Riffat Hassan: Muslim Feminist Theologian

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MY LIFE JOURNEY BEGAN IN LAHORE. PEOPLE FROM LAHORE OFTEN say with love and pride, "Lahore is Lahore," meaning thereby that the city is matchless and that there is no place like it in the world. The place where one

is born and spends one's childhood always has a special place in one's heart and one's memories, and for me, also, "Lahore is Lahore," the place I always return to in my dreams.

Lahore is an old "Mughal" city with the famed Shalimar Gardens and many celebrated monuments made of red sandstone with marble ornamentation. Lahore was once a walled city surrounded by a moat. Now the thirty-foot brick wall and the moat have been replaced, except in the north, by a garden. A circular road around the rampart gives access to the Old City by thirteen gates. Some relics of the past remain but few except visitors have much interest in them. For all their profession of love for their city, the people of Lahore have made few visible efforts to maintain the city's historic and cultural heritage, and over the decades the Old City has decayed in much the same way as many old city centers in this country have.

The house where I was born—68 Temple Road—was not situated in the Old City but in a historic neighborhood with a well-known "temple." I was the fifth child and third daughter of Syed Feroze Hassan, my father, and Daisy Dilara, my mother, both of whom came from Lahore's "oldest" families. My father's family had a long tradition of service to the government (and was, therefore, regarded as highly respectable), and my mother's family had a long history of commitment to the creative arts (and was, therefore, regarded as rather eccentric).

The foundations of the house in which I was born were weakened by earthquakes, and so, in the 1960s, when I was studying in England, my father had the old house demolished and a new one built in its place. But it is the old house—the house in which I had spent the first seventeen years of my life—that I remember whenever I think of my early years. The old house stood facing a *galee* (narrow street) that culminated in our *kothee* (bungalow). On both sides of the galee were houses (each called a *makaan*) lined up right next to each other with no empty spaces between them and no front or backyard (although they had inner courtyards).

All societies have their own sets of prejudices and discriminations. The cult of elitism developed by educated Muslims of the Indian-Pakistan subcontinent—largely under British influence—required the erection of serious psychological barriers not only between people who lived in cities and those who lived in villages, but also between those who lived in kothees and those who lived in makaans. The distinction between the kothee dwellers and the makaan dwellers has never been one of pure economics but of birth and "culture."

That in many ways my siblings and I were privileged children is evident. We were born into an upper-class *Saiyyad* family. Saiyyads, who are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, are considered the highest "caste" of Muslims even though Islam is supposed to have done away with the caste system. We lived in a spacious kothee, had a fancy automobile and a household full of servants, and were educated at the best English-language schools established by the British.

But though generally children who lived in kothees did not play with children who lived in makaans, this rule did not apply to us. This was largely due to the fact that my father—universally referred to as *Shah Sahib* or *Shahji* (titles of respect given to a Saiyyad)—though a bureaucrat trained in the tradition of British civil service, was regarded as the patriarch of the neighborhood, and his house was always an "open" house.

With so many obvious advantages, why was my early life so full of shadows? The major reason for my troubled childhood was undoubtedly the deep differences and conflict between my parents. Not only did they have diametrically opposing philosophies of life but also radical incompatibility of temperament and character. In many ways my father was traditional and conventional and my mother a nonconformist to tradition and convention.

Through most of my life I hated my father's traditionalism, because I understood it almost exclusively in terms of his belief in sex roles and his conviction that it was best for girls to be married at age sixteen to someone who had been picked out for them by the parents. It took me a long time to see that in some ways my father's traditionalism had been pure gold. He truly believed in taking care of people in need, relatives and strangers alike. Kind and compassionate, he took pleasure in solving other people's problems, whether they were personal, professional, or social. Anybody could call on him at any hour, and he would receive the caller with courtesy and grace.

What made my mother very unusual in a traditional society, and in my father's house, was her rejection of the hallowed cult of women's inferiority and submissiveness to men. Pre-Islamic Arabs had buried their daughters alive because they had regarded daughters not only as economic liabilities but also as potential hazards to the honor of the men in the tribe. Islam notwithstanding, the attitude of Muslims toward daughters has remained very similar to that of their nomadic forebears. Against this, my mother, who was a gifted poet with a brilliant mind, believed strongly in women's autonomy and independence.

Long before I began to understand the complexities and ambiguities of the Muslim value system, I knew that my mother would not win in any popularity contest vis-à-vis my father. She had a protected place in society because she was the daughter of the outstanding and creative artist-poet, playwright, and scholar, Hakim Ahmad Shuja'—who had also been a highly regarded educator and bureaucrat—and was my father's wife, but in her own person she was viewed as a dangerous deviant. The fact that she was fiercely independent in some ways and believed—like Nietzsche—in the will to power, which can make people ruthless, did not help to improve her image in many eyes. However, to me, all through my childhood, my mother was a savior figure who protected me from being sacrificed on the altar of blind conventionalism. And my father, who was admired and loved by so many, seemed to me through most of my early life to be a figure of dread, representing customary morality in a society that demanded that female children be discriminated against from the moment of birth.

