that the authoritative nature of the Qur'an just like that of the Christian Bible is made possible by an irony which inheres in the fact that both texts must be interpreted for them to make sense. As correctly noted by Abi Talibs, "[t]he Qur'an is written in straight lines between two covers. It does not speak by itself. It needs interpreters, and the interpreters are human beings" (Talibs in Wadud 2006: 197).

However, as an authoritarian and patriarchal narrative, the Qur'an and how it is interpreted is often contested in other minor subversive constructions of alternative images of womanhood in Islamic cultures. The film *The Stoning of Soraya M* bears witness to and is evidence of the existence of versions and subversions of Islamic cultures that contest the inhabited and domesticated images of Muslim women. I argue in this article that the waves of violence woven into the visual, aural and verbal narrative interstices of the film are well placed to question the homogenising traditions and canons of Western as well as patricentric Islamic cultures that survive on ventriloquising Muslim women. I further demonstrate that the emergent resistance culture to the stoning of women (which is both literal and metaphorical silencing of their voice) is also questioned in the Good News Christian Bible, New Testament: 8, V7: 113. This means that the accepted Islamic idea of stoning women is either a deliberate misinterpretation of the Qur'an by men, or that the Qur'an has not sufficiently undergone critical



revisions that reflect the democratic outlook now shared by many Muslims in their lived experiences. Walther (1993: 62) attributes the adoption of stoning instead of flogging to uncritical copying of Jewish penal law.

A critical review of *The Stoning of Soraya M* as one site where re-visioning of the Qur'an is taking place suggests four important things:

- There is no theological justification for silencing women, especially by stoning, as this is abhorred in both the Bible and the Qur'an.
- *The Stoning of Soraya* indirectly uses the authority of the scriptures to dispute the ritualising of women's death by Muslims and the process which is taken as truth in many Islamic communities.
- The reinterpretation of the ritual of stoning a woman falsely accused of adultery in the film produces different narratives with the most negative and violent one encoding the symbolism of violence of the practice, while the resistant narratives reject the practice that is used to silence women.
- The film reacts to a barbaric practice in ways that are ambivalent: while the female narrative attempts to resist ritual violence, the terms by which it does so are still festooned to the notion that Islamic cultures need the Western world to speak on their behalf. This imperialising posture displays Muslim patriarchy in favour of the narrative of the Western gaze.

## **Stoning/Rajm/Lapidation: Its Origins Past and Present**

- Stoning is one of the oldest traditions that were practised in the Middle East, medieval Europe, Britain, USA, Greece and most parts of the world. Stoning was practised in pre-Islamic Arabia because Muhammad (PBUH) himself had been threatened with stoning several times in his preaching (Quran, 2009: Sura 36: 18; Sura 44: 20). According to the Qur'an, even Abraham faced stoning by his father for his monotheistic beliefs (Sura 19: 46). These two examples deal with stoning for blasphemy and not adultery. In Jewish law, stoning is prescribed for adultery, blasphemy, calling up spirits, disobeying one's parents, and violating the Lord's order (Deut. 22: 13-21; Deut. 24: 14; Lev. 20:27; Lev. 20: 2) (in Coogen 2011; Wheeler 2002; Griffith 2013). Jewish law influenced Muhammad (PBUH) since he prescribed stoning for Jews according to their own laws and thus referred to the Jewish law of adultery in a number of Hadiths (Khan 2010). In the Christian Bible, John seems most sensitive to the issue of stoning, where he records it "three times", whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke do not mention it (Rejali 2010: 79). Jesus is twice nearly stoned, once for violating the Sabbath and once for blasphemy (Good



News Bible, John 5: 18; 11: 33). In John 8: 7, the scribes and Pharisees bring a woman who has been caught in the very act of adultery. They tell Jesus, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" According to John, they did this to test him. According to Swidler (1979), the dilemma is whether Jesus will go along with the death penalty commanded by Moses' law, thus pleasing the scribes and alienating the Roman authorities, or whether he will shirk his responsibility to the Mosaic law, please the Romans and alienate the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus' response is "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8: 7). This is similar to the Muslim practice, since the witnesses are to cast the first stone. When everybody has left and Jesus is alone with the woman he tells her that he does not condemn her and lets her off: "Go, and sin no more". What is interesting is that Jesus and Islamic jurists seem to be reading from a similar cultural script. Ancient civilisations (e.g. Greek, Classical Athenian, Roman) can also be used to cite stoning as a form of punishment and in our current civilisation there are many examples that could be cited from the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an, but this is not the purpose of this article. Cultural explanation of stoning deals with an "ancient disposition" that has no single justification, yet with each age, and each culture, a new one is furnished.

