



Muslim Women and Public Life in the Modern Society: An Assessment of Limitations of freedom and Liberty by Islam

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Abstract

Islam appeared to be the very first religion officially to grant the women a status rarely ever known before. The Glorious Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Islam, incorporates countless teachings, which apply equally to men and women alike. Modern life for Muslim women, imply a dual concept: a) Pursuing the main traits of Modernism emerged in the west during the 19th century as a response to the historic transformation in the western life that signified breaking with past including with religion. b) Designing a distinctive role compatible with the Islamic worldview within a sustained and ever- changing environment of the current modern life. Muslim perspective of modernism and role of modern women in Muslim communities and abroad are quite different. This paper will clarify the misconceptions about Islam regarding women rights. It is an earnest appeal that Islam not be judged by observing the conduct of misguided Muslims, but by a careful objective scrutiny of the Glorious Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Also, the highlights the position of women before the advent of Islam and after, the paper further explore the Limitations of freedom, Liberty and Status of Women in Islam. The analytical method is used when conducting the research.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Public Life, Modern Society, Freedom and Liberty.

INTRODUCTION

Modern life for Muslim women, in the view of researcher, may imply a dual concept. The first connotation is that modern Muslim women in an atmosphere of Modernism manage to shape their life style in all spheres, in line with the main traits and inherent characteristics of Modernism, within a peculiar western philosophy emerged in the 19th and early 20th century. We are all aware that the main pillars of the modernism of the past two centuries in the west centers around breaking with past including religion and many modernists rejected religious belief. It was, in one way or another, a revolution against religion and traditional faith.

In contrast, the history of Islamic civilization and religion from the beginning, predominantly, is well indicative of rejection of the text absolutism and instead, the way of *Ijtihad* (strive) and diversity has always been opened to Muslim scholars in an atmosphere of religious openness within the boundaries of submission to Allah. Therefore, In view of the foundational differences between the western history of religion in the west and Islam, Muslim perspective of modernism and role of modern women in Muslim communities and abroad are quite different. This being understood that modern Muslim women have a distinctive role compatible with the Islamic worldview within a sustained and ever- changing environment of the current modern life.

Islam, modernity and modernization

To understand the relationship between Islam and modernity, it is important to begin with an understanding of the religion itself. Generically, Islam is a religion which brings the mission of liberation and salvation. Islam came to the world in order to bring a set of new morality because of its metaphysical and humanitarian characters. It brings not only

vertical dimension teachings, but also horizontal aspects for humanity. It is a teaching deriving from Allah and oriented toward humanity¹.

Modernity and modernization are words that are continuously contested in contemporary Islamic discourse. Modernization, the introduction into society of the artifacts of contemporary life such as communications, technology, or household equipment, has permeated into virtually all societies including Muslims. But modernity, a way of thought and of living in the contemporary world and of change, as part of political and cultural processes by integrating new ideas in to society, may not always be present².

One may be using modern technologies and modern communication system, but maintains a past-oriented closed mindset and resists new ideas of modernity such as democracy or pluralism. The opposite can be true; one may lack modern facilities and live traditionally but adopt the attitudes of modernity.

Muslim Woman from the Qur'an and Sunnah

The woman is a mother and it is said that "Paradise lies under her feet" (reported by Al Tabarani). In an authentic hadith the Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked by a man: 'Who is the one most worthy of my care?'. The Prophet replied: 'Your mother'. The man asked: 'Then whom?'. He replied: 'Your mother'. The man further asked: 'Then whom?'. He replied: 'Your mother'. The man asked: 'Then whom?'. And in this fourth time the Prophet replied: 'Then your father.' This shows that Allah has placed the care of the mother as a primary responsibility of her sons.

Allah, exalted be He, says:

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him and that you be kind to parents. When one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor repel them but address them in terms of honour³.

A woman is also a daughter and sister and like their male brothers, are born of the same lineage and from the same womb: {He bestows female (offspring) upon whom He wills, and bestows male (offspring) upon whom He wills.}⁴

The Prophet (S. A. W) says:

'Women are the (equal) sisters of men'.⁵

A woman is also a wife who is a source of comfort for her husband as he is to her: Allah the almighty says: And among His signs is this that He created wives from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts).⁶

Allah also says:

They are like a garment to you and you are like a garment to them⁷.

