

# Is Islam a Help or Hindrance to Women's Development?

## Introduction

Women such as Khadījah and 'Ā'ishah, wives of the Prophet Muhammad, and Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyyah from Basra (the outstanding woman Sufī) figure significantly in early Islam. None the less, Islamic tradition has, by and large, remained strongly patriarchal up to today. This means, amongst other things, that the sources on which the Islamic tradition is based, mainly the Koran (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 for centuries have been kept in physical, mental, and emotional bondage, have accepted this situation passively. A very pertinent fact in this context is that while the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy among Muslim women, especially those who live in rural areas where most of the population is to be found, is amongst the lowest in the world.

In recent years, largely because of the pressure of laws antagonistic to women 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 essential to realize 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 a process of 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, conversely "Westernization" is considered equally undesirable. What is of importance to note at this juncture 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, *al-shayṭān* (Satan) is bound to be there. In the Muslim world today, because of 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 perpetrated on 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 the forces of religious conservatism were determined to cut women down to one-half 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 Koran, men are *qawwāmūn* (generally translated as "rulers" or "managers") in relation to women;<sup>1</sup> that according to the Koran, a man's share in inheritance is twice that of a woman;<sup>2</sup> that according to the Koran the evidence of one man is equal to that of two women;<sup>3</sup> that according to the Prophet, women are both deficient in prayer (due to menstruation) and in intellect (due to their evidence 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 non-patriarchal, 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

<sup>1</sup>Reference is made here to Surah 4 (*al-Nisā'*): 34.

<sup>2</sup>Reference is made here to Surah 4 (*al-Nisā'*): 11.

<sup>3</sup>Reference is made here to Surah 2 (*al-Baqarah*): 282.

<sup>4</sup>Reference is made here to hadiths cited in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.

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 text, to deal exhaustively with any of the above-mentioned questions. However, in the 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.

## **Women in the Sources of Normative Islam: Three Questions**

### *How Was Woman Created?*

The ordinary Muslim believes, as seriously as the ordinary Jew or Christian, that Adam was God's first 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 Koran which describes the creation of humanity in completely egalitarian terms. In the thirty or so passages pertaining to the subject of human creation, the Koran uses generic terms for humanity (*al-nās, al-insān, al-bashar*) and there is no mention in it of Hawwa' or Eve. The word "Adam" occurs twenty-five times in the Koran 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 Koran, 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 Muḥammad Iqbāl:

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.<sup>5</sup>

An analysis of the Koranic descriptions of human creation shows how the Koran 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 Koranic passages. If the Koran makes no distinction between the creation of man and woman -- as it clearly does not -- why do Muslims believe that Hawwā' 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 literature during the early centuries of Islam. In this context the following six hadiths are particularly important since they are cited in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, which Sunnite Muslims regard as the two most authoritative hadith collections, whose authority is exceeded only by the Koran:

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>

<sup>5</sup>Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 83.

<sup>6</sup>*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-anbiyā'* (Book of the Prophets), Chapter 1, in the English translation by Muḥammad Muhsin Khan, Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1971, 346.

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 neighbour. 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 women.<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 hadiths and shown them to be weak with regards to their formal aspect (i.e. with reference to

<sup>7</sup>Op. cit., *Kitāb al-nikāh* (Book of Marriage), first hadith of "Bāb al-mudārāh ma'a al-nisā'" (Chapter on Sociability with Women), in Khan's English translation, 80.

<sup>8</sup>Op. cit., same chapter, next hadith, in Khan's English translation, 81.

<sup>9</sup>*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-nikāh*, first hadith of the last chapter ("Bāb al-waṣiyyah bi-al-nisā'" [Chapter on Advice in Regard to Women]), in the English translation by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, Vol. 2. (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1972), 752 (in other editions of Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, this and the two following hadiths are included in the last chapter of a separate book, *Kitāb al-radā'* [The Book of Breast-feeding]).

