An Islamic Perspective

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The Islamic tradition: primary sources and their interpretation

It is necessary to clarify at the outset what one means by “the Islamic tradition”. This tradition — like other major religious traditions — does not consist of, or derive from, a single source. Most Muslims, if questioned about its sources, are likely to refer to more than one of the following: The Qur’an (the book of Revelation believed by Muslims to be the Word of God), the Sunnah and Hadith (the practice and sayings ascribed to Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam), Fiqh (jurisprudence) or Madahib (schools of law), and Shari’ah (the code of life which regulates all aspects of Muslim life). While all of the above “sources” have contributed to what is cumulatively referred to as “the Islamic tradition”, it is important to note that they do not form a coherent or consistent body of teachings or precepts from which a universally-agreed-upon set of Islamic “norms” can be derived. Many examples can be cited of inconsistency between various sources of the Islamic tradition as well as of inconsistency between various sources of the Islamic tradition and the Hadith literature. In view of this fact, it is inappropriate, particularly in a scholarly work, to speak of “the Islamic tradition” as if it were monolithic. Its various components need to be identified and examined separately before one can attempt to make any sort of generalization on the Islamic tradition.

Since it is not possible, within the scope of this paper, to discuss the complex subject of women’s sexuality and bodily functions comprehensively in the light of all of the sources of the Islamic tradition, I will focus, for the most part, on the Qur’an which is the primary source of normative Islam. Reference will also be made to some ahadith (plural of
hadith: a tradition ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad) which have had a formative impact on Muslim ideas and attitudes pertaining to women’s sexuality. Here it may be useful to mention that, according to Islamic theory, the Qur’an has absolute authority since it is believed to be God’s unadulterated message conveyed through the agency of Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, who then transmitted it to others without change or error. However, since the early days of Islam, the Hadith literature has been the lens through which the words of the Qur’an have been seen and interpreted.

It must however be pointed out that every aspect of the Hadith literature is surrounded by controversies. In particular, the question of the authenticity of particular hadith as well as of the Hadith literature as a whole has occupied the attention of many scholars of Islam since the time of Ash-Shafti (died in A.D. 809). As stated by Fazlur Rahman in his book Islam, “a very large proportion of the Hadiths were judged to be spurious and forged by classical Muslim scholars themselves.”1 This has generated much scepticism regarding the Hadith literature in general amongst “moderate” Muslims. Though few of them are willing to go as far as Ghulam Ahmad Parwez (leader of the “Tulu’ e Islam” or “the Dawn of Islam” movement in Pakistan) who rejects the Hadith literature virtually in toto, many of them are likely to be in agreement with the following observations of Moulvi Cheragh Ali, an important Indian Muslim scholar who wrote in the nineteenth century:

The vast flood of tradition soon formed a chaotic sea. Truth, error, fact and fable mingled together in an indistinguishable confusion. Every religious, social, and political system was defended when necessary, by an appeal to some oral traditions. The name of Mohammad was abused to support all manner of lies and absurdities or to satisfy the passion, caprice, or arbitrary will of the despots, leaving out of consideration the creation of any standards of test... I am seldom inclined to quote traditions having little or no belief in their genuineness, as generally they are inauthentic, unsupported and one-sided.2

Though valid ground exists for regarding the Hadith literature with caution, if not scepticism, Fazlur Rahman is right in saying that “if the Hadith literature as a whole is cast away, the basis for the historicity of the Qur’an is removed with one stroke.”1 Furthermore, as pointed out by Alfred Guillaume in his book, The Traditions of Islam:
The hadith literature as we now have it provides us with apostolic precept and example covering the whole duty of man: it is the basis of that developed system of law, theology, and custom which is Islam... However sceptical we are with regard to the ultimate historical value of the traditions, it is hard to overrate their importance in the formation of the life of the Islamic races throughout the centuries. If we cannot accept them at their face value, they are of inestimable value as a mirror of the events which preceded the consolidation of Islam into a system.¹

Not only does the Hadith literature have its own autonomous character in point of law and even of doctrine,² it also has an emotive aspect whose importance is hard to overstate since it relates to the conscious as well as to the sub-conscious patterns of thought and feeling of Muslims individually and collectively. As H.A.R. Gibb has observed perceptively:

It would be difficult to exaggerate the strength and the effects of the Muslim attitude toward Muhammad. Veneration for the Prophet was a natural and inevitable feeling, both in his own day and later, but this is more than veneration. The personal relationships of admiration and love which he inspired in his associates have echoed down the centuries, thanks to the instruments which the community created in order to evoke them afresh in each generation. The earliest of these instruments was the narration of hadith. So much has been written about the legal and theological functions of the hadith that its more personal and religious aspects have been almost overlooked. It is true, to be sure, that the necessity of finding an authoritative source which would supplement the legal and ethical prescriptions contained in the Koran led to a search for examples set by Muhammad in his daily life and practice. One could be certain that if he had said this or that, done this or that, approved this or that action, one had an absolutely reliable guide to the right course to adopt in any similar situation. And it is equally true that this search went far beyond the limits of credibility or simple rectitude, and that it was in due course theologically rationalized by the doctrine of implicit inspiration.³

Having underscored the importance of the Qur'an and the Hadith literature as primary sources of the Islamic tradition, it is necessary to point out that through the centuries of Muslim history, these sources have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have abrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women. While it is encouraging that women such as Khadijah and A'ishah (wives of the Prophet Muhammad) and Rabi’a al-Basri (the outstanding woman Sufi) figure significantly in early Islam, the fact remains that the Islamic tradition has, by and large,
remained rigidly patriarchal till the present time, prohibiting the growth of scholarship among women particularly in the realm of religious thought. In view of this it is hardly surprising that until now the overwhelming majority of Muslim women have remained almost totally unaware of the extent to which their “Islamic” (in an ideal sense) rights have been violated by their male-centred and male-dominated societies which have continued to assert, glibly and tirelessly, that Islam has given women more rights than any other religious tradition. Kept for centuries in physical, mental and emotional confinement and deprived of the opportunity to actualize their human potential, even the exercise of analyzing their personal life-experiences as Muslim women is beyond the capability of most Muslim women. Here it is pertinent to mention that while the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy of Muslim women — especially those who live in rural areas where the majority of the population lives — is among the lowest in the world.

In recent times, largely due to the pressure of anti-women laws which are being promulgated under the cover of “Islamisation” in some parts of the Muslim world, women with some degree of education and awareness are beginning to realize that religion is being used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation. For instance, in the face both of military dictatorship and religious autocracy, valiant efforts have been made by women’s groups in Pakistan to protest against the enactment of manifestly anti-women laws and to highlight cases of gross injustice and brutality towards women. However, it is still not clearly and fully understood even by many women activists in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, that the negative attitudes pertaining to women which prevail in Muslim societies, in general, are in general rooted in theology. Unless and until the theological foundations of the misogynistic and androcentric tendencies in the Islamic tradition are demolished, Muslim women will continue to be brutalized and discriminated against despite improvement in statistics relating to women’s education, employment, social and political rights, etc.

Sexuality and the Islamic tradition

Underlying the discussion on almost any women-related issue which is of importance in Muslim communities or societies are some widely prevalent notions concerning sexuality in general, and women’s sexuality in particular. The Muslim attitude towards the former generally tends to
be highly positive. The Muslim attitude towards the latter, however, is far more complex, as will become evident in this paper.

Sexuality, which in its broadest sense refers to "the quality of being sexual" is affirmed by the Islamic tradition (much as it is by the Jewish tradition) because the creation of human beings as sexual as well as sexually-differentiated creatures is believed to be an integral part of God's plan for humankind. Unlike dualistic traditions, whether religious or philosophical, the Islamic tradition does not see sexuality as the opposite of spirituality, but describes it as a "sign" of God's mercy and bounty to humanity, as the following Qur'anic passage shows:

> And among His (God's) signs
> Is this, that He created
> For you mates from among
> Yourselves, that ye may
> Dwell in tranquillity with them,
> And He has put love
> And mercy between your (hearts)
> Verily in that are signs
> For those who reflect (Surah 30:Ar-Rum:21).

It is noteworthy that in the above passage, sexuality is not associated with animality or corporeality (as it is in some religious and philosophical traditions), but is regarded as the divine instrument for creating man-woman relationships characterized by togetherness, tranquillity, love and mercy.

