

THE QUR'AN AND LIBERATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the most common topic of the oppression of Muslim women. But one thing that will be highlighted in this paper is that the oppression is not religious but social. The common misconception among non-Muslims is that Islam promotes the repression of women. This paper will clearly trace instances to prove that Islam lays great emphasis on the equality of the sexes and the oppression that is inflicted on women is by the society and it has nothing to do with Islam as such. Women were always suppressed by various cultures and laying the blame on Islam solely puts forth the fact that we are unaware of the other civilizations that had gone a step further in oppressing women. A study of Hinduism and its tradition will also bring forth the various ways of oppression done to women. Islam has always been misunderstood. It's not Islam but the laws of the Muslim based institutions that have created this gender bias. There are other aspects that play a major role in determining the identity of a person. Through this paper I will try to unveil these common misconceptions of Islam to reveal the beauty associated with this religion and bask in its glory.

Keywords: Oppression, Muslim Women, Islam, Hinduism, Identity.

INTRODUCTION:

A research conducted in 24 countries by a British research company Ipsos-MORI shows that Muslims are more religious than people of other faiths. Muslims strongly believe that their religion is the only true one and it motivates them to do good work. Going by this statistics, it will be wrong to assume that Muslim women should be so brutally subjugated. A true follower of Islam will never indulge in a heinous task of subjugating women. Islam lays emphasis on the fact that spiritually men and women are equal and have had a common origin. God does not discriminate between men and women in rendering mercy, forgiveness or fulfilling religious obligations like daily worship, fasting, performing the Hajj and so on. The following Qur'anic verse illustrates this point:

“For men and women who are devoted to God – believing men and women, obedient men and women, truthful men and women, steadfast men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, chaste men and women, men and women who remember God often – God has prepared forgiveness and a rich reward.”
(Qur'an 33:35)

Another verse which promotes the same notion is:

*“Anyone, male or female, who does good deeds and is a believer, will enter Paradise and will not be wronged by as much as the dip in a date stone.”***(Qur'an 4:124)**

Hence every true Muslim will ideally be a true feminist as well because Islam lays a lot of stress on the rights of women. As defined in the Wikipedia – “A feminist generally self-defines as advocating for or supporting the rights and equality of women”. A detailed study of the Quran shows that Mohammad was the greatest feminist of his times. Islam gave economic rights to women 1400 years ago, much before the Western world.

DISCUSSION:

From times immemorial the blame for the fall of man is put on Eve as she was the one to be lured by Satan. Hence, Christianity proclaims that every woman must bear the pangs of child birth as a punishment for the sin that was committed by Eve. But what many of us are not aware of is that Islam has mentioned that the fault of eating the fruit of the forbidden tree was that of Adam as well as Eve but God being merciful forgave both of them for being truly repentant. There is no single verse exclusively in Quran which states that Eve is responsible for this heinous sin. The Quran uplifts the status of women because of all the hardships that women face during pregnancy. The Prophet has mentioned – “The woman who dies in childbirth or pregnancy is a martyr”. The female is thus, at once the source of concupiscence and the theatre for the contemplation of the Divinity in Its uncreated aspect. When a man asked Prophet Muhammad: “Who is most entitled to be treated with the best companionship by me?” the Prophet replied, “Your mother”. The man asked, “Who is next?” The Prophet said, “Your mother.” Again the man asked, “Who is next?” The Prophet repeated, “Your mother.” The man asked for a fourth time, “Who is next?” The Prophet then replied, “Your father”. On another occasion, when a man came to the Prophet, and expressed the desire to join a military expedition, the Prophet asked him if he had a mother. When he replied that he had, the Prophet advised him, “Stay with her, for Paradise is at her feet.”

If we probe deeper into the study of other civilisations we will be able to understand that Islam liberated women from the various injustices that were forced upon her by other civilisations. History remains a witness of the Babylonian civilization where if man committed murder then instead of punishing him, his wife was sentenced to death. When we read the history of Greeks, Greeks considered a woman a cause of evil and monstrosity in the society. A man is even permitted to kill his wife. In Egyptian civilization, they considered women a sign of a devil. In Arab civilization, very often

when a female child was born, she was buried alive. In some parts of the Eastern Europe and in India, if a husband died, his wife was either killed or burned alive together with the dead body of her husband. In Egypt, India and all European countries during the dark ages, the condition of women were not better than that of slaves. In India there has been various instances of women been considered as witches by the men of those areas and they were either burned alive or stoned to death.

