

## Monolithic Interpretation of the Qur'an: Revisiting Selected Verses on Women

### Penafsiran Monolitik Al- Qur'an: Peninjauan Ayat-Ayat Tertentu Mengenai Wanita

Mariya Seemin Khan\*, & Rosnani Hashim\*\*

#### Abstract

Numerous Qur'anic verses such as 2:187, 4:19, 4:34, 7:189, and 30:21 deal with and address women, inspiring positively that women have serious role to play in the development of society. But it seems interpretation of these verses have been influenced by male chauvinism. Most of the Muslim scholars, early as well as contemporary, have tried to prove on the basis of these verses inferiority of womenfolk. This paper represents a humble effort to reflect on the related verses with a view to deriving positive messages rather than negative.

**Keywords:** Monolithic, the Qur'an, Muslim Scholars, Interpretation, Womenfolk.

#### Abstrak

Kebanyakan ayat-ayat Al-Quran seperti 2:187, 4:19, 4:34, 7:189, dan 30:21 berurusan dengan wanita, memberi inspirasi positif bahawa wanita memainkan peranan yang penting dalam pembangunan masyarakat. Tetapi tafsiran ayat-ayat ini kelihatan seperti ia dipengaruhi oleh kaum lelaki. Kebanyakan para ulama Islam, yang awal dan kontemporari, telah cuba untuk membuktikan kerendahan wanita berdasarkan ayat-ayat ini. Kajian ini merupakan satu usaha untuk memikirkan mengenai ayat-ayat yang berkaitan dengan tujuan untuk memperoleh mesej yang positif dan bukannya negatif.

**Kata Kunci:** Monolitik, Al- Qur'an, Ulama Islam, Penafsiran, Kaum Wanita.

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\* Mariya Seemin Khan completed her Ph.D in the field of Educational Psychology, Kulliyah of Education, IIUM.

\*\* Professor in the Kulliyah of Education, IIUM.

### Introduction

Education leads man to critical reflection upon his surroundings so as to become wary of injustices in the society. As educated Muslim women living in today's complex world, the authors have chosen to examine Muslim society closely and reflect on the foundation that it is laid upon – the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet (s.a.w.). The message of the Sublime Qur'an – Allah's own Voice -- never ceases to amaze human beings because it is full of mercy and kindness towards the entire humanity particularly womenfolk. Allah's Love and Kindness are abundantly manifest in the story of Maryam who received Allah's infinite mercy while undergoing severe trials and tests in carrying and giving birth to a child without male intervention. In the case of Nusaibah bint Ka'b one could see another striking example of the mercy of Allah towards womenfolk. She came to the Prophet (s.a.w.) and made observation that in the Qur'an everything was for men and that nothing was mentioned therein for and about the women. As reported in the sources (Tirmidhī, Vol. 1, Book 44, Hadith 3211), Allah validated her concern by revealing the verse, *“Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward”* (the Qur'an 33:35). However, it seems the situation of Muslim women in general in the Muslim world is completely at odds with the reality of the Muslim women during the Prophet's (s.a.w.) time. Probably, one of the main reasons for this scenario is the interpretation of the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions which has largely been a male endeavor. Muslim men studied and interpreted the message of Islam and shaped its adaptation into practice. Even though Muslim women during the Prophet's (s.a.w.) time played a significant role in the early transmission of *ḥadīth*, they were subsequently

marginalized from the interpretation of both religious Scripture and the law.