It is important to note that, in the context of human creation, the Qur'an describes man and woman as each other's *zauj* or "mate". The term "zauj" is generally used to refer to one of two in a pair when reference is made, for instance to "a pair of shoes" or "night and day". Not only are both parts necessary to complete a pair but also the proper functioning of each requires the presence of the other. While the Qur'anic usage of *azwaj* (plural form of "zauj") to refer to husbands and wives is well known in Muslim societies, it is not generally known that the Qur'an uses the term *azwaaj* (dual form of "zauj") for man and woman in describing the process of creation itself, as can be seen from the following passages:

- He (God) did create
- In pairs ("azwaaj") — male and female,
- From a seed when lodged
- In its place 11 Surah 53: An-Najm: 45-46).
- Does Man12 think
That he will be left
Uncontrolled, (without purpose)?
Was he not a drop
Of sperm emitted
(In lowly form)?
Then did he become
A leech-like clot;
Then did (God) make
And fashion (him)
in due proportion.
And of him He made
Two sexes ("zaujain"), male
And female (Surah 75: Al-Qiyamat: 36-39).

In other words, man and woman — two sexually-differentiated human beings — created by God from a unitary source (nafs in wahidat in wahidatin) are related to each other ontologically, not merely sociologically. The creation and sexuality of one is, thus, inseparable from the creation and sexuality of the other. That man and woman, or men and women, are bound together not only by virtue of their common source but also by virtue of their interdependent (though different) sexualities seems to be implicit in a number of Qur'anic statements about human creation. These statements warrant the inference that sexual differentiation between man and woman was intended by God to create closeness, not opposition, between them. It is interesting to see how, in a sense, Muslim societies honour this intent, for besides the relationship between husbands and wives (in which "sexuality" becomes associated with "sexual intercourse") they also promote a variety of other relationships between men and women (which are not characterized by "sexual intercourse"). A strong sense of the interdependence of men and women generally pervades Islamic societies which, despite their frequently blatant patriarchalism, acknowledge the pivotal role of women in maintaining the physical, emotional, moral and spiritual well-being of the ummah (community).

With regards to sexuality in the context of a heterosexual marriage, a highly affirming attitude is to be found both in sources of normative Islam as well as in actual Islamic societies. The Qur'an encourages Muslims who are able to marry a "single" or "virtuous" man or woman to do so regardless of the differences in status or wealth between them:

Marry those among you
Who are single, or
The virtuous ones among
Your slaves, male or female:
If they are in poverty
God will give them
Means out of His Grace:
For God encompasseth all,
And He knoweth all things\(^{15}\) (Surah 24: An-Nâr: 32).

Recognizing that marriage to a slave woman might put less economic strain on a man than marrying a free woman,\(^{16}\) the Qur'an says:

If any of you have not
The means wherewith
To wed free believing women,
They may wed believing
Girls from among those
Whom your right hands possess:
And God hath full knowledge
About your Faith.
Ye are one from another:
Wed them with the leave
Of their owners, and give them
Their dowers, according to what
Is reasonable\(^{17}\) (Surah 4: An-Nisa': 25).

A major reason why Muslims are encouraged, even urged, to marry is because the human need for sexual satisfaction and intimacy is considered "natural" by the Islamic tradition which regards Islam as the "Din" (religion) of Nature. According to the Qur'an, monasticism, which followers of Jesus had imposed upon themselves, was not prescribed by God.\(^{18}\) In other words, from the Qur'anic perspective, neither renunciation of the world nor celibacy is required of those who wish to dedicate their lives to the service of God or to spiritual (as opposed to material) pursuits. Marriage is seen by Muslims generally not as an obstacle to attaining the "higher" goals of life, but rather, as an aid to the creation of a just and moral society. It protects human beings (particularly men) from immorality and lewdness\(^{19}\), providing them with a religious framework in which their sexual and other energies can be channelled constructively.

It is of interest to note here that there are many Qur'anic prescriptions relating to the regulation of man-woman relationship in marriage. The assumption underlying these prescriptions is that if men and women can attain justice in their marital relationship which is the basis of the family — the basic unit of society — then they can also attain justice in the ummah and the world at large. The larger ramifications of marital
relationships for the Muslim ummah have generally been recognized by
the Islamic tradition which would appear to endorse the popular Hadith in
which the prophet of Islam is reported to have said that by marrying
Muslims they had fulfilled half of their “Din”.20

That is to say, sexuality in general, particularly in the context of marital
relationship, is viewed as normal and wholesome both by the primary
sources of Islam and by Muslims generally. However, when one consid-
ers issues relating to women (as sexually differentiated from men) one
discovers many instances when divergence is found not only between
normative Islam and popular Islam but also between Qur’anic teachings
and individual ahadith. There are also many cases of one Hadith con-
tradicting another. In view of these discrepancies or inconsistencies it is
not possible to give a simple answer to the question: What is Islam’s view
of women’s sexuality and bodily functions? Even as the question is
complex, so also the answer must include reference to a number of
interrelated issues pertaining to significant stages and aspects of women’s
lives. In the account which follows, an attempt is made to answer the
above-stated question in the light both of normative Islam (which repre-
sents Islamic ideals) and of Muslim practice (which represents Islamic
realities), for both are part of the Islamic tradition which spans a period of
over thirteen centuries.

Women and normative Islam: three fundamental theological issues

Much of what has happened to Muslim women through the ages
becomes comprehensible if one keeps one fact in mind: Muslims, in
general, consider it a self-evident truth that women are not equal to men.
Men are “above” women or have “a degree of advantage” over them.
There is hardly anything in a Muslim woman’s life which is not affected
by this belief, hence it is vitally important, not only for theological
reasons but also pragmatic ones, to subject it to rigorous scholarly
scrutiny and attempt to identify its roots.

The roots of the belief that men are superior to women lie — in my
judgment — in three theological assumptions: a) that God’s primary
creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been
created from man’s rib, hence is derivative and ontologically secondary;
b) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily
described as “Man’s Fall” or Man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden,
hence “all daughters of Eve” are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion and
contempt; and c) that woman was created not only from man, but also for
man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of funda-
mental importance. The three theological questions to which the above assumptions may appropriately be regarded as answers are: i) How was woman created? ii) Was woman responsible for the “Fall” of man? and iii) Why was woman created? While all three questions have had profound significance in the history of ideas and attitudes pertaining to women in the Islamic, as well as the Jewish and Christian tradition, I consider the first one, which relates to the issue of woman’s creation, to be more basic and important, philosophically and theologically, than any other in the context of man-woman equality. This is so because if man and woman have been created equal by Allah who is the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot become unequal, essentially, at a subsequent time. On the other hand, if man and woman have been created unequal by Allah, then they cannot become equal, essentially, at a subsequent time.

It is not possible, within the scope of this paper, to deal exhaustively with any of the three questions. However, in the brief discussion of each question which follows, an attempt is made to highlight the way in which sources of normative Islam have been interpreted to show that women are inferior to men.

i) How was woman created?

The ordinary Muslim believes, as seriously as the ordinary Jew or Christian, that Adam was God’s primary creation and that Eve was made from Adam’s rib. While this myth has obvious roots in the Yahwist’s account of creation in Genesis 2:18-24, it has no basis whatever in the Qur’an, which, in the context of human creation, always speaks in completely egalitarian terms. In none of the thirty or so passages which describe the creation of humanity (designated by generic terms such as “an-nas”, “al-insan” and “bashar”) by God in a variety of ways is there any statement which could be interpreted as asserting or suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man. In fact there are some passages11 which could — from a purely grammatical/linguistic point of view — be interpreted as stating that the first creation (“nafs in wahidatin”) was feminine, not masculine!12 The Qur’an notwithstanding, Muslims believe that “Hawwa” (the Hebrew/Arabic counterpart of “Eve”), who — incidentally — is never mentioned in the Qur’an, was created from the “crooked” rib of “Adam” who is believed to be the first human being created by God. Here, it needs to be mentioned that the term “Adam” is not an Arabic term but a Hebrew term meaning “of the soil” (from “adamah”: the soil). The Hebrew term “Adam” functions generally as a collective noun referring to “the human” (species) rather than to a
In the Qur'an, also, the term "Adam" refers, in twenty-one cases out of twenty-five, to humanity. Here it is of interest to note that though the term "Adam" mostly does not refer to a particular human being, it does refer to human beings in a particular way. As pointed out by Muhammad Iqbal:

Indeed, in the verses which deal with the origin of man as a living being, the Qur'an uses the words "Bashar" or "Insan", not "Adani", which it reserves for man in his capacity of God's viceregent on earth. The purpose of the Qur'an is further secured by the omission of proper names mentioned in the Biblical narration — Adam and Eve. The term "Adam" is retained and used more as a concept than as a name of a concrete human individual. The word is not without authority in the Qur'an itself.²⁴

