Feminism in Islam
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Islam: Sources of the Tradition

Before engaging in any meaningful discussion of feminism in Islam, it is useful to refer to the sources of the Islamic tradition, since much confusion surrounds the use of the term "Islam." The Islamic tradition—like other major religious traditions—does not consist of, or derive from, a single source. If questioned about its sources many Muslims are likely to refer to more than one of the following: The Qur'an (the book of revelation believed by Muslims to be God's Word), Sunnah (the practical traditions of the prophet Muhammad), hadith (the sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad), fiqh (jurisprudence) or madahib (schools of law), and the Shari'ah (the code of life that regulates all aspects of Muslim life).

While all of these "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. Examples can be cited of inconsistency between various sources of the Islamic tradition, e.g., the Qur'an and the hadith as also of inner inconsistency within some, e.g., the hadith literature.

In view of this fact, it is inappropriate, particularly in a scholarly context, to speak of "the Islamic tradition" as if it were unitary or monolithic. Before one can make any generalization on behalf of this tradition, it is necessary, therefore, to identify its different sources and examine each of them separately as well as with reference to the other sources.

Theoretically, the two most important sources are the Qur'an and the hadith. Of these two, undoubtedly, the Qur'an is the more important. 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.

Important as the hadith literature is to the Islamic tradition, it is necessary to point out that every aspect of this literature is surrounded by controver-
sies. In particular, the question of the authenticity or otherwise of individual
ahadith (plural of hadith) as well as of the hadith literature as a whole, has oc-
cupied the attention of many scholars of Islam since the time of Ash-Shafi‘i
(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.” This fact has generated much skepticism re-

garding the hadith literature in general among a number of Muslims. Though
few of them are willing to go as far as Ghulam Ahmad Parwez (founder of the
Tulu‘e-Islam or the Dawn of Islam group in Pakistan) who rejects the hadith
literature virtually in toto, many Muslims 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 undistinguishable confusion. Every
religious, social, and political system was defended when necessary, to
please a Khalif or an Ameer to serve his purpose 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 grounds exist for regarding the hadith literature with cau-
tion, if not skepticism, Fazlur Rahman is right in saying that “if the Hadith lit-
erature as a whole is cast away, the basis for the historicity of the Qur‘an is
removed with one stroke.”3 Furthermore, a 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 Is-
lam. . . . 4 However skeptical we are with regard to the ultimate his-
torical value of the traditions, it is hard to overrate their importance
in 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.5

Not only does the hadith literature have its own autonomous character in
point of law and even of doctrine,6 it also has an emotive aspect whose im-
portance is hard to overstate. It relates to the conscious as well as to the
subconscious patterns of thought and feeling of Muslims individually and collectively. 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 Qur’an led to a search for examples set by Muhammad in his daily life and practice. One could be certain that if he said this or that, had 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 theologicially rationalized by the doctrine of implicit inspiration.7

Normative Islam: Interpretation of Text and Tradition

Having underscored the significance of the Qur’an and the hadith as primary sources of the Islamic tradition, it is important to point out that through the centuries of Muslim history, these sources have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. While it is encouraging to know that women such as Khadija and ‘A’isha (wives of the prophet Muhammad) and Rabi’a al-Basri (the outstanding women Sufi) figure significantly in early Islam, the fact remains that until the present time, the Islamic tradition and Muslim culture remain overwhelmingly patriarchal, inhibiting the growth of scholarship among women particularly in the realm of religious thought.

Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that until recent times, the vast majority of Muslim women have remained wholly or largely unaware of their “Islamic” (in an ideal sense) rights. Male-centered and male-dominated Muslim societies have continued to assert, glibly and tirelessly, that Islam has given women more rights than any other religion, while keeping women in physical, mental, and emotional confinement and depriving them of the opportunity to actualize their human potential. Here, it is pertinent to mention that
while the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy in the rural areas where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world especially for Muslim women.

Contemporary Muslim Women and the Process of "Islamization"

Since the nineteen-seventies, largely due to the pressure of antiwomen laws which have been promulgated under the guise of "Islamization" in a number of Muslim countries, women with some degree of education and awareness have begun to realize that religion is being used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation from unjust social structures and systems of thought and conduct. This realization has stemmed from the fact that women have been the primary targets of the "Islamization" process.