The Qur'an is the Last Divine Message to mankind. It constitutes a direct communication from Allah Who engages in conversation with humans reciting it and reflect upon it. Every verse possesses multiple layers of meaning that need to be pondered upon and explored in order to unravel its original and relevant imports. Those who read its verses without understanding them or reflecting upon them are often satisfied with the crudest literal translation of a verse without feeling the need to go deeper. It may come as a surprise to many but the Qur'an is the only religious text that addresses women in particular. The Last Prophet (s.a.w.) reminded his people (*ummah*) explicitly to take care of their women. Yet the patriarchal system of Muslim society effectively limited the understanding of this religion and proved quite ineffective in establishing the rights of the women. These male-centered interpretations of religion also proved detrimental for Muslim women as they focused exclusively on verses and *ḥadīths* that maintained the status quo and protected the privileges the men of society were accustomed to. The paramount verse in this respect is of course verse 34 from *Sūrah al-Nisā'* (4:34) which appears to have become cornerstone for the debates on Muslim women and their place in Muslim society. One could be appalled at persistently quoted *ḥadīths* that women constitute nothing but temptation (*fitnah*) for men; that women are inherently flawed and deficient beings; and that women cannot be leaders. Numerous other Qur'anic verses which address women and inspire very positive associations with Muslim womanhood, however, have remained persistently neglected, such as 30:21, 2:187, 4:34, 4:19 and 7:189.

This paper seeks to re-examine the interpretation of these Qur'anic verses and Prophetic *ḥadīths* in order to shed new light on women's issues from a Muslim perspective, the perspective of Muslim women, that is, supported by the views of those Muslim men and scholars who champion the cause of Muslim women. The world is in a perpetual state of change and our perspectives change along with it. What changes is not *what* we look at but *how* we look at it. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of

massive emigration of Muslims who decided to leave the East and settle in the West. Today, a significant number of educated Muslims have been born and raised in Western society. The world as we know has become a global village where nearly everyone enjoys internet access and instant democratization is taking place through this revolution in communications. Nowadays, Muslims do not live isolated from the rest of the world and can no longer pretend to live in their own bubble – content with their own accustomed and often un-reflected ways. Today’s generation has to face an entirely different set of challenges and worldviews. Thus, when today’s Muslims read and interpret the Qur’an, they have to rediscover Islam’s own authentic message and rediscover the voices of those early Muslim men and women who understood their acceptance of Islam as life-changing event, a truer way of understanding and living life in direct response to revelation. The Qur’an is not just a book containing stories of the past (*asātīr al-awwalīn*). It is a book that recognizes the present and affects change in the present – right here and right now: “We have certainly sent down to you a book in which is your mention. Will you then not reason?” (Qur’an 21:10).

### **Educated Muslim Women: The Agent of Change**

The prevalent monolithic approach to the Qur’an when it comes to women can be explained with the fact that the voices of the women were excluded from the Islamic narrative. Men are not women and thus cannot comprehend or adequately express the female viewpoint. A man, even a scholar of the highest caliber, can never fully comprehend life as seen through the eyes of a woman and thus cannot speak on her behalf as his limited perspective is reflected in his reading of the religious text. For example, a Muslim jurist who condemns Muslim women refusing to wear a head scarf judges from his narrow point of view but fails to acknowledge the numerous internal struggles and reservations Muslim women have when confronting this issue. Muslim men are not required to dress in such a way as would readily identify them as Muslims to anyone passing by in the street. Muslim men do not know what it feels like

to literally become a walking billboard of Muslim womanhood and Islam. Muslim women who wear the headscarf make a public statement which has immediate consequences. The headscarf determines whether they will find work or not, whether they will be treated with respect or with suspicion and contempt, whether they are considered educated or not – depending on the society they live in. Muslim men do not have to deal with such issues. They are not required to wear a turban everywhere they go – whether to university, the office or the shopping mall. Conscientious Muslim women do not have the luxury to mix with everybody else; they stand out from the rest and draw attention to themselves and their identity – whether they want it or not. Unlike their sisters in the West, Muslim women in traditional Muslim societies, on the other hand, face a completely different set of challenges connected with the headscarf. It may be that they find themselves forced to wear very traditional clothes which restricts their movements, limits their mobility – not for the sake of Allah but for the sake of a repressive society.

Muslim voices have to include the voices of Muslim women. The absence of the experiences of Muslim women from the Islamic narrative has raised other questions as well. More and more critical Muslim minds are questioning the authority and authenticity of certain *ḥadīths* which have been used to justify the inferior position of women in Muslim society. A growing number of educated Muslims have started to realize that certain *ḥadīths* were promoted and cited more often than others, and that genuine *ḥadīths* which expressed favorable and praiseworthy behavior towards women were being neglected and overlooked – even though they possessed a stronger chain of transmission.