An analysis of the Qur'anic descriptions of human creation shows how the Qur'an evenhandedly uses both feminine and masculine terms and imagery to describe the creation of humanity from a single source. That God's original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman (who appeared simultaneously at a subsequent time) is implicit in a number of Qur'anic passages.²³ If the Qur'an makes no distinction between the creation of man and woman — as it clearly does not — why do Muslims believe that Hawwa' was created from the rib of Adam? Although the Genesis 2 account of woman's creation is accepted virtually by all Muslims, it is difficult to believe that it entered the Islamic tradition directly, for very few Muslims ever read the Bible. It is much more likely that it became a part of Islamic heritage through its assimilation in the Hadith literature. That the Genesis 2 idea of woman being created from Adam's rib did, in fact, become incorporated in the Hadith literature is evident from a number of ahadith. These are particularly important since they appear to have had a formative impact on how Muslims have perceived women's being and sexuality (as differentiated from men's). The main (contents) of these ahadith — one from Sahih Al-Bukhari and one from Sahih Muslim — all ascribed to the Companion known as Abu Harairah,²⁷ is given below:

1. Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so if you should try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat women nicely.²⁸

2. Woman is like a rib. When you attempt to straighten it, you would break it. And if you leave her alone you would benefit by her, and crookedness will remain in her.²⁹
I have examined these and similar hadith elsewhere and have shown them to be flawed both with regard to their formal (isnad) and their material (matn) aspects. The theology of woman implicit in these hadith is based upon generalizations about her ontology, biology and psychology which are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Qur'an. These hadith ought, therefore, to have been rejected, since Muslim scholars agree on the principle that any hadith which is inconsistent with the Qur'an cannot be accepted. However, despite the fact that the hadith in question contradict the teachings of the Qur'an, they have continued to be an important part of the ongoing Islamic tradition. Undoubtedly, one of the major reasons for this is that these hadith come from the two most highly-venerated Hadith collections by Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (810-870 A.D.) and Muslim bin al-Hallaj (817 or 821-875 A.D.). These two collections known together as Sahih (from "sahih" meaning sound or authentic) "form an almost unassailable authority, subject indeed to criticism in details, yet deriving an indestructible influence from the ijma or general consent of the community in custom and belief, which it is their function to authenticate." While being included in the Sahih gives the hadith in question much weight among Muslims who know about the science of Hadith, their continuing popularity among Muslims in general indicates that they articulate something deeply embedded in Muslim culture — namely, that women are derivative creatures who can never be considered equal to men.

Theologically, the history of women's subjection in the Islamic (as well as the Jewish and Christian) tradition began with the story of Hawwa's creation. In my view, unless Muslim women return to the point of origin and challenge the authenticity of the hadith which make all representatives of their sex ontologically inferior and irremediably crooked, male-centred and male-controlled Muslim societies are not likely to acknowledge the egalitarianism evident in the Qur'anic statements about human creation.

ii) Was Woman responsible for the Fall of Man?

Many Muslims, like many Jews and Christians, would answer this question in the affirmative, though nothing in the Qur'anic descriptions of the so-called Fall episode would warrant such an answer. Here it may be noted that whereas in Genesis 3:6, the dialogue preceding the eating of the forbidden fruit by the human pair in the Garden of Eden is between the serpent and Eve (though Adam's presence is also indicated, as contended by feminist theologians) and this has provided the basis for the popular
casting of Eve into the role of tempter, deceiver and seducer of Adam, in the Qur'an, the Shaitan (satan) has no exclusive dialogue with Adam's 

jauj. In two of the three passages which refer to this episode, namely Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 35-39 and Surah 7: Al-'Araf: 19-25, the Shaitan is stated to have led both Adam and jauj astray though in the former (verse 36) no actual conversation is reported. In the remaining passage, namely, Surah 20: Ta-Ha: 115-124, it is Adam who is charged with forgetting his covenant with God (verse 115), who is tempted by the Shaitan (verse 120) and who disobeys God and allows himself to be seduced (verse 121).

However, if one looks at all the three passages as well as the way in which the term "Adam" functions generally in the Qur'an, it becomes clear that the Qur'an regards the act of disobedience by the human pair in "al-jannah" (the Garden) as a collective rather than an individual act for which exclusive, or even primary, responsibility is not assigned to either man or woman. Even in the last passage in which "Adam" appears to be held responsible for forgetting the covenant and for allowing himself to be beguiled by the Shaitan, the act of disobedience, i.e., the eating from "the Tree", is committed jointly by Adam and jauj and not by Adam alone or in the first place.

Having said that, it is extremely important to stress the point that the Qur'an provides no basis whatever for asserting, suggesting or implying that Hawwa', having been tempted and deceived by the Shaitan, in turn tempted and deceived Adam and led to his expulsion from al-jannah. This fact notwithstanding, many Muslim commentators have ascribed the primary responsibility for man's Fall to woman, as may be seen from the following extract:

In al-Tabirs Tarikh (1:108) the very words Satan used to tempt Eve are then used by her to tempt Adam: "Look at this tree, how sweet is its smell, how delicious is its fruit, how beautiful is its colour!" This passage is concluded by God's specifically accusing Eve of deceiving Adam. Later in the narrative (1:111-112) al-Tabari mentions a report that is also cited by other commentators, the gist of which is to say that Adam while in his full reasoning faculties, did not eat of the tree, but only succumbed to the temptation after Eve had given him wine to drink. Al-Tha'labi in citing the same report also stresses the loss of Adam's rationality through the imbibing of wine, and al-Razi (Tafsir 3:13) says that such a story, which he has seen in several "tafsirs", is not at all far-fetched. Implicit in this specific act, of course, is both Eve's culpability and Adam's inherent rationality. Lest any should miss the point that Eve is actively and not just innocently involved in Adam's temptation, Ibn Kathir asserts that as God surely knows best, it was Eve who ate of the tree before Adam and urged him to eat. He then quotes a saying
attributed to the Prophet, "But for Banu Isra'il meat would not have spoiled (because they used to keep it for the next day), and but for Hawwa' no female would be a traitor to her husband!" (Bidaya 1:84). 33

There is hardly any doubt that Muslim women have been as victimized as Jewish and Christian women by the way in which the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions have generally interpreted the Fall episode. However, it needs to be pointed out that the Qur'anic account of the episode differs significantly from the biblical account, and that the Fall does not mean in the Islamic tradition what it means in the Jewish, and particularly in the Christian, tradition.

To begin with, whereas in Genesis 3 no explanation is given as to why the serpent tempts either Eve alone or both Adam and Eve, in the Qur'an the reason why the Shaitan (or "Iblis") sets out to beguile the human pair in "al-jannah" is stated clearly in a number of passages. The refusal of the Shaitan to obey God's command to bow in submission to Adam follows from his belief that being a creature of fire he is elementally superior to Adam who is a creature of clay. When condemned for his arrogance by God and ordered to depart in a state of abject disgrace, the Shaitan throws a challenge to the Almighty: he will prove to God that Adam and Adam's progeny are unworthy of the honour and favour bestowed on them by God, being — in general — ungrateful, weak and easily lured away from "the straight path" by worldly temptations. Not attempting to hide his intentions to "come upon" human beings from all sides, the Shaitan asks for — and is granted — a reprieve until "the Day of the Appointed Time". Not only is the reprieve granted, but God also tells the Shaitan to use all his wiles and forces to "assault" human beings and see if they would follow him. A cosmic drama now begins, involving the eternal opposition between the principles of right and wrong or good and evil, which is lived out as human beings, exercising their moral autonomy, must now choose between "the straight path" and "the crooked path".

In terms of the Qur'anic narrative, what happens to the human pair in "al-jannah" is a sequel to the interchange between God and the Shaitan. In the sequel we learn that Adam and zayn have been commanded not to go near "the Tree" lest they become zalimin. Seduced by the Shaitan, they disobey God. However, in Surah 7: Al-A'raf 23 they acknowledge before God that they have done zulm to themselves and earnestly seek God's forgiveness and mercy. They are told by God to "go forth" or "descend" from "al-jannah", but in addressing them the Qur'an uses the dual form of address (referring exclusively to Adam and "jauf") only once (in Surah 18
Ta-Ha: 123); for the rest the plural form is used which necessarily refers to more than two persons and is generally understood as referring to humanity as a whole.

In the framework of Qur'anic theology, the order to "go forth" from "al-jannah" given to Adam or the children of Adam cannot be considered a punishment because Adam was always meant to be God's vice-regent on earth, as stated clearly in Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 30. The earth is not a place of banishment but is declared by the Qur'an to be humanity's dwelling place and a source of profit to it. The "al-jannah" mentioned in the Fall story is not — as pointed out by Muhammad Iqbal — "the supersensual paradise from which man is supposed to have fallen on this earth".