Our ignorance and biased judgment has always made us cynical about the Muslims, thus, ignoring the positive facets that were and are ever present in this religion. I am a Hindu Brahmin, the so called upper caste of our society. But this has not made me blind to the follies that are present in our society. Women were not given any inheritance rights. It was only in 2005 that women legally gained their inheritance rights in India. Before Islam, inheritance rights were a privilege of only the male relatives. The Qur'an eradicated all these unjust customs and gave the close female relatives inheritance shares:

“Men shall have a share in what their parents and closest relatives leave, and women shall have a share in what their parents and closest relatives leave, whether the legacy be small or large: this is ordained by God.”(Qur'an 4:7)

Muslim women have the prerogative to earn money, ownership and legal rights, and to manage all of her assets in any way she pleases. She can run her own business and no one, including her husband, has any right over her earnings. The Qur'an states:

“Do not covet what God has given to some of you more than others – men have the portion they have earned; and women the portion they have earned – you should rather ask God for some of His bounty: He has full knowledge of everything.”(Qur'an 4:32)

In India, a girl child is considered to be a burden primarily because of the pressure of dowry that the girl's family will be subjected to at the time of her marriage. An enormous amount of bride gift has to be given to the groom's family failing which there has been innumerable instances of brides being tortured or even killed by her in-laws. Islam promotes dowry as a gift from a husband to his wife. The Qur'an states:

“If you wish to enjoy women [through marriage], give them their bride-gift – this is obligatory.” (Qur'an 4:24)

The Qur'an further mentions:

“If you wish to replace one wife with another, do not take back any of her bride gift, even if you have given her a great amount of gold. How could you take it when this is unjust and a blatant sin?” (Qur'an 4:20, 21)

The Hindu woman does not have the right to divorce her husband. The life of a widow is unimaginably harsh. She is looked upon as an evil woman and is barred from participating in any rituals. It is believed that her inauspicious presence will nullify the good of the rituals and will bring a curse upon the entire household. She is wrapped in a white sari, barred from having non-veg, compelled to cut her hair short. In fact, she remains nothing but a living dead. Whereas in Islam, the Qur'an mentions that it is the duty of the Muslim society to ensure that the widows get married. The Qur'an mentions:

“If any of you die and leave widows, the widows should wait for four months and ten nights before remarrying. When they have completed this set time, you will not be blamed for anything they may reasonably choose to do with themselves. God is fully aware of what you do.”(Qur'an 2:234)

Besides ensuring remarriage of widows, the Qur'an also takes care to ensure every sort of allowance and wellbeing of the widows. It is mentioned in the Qur'an that:

"If any of you die and leave widows, make a bequest for them: a year's maintenance and no expulsion from their homes."(Qur'an 2:240)

The same is applicable for divorced women as well:

"Divorced women shall also have such maintenance as is considered fair: this is a duty for those who are mindful of God." (Qur'an 2:241)

A Muslim woman can marry any Muslim of her choice. If her parents choose a partner for her, her consent must be taken:

"You who believe, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will, nor should you treat your wives harshly."(Qur'an 4:19)

Whereas in the situation of a Hindu girl she can only marry within her own caste provided her horoscope matches that of the prospective bridegroom.

Prior to Islam a woman was buried alive during her early childhood as she was regarded as a threat to family honour by her parents. As an adult, she was negated all other identities other than that of a sex object who was nothing less than a material possession for the men in the society. From this position of inferiority and oppression, Islam helped women to a position of authority and respect in family and society. Islam brought an end to the age old controversy within religious circles of whether women had souls and were human beings or not by proclaiming:

"People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman."(Qur'an 49:13)

In pre-Islamic Arabia female infanticide was very common and very often the moment a female was born she was buried alive. Islam not only prohibits female infanticide, but it forbids all types of infanticide, irrespective of whether the infant is a male or female.