Muslim religious jurists and scholars have written extensively on women's issues. However, it were always the Muslim men who knew better, Muslim women had not much say on their own issues. Muslim women are used to being told what to do, how to feel, how to be treated and how to accept the often unacceptable. On one hand, we have Muslim religious activists and reformists like Syed Maudūdī (1972) who – according to his simplistic and regressive approach – preached that women had to remain within the four walls of their homes (“A good woman only

leaves her home on two occasions – when she leaves her father’s house on her wedding day and on her funeral”), bear children and obey their husbands. On the other hand, visionaries like the progressive Qāsim Amīn (2000) insist that in order for Muslim society – or any society for that matter -- to prosper, men and women had to enjoy equal rights. Decade after decade, detailed lists of the countless duties of Muslim women have been penned and propagated. The status of women in Islam has been explained, discussed and analyzed in great length by Muslim men. Astonishingly, we do not find a similar intense effort explaining, discussing and analyzing the countless duties of Muslim men in Islam. When it comes to gender relations and marriage, the focus remains tilted strongly to the male side, the men’s rights over their women and the women’s duties towards their men.

From a strictly male viewpoint, what defines a Muslim woman is how she dresses and her role as someone’s daughter, wife and mother. In other words, what defines a woman is not so much her own person, her strengths, her weaknesses, her talents, her knowledge, her skills but the role she plays in relation to the men around her. Verse 34 of *Sūrah al-Nisā’* quickly became the standard, the banner under which all discussions on women in Islam were held. Muslim scholars all too often reflected their own traditional norms and values when interpreting Islamic sources and used the Qur’an to justify these convictions. Syed Mawdūdī’s book “*Purdah*” made ample use of Qur’anic rhetoric to drive home his views and overrule any objections. The learned opinion of certain scholars were and still are taken at face value and accepted unquestioningly. In fact, since Islamic law is based on divine law and any criticism or view which offers an alternative interpretation and narrative that is disfavored by the male mainstream opinion is immediately discredited and cast aside. One is reminded of the ‘Abbasid caliph who offered to make Imām Mālik’s *Muwatta’* the law of the land, an honor which Imām Mālik rejected to accept arguing that one individual jurist should never lay an exclusive claim on the truth. Also, one school of law should not be supported by the state to the exclusion of another in order to practice tolerance and encourage critical thinking. And yet, here we are, elevating

our limited and often quite rudimentary understanding of God's law as definitive, as finite and limited in scope and application according to our own intellectual limitations. It is as though we have once and for all refuted 1,400 years of scholarship, of lively discussion, of difference of opinion, heated debates and lively disputes – and all that after processing one speck of anecdotal information on one issue by one author. We Muslims have even gone as far as to brush off criticism of Muslim society and our actions as a criticism of the very Qur'an and Sunnah that came to humble us, to correct our ways, to affect change in us, not make us complacent and proud. If a brilliant scholar such as Imām Mālik was not certain enough of his own knowledge to claim it to be true and the only truth, then how is it that our own claim on the truth makes us deny the possibility that our view might be wrong – or at least not the only correct one, only one plausible truth among many? Has today's Muslim society and civilization already progressed to such heights of perfection that we are no longer in need of correction and guidance? How come then that we accept only those facets of Islam as true which affirm our own understanding of things, justify our own agendas and validate our own cultural norms? To whom are we ascribing divinity top and unquestionable authority, to Allah or to ourselves, our own limited scope of understanding and insight?

Muslim women today approach the Qur'an in a new light and have begun searching for answers to their questions. Who is a woman in Islam supposed to be? What is her purpose in life? What is her goal in life? What are her rights? What are her duties? What does the Qur'an say in these matters? What did the Prophet (s.a.w.) say regarding these issues? We Muslim women do no longer wish to be told what to think, how to interpret our own Islamic traditions. They constitute our means of guidance, too, and they are not exclusively owned by our men. We Muslim women are no longer satisfied with getting to know Islam through second hand sources and filtered male perceptions. Controversial verses such as *Sūrah al-Nisā'*:34 have raised new questions and raised more questions than provided answers. For example, is there a way to look at verses like this in a new light, from a fresh perspective? The interpretations of reli-