<sup>10</sup>Op. cit., same chapter, next hadith, in Siddiqi's translation, loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup>Op. cit., same chapter, next hadith, in Siddiqi's translation, Vol. 2, 752 f. The first "women" in Siddiqi's English translation of this hadith is singular ("woman"), but has here been rendered plural in conformity with the Arabic original.

their *isnad* or chain of transmitters).<sup>12</sup> As far as their content (*matn*) is concerned, it is obviously in opposition to the Koranic accounts about human creation. Since all Muslim scholars agree on the principle that any hadith which is in contradiction to the Koran cannot be accepted as authentic, the above-mentioned hadiths 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 Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (AD 810-70) and Muslim bin al-Ḥallāj (AD 817-75), collectively known as the *ṣaḥīḥān* ("the two sound/authentic ones") 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."<sup>13</sup> However, the continuing popularity of these hadiths 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 Hawwā'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 Koran — 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.

<sup>12</sup>Hassan, Riffat, "Made from Adam's Rib. The Woman's Creation Question", *al-Mushir (The Counselor)*. *Theological Journal of the Christian Study Centre* (Rawalpindi), 27, 3 (Autumn 1985), 147-151.

<sup>13</sup>Guillaume, *Traditions of Islam*, 32.

### *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 Koran. Here, it needs to be pointed out that the Koranic 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 Koran the reason why *al-shaytān* (or *Iblīs*) sets out to beguile the human pair in the Garden is stated clearly in a number of passages.<sup>14</sup> The refusal of *al-shaytān* 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, *al-shaytān* 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 honour conferred on them by God. Not attempting to hide his intentions to come upon human beings from all sides, *al-shaytān* asks for - and is granted a reprieve until "the Day of the Appointed Time." Not only is the reprieve granted, but God also tells *al-shaytān* 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, choose between "the straight path" and "the crooked path".

In terms of the Koranic narrative, what happens to the human pair in the Garden is a sequel to the interchange between God and *al-shaytān*. In the sequel we learn that the human pair has been commanded not to go near the Tree lest they become *zālim* (perpetrators of *zulm*: unfairness, tyranny, oppression, or wrongdoing). Seduced by *al-shaytān*, they disobey God. However, in Surah 7 (*al-A'rāf*): 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 Koran uses the dual form of address only once (in Surah 18 (*Ṭāhā*): 123); for the rest the plural form is used which necessarily refers

<sup>14</sup>For instance, see Surah 15 (*al-Hijr*): 26-43; Surah 17 (*Bānū Isrā'īl*): 61-64; Surah 18 (*al-Kahf*): 50; and Surah 38 (*Sād*): 71-85.



to more than two persons and is generally understood as referring to humanity as a whole.

In the framework of Koranic theology, the order to go forth from the Garden given to Adam or the Children of Adam cannot be considered a punishment because Adam was always meant to be God's viceregent on earth (Surah 2 (*al-Baqarah*): 30). The earth is not a place of banishment but is declared by the Koran to be humanity's dwelling place and source of profit to it.<sup>15</sup>

There is, strictly speaking, no "Fall" in the Koran. What the Koranic narration focuses upon is the moral choice that humanity is required to make when confronted by the alternatives presented by God and *al-shaytān*. This becomes clear if one reflects on Surah 2 (*al-Baqarah*): 35 and Surah 7 (*al-A'rāf*): 19, in which it is stated: "You (dual) go not near this Tree, lest you (dual) become part of the *zālim*." In other words, the human pair is being told that if they go near the Tree, then they will be counted amongst those who perpetrate *zulm*. Commenting on the root *zlm*, Toshihiko Izutsu says:

The primary meaning of ZLM [*zlm*] is, in the opinion of many 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 Koranic 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 Koran 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

<sup>15</sup>Iqbal, op. cit., 84.