There is, strictly speaking, no Fall in the Qur'an. What the Qur'anic narration focuses upon is the moral choice which humanity is required to make when confronted by the alternatives presented to them by God and the Shaitan. This becomes clear if one reflects on the text of Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 35 and Surah 7: Al-A'raf: 19, in which it is stated: "You (dual) go not near this Tree, lest you (dual) become of the 'zalimin'". In other words, the human pair is being told that if they go near the Tree, then they will be counted amongst those who perpetrate "zulm". Commenting on the root ZLM, Toshihio Izutsu says:

The primary meaning of ZLM is, in the opinion of many of the authoritative lexicologists, that of "putting in a wrong place." In the moral sphere it seems to mean primarily "to act in such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach upon the right of some other person." Briefly and generally speaking "zulm" is to do injustice in the sense of going beyond one's bounds and doing what one has no right to.

By transgressing the limits set by God the human pair become guilty of zulm towards themselves. This zulm consists in their taking on the responsibility for choosing between good and evil. Here it is important to note that the Qur'anic legend of the fall has nothing to do with the first appearance of man on this planet. Its purpose is rather to indicate man's rise from a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience. The fall does not mean any moral depravity, it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature with a throb of personal causality in one's own being. Nor does the Qur'an regard the earth as a torture hall where an elementally wicked humanity is imprisoned for an original act of
man's first act of disobedience was also his first act of free choice; and that is why, according to the Qur'anic narration, Adam's first transgression was forgiven. A being whose movements are wholly determined like a machine cannot produce goodness. Freedom is thus a condition of goodness. But to permit the emergence of a finite ego who has the power to choose, after considering the relative values of several courses of action open to him, is really to take a great risk; for the freedom to choose good involves also the freedom to choose what is the opposite of good. That God has taken this risk shows his immense faith in man; it is now for man to justify this faith.38

There is no Fall in the Qur'an, hence there is no Original Sin. Human beings are not born sinful into this world, hence do not need to be "redeemed" or "saved". This is generally accepted in the Islamic tradition. However, the association of the Fall with sexuality, which has played such a massive role in perpetuating the myth of feminine evil in the Christian tradition, also exists in the minds of many Muslims and causes untold damage to Muslim women.

It is remarkable to see that though there is no reference to sexual activity on the part of man or woman even in their post-lapsarian state of partial or complete nakedness in either Genesis 3 or the Qur'an, many Muslim scholars have jumped to the conclusion that exposure of their sau'at (i.e., "the external portion of the organs of generation of a man and of a woman and the anus")39, generally translated as "shameful parts", necessarily led the human pair to sexual activity which was "shameful" not only by virtue of being linked with their "shameful parts" but also because it was instigated by the Shaitan. The following explanation by A.A. Maududi — one of contemporary Islam's most influential scholars — represents the thinking of many, if not most, Muslims on this point:

The sex instinct is the greatest weakness of the human race. That is why Satan selected this weak spot for his attack on the adversary and devised the scheme to strike at their modesty. Therefore the first step he took in this direction was to expose their nakedness to them so as to open the door of indecency before them and beguile them into sexuality. Even to this day, Satan and his disciples are adopting the same scheme of depriving the woman of the feelings of modesty and shyness and they cannot think of any scheme of "progress" unless they expose and exhibit the woman to all and sundry.40

The initial statement leaves no doubt about Maududi's negative view of "the sex-instinct" which he describes as "the greatest weakness of the human race." Associating sexuality with the Shaitan's "attack on the adversary", Maududi assumes that on discovering their state of physical exposure, the human pair resorted irresistibly to an act of "indecency" i.e.
sexual intercourse. However, there is nothing in the text which warrants this assumption. In fact, according to the text, the human pair’s first act on discovering their exposed state was one of “decency”, namely, that of covering themselves with leaves.

That Maududi — like many other Muslims, Jews and Christians — sees women as the primary agents of sexuality which is regarded as the Shaitan’s chief instrument for defeating God’s plan for humanity, is clear from the way in which he shifts attention from the human pair to the woman, in the above passage. In turning his eyes away from the “nakedness” of the sons of Adam to focus on the “nakedness” of the daughters of Hawwa’, he is typical of Muslim culture.

Though the branding of women as “the devil’s gateway” is not at all the intent of the Qur’anic narration of the Fall story — as the foregoing account has shown — Muslims, no less than Jews and Christians, have used the story to vent their misogynistic feelings. This is clear from the continuing popularity of ahadith such as the following:

Narrated Usama bin Zaid: The Prophet said, “After me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women” (Shahih Al-Bukhari, Vol. VII, p.22).

Ibn Abbas reported that Allah’s Messenger said: “I had a chance to look into Paradise and I found that the majority of the people were poor and I looked into the Fire and there I found the majority constituted by women” (Sahih Muslim, Vol. IV, p. 1431).

Abu Sa’id Khudri reported that Allah’s Messenger said: “The world is sweet and green (alluring) and verily Allah is going to install you as vice-regent in it in order to see how you act. So avoid the allurement of women: verily, the first trial for the people of Isma’il was caused by women” (Sahih Muslim Volume IV, p. 1431).

iii) Why was Woman created?

The Qur’an, which does not discriminate against women in the context of the Fall episode, does not support the view — held by many Muslims, Christians and Jews — that woman was created not only from man but also for man. That God’s creation as a whole is “for just ends” (Surah 15: Al-Hijr: 85) and not “for idle sport” (Surah 21: Al-Anbiya’: 16) is one of the major themes of the Qur’an. Humanity, fashioned “in the best of moulds” (Surah 95: At-Tin: 4) has been created in order to serve God (Surah 51: Adh-Dhariyat: 56). According to Qur’anic teaching, service to God cannot be separated from service to humankind, or — in Islamic terms — believers in God must honour both Haquq Allah (rights of God)
and Haqiq al-‘ibad (rights of creatures). Fulfilment of one’s duties to
God and humankind constitutes the essence of righteousness. That men
and women are equally called upon by God to be righteous and will be
equally rewarded for their righteousness is stated unambiguously in a
number of Qur’anic passages such as the following:

The Believers, men
And women, are protectors.
One of another: they enjoin
What is just, and forbid
What is evil: they observe
Regular prayers, practise
Regular charity, and obey
God and His Apostle.
On them will God pour
His mercy: for God
Is exalted in power, Wise.
God hath promised to Believers,
Men and women, Gardens
Under which rivers flow,
To dwell therein,
And beautiful mansions
In gardens of everlasting Bliss
But the greatest bliss
Is the Good Pleasure of God:
That is the supreme felicity (Surah 9: At-Taubah: 71:72).

Not only does the Qur’an make it clear that man and woman stand
absolutely equal in the sight of God, but also that they are “members” and
“protectors” of each other. In other words, the Qur’an does not create a
hierarchy in which men are placed above women, nor does it pit men
against women in an adversary relationship. They are created as equal
creatures of a universal, just and merciful God whose pleasure it is that
they live — in harmony and in righteousness — together.

In spite of the Qur’anic affirmation of man-woman equality, Muslim
societies in general have never regarded men and women as equal,
particularly in the context of marriage. Fatima Mernissi’s observations on
the position of a Muslim woman in relation to her family in modern
Morocco apply, more or less, to Muslim culture generally:

...one of the distinctive characteristics of Muslim sexuality is its territorial-
ity, which reflects a specific division of labour and a specific conception of
society and of power. The territoriality of Muslim sexuality sets ranks, tasks,
and authority patterns. Spatially confined, the woman was taken care of materially by the man who possessed her, in return for her total obedience and her sexual and reproductive services. The whole system was organized so that the Muslim 'ummah' was actually a society of male citizens who possessed among other things the female half of the population. Muslim men have always had more rights and privileges than Muslim women, including even the right to kill their women... The man imposed on the women an artificially narrow existence, both physically and spiritually.46

Underlying the rejection in Muslim societies of the idea of man-woman equality is the deeply-rooted belief that women — who are inferior in creation (having been made from a crooked rib) and in righteousness (having helped the Shaitan in defeating God's plan for Adam) — have been created mainly to be of use to men who are superior to them.