gious source texts such as the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions always reflect the world view of the interpreter. Therefore, the act of interpretation has to be continuously renewed and repeated over and over again, until the end of time. Interpretation constitutes an active process which links the vast divine Truth to the subjectivity of the limited human mind. Slavery and the permitted sexual relations a man could entertain with his female slave, for example, appear outrageous and outlandish to us today but for someone living 1300 years ago, it reflected common practice and did not even raise an eyebrow. The same applies in my opinion to the issue of women's rights in Islam. As the world around us changes, our perspectives change, and Muslim perspectives change, too.

Most Muslim women – no matter how educated and successful they are in their profession and how prominent role they play in their society -- are reluctant to discuss women's issues in public. They do not wish to question (male) religious authority in the form of official imams or popular authors and speakers who have earned a name for themselves and often gathered a national or even worldwide following.

However, the Qur'an must not be understood in a one-sided manner and purely monolithically. In many cases, Qur'anic verses are open to diverse interpretations which can accommodate various viewpoints. In this respect, Yūsuf al-Qardāwī states that the reason for so many different rulings narrated from Imam Ahmad on one issue is because the latter's rulings changed in response to the different situations and circumstances he encountered in each case. Unfortunately, this rigorous intellectual flexibility is lacked by most Muslim scholars today. It seems that they do not possess the same confidence in their own depth of knowledge and insight that they do not dare to be more flexible in their views. Perhaps it is considered the strength of a Muslim scholar today to be rigid and inflexible in his views.

In her *Qur'an and Woman*, the Muslim feminist Aminah Wadud (1993) analyses the concept of justice in the Qur'an. She argues that too many of the Qur'anic verses and words have been falsely used to seemingly condone female oppression. She argues that most of the issues



mentioned in the Qur'an were practical solutions revealed to solve particular problems of the early Muslim community. Thus, these verses do not represent universal principles applicable to all women of all times. Wadud draws the reader's attention to many cases of careless, restrictive, and oppressive interpretations of Qur'anic terms and contexts and demonstrates, at times, very convincingly why careful and contextualized readings are necessary, especially when their consequences are as damaging as they have proven to be for women in most Muslim societies.

Wadud emphasizes that the achievement of social justice constitutes one of the major aims of the Qur'anic message. Hence, if Muslims are to strive for social justice, it becomes absolutely necessary to challenge patriarchy and replace it with a more egalitarian system which encourages the equal participation of all groups within a society. Furthermore, she argues, if Muslims are convinced that the Qur'an is valid for all people of all times, then they must take the changing times and societies into consideration, particularly where the roles of women and men are concerned. Different cultures may have propagated different roles for its members but Islam is not culture, and culture is not Islam. At many occasions, Wadud has called for the re-interpretation of the Qur'anic text. Such a mighty endeavor will require a growing number of authoritative female Qur'an commentators (*muffasirāt*, not *mufassirūn*) who are confident enough to take up such a challenge.

Our research calls to attention the daily struggles of educated Muslim women and professionals. The society at large needs to be made aware of these challenges as the achievements by women do not come without any social cost (Hashim, 2003). Wadud's views are undoubtedly controversial because they are uncomfortably demanding and highly critical. She has met with much rejection, opposition and outright hatred directed against her by established male Muslim scholars who found her demand to re-interpret the Qur'an outrageous, even blasphemous. Wadud did admittedly make matters worse and did not help her case when she decided to lead a mixed congregation of Muslims in prayer which constituted an open violation of established Islamic law touching the most sensitive of all aspects of it, that is, the matters of worship. Regrettably, this

highly confrontational and publicized event discredited Wadud in the eyes of many progressive Muslim hopefuls and also discredited those who had supported her in the demand for gender equality in Islam. Kausar's (2006) *Muslim Women at the Crossroads* discusses pressing issues which have been previously ignored by her male colleagues. She confronts all those Muslim scholars whom she found to be hopelessly biased towards women and accuses them of having spread misogyny in their society and encouraged traditional Muslims in their resistance against rational change and reform.