<sup>16</sup>Izutsu, *Structure of Ethical Terms*, 152-3.

disobedience was also his first act of free choice; and that is why, according to the Koranic 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.<sup>17</sup>

Even though there is no "Fall" or Original Sin in the Koran, 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 'Abd al-A'lā' Mawdūdī — one of the most influential scholars of contemporary Islam — 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 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.<sup>18</sup>

Though the branding of women as "the devil's gateway"<sup>19</sup> is not at all the intent of the Koranic 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 hadiths such as the following:

<sup>17</sup>Op. cit., 85.

<sup>18</sup>Maududi [Mawdūdī], *Meaning of the Qur'an*, vol. 2, 16, note 13.

<sup>19</sup>This expression comes from Tertullian (AD 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

[The Prophet] said, "After me I have not left any affliction [*sic*; "temptation" would better render the Arabic *fitnah*] more harmful to men than women"<sup>20</sup>.

Ibn 'Abbās reported that Allah's Messenger may peace be upon him 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".<sup>21</sup>

Abū Sa'īd Khudrī reported that Allah's Messenger may peace be upon him 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".<sup>22</sup>

### *Why Was Woman Created?*

The Koran, 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-Hijr*): 85) and not "for idle sport" (Surah 21 (*al-Anbiyā'*): 16) is one of the major themes of the Koran. Humanity, consisting of both men and women, is fashioned "in the best of moulds" (Surah 95 (*al-Tīn*): 4) and is called to righteousness which requires the honouring of *huqūq Allāh* (rights of God) as well as *huqūq al-'ibād* (rights of creatures). Not only does the Koran 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

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 Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations*, 346).

<sup>20</sup>*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Nikāh*, "Bāb mā yuttaqā min shu'm al-mar'ah" (Chapter on What Misfortune of the Woman one Should Be on One's Guard Against), in Khan's translation, 22 (quotation marks added).

<sup>21</sup>*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-riḥāq* (Siddiqi: "Book of Heart-Melting Traditions"), first hadith, in Siddiqi's translation, Vol. 4, 1431 (quotation marks added).

<sup>22</sup>Op. cit., same chapter, 11<sup>th</sup> hadith, in Siddiqi's translation, Vol. 4, 1432 (quotation marks added).

other words, the Koran 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 Koranic 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* (community) 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>23</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 *al-shayṭān* 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 Koranic passages. Two Koranic passages — Surah 4 (*al-Nisā'*): 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 Mawdūdī'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

<sup>23</sup>Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 103.

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.<sup>24</sup>

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 made a detailed analysis of this verse to show how it has been misinterpreted. For instance, the key word in the first sentence is *qawwāmūn*. This word is most often translated as *ḥākīmūn* or "rulers". By making men "rulers" over women, a hierarchy akin to the one created by the Apostle Paul and his followers in the Christian tradition, is set up in the Islamic *ummah*. Linguistically, the word *qawwāmūn* 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 favour of a male-controlled, male-oriented society.

The second Koranic passage which is cited to support the idea that men are superior to women is in the specific context of *'iddah* — 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 because, 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

<sup>24</sup>Maududi, op. cit., 321.

is made clear by its emphasis that "women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable."<sup>25</sup>

The reading of the Koran 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. Hadiths such as the following are often cited to elevate man to the status of "*majāzī khudā*" (pseudo-god):

And Ibn Habbān said referring to Abū Hurayrah: "A woman came to God's Prophet, may God's blessing and salvation be upon him. She said: 'I am so-and-so the daughter of so-and-so.' He said: 'I know you. What is your problem.' She said: 'My problem concerns my devout paternal cousin, so-and-so.' He said: 'I know him.' She said: 'He has asked for my hand and informed me what the right of a husband in relation to his wife is. If it is something I am capable of, I shall marry with him.' He said: 'His right is such that if blood and pus were streaming from his nostrils and she should lick it up with her tongue, she would not [yet] have given him his due. If it were befitting for a human being that he prostrated oneself before [another] human being, I would have ordered the woman that she prostrated herself before her husband when consummates his marriage because of the privilege He has bestowed upon him in relation to her.' She said: 'By Him who has sent you with the truth, I shall not marry as long as the world remains.'<sup>26</sup>

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 enormous impact on Muslim women. How such a hadith could be attributed to the Prophet, who regarded the principle of *tawhīd* (oneness of God) as the basis of Islam, is, of course, utterly shocking.