Physical and verbal violence did not characterize the relationship between my parents, but there was no disguising the fact that they had deep-seated resentments against one another that manifested themselves in all kinds of destructive ways. As a child I often wondered why they continued to live together. Now I understand the reasons that made it imperative for them to live under one roof—they both came from "old" families to whom divorce was anathema, and they had nine children to raise. But the one roof under which we all lived could not be called a "home," if one defines this term as a place of love, warmth, and security. Our home was a rough sea where tempests raged incessantly. I could deal with the unremitting hostility that pervaded the atmosphere only by becoming a recluse.

I believe that it was because I withdrew from an outer to an inner reality that I was able to survive the seemingly unending crises and calamities to which I was exposed. A hypersensitive, painfully shy, and profoundly lonely child, I hated the ugliness that surrounded me and retreated to a world made up of a child's prayers, dreams, and wishful thinking. In this world I found three things that have sustained me through the heartbreaks and hardships of my life: an unwavering belief in a just and loving God, the art of writing poetry, and a deep love of books. Unable to relate at a deep personal level to either of my parents—such dialogue, I see now, is virtually impossible in Muslim culture, in which human beings relate to each other mainly in terms of their "function" or roles and not in terms of who they are as persons—I

learned to talk to my Creator and Preserver, who at all times seemed very close. I often asked God to reveal to me the purpose of my life and to help me fulfill this purpose. Perhaps this was a strange prayer for a child. But I believed then, as I believe now, that God had put me on earth for a reason and that there was something that God wanted me to do.

Alone in my inner world I discovered that, like my mother and grandfather, I could write poetry almost effortlessly. This gave me great happiness and hope. I felt as if this were a gift from God given to me so that I could create a world free of shadows, of hate, bitterness, and pain. Writing was my chief mode of communication during my childhood, and I wrote much. By the time I was seventeen years old, two volumes of my poems, short stories, and articles had been published.

Most of my childhood I spent alone, writing and reading. I was a star pupil in my class from the beginning to the end of my scholastic career and won many honors and awards. But as a child what I craved was not success but love and peace around me and within me. I was a superachiever almost against my will. Toward the end of my high school career I became resentful of my own success, which my family members hardly seemed to notice, let alone to celebrate. I thought that if I failed they might pay some attention to me. Had it not been for a teacher who cared for me, I might have acted out my bitter, rebellious feelings, but I did not, and in future years I was very grateful that I had not wrecked a record career. I learned very early in life that there is no necessary connection between success and happiness, but I have also come to know that though many bright women are afraid to succeed, lack of success is not likely to lead to an enhancement of happiness, and I could not have found what I craved through underachieving.

My struggle as an "activist feminist" began in the twelfth year of my life. Until then, for the most part, I had lived in an inner sanctuary. But before I had turned twelve, the reality of the external world suddenly seemed to close in on me, threatening to destroy my place of refuge. My second sister was married off at sixteen to a man with a lot of money and very little education. She had tried to resist the arranged marriage but ultimately had succumbed—as most girls do—to the manipulations by means of which vulnerable and wavering girls are blackmailed into acquiescence in the name of family "honor." Witnessing what happened to her, I experienced total panic. I realized with acute shock that I was the next in line. Four years later the same ritual would be reenacted, and this time I would be the

sacrificial victim unless I found a way to fight my father's, and my society's, rigid conventionalism. At twelve I had not yet learned how to fight. I had not wanted to learn to fight. I simply wanted to be left alone in my dream world where I could write my poems and read my books . . . but I knew then, as I know now, that if one is born female in a patriarchal society in which girls are regarded as objects to be given and taken, one has no option but to fight. And so I learned to fight, and the fight continues to this day, though many battles have been won and lost. Battle-weary beyond words, I pray for the dawning of the day when women like myself will not have to spend their entire lifetime fighting for justice and freedom, but I also pray for strength to continue the fight until the last of my sisters has been freed from darkness and death into light and life.

My father, who had not seemed to like me much when I was a little girl hiding in my room, liked me even less when I appeared to become an impossible teenage rebel who disregarded his wishes. For instance, when I was twelve he wanted me to withdraw from the coeducational school where I studied and enroll in an all-girls' school. Thinking with the mind of a twelve-year-old, I believed that if I said yes to him once, I would always have to say yes to him. Therefore, I refused to comply with his desire and said that if I was forced to leave the school where I had studied for a number of years (and where my brothers still studied), I would not go to another school. My father did not force me to leave, but he upbraided my mother constantly for spoiling and misguiding me. From the time that I was twelve until I went abroad to England at age seventeen, my father never stopped being upset with me over the fact that I studied with boys. But he never reprimanded me directly—perhaps because, during most of that time, he and I were not even on speaking terms with one another.