Lamiya al-Faruqi's (1987) *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* addresses the role and rights of Muslim women in general and such gender-specific issues as marriage, parenthood, polygamy and divorce. She observes: "These women of early Islam were not veiled. They were enjoined by Islam to be proprietors, but they were never told to live lives of segregation and isolation. It is obvious from the following passages (the Qur'an, 33: 35; 24:30-31) that the Qur'an enjoins on both men and women the same sense of modesty." (p. 9). Faruqi discusses the remarkable mobility and independence of the first generation of Muslim women who lived in the days of the Prophet (s.a.w.). She adds, "Lectures of the Prophet were attended by audiences of both men and women; and by the time of the Prophet's death, there were many women scholars." (p. 37). Faruqi (n.d) also discussed the issue of gender equality in Islam in her article "Islamic Traditions and the Feminist Movement: Confrontation or Cooperation?" She uses the Qur'an to show that the original Islamic teachings do not contain any notion of gender distinction or discrimination and unequivocally support male-female equity such as the Qur'anic verse, "For men who submit [to God] and for women who submit [to God], for believing men and believing women, for devout men and devout women, for truthful men and truthful women, for steadfast men and steadfast women, for humble men and humble women, for charitable men and charitable women, for men who fast and women who fast, for men who guard their chastity and women who guard [their chastity], for men who remember God much and for women who remember - for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward" (the Qur'an, 33:35)

and, "Whoever performs good deeds, whether male or female and is a believer, We shall surely make him live a good life and We will certainly reward them for the best of what they did" (the Qur'an, 16:97). Faruqi (n.d) further shows that Allah reproaches anyone who believes women are inferior to men (the Qur'an, 16:57-59) and repeatedly urges the men and women to treat each other equitably (the Qur'an, 2:228, 231; 4:19). She stresses that any fault within a Muslim society lay not in Islam itself but in the Muslims' failure to adhere to its principles. She says, "Therefore, if Muslim women experience discrimination in any place or time, they do not and should not lay the blame on Islam, but on the un-Islamic nature of their societies and the failure of Muslims to fulfill its directives" (p. 4).

### **Revisiting the Qur'an and the Prophetic *Sunnah***

#### **1. Verse 4:34 and Verse 30:21**

Verse 34 of the fourth *Surah* entitled "The Women" (*al-Nisā'*) is probably the most commonly misquoted and misunderstood verse of the entire Qur'anic text. Interestingly, this verse is not only misquoted in the polemics written by skeptical non-Muslims – often with the malicious intent to mar the reputation of Islam and provide irrefutable evidence that the oppression of women is contained in its most fundamental source text, the Qur'an. Also, a number of Muslim writers and speakers on Islam also refer to this particular verse in order to propagate their own fundamentalist agenda which usually promotes strict gender segregation of society which pushes women to the outer fringes of public life and find their sole fulfillment in reproduction and home making, in short to deny women their rightful place in Muslim society. The verse in question reads:

*"Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than the later, and with what they may spend out of their possessions. And the righteous women are the truly devout ones, who guard the intimacy which God has [ordained to be] guarded. And as for those women whose ill will you have reasons to fear, admonish them [first]; then leave them alone in bed; then beat them; and if thereupon they pay you heed, do not seek to harm*

*them. Behold, God is indeed most high, great!*" (Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*).

I have chosen Muhammad Asad's interpretation here but it is worth mentioning that there exist many variants which depend to a certain extent on what the interpreters wanted the original meaning to be. The most contested term in the context of this particular verse is the Arabic word *qawwāmūn*. According to popular opinion, this verse undoubtedly puts men on a higher level than women and thus categorically as superior to women by nature. Men are thus understood as the leaders of their homes and families, and in extension the leaders of society. However, Allah's words "*Men are the qawwāmūn of women*" actually mean that men are liable and are held responsible for the women under their care. A husband, therefore, has the responsibility of taking care of his wife, protecting her, defending her honor, and fulfilling her needs regarding her religion and her worldly life. It does not mean, as all too many people erroneously assume, that he has the right to behave obstinately towards her, subject her to his will, suppress her individuality, and thus deny her own identity and status as a mature individual. His status as protector and maintainer is pure responsibility, pure liability and not so much a position of authority. It requires of him that he uses his good sense, carefully think about what he does, and exercise patience. It means that he cannot be whimsical, hasty, egotistic and offhanded in his decisions. It does not mean that he can disregard his wife's opinions and wishes or belittle her good person.