In order to understand the motivation underlying this process, it is useful to bear in mind that of all the challenges confronting the contemporary Muslim world, the greatest appears to be that of modernity. The caretakers of Muslim traditionalism are aware of the fact that viability in the modern technological age requires the adoption of the scientific or rational outlook, which inevitably brings about major changes in modes of thinking and behavior. Women, both educated and uneducated, who are participating in the national workforce and contributing toward national development, think and behave differently from women who have no sense of their individual identity or autonomy as active agents in a history-making process. They regard themselves merely as instruments designed to minister to, and reinforce, a patriarchal system that they believe to be divinely instituted.

Unable to come to grips with modernity as a whole, many contemporary Muslim societies make a sharp distinction between two aspects of it. The first—generally referred to as "modernization" and largely approved—is identified with science, technology, and a better standard of life. The second—generally referred to as "Westernization" and largely disapproved—is identified with emblems of “mass” Western culture such as promiscuity, break-up of family and community, latch-key kids, and drug and alcohol abuse. Many Muslims see “emancipated” women, not as symbols of "modernization" but as symbols of "Westernization." The latter is linked in Muslim minds not only with the colonization of Muslim people by Western powers in the not-too-distant past, but also with the continuing onslaught on “the integrity of the Islamic way of life” by Westerners and Westernized Muslims who uphold the West as a model for intellectual and social transformation of Muslim communities.

Many traditional societies—including the Muslim—divide the world into "private" space (the home, which is the domain of women) and "public"
space (the rest of the world, which is the domain of men) Muslims, in general, tend to believe that it is best to keep men and women segregated—in their separate, designated spaces. The intrusion of women into men’s space is seen as leading to the disruption, if not the destruction, of the fundamental order of things. If some exigency makes it necessary for women to enter 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 the segregation of the sexes.

Women-related issues pertaining to various aspects of personal, as well as social, life lie at the heart of much of the ferment or unrest that characterizes the Muslim world in general. Many of the issues are not new issues but the manner in which they are being debated today is something new. Much of this ongoing debate has been generated by the enactment of manifestly antiwomen laws in a number of Muslim countries. For instance, since the “Islamization” process was initiated in Pakistan by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in the nineteen-seventies, many Pakistani women have been jolted out of their “dogmatic slumber” by the enactment of laws such as the Hudood Ordinance (1979), the Law of Evidence (1984), and the Qisas and Diyat ordinance (1990), which discriminate against women in a blatant manner. These laws which pertain to women’s testimony in cases of their own rape or in financial and other matters, and to “blood-money” for women’s murder, aimed at reducing the value and status of women systematically, virtually mathematically, to less than that of men. The emergence of women’s protest groups in Pakistan was very largely a response to the realization that forces of religious conservatism (aided by the power of the military government) were determined to cut women down to less than a fully human status (stating that in many matters two women were regarded as being equal to one man), and that this attitude stemmed from a deep-rooted desire to keep women in their place, which is understood as being secondary, subordinate, and inferior to that of men.

Though women’s groups have put up serious resistance to the erosion of women’s status and rights in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, it is still not clearly and fully understood by many Muslim women activists that the negative ideas and attitudes pertaining to women that prevail in Muslim societies generally are rooted in theology. Unless, or until, the theological foundations of the misogynistic and androcentric tendencies that have become incorporated in Muslim culture 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, and so on.

No matter how many socio-political rights are granted to women by patriarchal Muslim countries, as long as these women are conditioned to accept the myths and arguments used by religious heirarchs to shackle their bodies,
hearts, minds, and souls, they will never become fully developed or whole human beings, free of guilt and fear, able to stand equal to men in the sight of God.

The importance of developing a theology of women in the context of the Islamic tradition—as the West has developed "feminist theology" in the context of the Jewish and Christian traditions—is paramount today with a view to liberating not only Muslim women, but also Muslim men, from unjust social structures and laws that make a peer relationship between men and women impossible.

While it is good to know that there have been significant Muslim men, such as Qasim Amin in Egypt and Mumtaz `Ali in India, who used their scholarship in staunch support of women's rights, it is disheartening to also know that even in the age characterized by an explosion of knowledge, all but a handful of Muslim women lack any knowledge of Islamic theology.