The alleged superiority of men to women which permeates the Islamic (as also the Jewish and Christian) tradition is grounded not only in Hadith literature but also in popular interpretations of some Qur'anic passages. Two Qur'anic passages — Surah 4: An-Nisa': 34 and Surah 2: Al Baqarah: 288 — in particular, are generally cited to support the contention that men have "a degree of advantage" over women. Of these, the first reads as follows in A.A. Maududi's translation of the Arabic text:

Men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because men spend of their wealth on women. Virtuous women are, therefore, obedient; they guard their rights carefully in their absence under the care and watch of Allah. As for those women whose defiance you have cause to fear, admonish them and keep them apart from your beds and beat them. Then, if they submit to you, do not look for excuses to punish them: note it well that there is Allah above you, Who is Supreme and Great.47

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the general Muslim understanding of Surah 4: An-Nisa': 34 which is embodied in Maududi's translation. As soon as the issue of woman's equality with man is raised by liberals, the immediate response by traditionalists is, "But don't you know that God says in the Qur'an that men are qawwamun in relation to women and have the right to rule over them and even to beat them?" In fact, the mere statement, ar-rijal-o qawwamun-o 'ala an-nisa (literally, the men are qawwamun in relation to the women) signifies the end of any attempt to discuss the issue of woman's equality with man in the Islamic ummah.

It is assumed by almost all who read Surah 4, verse 34, that it is addressed to husbands. The first point to be noted is that it is addressed to
"ar-rijal" (the men) and to "an-nisa" (the women). In other words, it is addressed to all men and women of the Islamic community. This is further indicated by the fact that in relation to all the actions that are required to be taken, the plural and not the dual form (used when reference is made to two persons) is found. Such usage makes clear that the orders contained in this verse were not addressed to a husband or wife but to the Islamic "ummah" in general.

The key word in the first sentence of this verse is "qawwamun." This word has been translated variously as "protectors and maintainers (of women)," "in charge (of women)," "having pre-eminence (above women)," and "sovereigns or masters (over women)." Linguistically, the word "qawwamun" means "breadwinners" or "those who provide a means of support or livelihood." A point of logic that must be made here is that the first sentence is not a descriptive one stating that all men as a matter of fact are providing for women, since obviously there are at least some men who do not provide for women. What the sentence is stating, rather, is that men ought to have the capability to provide (since "ought" implies "can"). In other words, this statement, which almost all Muslim societies have taken to be an actual description of all men, is in fact a normative statement pertaining to the Islamic concept of division of labour in an ideal family or community structure. The fact that men are "qawwamun" does not mean that women cannot or should not provide for themselves, but simply that in view of the heavy burden that most women shoulder in child-bearing and rearing, they should not have the additional obligation of providing the means of living at the same time.

Continuing with the analysis of the passage, we come next to the idea that God has given the one more strength than the other. Most translations make it appear that the one who has more strength, excellence, or superiority is the man. However, the Qur'anic expression does not accord superiority to men. The expression literally means "some in relation to some," so that the statement could mean either that some men are superior to some others (men and/or women) and that some women are superior to some others (men and/or women). The interpretation which seems to me to be the most appropriate contextually is that some men are more blessed with the means to be better providers that are other men.

The next part of the passage begins with a "therefore," which indicates that this part is conditional upon the first: in other words, if men fulfill their assigned function of being providers, women must fulfill their corresponding duties. Most translations describe this duty in terms of the wife being "obedient" to the husband. The word "salihat," which is
translated as "righteously obedient", is related to the word *salahiat*, which means "capability" or "potentiality", and not obedience. Women's special capability is to bear children. The word *quniat*, which succeeds the word "salihat" and is also translated as "obedient" is related to a bag for carrying water from one place to another without spilling. Women's special function, then, according to this passage, is that like the bag in which water is transported without loss to its destination, she carries and protects the foetus in her womb until it can be safely delivered.

What is outlined in the first part of this passage is a functional division of labour necessary for maintaining balance in any society. Men who do not have to fulfill the responsibility of childbearing are assigned the functions of being breadwinners. Women are exempted from the responsibility of being breadwinners in order that they may fulfill their function as childbearers. The two functions are separate but complementary and neither is higher or lower than the other.

The three injunctions in the second part of the verse were given to the Islamic ummah in order to meet a rather extraordinary possibility: a mass rebellion on the part of women against their role as childbearers, the function assigned to them by God. If all or most of the women in a Muslim society refused to bear children without just cause as a sign of organized defiance or revolt, this would mean the end of the Muslim ummah. This situation must, therefore, be dealt with decisively. The first step to be taken is to counsel the rebels. If this step is unsuccessful, the second step to be taken is isolation of the rebellious women from others. (It is to be noted here that the prescription is "to leave the women alone in their beds". By translating this line, "keep them apart from your beds," Maududi is suggesting, if not stating, that the judging party is the husband and not the Islamic community — an assumption not warranted by the text). If the second step is also not successful then the step of confining the women for a longer period of time may be taken by the Islamic community or its representatives. Here, it is important to point out that the Arabic word that is generally translated as "beating" has numerous meanings. When used in a legal context as it is here, it means "holding in confinement", according to the authoritative lexicon *Tal-al-'Arus.* *(In Surrah 4: An-Nisa': 15, unchaste women are also prescribed the punishment of being confined to their homes.)

While Muslims, through the centuries, have interpreted Surah *An-Nisa*: 34 as giving them unequivocal mastery over women, a linguistically and philosophically/theologically accurate interpretation of this passage would lead to radically different conclusions. In simple words
what this passage is saying is that since only women can bear children (which is not to say either that all women should bear children or that women’s sole function is to bear children) — a function whose importance in the survival of any community cannot be questioned — they should not have the additional obligation of being breadwinners whilst they perform this function. Thus, during the period of a woman’s child-bearing, the function of breadwinning must be performed by men (not just husbands) in the Muslim ummah. Reflection on this Qur’anic passage shows that the division of functions mandated here is designed to ensure justice in the community as a whole. There are millions of women all over the world — and I am one of them — who are designated inaccurately as “single” parents (when, in fact, they are “double” parents) who bear and raise children singlehandedly, generally without much support from the community. This surely does not constitute a just situation. If children are the wealth and future of the ummah, the importance of protecting the function of child-bearing and child-raising becomes self-evident. Statistics from all over the world show that women and children left without the care and custodianship of men suffer from economic, social, psychological and other ills. What Surah An-Nisa’: 34 is ensuring is that this does not happen. It enjoins men in general to assume responsibility for women in general when they are performing the vitally important function of child-bearing (other passages in the Qur’an extend this also to child-rearing). Thus the intent of this passage, which has traditionally been used to subordinate women to men is in fact to guarantee women the material (as well as moral) security needed by them during the period of pregnancy when breadwinning can become difficult or even impossible for them.

The second passage which mentions the so-called "degree of advantage" that men have over women is Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 228, which reads:

Divorced women
Shall wait concerning
For three monthly periods.
Nor is it lawful for them
To hid what God
Hath created in their wombs,
If they have faith
In God and the last Day.
And their husbands
Have the better right
To take them back
In that period, if
They wish for reconciliation.
And women shall have rights
Similar to the rights
Against them, according
To what is equitable;
But men have a degree
(of advantage) over them,
And God is Exalted in Power, Wise. 49

As can be seen, the above-cited passage pertains to the subject of divorce. The “advantage” that men have over women in this context is that women must observe a three-month period called “iddat” before remarriage, but men are exempted from this requirement. The main reason why women are subjected to this restriction is because at the time of divorce a woman may be pregnant and this fact may not become known for some time. As men cannot become pregnant they are allowed to remarry without a waiting period.

In my judgment, the Qur’anic passages — in particular the two discussed above — on which the edifice of male superiority over women largely rests, have been misread or misinterpreted, intentionally or unintentionally, by most Muslim societies and men. A “correct” reading of these passages would not, however, make a radical or substantial difference to the existing *pattern of male-female relationships in Muslim societies unless attention was also drawn to those Ahadith which have been used to make man not only superior to a woman, but virtually her god. The following hadith is particularly important:

A man came in with his daughter and said, “This my daughter refuses to get married.” The Prophet said, “Obey your father.” She said, “By the name of Him Who sent you in truth, I will not marry until you inform me what is the right of the husband over his wife.” He said,..."if it were permitted for one human being to bow down (sajada) to another I would have ordered the woman to bow down to her husband when he enters into her, because of God’s grace on her.” (The daughter) answered, “By the name of Him Who sent you, with truth, I would never marry!” 50

A faith as rigidly monotheistic as Islam cannot conceivably permit any human being to worship anyone but God, therefore the hypothetical statement “If it were permitted...” in the above-cited hadith, is, *ipso facto*, an impossibility. But the way this hadith is related makes it appear that if not God’s, at least it was the Prophet’s will or wish to make the wife prostrate herself before her husband. Each word, act or exhortation...
attributed to the Prophet is held to be sacred by most of the Muslims in the world and so this hadith (which, in my judgement seeks to legitimate *shirk*: associating anyone with God — an unforgivable sin according to the Qur'ān) becomes binding on the Muslim woman. Muslims frequently criticize a religion such as Hinduism where the wife is required to worship the husband (pathipuja) but in practice what is expected from most Muslim wives is not very different from pathipuja. In India and Pakistan, for example, a Muslim woman learns almost as an article of faith that her husband is her *ma'aji khuda* (God in earthly form). This description, undoubtedly, constitutes "shirk".