<sup>25</sup>Koran, Surah 2 (*al-Baqarah*): 228.

<sup>26</sup>Muhammad Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān Bahādur, *Ḥusn al-uswah bi-mā thabata min Allāh wa-rasūlih fī al-niswah* (The Good Example of What Has Been Established from God and His Prophet on Women), Constantinople, AH 1301 (AD 1884), 390. This author mentions that this hadith was collected by al-Bazzār and al-Ḥākim. For details and several similar hadiths see op. cit., 390 f.

## **Toward a Feminist Theology**

### *Islam as a Religion of Justice*

Reference has been made in the foregoing account to the fundamental theological assumptions which have coloured 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 Koran, 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 Koran to liberate women from the status of chattel or inferior creature, making them free and equal to men. Not only does the Koran 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 Koran goes beyond egalitarianism. It exhibits particular solicitude towards women as also towards other classes of disadvantaged persons. And not only this, it provides particular safeguards for protecting women's special sexual/biological functions such as carrying, delivering, suckling, and rearing offspring.

God, who speaks through the Koran, is characterized by justice, and it is stated clearly in the Koran that God can never be guilty of *zulm*. Hence, the Koran, 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 Koranic Islam is to establish peace which can only exist within a just environment. Here it is of importance to note that there is more Koranic 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 Koranic 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 Koran 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 judgement, 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 social structures and systems of thought which make a peer relationship between men and women impossible. It is extremely important for Muslim women activists to realize that in the contemporary Muslim world, laws instituted in the name of Islam cannot be overturned by means of political action alone, but through the use of better religious arguments. Professor Fazlur Rahman had stated that the tragedy of modern Muslims has lain in the fact that those who understood modernity, did not understand Islam, and those who understood Islam did not understand modernity. In my opinion a greater tragedy lies in the fact that Islam seems to be represented globally - as also so visibly at the conference where this text was presented - by two extreme groups, one presenting Islam in extremely narrow and conservative terms, and the other as being in absolute opposition to human rights as they are defined in Western secular discourse. The majority of the educated Muslims who, in my opinion, tend to be progressive rather than conservative, appear to be marginalized even though it is from amongst such people that the reformers who liberated the Muslim world from colonialism came. Neither the extreme right nor the anti-religious groups which have "hijacked" human rights in many Muslim countries represent the vast majority of Muslims who are religious without being fanatic, narrow-minded, or inclined toward violence and terrorism.

George Santayana has remarked with acute insight that those who do not know their history are destined to repeat it. Stating the same idea in another way, a Muslim scholar once said to me, "If you are going somewhere in a train and you realize after some time that the train has somehow become derailed and is going in the wrong direction, you cannot at that moment get back on the right track. You have first to get back to the point at which you got off-track and then you can get back on-track." Women in general need to know the point at which they became derailed in history in order to reclaim their proper place in the world. I believe strongly that by means of feminist theology it is possible to equip and empower women to combat the



gender-inequality and injustice to which they have been subjected for a very long time.

*Muslim Women: A Paradigm Shift from Re-active to Pro-active*

The United Nations Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994, was an extremely important landmark in raising global consciousness with regard to a number of issues which are central to the lives of women. The conference was particularly momentous for Muslim women who participated in record numbers in this meeting, which was held in one of the most important capitals of the Muslim world. The presence in Cairo of al-Azhar University, the oldest University in the world, of which the fatwas or religious proclamations carry much weight amongst Muslims, added further significance to the venue of this conference.

