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SEXUAL INEQUALITY AMONGST MUSLIM ARABS

Introduction

In order to understand the make up and status of the Muslim woman up to the present, it is absolutely necessary to trace and examine the factors and causes of her inequality with the man since the emergence of Islam. Against this background, the understanding of any progress in the position of woman becomes easier and more understandable. Identifying the relevant causes would ultimately facilitate remedying of the disease and ensure an effective treatment.

A. Religious Causes and Attributes

To be historically just, it must be admitted that the degradation of women in Islam is for the most part the result of social influences for which Islam is unjustly made totally responsible; they are definitely the outcome of the social relations of the peoples converted to Islam.¹ But even this must not be taken too far. It is also true that Islam itself placed women far lower than men on the social scale; women are called "the majority of those in Hell", *naquisat aqel wa-din*, i.e. lacking in understanding and religion.

a) **Quran:** Reflecting on the very essence of Quran, one can single out certain customs which have been wrongly interpreted; or which do not quite coincide with rational thinking; Even though they are found in the *Hadith*, (e.g. charms, etc.), Bigamy and scolding of women which are exercised without reason, are but a few of the laws set forth which Muslims realize need to be in concord with the real spirit of Quran if justice is to be achieved. Muslims for the first time are ready to question the long undisputed assumptions in regard to maintaining the ignorance of women of anything that exists beyond the realm of her household.

1. Kraemer, H., *Studien Zur Vergleichenden Kulturgeschichte II*, Berlin, 1980, p. 106.

The Quran explicitly attributes the quality of deception to females only. It regards this quality as a gift which nature has given women in order to tempt and enslave the other sex. Naturally, Muslim scholars in their defence of Quran considered such a gift a "natural compensation" for man's mental and intuitive capacities.² While she acquires most of her strength from this source, she becomes frustrated and fragile at encountering reality. Man, therefore, was "there" to prevent her from straying and, as if it were, redeem her from her fantasies. Hence the Muslim's perception of himself is altered to one which is elitist, condescending and superior to his female counterpart.

While, however, great stress is laid concerning the different modes of treatment of woman and also recommendations regarding the choice of her occupation, the husband is permitted to take stern measures if she conducts herself immorally. Islam places the highest value upon the chastity of woman. Hence, if she falls off from the heights of virtue, she is no longer entitled to that honour and kind treatment which is otherwise accorded to her. The Holy Quran allows stern measures in the case of *mushuz*, which means the rising of the wife against her husband. Some commentators explain *mushuz* as leaving the husband's place and taking up an abode to which he objects. Here, the husband is allowed to inflict slight corporal punishment in order "to bring her back to her senses".

In a different instance, the Quran maintains that unless one of the parents is given a higher authority, chaos would take place at home. The reason for giving the higher authority to the male parent is thus stated in the Quran:

"Men are maintainers of women, because Allah has made some of them excel others and because they spend out of their property" (4: 34).

The Arabic word for maintainers is *qawwamun*, derived from *qama*, meaning he stood up or managed. The word therefore means that the husband provides maintenance for the wife, and also that he has final charge of affairs of the home; thus he exercises authority over his wife when there is need for it. It is no wonder that as a result, some Muslim

2. al-Aqqad, Abbas M. *Al-Falsapha al Quraniyah* (Philosophy of Quran), Cairo, Dar al Hilal, 1960?, p. 48.

scholars such as Muhammed Ali are of the view that it is man who can be entrusted with the maintenance of the family, and therefore, it is he who must hold the higher authority.³

Further, Sura II, 228, vaguely grants women the same right as men, but "then, men have a degree above them". Outlined in the Quran are the rights and privileges of the husband over his wife. The most important is to obey his demands for cohabitation in bed. Thus, if she objected, she would be disobeying the Lord's commandments, and would have to bear the curse of angels until she wakes up again. Implied in this command, which appears in *Surat al-Nisa*, is the woman's constant seeking of the man's permission for her actions.

In another verse in *Surat al-Nisa*, the Quran states that "Men are more mobile than women", which probably signifies man's superior physical ability at protecting and defending themselves and women from the invading tribes during the *Islamic era*.