Most ahadith dealing with the subject of married women describe a virtuous woman as one who pleases and obeys her husband at all times. Pleasing the husband can, in fact, become more important than pleasing God. Putting it differently, one can say that most Muslims believe that a woman cannot please God except through pleasing her husband. Some ahadith are cited below to illustrate this point:

The wife of Sufwan B. Mu'attal went to the Prophet when we were with him and said, "O Messenger of God, my husband... beats me when I perform my devotions, and makes me eat when I fast..." (The Prophet) asked Sufwan about what she had said and he replied, "O Messenger of God...she fasts and I am a young man and have not patience." Then the Messenger of God said, "From now on let a woman not fast except by permission of her husband" (Ibn Hanbal). 51

A woman whose husband is pleased with her at the time of her death goes straight to Paradise (Tirmidhi). 52

There are three (persons) whose prayer is not accepted nor their virtues taken above: the fugitive slave till he returns to his masters and places his hand in their hands; the woman on whom her husband remains displeased; and the drunkard, till he becomes sober (Baihaqi). 53

Hadrat Anas reported that the Holy Prophet had said: "For a woman her husband is Paradise as well as hell" (Ahmad and Nasai'). 54

Hadrat Ibn Abi Aufi reported that the Holy Prophet has said: "By Allah in Whose Hand is my life, the woman who does not discharge her duties to her husband is disobedient to Allah, and the discharge of duties towards Allah depends on the discharge of duties towards the husband" (Ibn Majah). 55

Man and woman, created equal by God and standing equal in the sight of God, have become very unequal in Muslim societies. The Qur'ānic description of man and woman in marriage:

They are your garments
And you are their garments (Surah 2: Al-Baqarah:187)
implies closeness, mutuality and equality. However, Muslim culture has reduced many, if not most, women to the position of puppets on a string, to slave-like creatures whose only purpose in life is to cater to the needs and pleasures of men. Not only this, it has also had the audacity and the arrogance to deny women direct access to God. Islam rejects the idea of redemption, of any intermediary between a believer and the Creator. It is one of Islam's cardinal beliefs that each person — man and woman — is responsible and accountable for his or her individual actions. How, then, can the husband become the wife's gateway to heaven or hell? How, then, can he become the arbiter not only of what happens to her in this world but also of her ultimate destiny? Surely such questions must arise in the minds of thoughtful Muslim men, but Muslim women are afraid to ask questions whose answers are bound to threaten the existing balance of power in the domain of family relationships in most Muslim societies.

Qur'anic Islam versus Islam in history and issues of women's sexuality

The foregoing account provides much evidence to show that the Qur'an does not discriminate against women, whose sexuality is affirmed both generally and in the context of marriage. Furthermore, while making it clear that righteousness is identical in the case of man or woman, the Qur'an also provides particular safeguards for protecting women's special sexual/biological functions such as carrying, delivering, suckling and rearing offspring.

Underlying much of the Qur'an's legislation on women-related issues is the recognition that women have been disadvantaged persons in history to whom justice needs to be done by the Islamic ummah. Unfortunately, however, the cumulative (Jewish, Christian, Hellenistic, Bedouin and other) biases which existed in the Arab-Islamic culture of the early centuries of Islam infiltrated the Islamic tradition, largely through the Hadith literature, and undermined the intent of the Qur'an to liberate women from the status of chattels or inferior creatures and make them free and equal to men.

A review of Muslim history and culture brings to light many areas in which — Qur'anic teachings notwithstanding — women continued to be subjected to diverse forms of oppression and injustice, not infrequently in the name of Islam. However, there are also areas in which the message of the Qur'an has been heeded. For instance, in response to the Qur'an, condemnation of female infanticide which was not uncommon amongst pre-Islamic Arabs. Muslim Arabs abolished the practice of burying their
daughters alive. This means that when Muslims say with pride that Islam gave women the right to live, they are, indeed, right. However, it needs to be added here that though Muslims do not kill their baby daughters, they do not, in general, treat them equally with boys. Generally speaking, the birth of a daughter is met with resignation and even sadness. A woman who only produces daughters is likely to be the target of harsh and abusive behaviour and threatened with divorce. It will be interesting to see what change, if any, takes place in Muslim culture when the fact becomes widely known that it is not the mother but the father who determines the sex of the child!

Underlying the gruesome practice of female infanticide was the notion, prevalent amongst Bedouin Arabs, that the birth of a daughter meant not only additional drainage of extremely scarce means of survival, but also — and more importantly — a real hazard to their “honour”. The concepts of “honour” and “shame”, which have a profound significance in Bedouin culture (as also in Mediterranean societies) are linked with the idea of women’s chastity or sexual behaviour. Pre-Islamic nomadic Arabs who lived in a state of constant warfare with the environment and with other tribes, had a separate word for the honour of women — ird, about which B. Fares observes:

“ird” from its etymology seems to be a partition which separates its possessor from the rest of mankind... This partition is certainly fragile since it was easily destroyed... (In the pre-Islamic jahiliyya period) ‘ird’ was intense and of momentous importance; besides it was the guiding motive in the acts and deeds of all the Arabs except those of the Yemen... on account of its sacred nature, it was entitled to take the place of religion; the Arabs put it in the highest place and defended it arms in hand.7

So fearful were pre-Islamic Arabs of the possibility of having their “ird” compromised by their daughters’ voluntary or involuntary loss of chastity that they were willing to kill them. Obviously, to them their honour mattered more than the lives of their infant daughters. It is important to note that the “honour” killings still go on in many Muslim societies in which a woman is killed on the slightest suspicion of what is perceived as sexual misconduct. There are also many instances of women being killed for other reasons and the murder being camouflaged as an “honour” killing in order to make it appear less heinous a crime.

The term “ird” does not appear in the Qur’an. However, just as in the case of Bedouin Arabs, most Muslim men’s concept of “honour” revolves around the orbit of women’s sexuality, which is seen as a male posses-
sion. Commenting on how men’s honour is intertwined with women’s virginity (which symbolizes their chastity) in patriarchal Muslim culture, Fatima Mernissi observes:

...virginity is a matter between men, in which women merely play the role of silent intermediaries. Like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence. The concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a women. It is not by subjugating nature or by conquering mountains and rivers that a man secures his status, but by controlling the movements of women related to him by blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers.

Since women’s sexuality is so vitally related to men’s honour and the self-image in Muslim culture, it becomes vitally important in Muslim societies to subject women’s bodies to external social controls. One way in which some Muslim societies (e.g. in North Africa) have sought to do so is by means of female circumcision, which ranges from cutting off the tip of the clitoris to virtual removal of the clitoris and the sealing of the mouth of the vagina except for a small passage. The extent of physical, emotional or psychological damage done to women by the practice of female circumcision depends, among other things, upon the nature of the “operation” and how it was performed. Having heard personal testimonies from Muslim women who have experienced the horror of radical circumcision, I have no doubt at all that this practice constitutes an extreme form of cruelty towards women which must not be tolerated. Here it needs to be pointed out that though the Islamic tradition (following the Jewish tradition) requires male circumcision, it does not require female circumcision. Female circumcision practised in countries such as Egypt, the Sudan, and Somalia, is, thus, rooted in the culture of those regions and not in religion.

Another way in which Muslim societies seek to control women’s bodies is by denying women access to means of birth control. Here it may be noted that though there are Qur’anic statements referring to the killing of one’s living children, there are no Qur’anic statements on birth control. In the Hadith literature, examples may be found which support the practice of az / coitus interruptus) and which do not. A similar ambiguity is found amongst Muslim jurists. In view of the fact that there is no definitive statement on the subject of birth control in the major sources of the Islamic tradition, the issue — in a sense — remains open. Considering the overwhelming importance of the problem of expanding population in most Muslim countries, the subject of family planning or
birth control should obviously be considered a high priority for discussion by the learned in the Muslim ummah. ("Ijma", or consensus of the community, constitutes a source of law in the Islamic tradition). However, family planning programmes have met with strong resistance in the Islamic world in general and most of this resistance appears to be rooted in religious grounds.

One Qur'anic passage commonly cited by opponents of birth control in Muslim societies is Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 223, which states:

Your wives are
As a tilth unto you
So approach your tilth
When or how you will;
But do some good beforehand,
And fear God.
And know that you are
To meet Him (in the Hereafter),
And give (these) good tidings
To those who believe. 63

The likening of a wife to life-containing soil has profound meaning but the average Muslim is not sensitive to the subtleties of the comparison or to the implications of the Qur'an's reminder to the husband that he should act righteously. Since wives are described as a "tilth" and permission has been given to the husbands to approach them "when or how you will", the average Muslim man believes not only that husbands have the right to have sexual intercourse with their wives whenever they choose, but also the right to impregnate them at will in order that they might yield a harvest.