- It was after the 1986 Fundamentalist Islamic Revolution in Iran, when the government was overthrown, unleashing a series of forces that transformed and reshaped the Iranian society in every aspect imaginable, that the persistence of lapidation was seen. Articles 68 and 74 of the new Penal Code of Iran are based on either witnesses' testimony or on the accused's confession. Either four male witnesses or three male and two female witnesses testify to the incident or the accused repeats a confession four times before a judge. This did not occur in the case of Soraya M. Laws are in the books, but whether and how they are observed is another matter (Rejali 2001: 70).
- Soraya M's lapidation in 1986, three years after the new Islamic Penal Code of Iran was approved, was not a "rule-governed practice", as it deviated from the Penal Code, and Islamic Law, in many ways. She was sentenced on the testimony of two witnesses and not four. The witnesses did not see her commit adultery; the mayor, not a religious judge, presided over the case; and a council of men determined the punishment. The witnesses did not cast the first stone, in fact Hashem, the key witness, could not; and finally when the mullah said that Soraya had no right to internment and was to be stoned to death, shows how the law was manipulated, as this is clearly not Islamic



Law, and therefore the government had to introduce further clarification in 1989, article 24 (Rejali 2001).

## Intellectual Antecedents to *The Stoning of Soraya M*

In order to insightfully engage the themes of *The Stoning of Soraya M*, it is important to reharsh a couple of intellectual antecedents to the film that exist in the form of creative and critical books. In his book *la Femme Lapidee*, first translated in 1994 from French as *The Stoning of Soraya M: A True Story*, and more recently as *The Story of Soraya M: Injustices in Iran* (2011), Freidoune Sahebjam writes that in public, many Islamic cultures boast of having stopped the evil practices of hanging, stoning and summary executions of women, “[b]ut the hard, sad fact remains that ... these barbaric practices are still going on, for the greater glory of an implacable, hard-line, reactionary Islam” (1990: xv). Critical books that precede *The Stoning of Soraya M* underplay the violence perpetrated against Muslim women within their communities. O’Riley’s study, *Cinema in an Age of Terror: North Africa, Victimization and Colonial History* (2010) contains chapters that emphasise the history of colonial terror on Arabs as if to suggest that this is the only history that all Arabs, men and women have known. The complicity of some Muslim intellectuals in refusing to question the “enemy within” Islamic cultures suggests that much violence is swept under the carpet so as to preserve the masculine version of the violent Islamic culture. Josef Gugler’s book *Film in the Middle East and North Africa* (2011) contains useful articles although most of them focus exclusively on imaginations of different Islamic nations from the perspective of male directors and male protagonists. Their themes pit Islam and Western “modernity” as the axis upon which resistance to forces that dehumanise Muslims are all dramatised.

Roy Armes’s *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (2005) attempts to defy the hard-line stance of “reactionary Islam”. The book does this by exploring, on a smaller scale, the female stereotypes that remain a controlling image of women’s agency. Armes’s book omits engagement with themes that reveal how Muslim female characters are contesting the patriarchal enemy within Islamic communities. However, as a corrective new critical study, especially by a Muslim woman, the book has taken on the mantle of questioning male authority inscribed in the dominant Islamic ideology. Leila Ahmed’s *The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (2011) uses the metaphor of the veil as signifying the revived silencing of women. The concern with the problem of marginalising women is underscored further in Wadud’s book *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (2006).