Women make up half of society and they are responsible for the nurturing, guidance and reformation of the subsequent generations of men and women. It is the female who imbues principles and faith into the souls of the nation.

Hijab

The word 'Hijab' is basically used for that clothing which plays a role of a drape, while a Muslim woman puts it on to shield her parts of body, such as head, face, chest and or, whole of the body, as she is advised to cover, in the Holy Quran. If we have a look on the Arabic literacy, we find that the word of Hijab or Pardah is meant to be for 'a screen or curtain' and is implemented in the Qur'an to refer to a partition.

The Arabic word 'Hijab' that was used to refer to the Islamic code, is now generally used specifically in English. This is considered as the identity of the Muslim Women in many countries of various continents including the Europe and the USA. It represents the act of obedience to Allah and declares a step forward towards freedom. The freedom that will be jud

¹ L. Z. Munir, Islam, *Modernity and Justice for Women*, Paper presented at the Islam and Human Rights Fellow Lecture, October 14, 2003, organized by the Islam and Human Rights Project, School of Law, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. 2003, P. 2

² Ibid, P. 2

³ Qur'an, 17: 23.

⁴ Qur'an, 42: 49.

⁵ S. A. Dawud, Sunan Abi Dawud, A. Abdulkhair et-tal (eds), Dar al-Hadith. 2003, Hadith NO> 234, and also see Tirmidhi Hadith, NO. 113.

⁶ Qur'an, 30: 21

⁷ Qur'an, 2: 187

ged by their look rather than their intelligence⁸ Commands on modesty, and hijab have also been put together over women in such a way that, **Allah says:**
And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest and to display their adornment only that which is apparent⁹.

In this verse, Allah instructs women to put on hijab in such a way that all of her body parts are screened including her gaze. She is advised even to keep her trimming secret except that which is obvious, while she moves out of the home. It is forbidden for her to expose herself to the illicit men. This is the way to keep maintained her honour and respect in the society, and to introduce her as a modest woman, and therefore to protect her from the mischief of forbidden man.

It is however clear that if one obeys Allah and follows the commands and instructions according to the advised ways, either a male or a female, he/she will be cheered by a great reward and honour in this world and hereafter. In the same way if someone becomes disobedient to Allah and betrays the instructions of Islam and becomes dishonest, then Allah is the great observer and He knows everything that is visible or invisible. He even knows what makes one think, and all that is present in the hearts of people. No one is responsible for the evil deeds of others and, each one has his and her own responsibility of deeds.

All of such above quoted verses instruct women to put on hijab and to follow the directed way that is righteous and leads towards paradise. It is cleared that immodest and unrestricted gazing pay very important rule to motivate the desire of sex. This evil act attracts very fast to two sexes' (man and woman) mind and heart, and woman gazing creates more mischief. Woman is by nature gushier and easily taken away. Therefore, command is being given to women that they save their modesty and haya (shame) and keep their eyes down.

Application of Hijab as Religious Identity and Expression of Observant Muslim

The application and the extent of covering vary from community to community. Prusher argues that today, reasons for veiling are as varied as the types of covering women wear, from the long robes and colourful scarves in the North African countries to the black-on-black garb of the conservative Gulf states. The purpose on the whole is modesty for both men and women. Modesty rules are open to a wide range of interpretations. Some Muslim women wear full body garments that only expose their eyes. Some cover every part of the body except their face and hands. Some believe only their hair or their cleavage is compulsory to hide, and others do not observe any special dress rules¹⁰. The modesty as is the result in both sexes being evaluated on the ground of intelligence and skills, rather than appearance and sexuality. The modesty of hijab for women does not only constitute the covering of the body, but general behaviour, manners, speech and appearance in public. Dress is only one facet of the total being. It is therefore, hijab is taken as a symbolic application presenting an understanding of the general status and rights of women in Islam.

Difference between Islamic way of public life of a Muslim Women and modern Public Life of some Muslim Women

Muslim women contribute to all the activities of society, and have the right to work in the various jobs they afford to perform, on equal footing with men. What Islam specifically ordains is the preservation of women's chastity and keeping them away from indecency, caring for their dignity and protecting society against decadence and depravity. The better the Muslim society can provide a field of work specific to women, the closer it becomes from the Islamic pathway, and if it loses the means for that, it should strive to provide female unity as much as possible. Muslims do not build mosques specific for men and others specific for women; rather, they separate men's place from women's within one mosque. This shows a tendency to simplification and facilitation instead of complication and deprivation.

