

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. Nonetheless, the Islamic tradition has, by and large, remained strongly patriarchal till today. This means, amongst other things, that the sources on which the Islamic tradition is based, mainly, the Qur'an (which Muslims believe to be God's Word transmitted through Angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad), Sunnah (the practice of the prophet Muhammad), Hadith (the oral traditions attributed to the prophet Muhammad), and Fiqh (jurisprudence), 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. It is hardly surprising that up till now the majority of Muslim women who have been kept for centuries in physical, mental, and emotional bondage, have accepted this situation passively. Here it needs to be mentioned 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 most of the population lives, is amongst the lowest in the world.

In recent years, largely due to the pressure of anti-women laws which have been promulgated under the cover of "Islamization" 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. To understand the powerful impetus to "Islamize" Muslim societies, especially with regard to women-related norms and values, it is necessary to know that of all the challenges confronting the Muslim world perhaps the greatest is that of modernity. Muslims, in general, tend to think of "modernity" in two ways: (a) as modernization which is associated with science, technology and material progress, and (b) as Westernization which is associated with promiscuity and all kinds of social problems ranging from latch-key kids to drug and alcohol abuse. While "modernization" is considered highly desirable, "Westernization" is considered equally undesirable. What is of importance to note, here, is that an emancipated Muslim woman is seen by many Muslims as a symbol not of "modernization" but of

"Westernization". This is so because she appears to be in violation of what traditional societies consider to be a necessary barrier between "private space" where women belong and "public space" which belongs to men. The presence of women in men's space is considered to be highly dangerous for - as a popular "hadith" states - whenever a man and a woman are alone, ash-Shaitan (the Satan) is bound to be there. In today's Muslim world, due to the pressure of political and socio-economic realities, a significant number of women may be seen in "public space". Caretakers of Muslim traditionalism feel gravely threatened by this phenomenon which they consider to be an onslaught of "Westernization" under the guise of "modernization". They believe that it is necessary to put women back in their "space" (which also designates their "place" ) if «the integrity of the Islamic way of life» is to be preserved.

Though I had begun my study of theological issues pertaining to women in the Islamic tradition in 1974, it was not until 1983-84 when I spent almost two years in Pakistan, that my career as an activist began. The enactment of the "Hadud Ordinance" (1979) according to which women's testimony was declared to be inadmissible in Hadd crimes, including the crime of rape, was accompanied by a wave of violence toward women and a deluge of anti-women literature which swept across the country. Many women in Pakistan were jolted out of their "dogmatic slumber by the Islamization" of the legal system which through the promulgation of laws such as the Hadud Ordinance and the Law of Evidence (1984) as well as the threat of other discriminatory legislation (such as the Law of Qisas and Diyat or "blood-money") reduced their status systematically, virtually mathematically, to less than that of men. It soon became apparent that forces of religious conservatism were determined to cut women down to onehalf or less of men, and that this attitude stemmed from a deep rooted desire to keep women in their place, which means secondary, subordinate and inferior to men.

Reflecting upon the scene I witnessed with increasing alarm and anxiety, I asked myself how it was possible for manifestly unjust laws to be implemented in a country which professed a passionate commitment to both Islam and modernity. The answer to my question was so obvious that I was startled that it had not struck me before. Pakistani society (or other Muslim societies) could enact or accept laws which specified that women were less than men in fundamental ways because Muslims, in general, consider it a self-evident truth that women are not equal to men. Among the "arguments" used to overwhelm any proponent of gender equality, the following are perhaps the most popular: that according to the Qur'an, men are "qawwamun" (generally translated as "rulers" or "managers") in relation to women (<sup>1</sup>); that according to the Qur'an, a

---

<sup>1</sup>. Reference is made here to Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 34.

man's share in inheritance is twice that of a woman <sup>(2)</sup>; that according to the Qur'an the witness of one man is equal to that of two women <sup>(3)</sup>; that according to the prophet, women are deficient both in prayer (due to menstruation) and in intellect (due to their witness counting for less than a man's) <sup>(4)</sup>.