In the contemporary world there is an urgent need for Muslim women to engage in a scholarly study of Islam's primary sources in order to become effective voices in the theological deliberations and discussions on women-related issues that are taking place in much of the contemporary Muslim world. Though political activism is necessary in order to combat the onslaught of anti-women laws and acts of brutality toward women in a number of present-day Muslim societies, it is not sufficient by itself to overturn what has been imposed in the name of Islam.

Legislation legitimized by reference to a religious argument can be superseded or set aside, in most contemporary Muslim societies, only by reference to a better religious argument. A profound tragedy of Muslims, as pointed out by Fazlur Rahman, is that those who understand Islam do not know modernity and those who understand modernity, do not know Islam. However, through study, reflection, and interaction among human and women's rights activists, it is possible to equip "modernist" Muslims—both women and men—to understand Islamic ideals as well as Muslim realities and be able to counter the retrogressive arguments being used to deny women their God-given rights by means of better theological arguments. This is essential if the Qur'anic vision of what a Muslim society should be is to become actualized in any Muslim society or community.

Women and Normative Islam: Three Fundamental Theological Assumptions

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 self-evident that women are not equal to men who are "above" women or have a "degree of advantage" over them. There is hardly anything in a Muslim
woman's life that is not affected by this belief. Hence it is vitally important, not
only for theological reasons but also for pragmatic ones, to subject it to rigor-
ous scholarly scrutiny and attempt to identify its roots.

The roots of the belief that men are superior to women lie, in my judg-
ment, 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 and
is, therefore, derivative and secondary ontologically: (b) that woman, not man,
was the primary agent of what is customarily described as "man's fall" or ex-
pulsion from the Garden of Eden, and 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 instru-
mental and not of fundamental importance.

The three theological questions to which the above assumptions may ap-
propriately be regarded as answers are: (1) How was woman created? (2) Was
woman responsible for the fall of man? and (3) 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, Christian, and Jewish tradi-
tions, I consider the first one that relates to the issue of woman's creation, more
basic and important, philosophically and theologically, than any other in the
context of gender-equality. This is so because if man and woman have been cre-
ated equal by God 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 God, then they cannot become equal essentially
at a subsequent time.

How was Woman Created?: The Issue of Woman's Creation

The ordinary Muslim believes, as seriously as the ordinary Jew or Chris-
tian, that Adam was God's primary creation and that Eve was made from
Adam's rib. While this myth has obvious rootage 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 speaks always in completely egalitarian terms.
In none of the thirty or so passages that describe the creation of humanity (des-
ignated by generic terms such as an-nas, al-insan, and bashar) by God in a va-
riety of ways is there any statement that could be interpreted as asserting or
suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created
from man. The Qur'an notwithstanding, Muslims believe that Hawwā' (the He-
brew/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 one 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 male human being. 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 "Adam," which it reserves for man in his capacity of God's vicegerent 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.\(^8\)

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. 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 by virtually 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 Muslim 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*. Of these, six are particularly important since they appear to have had a formative impact on how Muslims have perceived woman's being and sexuality (as differentiated from man's). The *matn* (content) of these six *ahadith*—three from *Sahih Al-Bukhari* and three from *Sahih Muslim*, and all ascribed to the companion known as Abu Huraira—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 would try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat women nicely.\(^9\)

2. The woman is like a rib; if you try to straighten her, she will break. So if you want to get benefit from her, do so while she still has some crookedness.\(^10\)
3. Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not hurt (trouble) his neighbor. And I advise you to take care of the women, for they are created from a rib and the most crooked part of the rib is its upper part; if you try to straighten it, it will break; and if you leave it, it will remain crooked; so I urge you to take care of woman.\[^{11}\]

4. 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.\[^{12}\]

5. Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so benefit by her while crookedness remains in her. And if you attempt to straighten her, you will break her, and breaking her is divorcing her.\[^{13}\]

6. He who believes in Allah and the Hereafter, if he witnesses any matter he should talk in good terms about it or keep quiet. Act kindly toward women, for woman is created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, the crookedness will remain there so act kindly toward women.\[^{14}\]