I learned through those tense, silence-filled years how dreadful cold war is and how through the coldness of its silence it may inflict deeper injury than the angriest of words. Looking back, I am stricken with sorrow that the world in which we lived made it impossible for my father and me to talk to one another for so long. Perhaps if we could have communicated directly we could have resolved some of our differences, or even learned to build a personal relationship with one another; but in Muslim societies fathers and daughters seldom talk to one another as peers or persons until the daughters have left the father's household and become part of another household. I, who have been looking for a father all my life, never knew my own until the

last year of his life when he had become so weak and ailing that he cried when his children came and cried when they left. Not until then did I know for sure that he cared about me and wanted to see me happy, regardless of how he had disapproved of me through my growing-up years. We had so little time to get to know each other, but I am grateful that I was reconciled to him before he died. Such reconciliation does not, and cannot, of course, make up for a lifetime of deprivation, but at least it makes it possible for me to weep for my father and for what we missed.

While being alienated from my father left a deep imprint on my life, my intense and strange relationship with my mother left an even deeper one. For much of my life my mother was the most important person in my life. Feeling as I did that I lived in an arena of gladiators, I regarded my mother as my sole protector after God, and depended on her for my emotional survival. Certainly my mother gave me the opportunity to become a "person." Perhaps my particular tragedy lay in the fact that my mother regarded me as her Derby-winning horse who would actualize all her dreams of glory. Perceiving me as the most single-minded of her children, my mother believed that I had what it took to do what she wanted to do in her life. Much of what I am today is due to my mother's schooling, but I could never become the Nietzschean superwoman she wanted me to be.

In my society there are many stories of how a mother's love is superior to all other kinds of love because it is "unconditional." As a child I wanted so much to believe this, but I could not since I heard my mother say repeatedly to me, "I do not love you, I love your qualities." Her words, which were meant to affirm my "qualities," made me feel very sad and lonely. I could not receive my mother's love simply because I was her child. I could receive her approval only if I proved myself worthy. As a child my mother's attitude toward me often made me very melancholy, but as an adolescent it made me very angry. Part of this anger, which stayed with me for a long time, was directed at myself because I could not break loose of my mother's control over me. Regardless of how strongly I wished to resist her emotional manipulation, when confronted by her immensely powerful personality I felt myself relapsing into a state of juvenile behavior in which I would begin to react to her instead of acting as an autonomous person. It took some devastating experiences finally to sever the chains that bound the little girl in me to my mother's power and to liberate me from the burden of living out her fantasies instead of being able to live my own life.

Free of the bondage, I sought to reestablish the bond. Though I could never "dialogue" with my mother, I remained bound to her in love and duty. I was with her at the time of her sudden death in 1991 and was able to spend some hours sitting by her as she lay, beautiful and serene, in her final repose. Gazing silently at the most extraordinary human being I had ever known, I told her all the things I did not have a chance to tell her when she was alive. That time together was exceedingly precious not only because I could pay homage to my mother for her indomitable spirit reflected in her steadfastness of purpose, courage, and refusal to give up in the face of insuperable odds, but also because I could wash away all the antagonisms that had existed between us with my tears. I believe that in the hour of death my mother listened to me and understood my silent words better than she ever did my spoken words, and this comforts me as I carry forward the legacy of women's struggle that she bequeathed to me.

At age seventeen, after standing first among the 24,000 students who took the intermediate examination in the Punjab, I was allowed to go to England for higher studies. I had expected my father to oppose the idea of my studying abroad, but he did not. One reason for his letting me go was to remove me from my mother's sphere of influence. But my academic success, which brought much "honor" to the family, could also have influenced his decision.

My seven years at St. Mary's College, University of Durham, England, were full of homesickness and hard studying. After three years I graduated with joint honors in English Literature and Philosophy, and then, at age twenty-four, I became a Doctor of Philosophy specializing in the philosophy of Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the spiritual founder of Pakistan, whose work I had loved and admired since childhood. However, when I returned home after finishing my studies abroad, I found that I was alienated from both my mother and father in fundamental ways.

It is not possible for me to narrate even a summary of what happened during the next phase of my life within the scope of this paper. All I can say is that during this time I experienced some of the most important events of my life—marriage, motherhood, and divorce; self-exile from my beloved homeland; and death, first of my father in 1970 and then of my two most dearly loved brothers in 1974. The imprint left on my heart, mind, and soul of these events was deeper than words can convey. What sustained me during the darkest and most difficult days of my life was my faith in God and my child,

who has been God's greatest gift to me. I named my daughter Mehrunnisa Mujahida. *Mehr* refers to "love" and "the sun," and *Mehrunnisa* refers to one who is a symbol of love and sunshine among women. *Mujahida* refers to a woman who engages in *jihad* or struggle in the cause of God.