The functions of husband and wife are quite distinct. Each of them is entrusted with the functions which are best suited for his or her "nature". In a number of places, the Quran clearly states that God made man and woman excel each other in certain respects. The man excels the woman in his physical constitution, thus making him capable of bearing greater hardships and dangers. On the other hand, woman excels man in the qualities of love and affection. Nature, for her own purpose of helping in the growth of creation, has endowed women with the quality of love far greater than that possessed by man. Hence there is a natural division of labour, the purpose of which is the progress of humanity. Man is better suited to face the harsh striving of life on the account of his stronger physique, woman is better suited to bring up the children because of the abundance of her love. The duty of maintaining the family has been entrusted to man; bringing up of children to the woman. Nevertheless, one wonders whether or not such division of work is conclusive, or if women have entirely been excluded from other kinds of activities; or, least of all, whether caring of children prevents her from performing outside duties !

It is noteworthy that the Prophet had enacted general guidelines of modest conduct and chastity, bidding women not to display their charms

3. Licheenstadter, I. *Women in the Aiyam al Arab*, London. The Royal Asiatic Society, 1835, p. 81.

openly, except in the presence of their husbands or any person closely related to them. Apparently, these rules and regulations did nothing to foster their development or intergration of women, but merely maintained the status quo. The pertinent paragraphs read :

“Say to the believers that they cast down their looks, and guard their privy parts, and display not their ornaments except for those which are external”.

(Quran 24, 25)

Indeed, in pre-Islamic Arabia women had played a part in the life of their tribes, exercising an influence which they later lost in the Islamic Empire. Obviously, the tribal community and similarly, the position of women were never prescribed by the *sharia* nor the religious law; indeed, her status depended on her personality and her character.⁴ Free women in pre-Islamic times certainly held a more respected position than Muslim women do today.

b) Spirit of Islam, Prescriptions and General Principles :

The subordination of women has often been justified by the religious precepts of Islam, and its values, principles and morality. Naturally, these were derived from different sources of revelation, such as the *Hadith*, the four legal schools as well as various religious or philosophical sects. Some of them favour the Muslim woman and some work to her disadvantage.

The spirit of Islam is distinctly opposed to the education of women; there is little doubt that the establishment of facilities offered to them for acquiring literacy has been influenced by the acquisition of foreign standards and ideals by Muslim males that the education of women is unnecessary, unorthodox and dangerous, is still the opinion of the predominant section of Islamic society. Thus, the problems involved in achieving it are, if not insuperable, still formidable. It is apparent that only when the male culture has moved beyond the stage of vernacular literacy, the atmosphere becomes favourable to the advancement of females. An equally important factor is that any improvement in the condition of women, is built upon the grounds of elementary literacy. That there can be no great improvement of the community as a whole until some of the cruel limitations have

4. Ali, M. *The Religion of Islam*, Lahore, 1950, p. 647.

been removed from the life of women, is a slowly penetrating idea which has produced dissatisfaction with the status quo. Certainly, Islam theoretically advocates equality between man and woman, as the Muslim scholar, al-Musawa, maintains.⁵ Also it might have allowed women to engage in "legal" careers which do not conflict with her nature. However, contrary to what the author claims, religiously sanctioned restrictions *do* limit her rights in their avowed aims of maintaining her dignity and keeping her away from beginning, as well as, "anything which conflicts with good manners . . . , also that the nature of her career does not lead to a social or ethical harm, nor does it deter her from fulfilling her other duties towards her husband, children and home, nor should she be burdened beyond her capacity, nor should she use cosmetics, and all of her physical organs should be covered during her work . . ." etc.⁶

The power of fatalism is also unequivocally rooted in Islam. Says Dr. Mott,

"it helps her live on with her heart buried in the graves of her babies. Often they are laid there through the foolish love that refused them nothing or torn over the wretchedness of the daughter concerning whose marriage she had spent months of intrigue and heart; or broken over the waywardness of the son of whom she was so proud when he first showed his manliness by beating her".⁷

Naturally, she cannot reason about these things – cause and effect are an unintelligible mystery; stamping out all questioning under the fiat, "It is decreed", and goes on mechanically preparing her woes all over again.