I have examined these *ahadith* elsewhere and have shown them to be flawed both with regard to their formal *issad* as well as their material *matn* aspects. The theology of woman implicit in these *ahadith* is based upon generalizations about her ontology, biology, and psychology contrary to the letter and spirit of the Qur'an. These *ahadith* ought, therefore, to have been rejected—since Muslim scholars agree on the principle that any *hadith* that is inconsistent with the Qur'an cannot be accepted. However, despite the fact that the *ahadith* 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 *ahadith* come from the two most highly venerated *hadith* collections by Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (810–70) and Muslim bin al-Hallaj (817–75). These two collections known collectively as *Sahihan* (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* of general consent of the community in custom and belief, which it is their function to authenticate."\[^{15}\]

While being included in the *Sahihan* gives the *ahadith* 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, the belief 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 *ahadith* that makes all representatives of their sex onto-
logically inferior and irremediably crooked, male-centered and male-controlled
Muslim societies are not at all likely to acknowledge the egalitarianism evident
in the Qur’anic statements about human creation.

Was Woman Responsible for Man’s Expulsion from Paradise:
The Issue of Woman’s “Guilt” in the “Fall” Episode

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 zaaj (mate).

In two of the three passages that refer to this episode—namely Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 35–39 and Surah 7: Al-A’raf: 19–25—the Shaitan is stated to have led both Adam and zaaj 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 an 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—the eating from “the tree”—is committed jointly by Adam and zaaj 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-Tabiri’s Tarikh (1:108) the very words Satan use 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 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). 16

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. 17 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 honor and favor 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 zauj 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 zauj) 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 vicegerent 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 that 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 zalim.” In other words, the human pair is being told that if they go near the tree, then they will be counted among those who perpetrate zulm. Commenting on the root ZLM, Toshihiko 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 becomes guilty of zulm toward themselves. This zulm consists in their taking on the responsibility for choosing between good and evil. Here it is important to note:

(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 sin. 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. 20

Since there is no "fall" in the Qur'an, 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 postlapsarian 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 ("the external portion of the organs of generation of a man and of a woman and the anus"), generally translated as "shameful parts," necessarily led the human pair to sexual activity that was "shameful" not only by virtue of being linked with their "shameful parts" but also because it was instigated by 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. 22
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 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"—sexual intercourse. However, there is nothing in the text that 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 (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." 23

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." 24

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 vicegerent in it in order to see how you act. So avoid the allurement of women: verily, the first trial for the people of Isra’il was caused by women." 25

Why was Woman Created? The Issue of the Purpose of Woman's Existence

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 molds" (Surah 95: At-Tin: 4) has been created in order to serve God (Surah 51: Adh-Dhariyat: 56). God cannot be separated from service to humankind, or—in Islamic
terms—believers in God must honor both Haquq Allah (rights of God) and Haquq al-‘ibad (rights of creatures).

Fulfillment 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 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 God Pleasure of God:
That is the supreme felicity. 26

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 Creator 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 territoriality, which reflects a specific division of labour and a specific concep-
tion 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 a 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 woman an artificially narrow existence, both physically and spiritually.27

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 Bagarah: 228—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.29

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 liberal Muslims, the immediate response by traditional Muslims 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-a 'ala an-nisa (literally, the men are qawwamun in relation to 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, An-Nisa': verse 34, that it is addressed to husbands. The first point to be noted is that it is addressed to ar-rumal (the men) and the 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 prescriptions 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 preeminence (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. 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 popular Muslim culture and tradition have regarded as an actual description of all men, is, in fact, a normative statement pertaining to the Islamic concept of division of labor 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 childbearing and rearing, they should not have the additional obligation of providing the means of living at the same time.

Continuing with 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 text does not accord superiority to men. Using an idiomatic expression which literally means "some in relation to some," the Qur'anic statement could mean either that some men are superior to some others (men or women) and that some women are superior to some others (men or women). The interpretation that seems to me to be the most appropriate contextually is that some men are more blessed with the means to be better providers than 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 salahat, which means "capability" or "potentiality." A woman's special capability is to bear children, and she carries and protects the fetus (which is hidden from the eye) in her womb until it can be safely delivered.
What is outlined in the first part of this passage is a functional division of labor 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—a 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 find out the reasons for this act of defiance and to offer counseling. 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 in solitary confinement. 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 daraba 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 Taj-al-‘Arus. (In Surah 4: An-Nisa’: 15, women who are proven to be guilty of immorality are also given the punishment of being confined to their homes.)