In these very surroundings, the primary vital and the essential prerequisite is that a contemporary-day Muslim girl wishes to have an experience of duty in the direction of herself, her own circle of relatives and her network wherein she leaves. A crucial detail for a contemporary-day girl on this path, just like the pioneer Muslim ladies in Islam, is to apprehend surrounding surroundings which include the dynamic and influential forces that have an effect in shaping the existence of ladies in a globalized world¹¹. Women have to undertake to rent those forces with inside the excellent hobby of themselves and the societies wherein they stay so one can creating an extrude consistent with the Islamic attitude of peace and prosperity.

⁸ S. Omar, Women in Islam (Frequently Asked Questions), International Muslim Women Union (IMWU) Pakistan. 2012, PP. 12-13.

⁹ Qur'an, 24: 31.

¹⁰ Ali, M., The Question of hijab: Suppression and Liberation. Islamic Academy for Scientific Research, Chicago: The Institute of Islamic Information and Education, 2001, p (available on internet: <http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/womn/hijab.htm>. date of access 25/08/2016

In view of the above and to put into effect the considerations outlined, the researcher try to identify the areas on which the Muslim modern women, should focus and take into account when they act to make progress¹¹. These areas may constitute the theoretical foundational approach needed to be looked at by modern women as a point of departure:

1. Emancipation from a pure individualist, self-centered and egoistic vision of the modern life. Women's interests, like men, are defined in conjunction with the rest of humanity. Quran provides that:

And among His signs is this that He created wives from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts)¹².

Women in Islam are not considered commodities, sexual or otherwise and commercial tools. Women in Islam are not the instrument of pleasure and sexual satisfaction, even though they claim the so called "rights/choice" within the sexual partnership and the ownership of their body as may be understood from some international human rights literature. One other important point is that women and men in Islam do not compete with each other for their individualist desires, rather they complement each other for the best interest of themselves, their family and their community.

In fact, women and men are equal human beings in Islam. Quran ordains:

No one, neither man nor woman, is superior to the other before the Creator, but with the power of *Taqwa*. Men and women are equal human beings but with different responsibilities in some aspects of the development within the family and society. The institution of family is the fundamental unit of society.

2. Emancipation from unleashed and irresponsible liberalism in all aspects of life. Freedoms should be understood within the Islamic perspective in a balanced manner. All human beings are born free by the Almighty. No one can impose restriction on human freedom illegitimately. This is the rule and not the exception. However, rights and freedoms come with corresponding responsibilities. Rights and freedoms of women should not result in kind of utilitarianist approach.

Within the above description of the global situation, the following areas are critical ones, in my view, for Muslim women to follow and take action to build a modern Muslim society:

- a) Peace and security: Women as a dynamic and constructive force need to engage in peace making and peace building activities in their own societies and abroad in all aspects. The first step in this regard is to denounce the sense, tendency and practice of militarism which brought destructive consequences for Muslim women and children and the entire populations. Those who wage wars in countries should be held accountable for the devastating consequences.
- b) Poverty eradication: This very important mission can be accomplished through diverse local, national and international means. Participation in decision making in economic development of their countries, providing development mechanisms with technical studies and advice, advocacy and activities at the grass root level and drawing in international cooperation and stressing on the principle of accountability for the foreign stakeholders are among the measures women can take.¹³
- c) Education: Women as educators and trainers as well as the target of education should be empowered within a Prophetic modern society. Women with their human virtues are the best educators to upbringing the future generations¹⁴. The early phases of the children's life are pivotal in education and training which women can highly contribute to. Women are also capable of designing, planning and implementing educational strategies.

Limitations of freedom, Liberty and Status of Women in Islam

It is not an overstatement to say that Islam is the first religion in the world to offer a system for the protection and well-being of women and their rights. This system is absolutely perfect. It offers her dignity, respect, and equal status as men.

In the Holy Qur'an, Allah Almighty instructs both men and women separately and collectively regarding their role, duties, and responsibilities both as men/women and as a practicing Muslim. These instructions throw light on the purpose of the creation of both genders. They also provide guidelines using which will ensure the safeguard of the chastity and modesty of both the creations as this is important for the sustenance of the society. Allah Almighty says in the Holy Qur'an:

He created you from one soul. Then He made from it its mate¹⁵.