It is also noteworthy that the religious life of an Arab Muslim woman becomes markedly cruder in its emphasis as you follow her into the inland districts. There, one will find women who will take a visitor to the desert villages by his shoulders and yell, "*Shehedi*" at him in order that he may be induced to repeat the formula of witness to Muhammed, which she believes to be the passport into heaven. In this manner she displays her interest in one by smoothing one's path into heaven by her action. Beyond that she knows nothing but that she should fast throughout the *Ramadhan* noon; and this she does with touching faithfulness. The two aforementioned religious observances she carries out with pride as a good Muslim.⁸

5. Wafi, A. *Fi al Islam* (about Islam), Cairo, 1962, p. 82.

6. *ibid.*, p. 82.

7. Mott, J. *The Muslim World Today*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1925, pp.240, 1.

8. *ibid.*, p. 241.

The prevailing emotion in the heart of a Muslim native woman from childhood to old age, and in even rank and condition, would appear on the surface to be fear. There are fears well founded, and many of them – the fear of her husband's anger and unconditional divorce, fear of the day when old age will bring contempt and neglect, fear of the power, of lashing tongues around her and their effect on the mother-in-law who grudges her the position in which she herself has placed her, or the autocratic grandmother who dominates her household. Nevertheless, these are less terrible than the terror of the charms and spells that may be cast on her arousing the wrath of demons. Ultimately, she may be even driven into insanity by the threats of the "powers of darkness".

c) Influences and Attitudes of Muhammed: With the advent of Muhammed, a new influence was brought to bear upon the life and character of females. Muhammed's relation with women could alone be lengthened into an interesting chapter. His love for his first wife was pure and constant; and he always honoured his mother in a most devoted manner. However, it is with reference to Muhammed's personal bearing toward the female sex that he has received the most scathing criticisms. How many times he was married is an unresolved controversy; but there were probably no less than fourteen. Since Muhammed allowed his faithful followers only four wives, it was necessary to explain why he himself should have exceeded the limit.

The most decisive religious influence in shaping the woman's life among the followers of Islam has been indeed, Muhammed's attitude towards women. There is a Muhammedan legend which is pertinent at this point. When Adam and Eve sinned, God commanded that their lives be purified in that both culprits should stand naked in the river Jordan for forty days. Adam obeyed, and so he became comparatively pure again; Eve however, refused to be thus washed, and of course her standing before God has been relatively lower ever since.⁹

The Muhammedan woman does not worship upon an equal footing with the man. It is not that Muhammed prohibited the female sex from attending service at the mosque, but he did advise that they make their prayers in private, so that they would not be the cause of any tempting

9. Pollard, E.B., *Women in all Ages and in all Countries-Oriental Women*, Philadelphia, Rittenhouse Press, 1908, p. 227.

distraction. In other places, women could participate as long as they placed themselves apart from men, and always stayed behind them.¹⁰

The Quran has much to say about women. *Sura al-Nisa* deals entirely with them and their position. The ancient doctrine of woman's creation from man is fully accepted, and probably was derived from contact with Judaic culture, from which source most of Muhammed's teaching was derived. Matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc., are frequently dealt with. Yet, one can easily note that most of Muhammed's commands and teachings lacked a systematic framework. At best, his teachings placed women on a distinctly lower plane than man, thus rendering her subservient to man whose sensuality was to be gratified to the limits. Obviously, Muhammed's state of mind regarding women as well as misunderstanding the true relationship between the sexes have overshadowed the attitude of his followers.¹¹ The female has never been a companion, only a decorative object, thus allowing family relationships in the modern Western sense no place in society.

Long established traditional practices must have influenced the Prophet's views and estimation of the female as a lesser being. In denouncing the idolators who worshipped the goddesses Allat, al-Uzza and al-Munat, he asks ironically,

"Shall there be male offspring for him (Allah) and female for you? That were an unfair division".

(Quran, 53)

"Verily", he says in another place, "those who believe not in the hereafter do surely name the angels with female names".

(ibid v. 29)

Even more definitely stated is his view of unaccommodating women, particularly married ones, whom he regards as entitled to no better treatment than that given to obstinate children.

"Men stand superior to women in that God hath preferred the one over the other . . . those whose perverseness ye fear, admonish them and remove them into bedchambers and beat them; but if they submit to you, then do not seek a way against them".

(ibid 4. 38)

10. *ibid.*, p. 227.

11. *ibid.*, p. 240.