While Muslims, through the centuries, have interpreted Surah 4: 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 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 while they perform this function. Thus, during the period of a woman’s childbearing, 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 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 childbearing and childraising 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 childbearing (other passages in the Qur'an extend this also to childrearing). 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 that mentions the so-called “degree of advantage” that men have over women is Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 228, which reads:

\[
\text{Divorced women} \\
\text{Shall wait concerning} \\
\text{For three monthly periods.} \\
\text{Nor is it lawful for them} \\
\text{To hide what God} \\
\text{Hath created in their wombs,} \\
\text{If they have faith} \\
\text{In God and the last Day} \\
\text{And their husbands} \\
\text{Have the better right} \\
\text{To take them back} \\
\text{in that period, if} \\
\text{They wish for reconciliation.} \\
\text{And women shall have rights} \\
\text{Similar to the rights} \\
\text{Against them, according} \\
\text{To what is equitable} \\
\text{But men have a degree} \\
\text{(of advantage) over them,} \\
\text{And God is Exalted in Power, Wise}^{30}
\]

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 ex-
empted 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 hadith that have been used to make man not only superior to 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!”

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 judgment seeks to legitimate shirk: associating anyone with God—an unforgivable sin according to the Qur’an) becomes binding on the Muslim woman. Muslims frequently criticize a religion such as Hinduism where the wife is required to worship the husband (patipuja) but in practice what is expected from most Muslim wives is not very different from patipuja. In India and Pakistan, for example, a Muslim woman learns almost as an article of faith that her husband is her majazi khuda (“god in earthly form”). This description, undoubtedly, constitutes shirk.

Most hadith 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 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.” The Messenger of God said, “From now on let a woman not fast except by permission of her husband” (Ibn Hanbal).  

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

Hadrat Anas reported that the Holy Prophet had said: “For a woman her husband is Paradise as well as hell” (Ahmad and Nasa‘i).  

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 toward Allah depends on the discharge of duties towards the husband” (Ibn Majah).  

Man and woman, created equal by God and standing equal in the sight of God, have become very unequal in Muslim societies. The Qur’anic description of man and woman in marriage: “They are your garments/And you are their garments” implies closeness, mutuality, and equality. However, Muslim culture has reduced many, if not most, women to the position of puppets on a string, to slavelike 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 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 Qu’ran’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 that existed in the Arab-Islamic culture of the early centuries of Islam infiltrated the Islamic tradition, largely through the hadith literature. It 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’s condemnation of female infanticide which was not uncommon among 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, correct.

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 gives birth to daughters is likely to be the target of harsh and abusive behavior 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 among 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 behavior. 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 honor of women—‘ird. 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.38

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 honor mattered more than the lives of their daughters. It is important to note that the “honor” killings still go in a number of 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 “honor” 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 “honor” revolves around the orbit of women’s sexuality, which is seen as a male possession. Commenting on how men’s honor 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 honor, 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 honor and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman. 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 the blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers.39

Since women’s sexuality is so vitally related to men’s honor and self-image in Muslim culture, it becomes vitally important in Muslim societies to subject women’s bodies to external social controls. On way in which some Muslim societies (for example, in North Africa) have sought to do so is by means of fe-
male 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 toward 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 practiced in countries such as Egypt, 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 that may be interpreted as prohibiting birth control. While the Qur'an does not address the issue of family planning specifically, or directly, its teachings shed a good deal of light on how this issue—and other contemporary issues—may be understood, or dealt with, within the ethical framework of normative Islam.

The Qur'an puts great emphasis on the preservation of what we commonly refer to as "fundamental human rights" such as (a) the right to be respected for one's humanity; (b) the right to be treated with justice and equity; (c) the right to be free of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, intellectual, political, economic), tribalism, classism, or caste-system, sexism and slavery; (d) the right to privacy and protection from slander, backbiting, and ridicule; (e) the right to acquire knowledge; (f) the right to work, to earn, to own property; (g) the right to have a secure place of residence in an environment in which one's possessions and covenants are protected and in which one can move freely; (h) the right to leave one's place of origin under oppressive conditions; (i) the right to develop one's esthetic sensibilities and enjoy the bounties created by God; and (j) the right not only to life but to "the good life," which is possible—according to Qur'anic perspective—only in a just society because justice in a prerequisite for peace and peace is a prerequisite for self-actualization.