Since, in all probability, I was the only Muslim woman in the country who had been engaged in a study of women's issues from a nonpatriarchal, theological perspective, I was approached numerous times by women leaders (including the members of the Pakistan Commission on the Status of Women, before whom I gave my testimony in May 1984) to state what my findings were and if they could be used to improve the situation of Pakistani women. I was urged by women activists who were mobilizing and leading women's protests in a country under martial law, to help them refute the arguments which were being used against them, on a case-by-case or point-by-point basis. Though I felt eager to help, I was not sure if the best strategy was simply to respond to each argument which was being used to deprive women of their human (as well as Islamic) rights. What had to be done, first and foremost, in my opinion, was to examine the theological ground in which all the anti-women arguments were rooted to see if, indeed, a case could be made for asserting that from the point of view of normative Islam, men and women were *essentially* equal, despite biological and other differences.

As a result of further study and reflection I came to perceive that in the Islamic, as well as in the Jewish and the Christian, tradition, there are three theological assumptions on which the super-structure of men's alleged superiority to women has been erected. These three assumptions are: (1) 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 secondary ontologically; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is generally referred to 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 (3) that woman was created not only *from* man but also *for* man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not fundamental. The three theological questions to which the above assumptions may appropriately 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?

It is not possible, within the scope of this short paper, to deal exhaustively with any of the above-mentioned questions. However, in the

---

<sup>2</sup>. Reference is made here to Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 11.

<sup>3</sup>. Reference is made here to Surah 2: *AlBaqarah*: 282.

<sup>4</sup>. Reference is made here to "ahadith" (plural of "hadith" meaning an oral tradition) cited in *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*.

brief discussion of each question which follows, an effort has been made to highlight the way in which sources of normative Islam have been interpreted to show that women are inferior to men.

### 1. *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 is obviously rooted in the Yahwist's account of creation in *Genesis 2: 18-24*, it has no basis whatever in the Qur'an which describes the creation of humanity in completely egalitarian terms. In the thirty or so passages pertaining to the subject of human creation, the Qur'an uses generic terms for humanity ("an-nas", "al-insan", "bashar") and there is no mention in it of Hawwa' or Eve. The word "Adam" occurs twenty-five times in the Qur'an but it is used in twenty-one cases as a symbol for self-conscious humanity. Here, it is pertinent to point out that the word "Adam" is a Hebrew word (from "adamah" meaning "the soil") and it functions generally as a collective noun referring to "the human" rather than to a male person. In the Qur'an, the word "Adam" (which Arabic borrowed from Hebrew) mostly does not refer to a particular human being. Rather, it refers 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 (5)».

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 Adam's rib? It is difficult to imagine that Muslims got this idea directly from *Genesis 2* since very few Muslims read the Bible. It is much more likely that the rib story entered the Islamic tradition through being incorporated in the Hadith

---

<sup>5</sup>. Iqbal Muhammad (1962), *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, p. 83.

literature during the early centuries of Islam. In this context the following six "ahadith" are particularly important since they are cited in *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* which Sunni Muslims regard as the two most authoritative Hadith collections whose authority is exceeded only by the Qur'an:

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 <sup>(6)</sup>.

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 <sup>(7)</sup>.

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 <sup>(8)</sup>.

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 <sup>(9)</sup>.

5. Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so if you wish to benefit by her, 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 <sup>(10)</sup>.

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 towards 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, its crookedness will remain there so act kindly towards women <sup>(11)</sup>.

Elsewhere in my writings I have examined the above "ahadith" and shown them to be weak with regards to their formal aspect (i.e. with reference to their "isnad" or list of transmitters). As far as their content ("matn") is concerned, it is obviously in opposition to the Qur'anic accounts about human creation. Since all Muslim scholars agree on the principle that any hadith which is in contradiction to the Qur'an cannot be

---

6. Khan M.M. (1971), translation of *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Kazi Publications, Lahore, p. 346.