¹¹ Ibid, PP. 38–39

¹² Qur'an, 30: 21

¹³ P. Lewis, *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Op. Cit, P. 3.

¹⁴ Ibid, P. 3.

¹⁵ Qur'an, 39: 9

O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed, Allah is ever, over you, an Observer¹⁶.

It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her. And when he covers her, she carries a light burden and continues therein. And when it becomes heavy, they both invoke Allah, their Lord¹⁷.

And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between your affection and mercy. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought¹⁸.

Islam teaches to be thankful to Allah (The Almighty) for all the countless blessings He bestowed upon us:

And Allah has extracted you from the wombs of your mothers not knowing a thing, and He made for you hearing and vision and intellect that perhaps you would be grateful¹⁹.

Therefore, Islam pays attention to all details regarding the role of women in society, their relationship with men as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. It provides a charter of rules and regulation to make sure that women are protected and respected in every possible scenario in society.

Women make up half of society and they are responsible for the nurturing, guidance and reformation of the subsequent generations of men and women. It is the female who imbues principles and faith into the souls of the nation.

There is no direct or indirect text in the Islamic Law (*Shari'ah*) that even remotely suggests that women are inherently evil or impure as found in some distorted creeds that attribute lies to Allah. In fact, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said in an authentic hadith that 'A believer is never impure'.

CONCLUSION

Muslim women contribute to all the activities of society, and have the right to work in the various jobs they afford to perform, on equal footing with men. What Islam specifically ordains is the preservation of women's chastity and keeping them away from indecency, caring for their dignity and protecting society against decadence and depravity.

Women are entitled to have access to various occupations, except for the supreme religious leadership (*Imama*) and judgeship, according to the consensus of Muslim scholars. The exception concerning judgeship has been open to debate among scholars such as al-Tabari, Ibn al-Kassim or Ibn hazm. Similarly, the *Imama* and judgeship are still open to debate among a group of contemporary scholars; which requires jurisprudence over the whole matter, in line with the supreme interests of the *Ummah*.

Islam encourages women to acquire knowledge, allows them what it allows men in social and economic dealings, and does not deprive them of enjoying marriage and procreation. Therefore, it has equipped women to be the nucleus of the family and an active member in the progress of societies. Islam compels the Muslim society to provide education for men and women on equal footing. The prophet (peace be upon him) said:

Seeking Knowledge is prescribed upon each and every Muslim²⁰

In the same way Islam obliges parents to honor their material obligations, it induces them to take care of their children's intellectual and moral build up, i.e. primary training, and moral and social education, so as the younger generations could integrate society as soundly as to be able to develop and prosper. Hence, parents are responsible for educating their male and female children, and education includes religious knowledge and the general knowledge that would help people to integrate society to earn their living and preserve their dignity. Education also includes any discipline that would be of use to people and to their societies. Islam cares for women's chastity and protecting them against deviants.

Islam honors and respects women, it maintains that achievement of Heaven and Allah's grace lies in serving and respecting one's mother, Islam regards daughters as the blessing of Allah and so on. Undoubtedly, in Islam, women enjoy great status, and receive all their rights. Surely, this paper clarified the misconceptions about Islam regarding women rights. It is an earnest appeal that Islam not be judged by observing the conduct of misguided Muslims, but by a careful objective scrutiny of the Glorious Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

¹⁶ Qur'an, 4: 1

¹⁷ Qur'an, 7: 189

¹⁸ Qur'an, 30: 21

¹⁹ Qur'an, 16: 78

²⁰ Muslim

Therefore, to be realistic and constructive they need to seek for the solutions commensurate with the characteristics of the Muslim societies and their history, responsive to the modern and emerging threats and challenges and congenial with the changing environment and above all, within the value disciplines introduced by the Allah Almighty through Quran and other legitimate Islamic sources.

Consequently, modern Muslim women as the first step need to have a good knowledge of the process of globalization in all its branches, economic to cultural and social, particularly social media, and identify the driving forces influential in shaping the real life in different communities in Islamic world. The areas of concern such as “peace and security”, “poverty eradication”, “education” and last but not least “science and technology”, in the view of the researcher, are the key ones to be tackled by modern Muslim women.

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