Certainly the most important relationship of my life has been with my daughter, who has been, from the moment of her birth, "the light of my eyes and the joy of my heart," as easterners say. I could not have withstood the ordeals of my life without her, even though raising her single-handedly in the face of multifaceted adversities has been a most difficult task. But when I look at her today I feel immeasurably comforted and strengthened. Exceptionally sensitive, she has a radiant personality yet is able to empathize deeply with those who suffer.

Experientially I have always known what it means to be a Muslim woman, but it was not until the fall of 1974 that I began my career as a "feminist" theologian in a rather strange way when, in the midst of a very difficult period of my life, I moved with my very young child to Stillwater, Oklahoma. I had a Ph.D. but very few survival skills when my search for a job that could support me and my child after the collapse of a marriage in which I had invested a lot brought me to a small university town in which I knew no one. Here I was asked to be the faculty advisor to the Muslim Students Association (MSA) chapter at Oklahoma State University (OSU), where I had been appointed a Visiting Assistant Professor in Religion and Humanities. The MSA was a North American association, which had chapters in many colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.

The membership of the MSA chapter at OSU consisted entirely of Arab men largely from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Gulf area. These men were so patriarchal in their mind-set that they did not allow women to become members of the association. However, there was a rule at OSU according to which every student chapter had to have a faculty advisor and that year I happened to be the only Muslim faculty member on campus. This is how I came to be the faculty advisor to this group of Arab men who made it clear to me from the outset that they were not too thrilled at the prospect of working with a woman.

The MSA chapter at OSU had a tradition of having an annual seminar in the fall of each year. It was customary for the faculty advisor to make one of the introductory presentations on the theme of the seminar. However, I was asked by the organizers of the MSA seminar to speak on the subject of

women in Islam. I knew that this was not the topic of that year's seminar. I also felt that I had been asked to speak on this subject because in the opinion of the MSA organizers, I was not competent to talk on any other subject pertaining to Islam, even though I taught Islamic studies. I resented what the assigning of a subject meant. Furthermore, I was not much interested in the subject of women in Islam at that time.

Despite my reservations I accepted the invitation for two reasons.

1. I knew that being asked to address an all-male, largely Arab Muslim group that excluded women even from being a part of the audience (though many of the male Arabs had wives who helped them in organizing the event) and who thought that hearing the voice of a woman unrelated to them was *haram* (forbidden) was itself a breakthrough.
2. I was so tired of hearing Muslim men pontificate on the position, status, or role of women in Islam, while it was totally inconceivable any woman could presume to talk about the position, status, or role of men in Islam.

After accepting the invitation, I began to think about what I was going to talk about. I knew that the MSA organizers wanted me to focus on the traditional roles of Muslim women as "good" wives and mothers—a subject on which hundreds of books, brochures, and articles have been written. I thought that it was time to look at the subject of women in Islam from a different—a nonpatriarchal—perspective. I had read the Qur'an many times and used it as a textbook in the courses I teach on Islam, but until then I had not done a systematic study of the Qur'anic passages relating to women. I decided to undertake this study as a preparation for my presentation. At that time I had no idea that this study would change the course of my life.

At what time my "academic" study of women in Islam became simultaneously an Odyssean venture in self-understanding I do not know. Perhaps it was when I realized the impact on my own life of the so-called Islamic ideas and attitudes toward girls and women. Soon after I began my research I became aware of the glaring discrepancy between normative Islam and Muslim practice. But "enlightenment" does not always lead to "endless bliss." The more I saw that justice and compassion formed the core of Qur'anic teachings regarding women, the more anguished and angry I felt seeing the injustices

and inhumanity to which a large number of Muslim women are subjected in actual life. I began to feel strongly that it was my duty—as a part of the microscopic minority of educated Muslim women—to do as much consciousness raising regarding the situation of Muslim women as I could. The journey that began in Stillwater, a small town that lived up to its name, has been an arduous one. It has taken me far and wide in pursuit of my quest. When I remember the stormy seas and rocky roads I have traversed, it seems like the journey has been a long one. But when I think of my sisters who, despite being the largest "minority" in the world—more than half of the 1.3 billion-strong Muslims *ummah* (community)—remain for the most part nameless, faceless, and voiceless, I know that there is no end to the journey in sight. In 1974 when this journey began, I had no idea where it was going to take me or how drastically the world of Islam would change in the next ten years.