In his interpretation to this passage, the thirteenth century commentator Baydawi, whose word is respected by the Sunnites to the present day, sets out categorically the different ways in which men stand superior to women. Allah has preferred the one sex over the other, he says,

"in the matter of mental ability and good counsel, and in their power for the performance of duties and for the carrying out of (divine) commands".

Hence, to men were allocated the spheres of religious leadership and the duties of Holy Wars.¹²

This typical Muslim view of women as creatures, incapable of and unfitted for public duties has not completely faded away from the Islamic Middle East, in modern times.

Some of the requirements to be observed by every Muslim woman, which ultimately restricted her freedom, were laid down by the Prophet himself. Firstly, a woman may not travel by herself without escort, nor may she be left alone with a male outsider, whether inside her home or outside it. Women are further to be reserved in their conversation and "to discourage their interlocutors from tempting them".¹³ And she must avoid all practices which may arouse feelings of lust or evil thoughts among those who happen to be observing her. She is required to strictly observe the Islamic code of morals for the interest of her society as well as her own chastity . . .

B. Unbalanced Assumptions and Miscalculations of Orthodox Muslim Scholars

Muslim scholars, ancient or modern have certainly added to the already prevalent discrimination and repression of the Muslim female. Motivated by their male chauvinistic background as well as dogmatic interpretation of Quranic verses, they pose with their assumptions as an ultimate reference for the whole of the Muslim world. I choose two for a background reference.

12. Ibn Khaldun, *F. Prolegomenes* (ed. text), Paris, Quatremere, 1858 ff. 1, p. 354.

13. al Tabib, N. "Status of Women in Islam" in *Islamic Literature*, 1969, p. 62.

a) **al-Khawli, An Egyptian Scholar**: According to al-Khawli, and many other Muslim scholars, nature or "destiny" is responsible for the division of labour between the two sexes. By this, al-Khawli emphatically referred to the burdensome repercussions of pregnancy which limits both of the woman's mental and physical capacities. He further supports his argument by referring to the prophetic tradition whereby Muhammed appeals judiciously to Caliph Ali and his wife, who were then complaining about the pressures and duties of their work. He said, "the man works outside, the woman inside her home . . ." ¹⁴

In his next paragraph, al-Khawli refers to the Quranic verse, "Men have a better advantage over them (women)", thereby attributing leadership to man. He further adds that, "this is in agreement with reason and the nature of things". ¹⁵ Such leadership, therefore, is just one privilege of many, attributed to his innumerable range of specializations.

Like many other orthodox Muslim scholars, al-Khawli vaguely surveys "differences of superiority" between man and woman; and eventually surrenders to "the requirements of reality". ¹⁶

He argues that in bringing up their children, women are not in any need of intuition or ingenuity; instead, they need to be good-natured, and even-tempered.

"She is consequently obliged to reason on a lower level in order to understand the thoughts and feelings of her child".

As for the welfare of her house it is narrow in scope and requires little in thought. ¹⁷ Like many others, such superficial and spurious justification for division of both labour and nature, make us wonder whether the characteristics of logic in the East and the West are identical. The climax of this discrepancy lies in al-Khawli's concluding remark, that the physical difference is irrevocably nature's intention to prepare each sex for a different type of career!

b) **Outb, A Kuwaiti Scholar**: Outb, the Kuwaiti Muslim Scholar, dispenses the word "inequality" between man and woman with

14. al Khawli al Bahi, *al Mara bein al Beit wal Muftama* (Women between her home and Society) Cairo, 1967, p. 43.

15. *ibid.*, p. 46.

16. *ibid.*, p. 51.

17. *ibid.*, p. 51.

"differentiation", regarding their special functions in life.¹⁸ It is natural therefore, that each of the functions is fulfilled through a different disposition and constitution, he adds. Qutb, adventures in an even more controversial assumption than other Muslim scholars and so-called reformers. He ventures,

"of course, motherhood with all the noble tender feelings and intuitional impressibility cannot exist in the absence of that physical constitution which befits a woman for her specialized functions of conceiving, and gives form to her psychological, intellectual characteristics of womanhood".¹⁹

Basically, Qutb's apparent assumptions about women are imbued with an emotional bias rather an intellectual insight. This is quite apparent, though his statement, that woman is physically and intuitively best equipped for her real function of motherhood could hardly be disputed.²⁰ All the same, if attention and capacity are diverted to other social spheres, humanity is unlikely to suffer.