7. *Ibidem*, p. 80.

8. *Ibidem*, p. 81.

9. Siddiqui A.H. (1972), translation of *Sahih Muslim*, vol. 2. Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, p. 752.

10. *Ibidem*.

11. *Ibidem*, pp. 752-753.

accepted as authentic, the above-mentioned "ahadith" ought to be rejected on material grounds. However, they still continue to be a part of the Islamic tradition. This is due certainly, in significant measure, to the fact that they are included in the Hadith collections by Muhammad ibn Isma'it al-Bukhari (810-70) and Muslim bin al-Hallaj (817-75), collectively known as the *Sahihan* (from "sahih" meaning sound or authentic) which «form an almost unassailable authority, subject indeed to criticisms 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» (12). But the continuing popularity of these "ahadith" amongst Muslims in general also indicates that they articulate something deeply embedded in Muslim culture, namely, the belief that women are derivative and secondary in the context of human creation.

Theologically, the history of women's inferior status in the Islamic (as well as the Jewish and Christian) tradition began with the story of Hawwa's creation from a (crooked) rib. Changing her status requires returning to the point of creation and setting the record straight. Given the way the rib story has been used it is impossible to overemphasize its importance. The issue of woman's creation is more fundamental theologically than any other. This is so because if man and woman have been created equal by God who is the ultimate giver 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. If one upholds the view that man and woman were created equal by God - which is the teaching of the Qur'an - then the existing inequality between men and women cannot be seen as having been mandated by God but must be seen as a subversion of God's original plan for humanity.

## 2. Was Woman Responsible for the "Fall" of Man?

Muslims, like Jews and Christians, generally answer the above question affirmatively though such an answer is not warranted by the Qur'an. Here, it needs to be pointed out that the Qur'anic account of the "Fall" episode differs significantly from the Biblical account. 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 ash-Shaitan (or "Iblis") sets out to beguile the human pair in the Garden is stated clearly in a number of passages (13). The refusal of ash-

---

12. Guillaume Alfred (1966), *The Traditions of Islam*, Khayats, Beirut, p. 32.

13. For instance, see Surah 15: *Al-Hiir*. 26-43; Surah 17: *Bani Isra'il*: 61-64; Surah 18: *Al-Kahf*: 50; and Surah 38: *Sad*: 71-85.

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 an earth-creature. When condemned for his arrogance by God and ordered to depart in a state of abject disgrace, ash-Shaitan throws a challenge to God: he will prove to God that Adam and Adam's progeny are ungrateful, weak, and easily lured by temptations and, thus, unworthy of the honor conferred on them by God. Not attempting to hide his intentions to come upon human beings from all sides, ash-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 ash-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 good and evil, which is lived out as human beings, exercising their moral autonomy, to choose between "the straight path" and "the crooked path".

In terms of the Qur'anic narrative what happens to the human pair in the Garden is a sequel to the interchange between God and ash-Shaitan. In the sequel we learn that the human pair have been commanded not to go near the Tree lest they become "zalimin". Seduced by ash-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 to "go forth" and "descend" from the Garden, but in addressing them the Qur'an uses the dual form of address 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 the Garden given to Adam or Children of Adam cannot be considered a punishment because Adam was always meant to be God's vicegerent on earth (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 source of profit to it (<sup>14</sup>).

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 by God and ash-Shaitan. This becomes clear if one reflects on 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 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 "zulm", Toshihiko Izutsu says: «The primary meaning of zulm is, in the opinion of many authoritative lexicologists, that of "putting in a wrong

---

<sup>14</sup>. Iqbal Muhammad, p. 84.

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 (15)».

By transgressing the limits set by God, the human pair became guilty of "zulm" toward themselves. This "zulm" consists in their taking on the responsibility for choosing between good and evil. As pointed out by Iqbal, «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 ... 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 ... 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 (16)».