Between 1974 and 1983 the major focus of my research was on interpreting the Qur'anic passages relating to women from a nonpatriarchal perspective. In 1979, while I participated in an ongoing "trialogue" of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars (under the sponsorship of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics in Washington, DC) who were exploring women-related issues in the three "Abrahamic" faith-traditions, I wrote a monograph entitled *Women in the Qur'an.* In this study I did a systematic analysis of those passages of the Qur'an that related to women in various contexts—for example, female infanticide, attitudes toward girl children, birth control and abortion, the creation of woman and the story of the "Fall," marriage and divorce, polygamy, motherhood, segregation and "veiling" of women, women's economic rights, women and inheritance, women as witnesses to contracts, and women's "reward" in the afterlife. In particular, I focused attention on those passages that were regarded as definitive in the context of woman-man relationships and on which the alleged superiority of men to women largely rested. On the basis of my research I became convinced that though several Qur'anic texts had often been used to legitimize discrimination toward women, an unbiased reading of the Qur'an clearly affirmed the equality of men and women. In fact, recognizing the fact that women have traditionally been victimized and oppressed in various ways, the Qur'an puts a central emphasis on safeguarding their rights.

Between 1974 and 1983 I presented my research findings at various conferences and meetings, underscoring the need to critique the negative ideas and attitudes toward girls and women widely prevalent in Muslim culture in

the light of normative Islamic teachings embodied in the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet of Islam. During the same time, however, the gap between theory and practice appeared to widen with the onset of "Islamization"—a process whereby the governments of predominantly Muslim countries, including Pakistan, began to impose so-called Islamic laws on their already largely Muslim populations.

In order to understand the powerful impetus to "Islamize" Muslim societies and why "Islamization" has focused so heavily on women and the imposition of so-called Islamic punishments, in my judgment it is important 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 equated with science, technology, and material progress; and (b) as "westernization," which is associated with promiscuity and all kinds of social problems ranging from the breakup of marriages to the falling apart of communities. While "modernization" is considered highly desirable, "westernization" is considered equally *un*desirable. Generally speaking, 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" (i.e., the home) where women belong and "public space" (i.e., the rest of the world), which belongs to men. The presence of women in men's space is considered to be highly dangerous for—as a popular *hadith* (the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) 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 socioeconomic 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" of subservience and subordination to men) if "the integrity of the Islamic way of life" is to be preserved.

Though I have lived in the United States since 1972, I have maintained close ties with Pakistan and have frequently visited Lahore, my city of origin, during the summer break from my university teaching obligations. In 1983–1984, however, I got the opportunity to spend almost two years in Pakistan. I had a sabbatical leave of absence and research fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the American Associa-

tion of University Women (AAUW) to do research on the Qur'anic texts pertaining to the relationship between Muslims and the *Ahl al-Kitab* (Jews and Christians). This period was one in which many women in Pakistan had been jolted out of their dogmatic slumber (in Kantian terms) by the enactment, under the directives of the military ruler General Muhammad Zia ul Haq, of laws such as the Hadud Ordinance (1979), according to which women's testimony was declared to be inadmissible in "Hadd" crimes, which included rape. In 1983 two other antiwomen laws—the Law of Evidence and the Law of Qisas and Diyat, or "blood money" (which were promulgated subsequently)—were being debated, accompanied by increased violence toward women and a deluge of antiwomen literature, which swept across the country.

Upon my arrival at Lahore in the spring of 1983, I could see that powerful forces—including those of military authoritarianism and religious conservatism—were determined to reduce the status of women systematically—virtually mathematically—to one-half or less than that of men. Reflecting on the scene I witnessed with increasing anxiety and alarm, I asked myself how it was possible for laws that were archaic, unjust and un-Islamic to be implemented in a society that professed a passionate commitment to both modernity and Islam. The answer to my question was so obvious that I was startled that it had not struck me before. Pakistani society (or any other Muslim society, for that matter) could enact or accept laws that specified that women were less than men because in patriarchal Muslim culture it is regarded as a self-evident truth by almost all men and women that women are inferior to men. In this culture anyone who argues in favor of women's equality with men is likely to be confronted, immediately and with force, by a mass of what is described as "irrefutable evidence" taken from the Qur'an, hadith, and Sunnah to "prove" that men are "above" women. Among the arguments cited in this context, the following are perhaps the most popular: according to the Qur'an, man are *qawwamun* (generally translated as "rulers" or "managers") in relation to women; a man's share in inheritance is twice that of a woman; the witness of one man is equal to that of two women; according to the Prophet, women are deficient both in prayer (due to menstruation) and in intellect (due to a woman's witness counting for less than a man's).