It is not our intent here at this point to debate the contested interpretations of the word *qawwāmūn*. Rather our intent is to ask why this verse which can be easily misinterpreted and turned to the disadvantage of women has been given preference over verse 30:21 which possesses a much more unmistakable positive message: "*And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought*" or verse 2:187 which reads "... *They are a cover for you and you are a cover for them ...* " or verse

7:189 which reads *“It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her”* or verse 4:19: *“O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion. And do not make difficulties for them in order to take [back] part of what you gave them unless they commit a clear immorality. And live with them in kindness. For if you dislike them - perhaps you dislike a thing and Allah makes therein much good”*.

One single verse in the Qur'an (4:34) has become the rallying point and banner under which Muslim men gather in order to defend their superior status. This verse has been subjected to much heated debate among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Muslim scholars quote this verse again and again to assign Muslim women a subservient place in Muslim society. This verse is repeatedly used to define the relationship between a husband and wife. Thus, if the status of women is indeed inferior to the status of men, then it follows that the duties of a wife outweigh her rights, and in turn the rights of a husband outweigh his duties. The verse in discussion has become the framework to design all the laws pertaining to Muslim women.

Another verse of the Qur'an 30:21 remains conveniently ignored which emphasizes the equal status of men and women. This is a familiar phenomenon whereby one verse is given more prominence than another and thus is used to support one particular viewpoint while disregarding another. The selection of verses is in itself an indication of a scholar's own subjective views on controversial matters such as the status of women in Islam. It also serves as an example of how Islam is often used as nothing short of a manipulative tool to serve a particular party's interest. The verse in question, also quoted earlier, is: *“Among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility (sakinah) with them, and He has put love (mawaddah) and mercy (rahmah) between your (hearts)...”* (the Qur'an, 30:21). Why then was verse 4:34 elevated to the status of principal one which establishes the entire framework of marriage and gender relations and completely overshadows verse 30:21? Instead of being taught to act as a mercy for each other and a source of tranquility and mutual affection and support,

men are taught that they have the right to expect a woman's subservience to them and their right to subdue them and use them.

The one-sided and narrow interpretation of this one verse was also given preference over the Prophet's (s.a.w.) own example during his lifetime. In turn, the women's role in the family and in the society continues to stand in stark contrast to the way the Muslim women of the early period of Islam during the Prophet's time lived their lives and understood themselves. 'Ā'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) is a perfect example of how headstrong, knowledgeable and independent the women had been in the early days of Islam. During the controversial battle in Muslim history, she emerged riding a camel to lead the troops. She was known for her assertive temperament and sense of humor. She commanded the respect of the society. After the Prophet's (s.a.w.) death, 'Ā'ishah went on to remain actively engaged in the transmission of knowledge and the affairs of her community. The Companions of the Prophet (s.a.w.), including the senior-most like 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb consulted her in almost all matters. She was known as the most knowledgeable in Islamic law, medicine, and Arabic poetry (Ibn al-Athīr, 1997: 5/341-344). Later interpretations of Islamic traditions which were almost exclusively authored by men obliterated these precious female voices of the past and thus robbed the subsequent generations of Muslim women of the chance to emulate these early examples and become another 'Ā'ishah or another Khadījah. If we dare to imagine verse 30:21 to be the most quoted verse on women in Islam, how different would our society now be? How much more just and harmonious would it be?

## 2. Hijab verse 24:30-31

This verse constitutes another example of how Qur'anic text is being used to propagate certain one-sided and narrow interpretations of Islamic law. Some Muslim scholars are not only guilty of reducing the notion of *hijab* in Islam to the mere wearing of a headscarf, they have also restricted it to Muslim women. Numerous debates and efforts are rallied behind "correcting the women" when actually in the context of Islamic morality the *hijab* applies to both men and women. The verse 24:30-31

reads, “Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is well-acquainted with what they do. And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed.”