Numerous hadith attributed to the Prophet insist that a wife must never refuse to have sexual relations with her husband. For instance, Imam Muslim reports the following hadith on the authority of Abu Huraira:

Allah's Apostle said: "When a woman spends the night from the bed of her husband the angels curse her until morning."

... Allah's Messenger said: "By Him in whose Hand is my Life, when a man calls his wife to his bed and she does not respond, the One who is in the heaven is displeased with her until he (her husband) is pleased with her." 64

In view of this insistence that the husband's sexual needs be instantaneously satisfied (unless the wife is menstruating, fasting, or in some other exceptional circumstances) it is rather ironic to note that a large number of Muslim women suffer from "frigidity". Like the earth, all too often they
are "cultivated" without love or proper care and never discover the wonder or joy of their own womanhood.

Undoubtedly the threat of unlimited pregnancies and childbirths with little or no health care available has made many Muslim women afraid of sex. But the manner in which Muslim societies have legislated that regardless of her own wishes a woman must always meet her husband's sexual demands as duty has also led to sexual intercourse becoming a mechanical performance which leaves both the man and the woman sexually unsatisfied.

A number of studies conducted by social scientists indicate that Muslim societies put a high premium on female fertility. Among the reasons why this should be so is the belief, however unfounded, that birth-control and abortion are morally "wrong". A second reason is a hankering for a son and then more sons. A third and more traditional reason is the desire to keep women tied to the homestead and in a state of perpetual dependency upon men.

It has been assumed by conservative Muslim scholars (who form the majority of scholars in the Muslim world) that birth control is demonic in origin and its primary purpose is to facilitate immorality. A.A. Maududi's views cited below are typical of this viewpoint.

Co-education, employment of women in offices, mixed social gatherings, immodest female dresses, beauty parades, are now a common feature of our social life. Legal hindrances have been placed in the way of marriage and on having more than one wife, but no bar against keeping mistresses and having illicit relationships prior to the age of marriage. In such a society perhaps the last obstacle that may keep a woman from surrendering to a man's advances is fear of an illegitimate conception. Remove this obstacle too and provide to women with weak character assurance that they can safely surrender to their male friends and you will see that the society will be plagued by the tide of moral licentiousness.

In this day and age it hardly needs to be argued that a woman who has no control over her own body or who is compelled by social and religious pressures to play the part of a reproductive machine becomes less than a fully autonomous human being. Furthermore, there is a definite connection between the status of women and their ability to control or determine the number and spacing of children they will have, as a recent United Nations study has shown.

While the issue of birth control is of great urgency and importance to many Muslim women, the issue of segregation and veiling seems to me to
affect an even larger proportion of women in Muslim culture. In recent times, the heated, ongoing discussion in a number of Muslim societies (e.g. Egyptian, Iranian, Pakistani) as well as amongst Muslim minority groups (e.g. in Western Europe or North America) on whether Muslim women are required to veil themselves totally or partially, shows that the issue of veiling is at the heart of the greatest dilemma confronting contemporary Islam. It is necessary to understand that the most serious challenge to the world of traditional Islam is that of modernity. The caretakers of Muslim traditionalism are aware of the fact that viability in the modern world requires the adoption of the scientific or rational outlook which inevitably brings about major changes in modes of thinking and behaviour. While all Muslim societies want to have "modernization" (which is largely identified with science, technology and a better standard of living), hardly any Muslim society wants to have "Westernization" (which is largely identified with "mass" Western culture leading to moral and social laxity).

To the majority of Muslims in the world, perhaps the most undesirable symbol of "Westernization" is a woman who does not honour the boundary between "private" space (i.e. the home which belongs to women) and "public" space (i.e. the world, which belongs to men) which they consider essential for preserving the integrity of the Islamic way of life in the face of endless onslaughts by erstwhile colonisers of the Muslim peoples. Muslims, in general, believe that it is best to keep men and women in their separate, designated spaces, and that the intrusion of women into men's territory leads to the disruption, if not the destruction, of the fundamental order of things. However, if it becomes necessary for women to intrude into men's space, they must make themselves faceless, or at least, as inconspicuous as possible. This is achieved through veiling, which is thus an extension of the idea of segregation of the sexes.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse all the Qur'anic statements which have a bearing upon the institution of *purdah* (i.e. segregation and veiling), a few observations need to be made. The Qur'an does not confine women to "private" space. In fact, in Surah 4: An-Nisa': 15, confinement to the home is prescribed as a punishment for unchaste women! The Qur'anic law of modesty — addressed to men as well as to women — does indeed discourage exhibitionism in dress or conduct. Its underlying message — addressed particularly to women who have, since time immemorial, been reduced to sex objects by androcentric cultures — is: do not dress or act like sex objects. The purpose of the Qur'anic
legislation pertaining to women’s attire or behaviour is not to confine
them, spatially or psychologically, but to enable them to move round in
“public” space without the fear of being molested. Its larger aim is to
transform women into persons who are secure and self-respecting and
who do not feel that their survival depends on their ability to attract,
entertain, or cajole those men who are not interested in their personality
but only in their sexuality.

In evaluating the impact on Muslim women of veiling, it is necessary to
clarify two points. The first is that “veiling” can be understood in a
variety of ways, ranging from the wearing of a head-scarf to total
covering of the body from head to foot. The second is that, in recent
times, the veil has functioned not as a symbol of women’s oppression but
as an emblem of their political, economic and cultural emancipation and
as a means of asserting their multi-faceted identities. The “veiled”
revolutions which have taken place in Iran and Egypt in the 1980s
illustrate this well.

While the wearing of a head-scarf by a Muslim woman, especially if
she has worn the head-scarf as an act of free choice, does not restrict her
autonomy as a person; total veiling of the body, especially if it is imposed
externally, certainly constitutes a serious deterrent to the full and healthy
development of Muslim women. While the Qur’an has given the Muslim
woman the right to work, to earn73, to go about her daily business without
fear of sexual harassment, Muslim societies, in general, have imprisoned
and entombed many Muslim women in oppressive veils and put them
behind locked doors.

Nothing illustrates the obsession of Muslim men with women’s
sexuality and the desire to control it than the constant effort made by
many of them to ensure that not a single hair on the head of any
woman related to them is visible to a man who is not related to them!
Not satisfied with “the outer garment”71 prescribed for Muslim
women in a specific cultural context, conservative Muslims seek the
help of a weak hadith72 to compel women to cover themselves from
head to foot, leaving only the face and hands uncovered. Ultra-
conservative Muslims have gone even further, requiring that a
woman also cover her face73. Certainly there are no Qur’anic
statements which justify the rigid restrictions regarding segregation
and veiling which have been imposed on Muslim women in the name
of Islam. If, for instance, the Qur’an had intended for women to be
completely veiled, why would it have required Muslim men to lower
their gaze when looking at them?74
Summary

Within the Islamic tradition both negative and positive attitudes are found towards women and women's issues. The Qur'an — which to me is the primary source on which Islam is founded — consistently affirms women's equality with men and their fundamental right to actualize the human potential which they possess equally with men. Seen through a non-patriarchal lens, the Qur'an shows no sign of discrimination against women. If anything, it exhibits particular solicitude for women, much as it does for other disadvantaged persons.

The attitude of the Hadith literature towards women is a mixed one. While there are a number of ahadith which recommend an attitude of kindness towards daughters and wives, there are also others — such as the following — which reflect a number of anti-women biases characteristic of Islamic culture.

Narrated Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri: Once Allah's Apostle went out to the Musalla (to offer the prayers) of 'Id-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, "O women! give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women)." They asked, "Why is it so, O Allah's Apostle?" He replied, "You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious, sensible man could be led astray by some of you." The women replied, "O Allah's Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?" He said, "Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?" The women replied in the affirmative. "This is the deficiency in your religion."

In this paper many instances have been cited in which individual ahadith conflict with the Qur'an. However, there is one area in which the Qur'an and the Hadith literature seem to be in total accord. This pertains to attitudes towards one's mother. Surah 4: An-Nisa': 1 commands human beings to revere God who created them, and next, to revere the wombs which bore them. There are also numerous ahadith on the subject of honouring one's mother. One of these — "Paradise lies at or under the feet of your mother" — cited by a number of Hadith collections, is probably the best-known of all ahadith in Muslim culture.