Since in 1983–1984 I was (in all probability) the only Muslim woman in the country who had been engaged in a systematic 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 research findings were and if they could be used to improve the situation of women in Pakistani society. I was urged by a number of 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. I was eager to help. I did not think that the best strategy for stemming the tide of antiwomen legislation was simply to respond to each argument that was being used to deprive women of their human—as well as Islamic—rights. I knew on the basis of my research that behind and below these arguments were others, and no sooner would one line of attack be eliminated than another would be set up in its place. What had to be done, first and foremost, in my opinion, was to examine the theological ground in which all the antiwomen 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 deliberation I came to perceive that in the Islamic, as well as in the Jewish and Christian, tradition, there are three theological assumptions on which the superstructure of men's alleged superiority to women has been erected. These three assumptions are:

1. 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. 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.
3. 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?
3. Why was woman created?

The research I have done on these questions since 1984 has been incorporated in a number of published and unpublished writings. The draft of a book entitled *Equal Before Allah: The Issue of Woman-Man Creation in the Islamic Tradition*, which I began in Pakistan in 1984, was revised during the year I spent as a research associate in the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School (1986–1987). Some parts of this book have been published in the form of articles. In many of my writings I have presented compelling evidence to show that the Qur'anic text does not support the above-mentioned foundational theological assumptions, which—in fact—are contrary to the teachings of normative Islam.

While I have continued to pursue my theological research on issues relating to women in Islam, I have been increasingly engaged, since 1983, in sharing my research findings with diverse groups of Muslim women and youths in many countries. Believing that knowledge is power, I have endeavored, through extensive travel and participation in a large number of educational meetings, to disseminate, particularly among Muslim girls and women, the positive outcome of my study of the sources of normative Islam.

In the decade of the 1990s, when women's rights were the major focus of international discourse on human rights, I had the opportunity to be a major spokesperson for "liberal" or "progressive" Islam at the international conferences sponsored by the United Nations at Cairo (1994), Copenhagen (1995), Beijing (1995), and Istanbul (1996). Presenting the findings of my research over two decades, I urged Muslim women to claim the rights granted to them by God. Paramount among these rights is the right to acquire knowledge, which is so strongly emphasized by the Qur'an.

The United Nations Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994 was an extremely important landmark in raising global consciousness with regard to some of the most intimate and intricate issues pertaining to women's lives as well as human sexuality and relationships that have ever been discussed at an international forum. One of the fundamental issues underlying the deliberations of the Cairo conference was that of the "ownership" of a woman's body. Women's identification with body rather than with mind and spirit is a common characteristic of the dualistic thinking that pervades many religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Ironically, however, though women have traditionally been identified with body, they have not been seen as "owners" of their bodies, and the issue of who controls women's bodies—men, the state, the

church, the community, or women—has never been decided in favor of women in patriarchal cultures. The great breakthrough of the Cairo conference was 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 assumption that women are not "owners" of their bodies.

After the Cairo conference at which I had made nine presentations, I was given a grant by the Ford Foundation office in Cairo to do a series of workshops in the Middle East on issues that Muslim women needed to focus on at the United Nations Fourth World Conference, which was to be held at Beijing, China, in September 1995. The resource papers that I wrote for these workshops (held in Cairo, Jordan, Tunisia and Pakistan) were later compiled into a monograph entitled *Women's Rights and Islam: From the I.C.P.D. to Beijing.*[1]

Having successfully challenged age-old definitions of womanhood imposed on them by patriarchal cultures, women were confronted by a new challenge as they journeyed from Cairo to Beijing. This challenge was to shift from the reactive mind-set of those who are subjected to systematic discrimination and made to feel powerless to the proactive mind-set of those who have a strong sense of personal identity, autonomy, and efficacy as makers of their own lives. I hoped, as I went to China with thousands of others, that women in general, and Muslim women in particular, would be able to build on the hard-won gains of the ICPD and begin to speak of themselves as full and autonomous human beings who have not only a body but also a mind and a spirit.

Unfortunately, however, what happened at Beijing was a reversal, almost a betrayal, of the promise that had been seen and felt at Cairo. Instead of engaging in a critical dialogue on the existential situation of the majority of Muslim women in the world (who generally share three characteristics—they are poor, illiterate, and live in a village), the spokespersons of the most visible Muslim groups at the nongovernmental forum in China denied that these women had any serious problems that needed to be addressed. Instead of confronting the indisputable fact that Muslim culture, like other patriarchal cultures, is pervaded by antiwomen biases, which have a negative impact on every aspect of a woman's life, these spokespersons not only defended, but glorified, whatever goes under the name of Islam in traditional Muslim societies. As the conference in China drew to a close, it seemed that the hope of a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive thinking that had come to birth at Cairo was likely—like female children in pre-Islamic Arabia—to be buried alive.