According to Wadud, the misfortunes of Muslim women are justified in the Qur'an; the book promotes "just treatment of slaves" (2006: 192), "promotes male sexuality" (p. 193), permits polygamy (pp. 193-194), and accepts female subjugation within marriage (p. 195). These themes are foregrounded in the film *The Stoning of Soraya M* in ways that simultaneously affirm and critique the idea of the Qur'an as "universal guidance" (p. 198) because its authority is constantly negotiated "from individual to individual and from time and place to time and place" (p. 199). *Inside the Gender Jihad* suggests that it is not blasphemy to interpret the Qur'an text in non-canonical ways. This is what *The Stoning of Soraya M* encourages in the film's exploration of narratives of violence against women.

### **The Violent Patriarchal Narrative in *The Stoning of Soraya M***

The film opens with the haunting music of the cello, depicting the sun rising over the hills in a very remote part of Iran. It is a dynamic contrast of power and beauty, of nature and the unnatural power and ugliness of most of the men in the patriarchal community which we enter. This patriarchal community is both unjust and hypocritical, hiding its venality and selfishness behind primitive traditions and under corrupt use of Islamic Law, and as Brisman (2012: 361) goes on to say, "In this post Shah Iran, they are the pigs of animal farm".

Briefly, the story in *The Stoning of Soraya M* revolves around a lustful, immoral husband who decides to physically eliminate his wife because he wants to marry a fourteen-year-old girl. The systemic violence of this narrative is both that the girl in question is underage and that she is a pawn in a game choreographed by two Muslim men. The girl's father, a medical doctor, commits a crime that should see him thrown into jail. To prevent this eventuality from happening, he seeks the help of Soraya's husband, Ali, who knows important people in the judiciary whom he can bribe. In return, Ali suggests that he be given the fourteen-year-old girl as payment for bailing out the father. Fortunately the scheme never materialises and the medical doctor is prosecuted and jailed, and Ali never lays his filthy hands on the young girl. But the point regarding the mistreatment of women in this hard-line and dominant Islamic narrative is that women are considered people without a voice; they can be dispensed with since they are open to the raw fact of negotiability. As Wadud points out, in Muslim culture, whether it is a discussion on women's ideas on sex and sexuality, on the "sexual position or permissible times of sexual satisfaction", Islam favours "male sexual desires, while women and women's sexuality remain passive" (2006: 193). And furthermore, Muslim women's fate is compounded by the fact that in



the Qur'an, most strategic pronouncements on women are undermining to their status: women are a cultivatable land (*nisa'ukum harthun lakum fa'tuw harthaku innaa' shi'tum* – "your women are a tilth for you to cultivate" (in Wadud 2006: 193).

*The Stoning of Soraya M* clearly illustrates the low esteem women are held in in the Islamic culture of particular constructions. In the film, Soraya's husband physically assaults her for what he regards as bad cooking. In itself wife-bashing is abhorrent and worse when it is performed in front of the children.

The wife-bashing we see in *The Stoning of Soraya M* is the metaphorical preamble to Ali's accusing Soraya of adultery. He connives with another man to accuse her of something she has not done. The male elder and mullah, Sheikh Hassan, holy Qur'an in hand, pronounces the death sentence on Soraya when he says, "Ali has a complaint. You are neglecting his rights". Sheikh Hassan is shrewd; his religious antics are a dramatisation of lies and hypocrisy; this is shown when he proposes to Soraya, who rejects the offer to become the mullah's lover in exchange for protection and monetary support for herself and her children. In this patriarchal and authoritarian narrative, the mullah, incensed at being rejected, was willing to assist in Ali's plot to accuse Soraya of committing adultery with Hashem, a widower and the local mechanic, who fixed Sahebjam's car. Soraya's only crime was cooking for Hashem and helping to care for his son, Mohsen: a job she had taken at the encouragement of Ali, the mullah, and the mayor Ebrahim. The tragedy of Soraya's position is that as young as Ali's two sons are, they have been socialised into the hard-line Muslim male tradition. They defend their father against their mother. Ali indoctrinates his sons, poisoning them with male stereotypes in the world and women's social position in it. Ali tells his sons: "This is a man's world, sons". Women lose property when their husbands die. And when the woman is accused of adultery as what happens to Soraya, the punishment is death by stoning. Different interpretations of the Qur'an sanction this punishment: and yet the men with whom women commit adultery are not stoned. All men are innocent and all women are guilty.