For Muslims, the Qur'an, being God's Word, is the primary and most authoritative source of Islam. As mentioned above, the Qur'an strongly affirms and upholds fundamental human rights. It follows, therefore, that these rights must be acknowledged and protected in all Muslim societies and communities. Given the unhappy socio-cultural, economic, and political conditions of much of the present-day Muslim world where the increase in the birth rate is among
the highest in the world, the need for family planning may be regarded as self-evident. The right to use contraceptives, especially by disadvantaged masses whose lives are scarred by grinding poverty and massive illiteracy, should be seen—in the light of the Qur’anic vision of what an Islamic society should be—as a fundamental human right. This is particularly applicable to Muslim women who, though over five hundred million in number, are among the most unrepresented or voiceless “minorities” in the world.

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. 50

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 that 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.” 51

In view of this insistence that the husband’s sexual needs be instantaneously satisfied (unless the wife is menstruating, fasting, or in some other ex-
ceptional 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 have 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 lead 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 number of studies have 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 (Egyptian,
Iranian, Pakistani, Malaysian, Sudanese) as well as among Muslim minority groups (in West 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 Muslims—namely, their ambivalence toward modernity.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze all the Qur’anic statements that have a bearing upon the institution of purdah (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: if you do not wish to be treated like a sex object, do not dress or act like sex objects. The purpose of the Qur’anic legislation pertaining to women’s attire or behavior is not to confine them, spatially or psychologically, but to enable them to move around 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 personhood 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 a total covering of the body from head to foot. The second is that, in recent time, 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 multifaceted identities. The “veiled revolution” which has taken place in Iran and Egypt in the 1980s illustrate this well.

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. However, 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 earn, 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 more than the constant effort made by many of them to ensure that not a single hair on the head of any women related to them is visible to a man who is not related to them! Not satisfied with “the outer garment” prescribed for Muslim women in a specific cultural context, conserva-
tive Muslims seek the help of a weak hadith 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 face. 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?

Conclusion

Within the Islamic tradition both negative and positive attitudes are found toward women and women's issues. However, the Qur'an, which 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 that they possess equally with men. Seen through a nonpatriarchal 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.

In conclusion, it is of importance to note that there is more Qur'anic legislation pertaining to the establishment of justice in the context of family relationships than on any other subject. This points to the assumption implicit in much Qur'anic legislation, namely, that if human beings can learn to order their homes justly so that the human rights of all within its jurisdiction—children, women, and men—are safeguarded, then they can also order their society and the world at large, justly. In other words, the Qur'an regards the home as a microcosm of the ummah and the world community. It emphasizes the importance of making it "the abode of peace" through just living.

Notes

3. Islam, 73.
5. Ibid., 12;13.


10. Ibid., 80.

11. Ibid., 81.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 752–53.


25. Ibid.


30. *The Holy Qur’an*, 92 (emphasis is mine).


34. Ibid., 51.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.


40. For instance, see Surah 17: *Al-Isra’*: 70.

41. For instance, see Surah 4: *An-Nisa’*: 135, 136; Surah 5: *Al-Ma’idah*: 8.


44. For instance, see Surah 9: *Al-Tawbah*: 122; Surah 20: *Ta-Ha*: 114; Surah 39: *Az-Zumar*: 9; Surah 96: *Al-Alaq*: 1–5

45. For instance, see Surah 4: *An-Nisa’*: 11–12, 31.

46. For instance, see Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 229; Surah 3: 17, 77; Surah 5: *Al-Ma’idah*: 1; Surah 17: *Al-Isra’*: 34; Surah 67: *Al-Mulk*: 15.

47. For instance, see Surah 4: *An-Nisa’*: 97–100

48. For instance, see Surah 7: *Al-A’raf*: 32; Surah 57: *Al-Hadid*: 27.


51. *Sahih Muslim* volume 2, 723.

52. For example, A. Aitken and J. Stoekel, “Muslim-Hindu Differentials in Family Planning Knowledge and Attitudes in Rural East Pakistan,” in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, spring 1971.


57. See Surah 4: *An-Nisa*: 32.

58. Reference here is to Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 59.

59. In this hadith, 'A'isha reports that the prophet Muhammed 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*, 4).


61. Reference here is to Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 30.