For "liberal" Muslims there were important lessons to be learned from the experiences at Cairo and Beijing. Paramount among them was the need to understand the role of religion and culture in Muslim societies and communities and the discrepancy between the norms or ideals of Islam's primary sources and Muslim practice with regard to women and women-related issues. A deep analysis of Muslim history, particularly of modern times, and the political, economic, social, and psychological factors that have had a formative influence on Muslim consciousness was also required.

That "liberal" Muslims in general had not done the hard work required to make a compelling case in support of a "liberal" or "progressive" approach to understanding Islam was apparent at Beijing. Perhaps like many other "liberals" they had assumed that what they had to say was inherently so "reasonable" or "rational" that it could be regarded as self-evident, requiring no corroborative data. But what the conferences at Cairo and Beijing have demonstrated is that the greatest impact is made by those who have done their homework best.

So much that was so significant and so complex happened at the ICPD and the Fourth UN Conference on Women that historians and other analysts will reflect on, and write about, the events in these landmark conferences for a long time. From these recollections and reflections will come a better understanding of what happened at Cairo and Beijing, which, in turn, will provide guidance for the future. But while the work of critical inquiry and analysis goes on, the historic process of which these conferences were a part also continues. The challenge that confronts us today, both individually and collectively, is how to participate, as creatively and constructively as possible, in the shaping of this process.

My personal response to the challenge was to develop programs on Muslim women's empowerment and self-actualization that could be implemented in specific Muslim societies or communities. The first of these programs that focused on Pakistan and selected areas of India was funded by the United Nations Population Fund (January 1997–February 1998). In the summer of 1998, the Women and Development Division of the Foreign Ministry of the Government of the Netherlands began the implementation of a program that focused on the empowerment of Muslim women in the Netherlands as well as in six other participating Asian and African countries. I was the principal researcher for this program (1998–2000) and was involved in its teaching and training activities as well as in developing a curriculum on Muslim ethics

that could be used both in educational institutions as well as in community-based workshops. In the summer of 1999 I also conducted a short project funded by the Center for Population and Development Activities in Washington, D.C., which focused on the life stories of exceptional Muslim girls and women in the city of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, India.

In January 1999 the BBC aired, in England, a documentary entitled "Murder in Purdah" about so-called honor killings of girls and women in Pakistan. On February 15 and 16, 1999, ABC's *Nightline* presented the same documentary with the title "A Matter of Honor," adding two commentators who answered questions asked by Forrest Sawyer, the presenter of the program. I was one of the commentators, and responded to the question about why men were killing their wives, sisters, and daughters in the name of "honor" by stating that such crimes had nothing to do with the teachings of Islam but had to be seen in the context of patriarchal culture. In this male-centered, male-dominated culture, men's "honor" was regarded as irreplaceable while women's lives were held to be of little worth. To many persons in this culture, men had proprietary rights over women, who were regarded as possessions.

While I expressed my concern about the erosion of women's rights in Pakistan, particularly in the wake of "Islamization" (and "Talibanization"), I did not agree with the presenter's view that the situation was utterly bleak and hopeless. I said that in my travels across the Muslim world I had seen a paradigm-shift taking place, particularly at the grassroots level among Muslim women and youths toward a different understanding of Islam. This new understanding of Islam was centered on affirming human rights and women's rights. I concluded by saying that the changes I had seen in the last twenty-five years made me believe that a process of internal empowerment was under way and that my optimism about the future was not rooted in naive idealism.

Following the showing of the *Nightline* program, I received a large number of messages by e-mail, telephone, fax, and letters from a variety of women and men in the United States. Two important sentiments that were common to these messages were a strong sense of outrage that vulnerable girls and women were being subjected to so much brutality and violence in Pakistan and a keen desire to do something about this state of affairs. Responding to these messages, I took the initiative of setting up a network to be called the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Vio-

lence in Pakistan (INRFVVP). This network, which became incorporated as a tax-exempt organization in 1999, now has members in many countries. Even with very scarce financial resources it has been an effective voice in highlighting the issue of violence against girls and women in Pakistan and in other Muslim countries and communities. More information about the INR-FVVP can be obtained from its website (www.inrfvvp.org).

A new struggle has become the focal point of my life in the aftermath of September 11, when more attention has been focused on Islam and Muslims than perhaps at any other point in modern history. Much of this attention—particularly in the case of mainstream U.S. television channels—has been negative, not only with regard to those who committed the criminal acts, but also with regard to Islam and Muslims/Arabs at large.