The highwater mark of the violence encoded in the dominant patriarchal narrative in *The Stoning of Soraya M* is enacted largely by men. When Soraya is falsely accused, the mayor reads Islamic law like one reading a riot act. Soraya is "found" guilty of a felony she has not committed and is sentenced to death by stoning. In the film, men are "purposefully" seen collecting and gathering stones with which to stone Soraya, and some men are busy digging the hole in which she would stand while being stoned. The violence of the scene is accentuated by the fact that it is Soraya's father who first starts throwing stones at his daughter. Then Ali, other men, and Soraya's two sons follow, until stones are raining on Soraya from all men present at the square. In a gesture that underlines the hard-line reactionary



Islamic culture's ways of passing down its neurosis to the younger generation, Soraya's two sons are the ones whose stones kill her, drawing out blood from her forehead.

Individual evil is in this scene transformed into the most dastardly community [in]justice with the result that the whole community has murdered an innocent woman. If Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) decreed that adultery should be punishable by death, this verdict is by itself terrible enough, but when this pronouncement by the Prophet is manipulated to kill *innocent* women it is worse. In other words, *The Stoning of Soraya M* elicits moral repugnance at the act of killing even when it is sanctioned by the Prophet and carried out by the community that interprets moral law in selective ways. Wadud quotes Ali ibn Abi Talib's famous view that "[t]he Qur'an is written in straight lines between two covers. It does not speak by itself. It needs interpreters, and the interpreters are human beings" (in Wadud 2006: 197). If the Qur'an cannot "speak by itself" since it needs interpreters, the paradox here is that the authority of the Qur'an is dependent on multiple interpretations.

*The Stoning of Soraya M* is giving one such critical interpretation of both the Qur'an and of male patriarchy when it reveals the unsavoury aspects of the scripture that lend themselves to distortion and manipulation by immoral/corrupt males posing as The Prophet's (PBUH) ministers of theology on earth. In other words, by an irony of having decreed that adultery by women is punishable by death through stoning, the Iranian clerics are not free from blame of the death of Soraya M by stoning. This inference from the film suggests that, in fact, no one individual among a group could be identified as the one who killed the convicted criminal, making the punishment appear as a communal act, and alleviating the potential for guilt by a sole executioner.

One of the tragic moments in the film is when Soraya tells her women "sisters" that Ali has "gotten rid of" her. Soraya condemns Ali and the Islamic religious mullahs for declaring women throw-away people who are dispensable when men feel like disposing of them. In short, one of the inescapable conclusions in *The Stoning of Soraya M* is that the misinterpretations of Sura An-Nur provides the legal/theological basis for persecuting women. It could be that the Prophet (PBUH) also set tough conditions that must be met by those who must stone women to death. However, as Talib suggests, human beings have an infinite capacity to misread and deliberately misinterpret the import of the Prophet's verdict in their own ways. Even if it could be granted that the Prophet did not intend stoning to be interpreted literally, there is no evidence that the mullahs extended this verdict to men. It seems, therefore, that one of the ways in which the film is crying for justice is a mild call for the practice of stoning women to stop, even where there is evidence of adultery. This mode of resistance embedded in the film's critique of the graphic moments where



Soraya is bashed and eventually stoned for an offence she did not commit cries to heaven for justice.

In the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ in John 8:17, recognises the fallibility of humankind and challenges the Pharisees – like the men in *The Stoning of Soraya M*, Jesus’ response to the Pharisees seems to be the point the film is attempting to make, namely, “Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her”. Many of the men depicted in the film have committed different felonies, lying; abuse of women and adultery, but not one woman has cast a stone on them. The narrative of violence against Muslim women in the film is fundamentalist, absolutist and pervasive, all because it is committed by men who call these women wives, sisters, and mothers.