Muslims, in general, have been faithful to the Qur'anic commandment and in Muslim societies great love and respect is shown to one's mother. Here, it is of interest to note that the two most beloved names of God — Rahman and Rahim — come from the root-word "Rahm", which means
“womb”. Also, the word “ummah” comes from the root-word “umm”, which means “mother”. Hence, some of the most important symbols/images in the Islamic tradition are women-related.

But though respect for one’s own mother is universal in the Islamic world, it must be noted that this respect is not necessarily extended at all mothers. In other words, though a Muslim may revere his own mother before all others, he does not consider motherhood as such to be worthy of the same respect that is given to his mother. The Qur’an, however, is concerned about all mothers and seeks to protect their rights. In Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 233, for example, the Qur’an refers to the duties of a man towards his divorced wife who is the mother of his child or children:

Mothers shall suckle their children for two whole years; (that is) for those who wish to complete the suckling. The duty of feeding and clothing nursing mothers in a surely manner is upon the father of the child. No one should be charged beyond his capacity. A mother should not be made to suffer because of her child, nor should he to whom the child is born be made to suffer because of the child. And on the (father’s) heir is incumbent the like or that (which was incumbent on the father) if they desire to wean the child by mutual consent and (after) consultation, it is no sin for them; and if ye wish to give your children out to nurse, it is no sin for you, provided that ye pay what is due from you in kindness. Observe your duty to Allah, and know that Allah is Seer of what ye do. 76

This verse shows, amongst other things, the way in which the Qur’an ensures that no one — mother, father, or child — is exploited or unjustly treated and how even in the event of a divorce the fundamental rights and duties connected with motherhood or fatherhood must be recognised. This verse also speaks of “mutual consultation” with regard to the weaning and nursing of the child — yet another acknowledgment of the right of the mother to be a party to every important decision affecting her child.

Although the Qur’an lays down that no mother should be made to suffer on account of her child, many millions of Muslim mothers — like non-Muslim mothers — suffer indescribable ordeals and hardships if they have the misfortune to be without means and without a husband or to have a husband who is not mindful of his duties.

A point of psychological interest needs to be made regarding the importance that is given to a Muslim mother when she has a grown son. This mother is the same woman who was discriminated against in her father’s household and given an inferior position in the context of her own marriage. Her chance to “get even” with the world comes when she has a
son who reaches manhood. The bitterness, resentment and frustration caused by a lifetime of repression, oppression and deprivation tend to find rather ugly expression when, at last, the son's mother becomes a mother-in-law and begins her (generally, not-too-benign) rule over her son's household. In Muslim societies the figure of the mother-in-law is feared as much as the figure of the mother is loved. However, as Fatima Mernissi has observed in the context of Moroccan society:

It is the structure which sets up the roles for everyone and leaves specific outlets for the human individual's cravings and wishes. It is the structure which is vicious, not the mother-in-law. 

I want to end this paper with the hope and prayer that men and women — created equal by God — remembering that they are zuajain whose different sexualities complement each other, work together to construct that order in the home and in the world which reflects the justice and mercy, compassion and love of God towards God's creatures, and foreshadows that lasting Paradise from which the myth of feminine evil has finally been expelled.

NOTES

3 Islam, p. 73.
4 The Traditions of Islam, p. 15.
5 Ibid., pp. 12, 13.
11 The Holy Qur'an, p. 1450.
“Mari” is the rendering of “Al Insan” which is a generic term for humanity.


The Qur'an is deeply concerned about issues raised by slavery and contains many recommendations aimed at the freeing of slaves and at their gradual absorption into the society of free believers. Marriage to a slave woman could serve several ends: it would free her from slavery and give her a socially respectable position; it would make it possible for a man with modest means to get married; it would rid society of the problems caused by illicit sex with slave women leading to illegitimate offspring who would also have the status of slaves, thus perpetuating the immoral institution of slavery. (See Islam: A Challenge to Religion, Idara Tulu' e Islam, Lahore, 1968, p. 346).

Referring to the followers of Jesus, the Qur'an states in Surah 57: Al-Hadid 27, “...the Monasticism/Which they invented/For themselves, We did not /Prescribe for them.” (The Holy Qur'an, p. 1507).

Reference may be made in this context to the following hadith which is reported by both Bukhari and Muslim, the two most authoritative Hadith scholars of Sunni Islam: “Abdullah b. Mas'ud reported God's Messenger as saying: 'Young men, those of you who can support a wife should marry, for it keeps you from looking at strange women and preserves you from immorality, but those who cannot, should devote themselves to fasting, for it is a means of suppressing sexual desire.'” (Robson, James, translation of Mishkat Al-Masabih, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1975, Vol. I, p. 658).

Reference here is to the following hadith: “Anas reported God's Messenger as saying, "When a man marries he has fulfilled half of the religion, so let him fear God regarding the remaining half."” (Mishkat Al-Masabih, Vol. I, p. 660).

Each hadith consists of two parts: “isnad” or “sanad” and “main”. The “isnad” contains the names of persons who have handed on the substance of the hadith to one another. The “main” is the text or actual substance of the hadith.

Since the early centuries of Islam, it has been axiomatic for (Sunn) Muslim masses to regard the Companions of the Prophet as being totally above the suspicion of being untrustworthy in any way least of all as transmitters of the Prophet's ahadith. Given such
an attitude of absolute devotion, a critical examination of the credentials of the Companions as transmitters could hardly have been undertaken. However, in the earliest phase of the development of Islam, a more critical attitude prevailed towards the Hadith literature and its transmitters. Here it is of interest to note that according to the well-known Muslim scholar 'Abdul Wahab Ash-Shairani, Imam Abu Hanifah, considered to be the founder of the largest school of law in Sunni Islam, did not consider Abu Hurairah to be a reliable transmitter of hadith (Al-Mizan al-Kubra, Cairo edition, Vol. I, p. 59).


See note 21.


It is interesting to observe that while in the Genesis 2 story, woman is derived from Adam’s rib, there is no mention of Adam in any of the hadith under discussion. This is a further “dehumanization” of woman since she could — in the hadith in question — have been created from a disembodied rib which may not even have been human.


Ibid.

"The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran," Keio Institute of Philosophical Studies, Mita, Shib, Minatoku, Tokyo, 1959, pp. 152-153.


The famous expression comes from Tertullian (A.D. 160-225), a Church Father from North Africa who wrote: "And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law, you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die."

(De cuing feminarum 1.1, cited in Biblical Affirmations of Woman, p. 346).

Also cited in Sahih Muslim, Vol. IV, p. 1431.


"The Qur’anic understanding of “righteousness” is described in Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 177, which states: It is not righteousness/That ye turn your faces/Towards East or West/But it is righteousness/To believe in God/And the Last Day/And the Angels/And the Book/And the Messengers/To spend of your substance/Out of love of Him/For your kin/For orphans/For the wayfarer/For those who ask/And for the ransom of slaves/To be steadfast in prayer/And practice regular charity/To fulfil the contracts/Which ye have made/And to be firm and patient/in pain (or suffering)/And adversity/And throughout/All periods of panic/Such are the people/Of truth, the God-fearing. (The Holy Qur’an, pp. 69-70)."
46 The Holy Qur'an, pp. 174-175.
50 The Holy Qur'an, pp. 89-90. The emphasis is mine.
51 Khan, Sadiq Hasan, Hissan al-Uswa, p. 281.
54 Ibid, p. 51.
55 Ibid.
57 Article on "Ild", in Supplement to the Encyclopaedia of Islam, E.K. Brill, Leiden, 1938, pp. 96-97.
58 "Virginy and Patriarchy", in Women and Islam, p. 183.
59 See, for instance, Surah 6: Al-An'am, 137, 140, 152; Surah 60: Al-Mumpahanah: 12; Surah 71: Nuh:3.
61 Ibid.
63 The Holy Qur'an, p. 88.
64 Sahih Muslim, Vol II, p. 723.
65 For example, A. Aitken and J. Stockel, "Muslim-Hindu Differentials in Family Planning Knowledge and Attitudes in Rural East Pakistan", in Journal of Comparative Family Studies, Spring, 1971.
69 See Surah 4: An-Nisa': 32.
70 See Surah 4: An-Nisa': 32.
71 In this hadith, Ayesha reports that the Prophet Muhammad told Asma, her sister, when she appeared before him wearing thin clothes, "O Asma, when woman attains her puberty, it is not proper that any part of her body should be seen except this" and he pointed to his face and hands. (Rights of Women in Islamic Shariah, p. 4.)
72 In this context, see A.A. Maududi, Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam, Islamic Publications Limited, Lahore, 1975.
73 Reference here is to Surah 24: An-Nur: 30.
76 Beyond the Veil, p. 79.