The September 11 assaults on the United States have been condemned strongly by the global community, including a large number of Muslims from all walks of life, ranging from leaders of Muslim countries to ordinary people. However, the crisis was perceived—and described—from the outset in terms that polarized the world into two absolutely opposed camps. The worldview that became dominant in the discourse of both the American administration and media was symbolized by expressions such as "us versus them," "either you are with us or you are against us," and "good versus evil." The dualistic thinking that permeated this discourse seemed, at times, to be cosmic in magnitude. It appeared as if the so-called clash of civilizations between the West and the world of Islam posited by Samuel Huntington had indeed come to pass.[2]

However one interprets the fateful events of September 11, 2001, one thing is clear: the world changed forever on that day. There is now no going back to the situation that existed prior to that day. We cannot go back—we can only go forward. This poses a serious challenge both for (non-Muslim) westerners and for Muslims. How and on what basis are we going to create a new world order in the aftermath of what happened on September 11, 2001? Is it possible to "depolarize" the world and to build a bridge between the West and the world of Islam?

At a meeting of an organization called Women in Networking (WIN) held in Milan, Italy, a couple of weeks after September 11, I was asked to propose a plan of action for depolarizing the world and building bridges between conflicting parties. Some of the participants pledged their commitment to follow through on my suggestions. This collective endeavor has led to the birth of Women Engaging in Bridge-Building (WEBB), an international network

of women—and men—that aims to set up centers in as many countries as it can. The first bridge that members of WEBB have undertaken to build is between Muslims and non-Muslims. In pursuance of this goal, WEBB is holding its premier conference, entitled "Islam and Diversity: Bridging the Gap," in Ottawa, Canada, in June 2003. It is a wonderful thing that this conference is being sponsored by many Canadian parliamentarians and other persons of vision who want to promote a culture of peace through knowledge and dialogue. More information about WEBB and its activities can be obtained from its website (www.webb-international.org).

My life's *jihad* goes on—from struggle to struggle to struggle. But I want to end this fragment by celebrating the spirit that keeps women living and striving in the face of endless trials and tribulations, dangers and death. This poem, which I wrote during a life-threatening crisis, epitomizes not only my personal journey but that of many of my sisters here and elsewhere.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
who, like Othello,
loved not wisely
but too well.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
living in a world
in which the rules
are made by men—
and where men can
break all the rules
and yet be gods
saviors and saints
martyrs and heroes
but where if women
break the rules
made by men
broken by men

they cannot live
without being shamed
slandered and abused
beaten and hurt
scourged and stoned
burned and buried
alive and damned.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
born to love
living in a world
in which when men
love—they are called
princes and knights
poets and mystics
or at the worst—perhaps—lunatics;
but when women love
then love becomes
a mortal sin
for which they must
give up their life—
for when a woman
is guilty of
a mortal sin
—the sin of loving—
then she must die
so that the jealous
god of love
may be at peace.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
living in a world
in which there are

a number of men
and also some women
who cannot love;
and since love is
what makes us human
and gives us life
these men and women
are callous and cold,
cruel and cowardly
though they wear
the masks of sages
and madonnas
and cherubs;
and they are always
ready to strike
my eternal heart
because I dare
to live and love.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
who has endured
so many births
and so many deaths
so that the seed
of life and love
may not be
destroyed by those
who in the name
of god of love
who does not love
want to create
a loveless world
a lifeless world
full of tombs
where one cannot hear

the sound of life—
the laughter of
a little child
warm from the womb
who wants to live
and wants to love
and to whom
an eternal—
hearted woman
is what god should be.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
the bearer of life
the nurturer of life
the protector of life
I can give life
because I am not
afraid of pain
for I know that love
is always pain
even joyful love
is ringed with pain
and no one can love
who cannot embrace
with heart and soul
the pain of living
the pain of loving.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
and I can suffer
again and again
the pain of loving
men and women

who do not love
who will tear
my heart and soul
to little shreds
and who will put
my life-carrying body
upon death's bed
in order to
placate a god
who says he is
the god of love
but who abhors
both life and love
and who demands
a sacrifice
—my sacrifice—
and says that I
must slaughtered be
just like an animal
helpless and trapped
whose blood is spilled
so that the sins
of those who kill
may be forgiven.

I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
and though I may be
tormented and abandoned
dishonored and disowned
scourged and flogged
stoned and burned
and buried alive
I will never
be a martyr
I will never

be a victim
I will never
be a loser
I will always
be a survivor
I will always
be a winner
I will always
be triumphant
for though I go
I will return
and though I die
I will live again
forever and forever
for I am a woman
with the eternal heart
of a woman
and since my heart
is made of love
and love is eternal
embodied in creation
leading to resurrection
though all else will burn
with the funeral pyre
in the flames of the fire
my eternal heart
will never to ashes turn
and like a phoenix I will rise again
and like a phoenix I will be reborn.

NOTES

1. Riffat Hassan, *Women's Rights and Islam: From the I.C.P.D. to Beijing* (Lahore: 1995).
2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, 1993).

"Riffat Hassan: Muslim Feminist Theologian," in *Transforming the Faith of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion*, edited by Ann Braude, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, pp.173-197