In a formula which he has calculated in a mysterious manner, Qutb states that two women in Islam are equivalent to that of one man. Because of her very emotional nature she is liable to digress from the real facts in any argument, he ventures, it would be wise to have another woman alongside in a dispute so "if one erreth, the other will remember". Here, the author postulates that the accused who may be an attractive woman may make the female witness jealous and hostile towards her and thus would give the wrong evidence...²¹ Therefore, the second woman-companion, may correct the first when she is confused about truth. On this issue it is sufficient for us to question, whether or not, both the nature and mental competence of the female's counterpart is fundamentally different!

Indeed, one is bound to question whether the view adopted by Islam towards man and woman is compatible with what we know of human nature; or at least whether there are any solid grounds for such a differentiation.

18. Qutub, M. *Islam, the Misunderstood Religion*, Cairo, 1964, p. 189.

19. *ibid.*, 182.

20. *ibid.*, P. 192.

21. *ibid.*, p. 199.

c) Other Scholars, Views and Interpretations: With regard to inheritance, Islam attempts to justify the inequality of distribution of assets between man and woman. The only reason given behind such status quo is that man alone is charged with shouldering all of the family's financial burdens. The female is under no obligation to spend money on anyone but her own person; except of course when she should head her family. Muslim scholars, however, argue that such a situation is very rarely met within an Islamic society. Consequently, that man inherits two thirds of what his female counterpart does, has been the result of what Islam calls "natural" but is in reality an "imposed" tradition. The Muslim man does not support woman as an act of grace but rather as a moral obligation.

Al-Mandudi, a famous Muslim scholar, pointedly defends man's right of inheriting a larger share of assets than his female counterpart. He justifies his attitude, which is also a law in the Muslim countries, in that unlike woman, man bears more financial responsibilities for both his family and his parents. It is thus natural and fair that "woman should be content with what she has received".²² However, the author fails to justify his discouraging of women from supporting themselves, denied as she is of an equal share of possessions. She is indefinitely dependant on the supporting male.

With regard to polygamy, the Prophet has obviously weakened the position of women by permitting its existence. Naturally, Muslim scholars such as Berlaz, attempt to justify this injunction in a fragile, unconvincing manner. He maintains, that an absolute need arises in times of wars when thousands of men lose their lives, resulting in an abnormal increase in the number of women. If polygamy does not come to the rescue of society, a large number of women will lead a deprived life, "thus producing many social evils".²³ Further, they will lose their self-respect, dignity and pride. Berlaz, in advocating this privilege had definitely excused men from the possibility that they would be taking advantage of women.

Other scholars back up the concept of polygamy with more elaborate, yet still discriminatory interpretations. For example, Haji Majid, states that few women understand that by allowing their husbands to marry

22. Abu al Ala al Mandudi, *al Islam fi attahadiyyat al Muassira* (Islam in contemporary revelations) Kuwait, 1971, p. 264.

23. Berlaz, N.H. "Position of Women in Islam" in *Islamic Religion*, May, 1935, p. 191,

other women, they are doing a service equal to *Jihad*. The reason is, because in their sacrifice, they are saving their sisters from the "evil effects engendered by the excessive numerical predominance of women over men, particularly after a war".²⁴

C. Social Traditions, Customs, Male Domination and Prejudicial Attitudes

a) **Traditional Status of Women in the Islamic Culture:** Muslim Arab girls, as a rule, have grown up in ignorance. It has not been thought worth the effort of educating the daughter, and indeed, it is still regarded by many, as a destructive of the best order of society to give her any opportunity, which may lead to the desire "to usurp the power which heaven has placed in the hands of men".²⁵ There is, accordingly, little enlightenment in housekeeping duties, little to stimulate her mind, and little opportunity "for the hand that rocks the cradle"²⁶ to move the world. Ultimately, sons grow up with little respect for their mothers, since there is nothing to make the situation otherwise.

Tradition further dictates that the husband, should he wish to divorce himself from his wife, simply orders her to leave his house, and his will becomes the law. For even the religious authorities allow the husband to do as much as he may see fit in his own house.

In regard to education, there has been a wide spread belief that it is not needed by women. Not only that, but education comes to be regarded as a threat to their chastity, partly because a literate girl could, and might send letters to her lover. Hence, the prevailing attitude that education is more of a luxury than a necessity.