Momentarily in the film, the hard-line and violent narrative is partially challenged by another coming from Hashem who is first entrusted to employ Soraya but then, sadly, pressured to incriminate her. Hashem initially refuses to be bribed to speak against Soraya. He appeals to God to forgive him because he feels ashamed of eventually capitulating to the aggressive posture of Ali and the mullah. It is Hashem’s lie that Soraya sometimes takes a “nap” in his house that provides Ali with witnesses to accuse Soraya of infidelity based on trumped-up charges. Although Hashem refuses to throw a stone at Soraya, this does not absolve him from her death, but it shows that there are some Muslim men who have a different understanding of the matter of stoning of women. Hashem’s narrative is a subversion, a narrative that runs parallel to and does not seek to displace the hard-line stance narrative that Ali, the mullah and Ebrahim, the mayor promote. Hashem’s narrative does not move away from male modes of ganging up against women. The narrative is complicit with the dominant narrative of male power in the film. Even when Hashem accuses the mullah that he forced him to lie, the mayor does not punish the sheikh and Ali as would be expected in some versions of the Hadith which state:

And those who accuse free women then do not bring four witnesses, flog them (giving) eighty stripes, and do not admit any evidence from them ever, and these it is that are the transgressors. Except those who repent after this and act aright, for surely Allah is forgiving, Merciful.

(Quran 2009: 336)

In this extract, men who are transgressors still have a chance to repent and Allah is supposed to forgive them. This shows the slanted nature of the Qur’an and how it speaks more for men like Ali and not for women like Soraya.



## **The Contradictions of an Emerging Female Voice in *The Stoning of Soraya M***

It would amount to theoretical non-disclosure if one does not explore the positive but uneven development of human consciousness that is against the stoning of women in *The Stoning of Soraya M*. In fact, the film's opening symbolically dislodges the male violent narrative by beginning with the empathetic perspective of a woman towards the plight of other women. In the opening scene in the film, it is dark, and by the riverside Zahra is seen gathering Soraya's burnt remains, which stray dogs are also feeding on.

In the film, it is Zahra who first meets the French-Iranian journalist to whom she confides that a woman is going to be stoned to death on false accusations of adultery. *The Story of Soraya M* is actually an oral story told to the journalist, in a long flashback. The significance of this intervention is that this story undermines the hypocrisy of a male-dominated community that prides itself on humiliating women. In the story, the men are not comfortable with Zahra. She is described as "old and insane" and a worthless woman. In the men's estimation, Zahra is a "talker", suggesting that she is likely going to reveal the secrets that allow the enemy of Muslim communities to survive with impunity. Zahra's narrative undermines the certitudes that Muslim patriarchy has in the film.

The rage of the woman in Zahra is further manifested when she chastises the mullah for proposing to Soraya. Zahra exposes the corruption of Sheikh Hassan, the mullah, who wants to sleep with Soraya and then look after her two daughters. Zahra reminds Sheikh Hassan that he is not ashamed of desecrating the holy Qur'an he uses when he ministers to the flock. Violence against women is committed by men of God. When Zahra realises that men have ganged up against Soraya, she suggests divorce – a radical option because it helps to proclaim women's independence from men. Divorce is painful to the children and women but it can afford the same women whose values are not inhabited by men's domineering sensibilities some space. It is unfortunate that Soraya does not consider this option which could have saved her life. But Zahra remains steadfast in the narrative of the film, annoying men, defending women like Soraya. She confronts Ibrahim, the mayor, and gives him a good slap for suggesting that Soraya is sleeping with Hashem, the man she is working for, to make ends meet because Ali can no longer provide for the family.

In the film, the scene of confrontation when Ali is accused of abdicating his manly duties demonstrates the violence that men use to hide their misdeeds. Ali slaps Soraya with brute force once, and twice in front of her children, with the aim of turning them against their mother. One of the children, Reza, is convinced that his mother is in the wrong. This is a success for Ali who has passed the patriarchal corrupt practices on to his male offspring. The rage that Soraya evinces is shown through Ali's words



“Don’t look at me like that”. Ali is afraid of being looked in the face by a wife whom he has abused.