In an opening session of the conference, three male professors representing al-Azhar University, presented what was labelled "Muslim viewpoints" on the subject of "Religion, Population, and Development". Only a small part of their presentations, however, dealt with the topic of Population and Development which was the subject of the conference. After stating that Islam was not against family planning but that it allowed abortion only to save the mother's life or health, the speakers focused on the status or position of women in the Islamic tradition. The purpose of this panel presentation by high-powered representatives of the most prestigious Muslim university in the world was to pre-empt any discussion on the subject of Muslim women by making the "privileged" position of women in Islam clear to both the Western media (which stereotypes Muslim women as "poor and oppressed") and to Muslim women themselves. In interventions from the floor, however, the "Muslim viewpoints" represented by the three male professors of Al-Azhar University were questioned as voices of Muslim women were conspicuous by their absence in the panel of presenters. Muslim women demanded "equal time" and they got that and more — in subsequent days when a number of sessions were held at the NGO Forum in which Muslim women figured significantly and in which women-related issues were explicated by women themselves.

Women's identification with body rather than with mind and spirit is a common feature of many religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions. However, though women have, traditionally, been identified with body, they

have not been seen as "owners" of their bodies. The issue of who controls women's bodies — men, the State, the Church, the Community, or women — has been one of the most important underlying issues of the Cairo Conference. The fact that Muslim women forcefully challenged the traditional viewpoint not only with regard to women's identification with body, but also with regard to the control of the woman's body, indicates that Muslim women are no longer nameless, faceless, and that they are ready to stand up and be counted.

It has now been accepted globally that issues which may appear to pertain primarily to a woman's body, namely that of contraception and abortion, cannot be looked at in isolation from the larger factor of women's over-all development as human beings. However, as pointed out by a number of persons and agencies, the primary focus of the Cairo Conference was on "population" issues focusing on the body, rather than on "development" issues which focus on the whole person.

The challenge before women in general, and Muslim women in particular, is to shift from the re-active mindset in which it is necessary for women to assert their autonomy over their bodies in the face of strong opposition from patriarchal structures and systems of thought and behaviour, to a pro-active mindset in which they can, finally, begin to speak of themselves as full and autonomous human beings who have not only a body, but also a mind and a spirit. What do Muslim women - who along with Muslim men have been designated as God's vicegerent on earth by the Koran - understand to be the meaning of their lives? Reacting against the Western model of human liberation no longer suffices as a pro-active orientation requires a positive formulation of one's goals and objectives. The critical issue on which Muslim women are called upon to reflect, with utmost seriousness, is: what kind of model or models of human self-actualization can be developed within the framework of normative Islam which takes account both of the realities of the contemporary Muslim world and its ideals?

I would like to say a word to those human rights groups in the Muslim world which adopt the position that human rights and Islam are incompatible and that the abandonment of Islam is a precondition for women's liberation from oppression and development. In my judgement, the average Muslim woman in the world has three characteristics: she is poor, she is illiterate, and she lives in a rural environment. If I, as a human rights activist, wanted to "liberate" this average Muslim woman living anywhere from Ankara to

Jakarta, I could not do so by talking to her about the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, 1948, because this means nothing to her. But it is possible for me to reach this woman's heart and mind and soul by reminding her that God is just and merciful and that, as a creature of this just and merciful God, she is entitled to justice and protection from every kind of oppression and inequity. I make this statement because I have seen the eyes of many Muslim women who have lived in hopelessness and helplessness light up when they realize what immense possibilities for development exist for them within the framework of the belief-system which defines their world.

In the end a word needs to be said about the representation of Muslim women in the West and by the Western media. Since the nineteen-seventies there has been a growing interest in the West in Islam and Muslims. Much of this interest has been focused, however, on a few subjects such as "Islamic Revival", "Islamic Fundamentalism", "The Salman Rushdie Affair", and "Women in Islam", rather than on understanding the complexity and diversity of "the World of Islam". Not only the choice of subjects which tend to evoke or provoke strong emotive responses in both Westerners and Muslims, but also the manner in which these subjects have generally been portrayed by Western media or popular literature arouses questions about the motivation which underlies the selective Western interest in Islam and Muslims.