This verse stipulates that both the men and the women are responsible to guard their eyes as well as their bodies, and yet in the Muslim world only the women have been made responsible for the *hijab*. Our society, our scholars and our leaders dexterously manumitted the Muslim men of all responsibilities pertaining to the *hijab*. Boys or men in our society are not asked to lower their gaze as a command from Allah, rather the women are told to dress in certain ways to shield themselves from the (often deliberately) scrutinizing gaze of men. Muslim men have not been taught that they are going to be held accountable of their gaping or even lustful stares. Muslim girls, on the other hand, are taught that they are accountable for their dress modus operandi in the eyes of Allah. If we Muslims emphasized on the men's *hijab* as much as we emphasize the women's *hijab*, our women would have been safe from harassment in our streets because our men would have learned to practice inner restraint and learn to respect women.

### 3. Ḥadīth against Female Rulers

“When news reached the Prophet (s.a.w.) that the Persians had appointed Chosroe's daughter as their ruler, he said: "A nation which

*placed its affairs in the hands of a woman shall never prosper!”* (al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, *ḥadīth* no. 4425).

This *ḥadīth* is another example which convincingly illustrates how the deprivation of women’s narratives from the Qur’anic interpretation has led to subjugation of Muslim women. It clearly indicates the Prophet’s stern disapproval of women assuming leadership positions, especially that of head of state. Even in leadership positions at work, women have to prove more than their worth and ability than men. This problem of gender discrimination and unequal opportunities is obviously a problem shared by women over the world and across all religions. However, Muslim women have to overcome even higher and thicker barriers because Islamic core tradition seems to speak against it. Women who thus assume leadership positions in their societies not only go against their cultural mainstream but also seem to go against religion itself. This often-quoted *ḥadīth* has always been interpreted out of context and thus its original meaning and purpose were misconstrued. According to the commentaries, the Prophet (s.a.w.) had made this remark in specific relation to the Sassanid Empire, at the time ruled by the sisters Azarmidokht and Borandukht. At the time, the Sassanid Empire was at the verge of collapse and the Sassanids had never been ruled by women before. The Persian populace was revolting which led to civil war (Ibn Ḥajar, 2000: 8/160-161). Assassinations were instigated by both women in order to establish some semblance of political order but failed.

The important point to remember is that the Prophet was referring specifically to this context, and not as a general rule, contrary to what others may wish or argue for. In the Qur’an we read the story of the King and Prophet Solomon (Sulayman) and his exchange with Balqis, the Queen of Sheba whom he urged to submit to worship of the One God (the Qur’an, 27:22-44). The importance of this story is that it illustrates how a woman’s leadership is characterized based upon her sound judgment and her faithfulness to God which is the source of a justice. In fact, the Queen of Sheba’s rule is described very positively in the Qur’an: "*Behold, I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been giv-*



*en [abundance] of all [good] things, and hers is a mighty throne.*" (the Qur'an, 27:23). The Qur'an does not at any point convey a negative image of a female ruler or suggests that women in general were unable to rule successfully. Therefore, it becomes rather clear that the Prophet's statement was based on the context on the specifics of the Sassanid Empire, which did indeed come to an end with the rule of the two sisters in question (Shapur, 2005, online edition; John Martindale, 1996: 160).