Ali’s fear is an overt admission that when confronted by women, the male-authored narrative is brittle. The female narrative of resistance to the arrogance of Muslim male patriarchy is bolstered when Hashem agrees to have Soraya work for him. This gesture, small as it is, ensures that women like Soraya have their own means of livelihood and therefore cannot be taken advantage of by men like Sheikh Hassan the mullah or Ibrahim the mayor of Kupayeh. In the film, Zahra warns Soraya that she should be careful because all men can be cruel to women. Unfortunately, Soraya thinks that Zahra is making up the accusations against men. This point is important because it reveals the deep psychological violence that some women like Soraya have been made to imbibe and believe without questioning. But the same point also indicates that there are uneven levels of radical consciousness in the narrative version of resistance within the community of women. Hashem further supports the female narrative of resistance when he refuses to be bribed by Ali and the sheikh to incriminate Soraya. The suggestion here is that not all Muslim men are cruel and exploitative of women. This point is significant in so far as it suggests some kind of space where some men and women can have converging and liberating thoughts about the welfare of women.

In the female-authored narrative, Zahra comes across as a character that embodies the community’s sentiments of what is right and what is wrong. In a pretty subversive interpretation of the laws relating to the punishment for adultery, she defiantly suggests that in the past, punishments for such crimes ranged from community service to fines but not stoning. She implies that the idea of stoning suggested by the Hadith is actually an invention meant to control women’s sexuality while men with whom women commit adultery get lesser punishments. What is subversive in this interpretation of the Qur’an is the open suggestion that the laws in the holy book are not cast in stone. The Qur’an can be reinterpreted in ways that are in line with the democratic pace of the Muslim society. Zahra’s view is an indictment of the original sin by the Prophet (PBUH) of decreeing such a law that can be manipulated in wrong ways in the first place. This attack on Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is oblique and implied. The critique of the masculinisation of the laws in the Qur’an is revisionist; it allows Zahra and possibly a future community of women to interrogate the terms by which the Qur’an is silent on the punishment of men. In short, in the film, Zahra’s convictions that the Qur’an can be distorted by self-righteous men is supported by one man: Hashem. He asks God to forgive him for having been prevailed upon by Ali and the Mullah to lie about Soraya M.

Before Soraya M is executed, she warns men and women that at the moment of her death she is powerless to defend herself against the iniquity of men who abuse Islam. However, she tells the crowd that what the



community is about to do to her is what all men have been doing to their mothers, sisters and wives at their homes. In other words, stoning of women is not merely a literal phenomenon. It is metaphorical in the sense that all the instances where Muslim mothers, sisters and wives have been assaulted, abused, insulted and silenced in other despicable ways constitute different forms of stoning of women. As Soraya M says, this abuse of women happens every day in the “homes, to all daughters, and wives” who are wrongly persecuted. Soraya M nearly achieves a Christ-like status and commands power at the time of her death to identify male authority as that which frustrates the progress of Muslim women. Male authority is the enemy within Islam. Zahra calls this version of hard-line men murderers. In her boldness she throws herself in front of the mayor begging him to have the crowd kill her and not Soraya. Zahra is brave even to the point of offering to give her life in defence of innocent women like Soraya who are constantly abused.

But this feminist narrative of valour is momentarily disrupted by one of the woman in the crowd who displays unwarranted enthusiasm in seeing Soraya M being condemned to death. This point reveals how the director of the film deliberately moves away from romanticising the narrative of resistance authored by women. There are other women whose world views have been domesticated by men. The implication is that the callous system that promotes the stoning of women is also supported by women whose minds have been twisted by phallocentric conceptions of justice. In short, the subversive element in the narrative version that Zahra promotes is constantly put to trial and tribulation by both men and women. However, the eagerness of this one woman is ameliorated by the fact that in the film there is not a single woman who physically throws a stone at Soraya in the hole. The business of murdering innocent women is carried out by men, beginning with its oldest patriarch, Morteza, Soraya’s father, followed by Ali and the mullah. In fact, one of the women in the crowd invokes a metaphysical interpretation of Soraya’s ordeal by suggesting that Morteza’s misses and failure to throw a stone that strikes Soraya is evidence that God is against the murder of an innocent woman.