Even though there is no "Fall" or Original Sin in the Qur'an, the association of the episode described in *Genesis* 3 with fallen humanity and illicit 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 has had an extremely negative impact on the lives of millions of Muslim women. The following comment of A.A. Maududi - one of contemporary Islam's most influential scholars - is representative of the thinking of many, if not most, Muslims: «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 to indecency before them and beguile them into sexuality. Even to this day, Satan and his disciples are adopting the same scheme of depriving the

---

<sup>15</sup>. Izutsu Toshihiko (1959), *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Koran*, Keio Institute of Philosophical Studies, Mita, Siba, Minatoku, Tokyo, pp. 152-153.

<sup>16</sup>. Iqbal Muhammad, p. 85.

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 (17)».

Though the branding of women as "the devil's gateway" (18) is not at all the intent of the Qur'anic narration of the "Fall" story, 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: The prophet said, «After me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than women» (19). 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» (20). 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 viceregent in it in order to see how you act. So avoid the allurements of women: verily the first trial for the people of Isra'il was caused by women»(21).

### 3. Why was Woman Created?

The Qur'an, which does not discriminate against women in the context of creation or the "Fall" episode, does not support the view held by many Muslims, Christians, and Jews that women were created not only *from* man but also *for* man. That God's creation as a whole is "for just ends" (Surah 15: *Al-Hiir*: 85) and not "for idle sport" (Surah 21: *Al-Anbiya*: 16) is one of the major themes of the Qur'an. Humanity, consisting of both men and women, is fashioned "in the best of moulds" (Surah 95: *At-Tin*: 4) and is called to righteousness which requires the honoring of "Haquq Allah" (Rights of God) as well as "Haquq al-'ibad" (Rights of creatures). Not only does the Qur'an make it clear that man and woman stand

---

17. Maududi A.A. (1976), *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, vol. 2, n. 13, Islamic Publications Ltd., Lahore, p. 16.

18. This 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 culte feminarum 1.1 cited, in *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* by Leonard Swidler, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 346).

19. Khan M.M., p. 22.

20. Siddiqui A.H., p. 1431.

21. *Ibidem*.

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 together in harmony and righteousness.

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 has aptly observed: «One of the distinctive characteristics of Muslim sexuality is its territoriality, which reflects a specific division of labor and 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 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 woman an artificially narrow existence, both physically and spiritually<sup>(22)</sup>».

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 ash-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 well as 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 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

---

22. Mernissi Fatima (1975), *Beyond the Veil*, Schenkman Publishing Company, Cambridge, p. 103.

to punish them: note it well that there is Allah above you, who is Supreme and Great (23)».

It is difficult to overstate the negative impact which the popular Muslim understanding of the above verse has had on the lives of Muslim women. Elsewhere in my work I have done detailed analysis of this verse to show how it has been misinterpreted. For instance, the key word in the first sentence is "qawwamun." This word is most often translated as "hakim" or "rulers". By making men "rulers" over women, a hierarchy akin to the one created by St. Paul and his followers in the Christian tradition, is set up in the Islamic "ummah". Linguistically, the word "qawwamun" refers to those who provide a means of support or livelihood. In my exegesis of this verse I have argued that the function of supporting women economically has been assigned to men in the context of child-bearing - a function which can only be performed by women. The intent of this verse is not to give men power over women but, rather, to ensure that while women are performing the important tasks of child-bearing and child-raising they do not have the additional responsibility of being breadwinners as well. The root-word "daraba" which has been generally translated as "beating" is one of the commonest root-words in the Arabic language with a large number of possible meanings. That the vast majority of translators - who happen to be all men - have chosen to translate this word as "beating" clearly indicates a bias in favor of a male-controlled, male oriented society.

The second Qur'anic passage which is cited to support the idea that men are superior to women is in the specific context of "iddat" - a three-month waiting period prescribed for women between the pronouncement of divorce and remarriage. The "advantage" men have in this regard is that they do not have to observe this waiting period due to the fact that, unlike women, they do not become pregnant (the three-month waiting period is for making certain that the woman is not pregnant). That the intent of this verse is to ensure justice is made clear by its emphasis that «women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable».