Given the reservoir of negative images associated with Islam and Muslims in "the Collective Unconscious" of the West, it is hardly surprising that, since the demise of the Soviet Empire, "the World of Islam" is being seen as the new "Enemy" which is perhaps even more incomprehensible and intractable than the previous one. The routine portrayal of Islam as a religion spread by the sword and characterized by "Holy War", and of Muslims as barbarous and backward, frenzied and fanatic, volatile and violent, has led, in recent times' to an alarming increase in "Muslim-bashing" — verbal, physical as well as psychological — in a number of Western countries. In the midst of so much hatred and aversion towards Islam and Muslims in general, the outpouring of so much sympathy, in and by the West, towards Muslim women appears, at a surface level, to be an amazing contradiction. For are Muslim women also not adherents of Islam? And are Muslim women also not victims of "Muslim-bashing"? Few of us can forget the brutal burning of Turkish Muslim girls by German gangsters or the ruthless rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serbian soldiers.

Since the modern notion of human rights originated in a Western, secular context, Muslims in general, but Muslim women in particular, find themselves in a quandary when they initiate, or participate in, a discussion on human rights whether in the West or in Muslim societies. Based on their life experience, most Muslim women who become human rights advocates or activists feel strongly that virtually all Muslim societies discriminate against women from cradle to grave. This leads many of them to become deeply alienated from Muslim culture in a number of ways. This sense of alienation oftentimes leads to anger and bitterness toward the patriarchal structures and systems of thought which dominate Muslim societies. Muslim women often find much support and sympathy in the West so long as they are seen as rebels and deviants with the world of Islam. But many of them begin to realize, sooner or later, that while they have serious difficulties with Muslim culture, they are also not able, for many reasons, to identify with Western, secular culture. This realization leads them to feel — at least for a time — isolated and alone. Much attention has been focused, in the Western media and literature, on the sorry plight of Muslim women who are "poor and oppressed" in visible or tangible ways. Hardly any notice has been taken, however, of the profound tragedy and trauma suffered by the self-aware Muslim women of today who are struggling to maintain their religious identity and personal autonomy in the face of the intransigence of Muslim culture, on the one hand, and the imperialism of Western, secular culture, on the other hand.

While the West constantly bemoans what it refers to as the "rise of Islamic fundamentalism", it does not extend significant recognition or support to progressive Muslims who are far more representative of "mainstream" modern Islam than either the conservative Muslims on the right or the "secular" Muslims on the left. Even after the Iranian Revolution and the "Islamization" of an increasing number of Muslim societies, many Western analysts are still unable or unwilling to see Islam as a religion capable of being interpreted in a progressive way or a source of liberation to Muslim peoples. An even deeper problem is their refusal to understand the pivotal role of Islam in the lives of Muslims the vast majority of whom — in a worldwide community estimated to be over one billion — are "believers" rather than "unbelievers". Compelled by facts of modern history, some social scientists in the West are now beginning to concede that Islam is *one* of the factors which needs to be considered — along with political, economic, ethnic, social and other factors — in planning and evaluating development

projects. This approach, though an improvement on the one which does not take account of religion at all, is still not adequate for understanding the issues of the Muslim world or finding ways of resolving them. Islam is not, in my judgment, simply *one* of the factors which impact on the lives of Muslims. It is the *matrix* in which all other factors are grounded. I do not believe that any viable model of self-actualization can be constructed in Muslim societies for women or men which is outside the framework of normative Islam deriving from Koranic teachings and exemplified in the life of the Prophet of Islam. Nor do I believe that any profoundly meaningful or constructive dialogue can take place between "the World of Islam" and "the West" without a proper recognition of what Islam means to millions of Muslims.

"Is Islam a Help or Hindrance to Women's Development?," in *Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim attitudes towards modernity and identity*, edited by Johan Meuleman, RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2002, pp. 189-209.