## **Community Guilt in *The Stoning of Soraya M***

In the film, the stoning of Soraya M is made a community ritual. All males are given stones to strike at the poor, miserable woman. Women are present at the stoning as witnesses. Men inspire fear in these witnessing women, and the ritual of killing is meant to pose as a deterrent so that none of them would ever think of being unfaithful. In this way men anticipate to intimidate the community of women into submission. But what is worrying about the depiction of the community is that after the killing of Soraya they



feel relieved and go home to celebrate as if something major had been spiritually satisfied and changed in their lives by the mere act of killing an innocent woman. Community guilt is predicated on a perverted sense of communal justice based on a subjective interpretation of a law. Community thirst for blood is assuaged in public. When the mullah confronts the journalist and asks his henchman to confiscate the journalist's tapes, the mullah insists that the practice of stoning women should be kept "inside our borders". In a country where the powers of religion supersede civil/secular authority, not even Ebrahim, the mayor, can stop Sheikh Hassan, the mullah, from destroying the evidence of the gruesome murder of Soraya M contained in the journalist's tape. Fortunately, Zahra has already foreseen the possibility of the journalist being harassed. In her wisdom that constantly subverts the negative agency of Muslim men in the film, she races down the road to give the journalist the original tape that she has been keeping. All the evil men in the film try to prevent the journalist from getting the tape. Zahra stands in front of gun-toting men and challenges them to shoot her. It is this act of bravery that allows the journalist in the film to escape with a tape containing the story of the murder of Soraya, and this is how the story gets to the international community.

Zahra pronounces, and fearlessly too, that the "whole world will know". Put differently, Zahra's actions weave narratives that contest the dominance of the male Muslim characters in the film. She is the memory of the gruesome abuses meted out to Muslim women by males who are their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. Zahra openly defends women, thereby becoming the Great Mother protector of women. She openly defies the monological narrative of lies created by Muslim men. She is responsible for exposing the hard-line enemy within Muslim societies composed of men and very few women who have been won over to the side of an evil law of stoning women. She enables the world to know that although the Western world constantly poses as an external enemy to Islam, the enemy within the Islamic communities is made up of those men who claim to be relatives of women, sisters, wives and mothers, yet these men prop their authority by subverting women's quest for a fulfilling existence.

It is in all these ways that the feminist narrative version of resistance authorised in *The Stoning of Soraya M* does not merely run parallel to the authoritarian male narrative of abuse of women, but it also provides the grammar and new vocabulary by which to contest male-made views and laws to benefit men at the expense of women. The film thus shows that there is no single Muslim culture within what we generally describe as Islam, and that not all the laws of Islam should be followed to the letter. In short, the film calls for reform to facilitate equality between the treatment of men and women within the gender jihad (Wadud 2006).



## Conclusion

The aim of this article is to explore versions of Islamness in the film *The Stoning of Soraya M.* It is demonstrated in the analysis that the film's depiction of different versions of Muslim cultures focuses on what Nancy Murray calls the "enemy within", this enemy being the Hadith, and in some countries the sharia law that permits the stoning of women accused of adultery. The enemy within Muslim communities as depicted in the film is also avaricious men like Ali, the mullah, and the bribable mayor who authorises interpretations of the Qur'an law in ways that benefit men. It is argued that even when parts of the Qur'an also call for the punishment of men, in the film it is disregarded: it allows men to control women's sexuality. The law lends itself to manipulation as different interpretations of it have either been silent on or minimised the punishment that should be meted out to men who commit adultery. Therefore, the genesis of violence against women is embedded in the interpretation of the laws of the Qur'an. In the film, the director does not question the law but its interpretation.

The analysis of the narrative version authorised by men in the film shows that it is full of lies and contrived, to disadvantage women like Soraya M. This version was not allowed to stabilise so as to pass as the only possible interpretation of the Qur'an. Men like Hashem attempt to complicate the dominant masculine narrative by also appealing to the moral law of God. In this subnarrative Hashem refuses to take part in the actual stoning of Soraya but accuses Ali, the mullah, and other men of forcing him to lie about an innocent woman. But the mere fact that Hashem mentions that Soraya used to take a nap in his house incriminates her. Hashem is therefore also responsible for her death. To this extent, he partakes in the violent values underlying the law on the stoning of women found in the Qur'an.