The reading of the Qur'an through the lens of the Hadith is, in my opinion, a major reason for the misreading and misinterpretation of many passages which have been used to deny women equality and justice. The following hadith is often cited to elevate man to the status of "majazi khuda" (God in earthly form): «A man came ... 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

---

<sup>23</sup>. Maududi A.A. (1971), *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, vol. 2, Islamic Publications Ltd., Lahore, p. 321.

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!"» (24).

A faith as rigidly monotheistic as Islam which makes "shirk" or association of anyone with God the one unforgivable sin, cannot conceivably permit any human being to worship anyone but God. However, this hadith makes it appear that if not God's, it was at least the prophet's wish to make the wife prostrate herself before her husband. Since each word, act, or exhortation of the prophet is held to be sacred by Muslims in general, this hadith has had much impact on Muslim women. How such a hadith could be attributed to the prophet who regarded the principle of "Tauhid" (Oneness of God) as the basis of Islam, is, of course, utterly shocking.

#### 4. In Summation

Reference has been made in the foregoing account to the fundamental theological assumptions which have colored the way in which Muslim culture, in general, has viewed women. That these assumptions have had serious negative consequences and implications - both theoretical and practical - for Muslim women throughout Muslim history up till the present time needs to be emphasized. At the same time, it needs to be borne in mind that the Qur'an, which to Muslims in general is the most authoritative source of Islam, does not discriminate against women despite the sad and bitter fact of history that 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 chattel or inferior creatures, making them free and equal to men. Not only does the Qur'an emphasize that righteousness is identical in the case of man or woman, but it affirms, clearly and consistently, women's equality with men and their fundamental right to actualize the human potential that they share equally with men. In fact, when seen through a non-patriarchal lens, the Qur'an goes beyond egalitarianism. It exhibits particular solicitude toward women as also toward other classes of disadvantaged persons. Further, it provides particular safeguards for protecting women's special

---

<sup>24</sup>. Khan Sadiq Hasan, *Husn al-Uswa* (Publications details unavailable), p. 281.

sexual/biological functions such as carrying, delivering, suckling, and rearing, offspring.

God, who speaks through the Qur'an, is characterized by justice, and it is stated clearly in the Qur'an that God can never be guilty of "zulm" (unfairness, tyranny, oppression, or wrongdoing). Hence, the Qur'an, as God's Word, cannot be made the source of human injustice, and the injustice to which Muslim women have been subjected cannot be regarded as God-derived. The goal of Qur'anic Islam is to establish peace which can only exist within a just environment. Here 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 rights of all within it - children, women, 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, and emphasizes the importance of making it "the abode of peace" through just living.

In my judgment, the importance of developing what the West calls "feminist theology" in the context of the Islamic tradition is paramount today in order to liberate not only Muslim women, but also Muslim men, from unjust structures and systems of thought which make a peer relationship between men and women impossible. It is good to know that in the last hundred years there have been at least two significant Muslim men scholars and activists - Qasim Amin from Egypt and Mumtaz' Ali from India - who have been staunch advocates of women's rights, though knowing this fact hardly lessens the pain of also knowing that even in this age characterized by an explosion of knowledge, all but a handful of Muslim women lack any knowledge of Islamic theology. It is profoundly discouraging to contemplate how few Muslim women there are in the world today who possess the competence, even if they have the courage and commitment, to engage in a scholarly study of Islam's primary sources in order to participate in the theological discussions on women-related issues which are taking place in most contemporary Muslim societies. Such participation is imperative if Qur'anic Islam which guarantees gender-justice or equity is to emerge in Muslim societies and communities.

"Women in Islam: Feminist theology as an agent of social change," in *The Annals of the International Institute of Sociology* (Proceedings of the XXXII Congress Plenary Sessions on "Dialogue Between Cultures and Changes in Europe and the World", Trieste, July 3-7, 1995), New Series, Volume V, 1996, pp. 221-233