#### 4. Women as part of the worldly temptation (*fitnah*)

The last example we wish to give at this point to illustrate the negative impact of absent female narratives from the interpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic traditions has led to series of fallacious choices in defining female Muslim identity. The Prophet (s.a.w.) was reported to have said on his deathbed, *"I am not leaving behind me a more harmful fitnah (temptation) for men than women"*. This *hadith* collected by Bukhari and Muslim is considered a sound tradition (*ṣaḥīḥ*) narrated by Osāmā ibn Zayd, the Prophet's adopted grandson. However our reading of the Qur'an shows that this translation is incorrect. The term *fitnah* possesses a much wider meaning than "temptation" or "source of sin". It commonly denotes any form of trial or test of one's moral steadfastness. According to the Arabic linguistics, the correct English translation of *fitnah* in this *ḥadīth* would thus be *"I am not leaving behind me a more difficult trial for men than women"*. Taking the Qur'anic usage of words as our point of reference, we would like to point at 29:2 which says, *"Do men think that on their [mere] saying, 'We have attained to faith', they will be left to themselves, and will not be put to a test?"* Here, the majority of the scholars have defined *fitnah* as "test". Another example is verse 29:3 which says, *"Yes, indeed, we did test those who lived before them; and so..."* and again, the scholars understood the word *fitnah* as "test". Any discussion of this matter would remain incomplete without the mention of verse 8:28 which reads, *"... and know that your worldly goods and your children are but a trial and a temptation, and that with God there is a tremendous reward."* The same notion is given in verse 64:15 which says, *"Your worldly goods and your children are but a trial and a temptation, whereas with God there is a tremendous reward"*

The notion of women as agents of *fitnah* (temptation) for men went on to become the defining aspect of female Muslim identity. With it came series of other complications which gave Muslim men the sense of entitlement towards treating women in whatever manner they felt befitting while laying the blame for their own weaknesses and shortcomings on the shoulders of the women. Thus, it does not come to a surprise that even in today's world, society still blames women for falling victim to rape and other forms of abuse at the hands of men. In the end, "she must have done something to make him do what he did ..." and thus exonerating men from their responsibility for their own actions. Interestingly, the Qur'an mentions "children and wealth" as the agents of *fitnah*, not women (the Qur'an, 8:28). One single *ḥadīth* was enough to subjugate women and portray them in an unfavorable light. In my view, men are being indeed tested through women but not in the usual sense. Men are being tested in the way they treat women, how they treat their mothers, their sisters, their wives, their daughters, and another women they cross paths with outside their homes. Do they treat women respectfully and honorably as equals or do they treat them dishonorably, especially when the gratification of their desires comes into play? If this *ḥadīth* is about the tests men have to undergo, the truth is that no one can escape being tested. The answer is not to lock all women away, deny their rights, banish them from the public sphere and restrict interactions with them to the barest minimum. Test are meant to be passed or failed but not to be avoided...

The Prophet (s.a.w.) himself certainly did not shun women or regard them as inferior human beings of lesser worth than men. The following *ḥadīth* collected by Nasa'ī makes it very clear it how favorably the Prophet (s.a.w.) thought of women: "The Messenger of God said: 'In this world, women and perfume have been made dear to me, and my comfort has been provided in prayer'" (al-Nasa'ī, 1991, *ḥadīth* no. 8887). Not only did the Prophet stress that women were dear to him but he referred to women in general. It is no accident that he mentioned women together with perfume and the comfort of prayer, thus placing female

companionship next to the pure essence stimulating the senses and his soul communion with Allah.

### **Conclusion**

The Qur'an has been interpreted mostly by male scholars and it comes to no surprise that these scholars understood it in line with their own understanding and perspective. However, this male monopoly on interpreting Islamic core traditions has distorted the understanding of the original teachings of Islam concerning women. Today, Muslim women are active in Qur'an study circles, community services sponsored by religious organizations, and Islamic education, as both students and teachers. There are a rising number of female Qur'an reciters, *Shari'ah* lawyers, and professors of Islamic studies throughout the world. These women are baffled by the course of narrative on women in the Qur'an. and the Prophetic traditions which does not do justice to Islam and the way the early generation of Muslim women experienced it when it was still free of religious dogmatism and static cultural tradition. This new development has given rise to ongoing debates among educated Muslim women, some of them being conservative or self-designated progressive while others assert their female Muslim identity demanding equitable rights with Muslim men – either while affirming certain unique roles for men and women or rejecting traditional gender roles altogether. Vibrant, passionate, and often contentious, these debates are asking for Muslim women voices to be heard and for Muslim men to step back for a while and listen. Muslim women wish to share their own experiences and their own narratives to be a part of the interpretation of the Qur'an as part of their Muslim identity. Such a change of perception of Muslim identity from submissive to assertive, from passive to active, can only be initiated by Muslim women themselves. Only women can change how others perceive them by affecting change as the very agents of this change.

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