*The Stoning of Soraya M.* is a revisionist film. Not all women play passive to the wiles of men. Soraya M works hard to provide for her family until she is brutally murdered at the instigation of a heartless man and husband with whom she has two daughters and two sons. She faces her death painfully, but warns men and women present at her "crucifixion" that what is happening to her has always been happening to Muslim daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives. Hers is a clarion call that women should wake up and fight against their oppression. Zahra embodies the values that weave a feminist resistant narrative. She is first seen gathering the remains of Soraya M and reburying them by the riverside. Her compassionate posture derives from a moral economy whose values oppose male oppression. Zahra is on the side of women; she defends Soraya M more than once and foils the mullah's sexual advances and harassment of Soraya M. She slaps the mayor for falsely accusing Soraya of sleeping with Hashem. Zahra is resented by men because she is brave and stands up for justice. She not only assumes the role of the mother figure to all the women in the film, but she is also the one who



gives the French journalist the tape on which the story of the brutal murder of Soraya M is captured. Zahra's narrative internationalised the problem of Muslim women. In this respect *The Stoning of Soraya M* contains versions of Islam that are not sitting comfortably in relation to each other. The version of Islam favoured by most men is oppressive of women while the version of Islam championed by Zahra seeks to liberate women from obscurantist and atavistic practices such as the stoning of women. Islam is not a single religion with single meanings that all Muslims accede to. It is this basic fact that the film has projected and dramatised successfully.

## References

- Ahmed, L.  
 1992 *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.  
 2011 *The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America: A Quiet Revolution*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- An-Naim, A.A.  
 1990 *Towards an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Armes, R.  
 2005 *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Baroody, G.M.  
 1979 *Crime and Punishment*. United Kingdom: Regency.
- Brisman, A.  
 2009 Untraceable. *Contemporary Justice Review: Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice* 12(3): 371-374.
- Glasse, C.  
 1989 *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*. London: Stacey International.
- Coogen, M.D.  
 2011 *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press.
- Good News Bible  
 n.d. *Today's English Version*. Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa.
- Griffith, S.H.  
 2013 *Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Gugler, J. (ed.)  
 2011 *Film in the Middle East and North Africa*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Hagopian, E.C. (ed.)  
 2004 *Civil Rights in Peril: The Targeting of Arabs and Muslims*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket & London: Pluto.
- Khan, M.M.  
 1997 *The Translations of the Meanings of Sahih al Bukhari: Arabic-English*. Riyadh: Dar-es-Salaam Publications.



- Meri, J.W.  
2006 *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*. Vol 1. New York: Routledge.
- Mersinni, F. & Lakeland, M.J.  
1991 *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Great Britain: Persus.
- Murray, N.  
2004 *Profiled: Arabs, Muslims, and the Post-9/11 Hunt for the "enemy within"*. In: Hagopian, E.C. (ed.) *Civil Rights in Peril: The Targeting of Arabs and Muslims*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket & London: Pluto, pp. 27-70.
- Quran  
2009 Translations by Sahih International. Riyadh: Al Muntada Al Islam.
- Rejali, D.  
2001 *Studying a Practice: An Inquiry into Lapidation, Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 10(18): 67-100.
- O'Riley, M.F.  
2010 *Cinema in an Age of Terror: North Africa, Victimization and Colonial History*. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Safwat, S.M.  
1982 *Offences and Penalties in Islamic Law. Islamic Quarterly* 26: 175-185.
- Sahebjam, F.  
1990 *The Stoning of Soraya M*. New York: Arcade.
- Said, E.  
1979 *Orientalism*. USA: Vintage.
- Sidahmed, A.S.  
2001 *Problems in Contemporary Applications of Islamic Criminal Sanctions: The Penalty for Adultery in Relation to Women. British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 28(2): 187-204.
- Swidler, L.  
1979 *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*. In: Kreitzer L.J. & Rooke, D. (eds) *Ciphers in the Sand*. United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic.
- Wadud, A.  
2006 *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Oxford: OneWorld.
- Walther, W.  
1993 *Women in Islam*. Princeton: Markus Wiener.
- wa Thiongo, N.  
2012 *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wheeler, B.M.  
2002 *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis*. New York: Routledge.

**Khatija Bibi Khan**  
University of South Africa (UNISA)  
khatijabibi.khan@gmail.com/Khankb@unisa.ac.za