Among highly educated and sophisticated Muslims, frequent complaints that equalization of the sexes will "defeminize" women, are often heard. Understanding why Eastern women in general are more stereotyped than Western women becomes fairly easy as soon as one ponders on the historical background. Oriental women, for centuries, have been trained to take

24. Haj Abdul Majid, "The position of Women in Islam" in *Islamic Religion*, July, 1935- p. 254.

25. Pollard, *Women in all Ages in all countries-Oriental Women*, Philadelphia, 1908, p. 233.

26. *ibid.*, p. 233.

a position in society subordinate to that of men. Berger, a Middle Eastern orientalist, observes that women have been brought up to please men, often by cultivating their charms at an early age.²⁷ It is inevitable, therefore, that the Muslim Middle Eastern women have neither been able to compete nor display any "masculine" qualities as is the case in the West.

Traditional ideology always demanded the domination of the wife; as it was thought weak to be tender towards her. Hence in terms of sexual relation, the aim was not at all to give pleasure to the wife, but rather it was viewed as one source of solace for the male.²⁸

And since ties between husbands and wives are not expected to be more than sexual, it may be assumed with accuracy, that her emotions begin and end with the sexual intercourse. In his essay on women in Algeria, Gordon observes that they are described "like animals, highly sexed and willing to have intercourse with any man. That is all they care about".²⁹

There is a general agreement that the Bedouins' attitudes towards women, like most village-and-city-dwellers, was that they should do the work. It was enough for men to be brave and valiant. Rigid proverbs expressing these attitudes did exist; "by night my wife, by day my she-ass". On this point, inevitable speculation points out the possibility that what made Islam very conservative towards women was the pressure of the ideal of tribal honour stimulated by the conquests of early Islam.

b) Male Prejudice and Exploitative Attitudes: Basically, social traditions have been a primary hindrance for the emancipation of Muslim women. Men little touched by the modern world insist upon maintaining ancient customs with respect to women and other aspects of social life, too. They cannot, for example, abide by the "exposure" of women in Western dresses. For them, it is inconceivable that a decent girl would dress in such a way as to make herself sexually attractive in public. Why should she exhibit her charms if she does not mean to sell or give them away, remains a baffling but "logical" question.

27. Berger, M. *The Arab World Today*, London, 1962, p. 147.

28. Goode, W. *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, New York, 1970., p. 140.

29. Gordon, D. *Women in Algeria, an essay on Change*. Cambridge, University Press. 1968., p. 13.

Furthermore, the Western practice of wearing slacks has eventually been completely rejected. Gulick³⁰ states two reasons for that. One is that men regard such practice as a "usurpation of a symbol of masculine status". The second is that women who wear slacks are assumed to be of loose morals. This has been so interpreted, because females who wear slacks in an Arab Muslim culture are associated with "artists, dancers and pick-ups".

Oftentimes, it is the male's exploitative assumptions and impositions of unfair values, that placed females on a lower scale. Observing wearing the veil does not necessarily provide women with feelings of security, contentment and happiness, as Mr. Zafar, a Muslim scholar, claims.³¹ Such virtues in disguise, is a common feature of the male dominated societies in Muslim countries. The purpose of such outlook is definitely to keep her free from striving for her rights and competing with men in the industrial fields. Worse even, is the fact that this outlook tends to stonewall her natural curiosity, intellect and taboo-free experiences, which most males enjoy.

Zafar furthermore believes that all men and women are not only unequally gifted by nature regarding their physical strength, but also in their mental capacity, endurance and temperament. Like many other Muslim scholars, Zafar volunteers to note, and without any valid grounds, that the mildness of temperament "affect sex organs particularly, and other parts of the body ordinarily".³² Men on the other hand are temperamentally hot, and thus are sexually more powerful and physically stronger; whereas he describes women as frail, delicate and lacking self-control. One, here, tends to ponder on the previous psychological conclusions, and if they are merely an Eastern method of psychological analysis. Moreover, Zafar advocates that husbands, during the pregnancy period, should seek another female in order to satisfy their desires.³³

Other Muslims, have accused women of forgetting their religious duties as if they had no knowledge of the *Sharia*, as well as forgetting her worldly duties "as if she was living all by herself". Fortunately, al-Ghazali, an Egyptian, comes to the defence of women. He notices that

30. Gullick, J. *Social Structure and Culture Change in a Lebanese Village*. New York, Werner Green Foundation, 1955, p. 44.

31. Zafar, M.I. "The observance of Purdah", in *Islamic Literature*, Feb., 1966 p. 30.

32. Zafar, M.I. "Polygamy—a boon" in *Islamic Literature*, March, 1966, p. 21.

33. *ibid.*, p. 21.

the person responsible for such grievances is the male himself. For his misunderstanding of Islam and its implications caused all of the Islamic community to be backward.³⁴ In his opinion, al-Ghazali, is more than sympathetic towards women, whose job, he considers, has been no different from fulfilling his animalistic impulses . . .

What Daghestani says of the impulses of a Syrian male which dominate the sexual relationship, may be extended to the whole Muslim society.

“His jealousy”, he points out “derives from his pride and familial honour rather than from his love”.³⁵

Precisely, because the honour of the male depends on the woman's sexual conduct, men are highly suspicious of women in this sphere Berger maintains, and rather intelligently, that because the women's sexual desires are too strong to be contained, they had to be controlled. If not, they would soon be a disgrace to their Muslim husbands, fathers, etc. As a consequence, they were thought to be justifiably secluded and confined to their own company, being the most effective way of maintaining their “refinement”.³⁶ Naturally, this was more of an interference in their movements than a fostering of their potential capacity; and the subjection and suppression which men exercise is only rationalization of this. Berger further hypothesises that this might also explain the male's sense of guilt while he is continually preoccupied with his own sexual gratification.

At the Muslim Ladies Conference held at *Poona*, India 1924, Muslim women came to the realization of their degradation and inferior status. Reflecting this attitude, the President was the first to deplore the behaviour of Muslim men. She advocated that men had wronged Muhammedan women by neglecting their education, treating them at the most, as a fine piece of delicate furniture, unfit to be moved about. Apparently, men were under the impression that Muhammedan women possessed neither head nor heart, and were meant for nothing more than serving their husbands as cooks, and in a sense they were treated worse than domestic slaves. Worse still, most

34. al Ghazali, M. *al Islam wal Taquat al Mu'attalah* (Islam dysfunctional Piety) Cairo, Dar al Kutub, 1965, p. 130.

35. Daghestani, K. *Etude Sociologique sur la Famille Musulmane Contemporaine en Syri* Paris, 1932, p. 58.

36. Berger, M. *The Arab World Today*, London, 1962, p. 120.

of the women apparently, have been quite satisfied with their miserable fate.³⁷

D. External Influences

A few Muslim scholars however, deny that Islam had anything to do with the degradation of women. Others, like Levy,³⁸ doubt that the harem system and their seclusion began with Islam. Instead, he believes that it originated in Persia. For it was approved by the first interpreters of the Quran who happened to be Persians, and whose authority in Islam flourished at the time of Harun al-Rashid. Therefore, in less than two centuries after the death of the Prophet, the system was fully established and women were shut off from the rest of the world under the charge of Arabian eunuchs.

To summarize, Muslim women for centuries were forced, and under a multiplicity of influences, to obey and submit to their husbands. Muhammed, distinctly regards females to be the inferiors of man, and supplies as one of the reasons for her inferiority, that man uses his wealth to dower her (Quran IV, 38); he also holds that masculine qualities are superior. He grants the husband the right to even beat his disobedient wife. If she commits adultery, he is permitted by custom to put her to death. He can even divorce her at any time and without giving any reason, which is certainly incompatible with all higher cultures, and often taken advantage of.

Even today the life of Muslim women appears to us to be in a very pitiable condition. She takes no part in the society of men, she seldom goes out, and wearing a veil and a certain amount of seclusion are forced upon her by the Quran.³⁹

In short, the fate of woman was not only to be relegated to a secondary status in her society, but to see her very nature as debased. Instead of being regarded as a ray of light, her nature was now seen as defective, false and deceptive.⁴⁰

37. Mott, J. *The Muslim World Today*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1925, p. 253.

38. Levy, R. *The Social Structure of Islam*. Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 127.

39. Ata, A.W. "Prospects and Retrospects on the Role of Muslim Arab Women at Present: trends and tendencies" *Islamic Culture*, Vol. LV, no. 4, 1981.

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