"And when the girl buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed."(Qur'an 81:8-9)

Islam prevents any kind of killing, harassing and humiliating of the female. Arabs practiced female infanticide at that time. He precluded that practice, and preached that nothing was more virtuous than the proper education and upkeep of daughters. Allah says in the Qur'an:

"Do not kill your children for fear of poverty – We shall provide for them and for you – killing them is a great sin."(Qur'an 17:31)

The Vedas highlight certain norms which typically symbolise the various norms and customs that were solely responsible for the miserable plight of women. 'Sati Pratha' was the custom of burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. 'Dasi Pratha' was the keeping of girls as slaves. A slave girl was called 'Vadhu' (wife), with whom sexual intercourse could be performed without any kind of marriage ceremony. These girls belonged to the men who snatched them from the enemies, or who had received them in dowry, or as gifts. Only the men to whom they belonged could have sexual intercourse with them. But some slave girls were kept as joint property of the tribe or the village. Any man could have sexual relations with them. These girls became the prostitutes. 'Niyog Pratha' was the ancient Aryan custom of childless widow or women having sexual intercourse with a man other than her husband to beget children. In the 'Mahabharata', it is mentioned that Satyawati had authorised her

son to confer male children to the queens of Vichitrvirya, the younger brother of Bhishma, as a result of which Dhritrashtra and Pandu were born. Pandu himself had asked his wife, Kunti, to have sexual intercourse with a brahmin to get a son. The birth of a daughter was considered to be a curse in the society. The woman who gave birth to a daughter was given a secondary position in the society compared to that of another woman who was the mother of a son. A sonless woman was considered to be unfortunate. The 'Vedas' described a special ritual called 'Punsawan Sanskar' which is a ceremony performed during the third month of pregnancy so that the woman begets sons.

The most debatable issue which keeps cropping in the minds of many non-Muslims as well is the issue of the veil. It is considered to be an indication of the oppression meted out to women. The scarf or 'hijab' worn by Muslim women is to cover their body with modest clothes that can conceal their figure from male strangers. Hijab is an all-encompassing term which symbolizes noble speech, simplicity, noble and virtuous conduct. It is equally applicable for men as well. The hijab does not restrict a Muslim woman's freedom or empowerment. If the Jews can wear the Star of David or Yamaka (a skull cap worn by the Jews), the Christian can wear the cross and the Christian nuns wear the head scarf, then why only the Muslim women are a topic of controversy.

It was much before the advent of Islam that veiling was in practice. Way back in 2500 BCE, veiled priestesses preceded Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In ancient Mesopotamia and in the Byzantine, Greek, and Persian empires the veil was worn by elite women as a sign of respectability and eminence. In ancient Mesopotamia, Assyria veiling was meant to "differentiate between 'respectable' women and those who were publicly available" (Ahmed 1992, p.15). Female slaves and unchaste women were explicitly forbidden to veil and suffered harsh penalties if they did so. Veiling thus was a symbol of rank and exclusive lifestyle, which highlighted the privilege upper-class women enjoyed over women in lower classes in the Assyrian community. Roman and Byzantine society also had the custom of veiling of women. Between 550 and 323 B.C.E, prior to Christianity, respectable women in classical Greek society were expected to seclude themselves and wear clothing that concealed them from the eyes of strange men. The later Byzantine empire was also influenced by this custom and for them proper conduct for girls necessitated that they be neither seen nor heard outside their home. At the inception of Christianity, Jewish women were veiling the head and face. Biblical evidence of veiling can be found in Genesis 24:64-65, "*Then Rebekah lifted her eyes and when she saw Isaac ... she took a veil and covered herself*". In Isaiah 3:18-20, "*In that day the Lord will take away the finery: the jingling anklets ... the veils...the headdresses ... and the headbands*"; and in 1 Corinthians 11:5-7, "*But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.*" That the position of woman is subservient to that of a man can further be proved from the lines in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, "*For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.*"

G.M. Trevelyan states in his book, *History of England*, states that 'Wife-beating was a recognized right of man, and was practiced without shame by high as well as low...Similarly, the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice, particularly in the "chivalrous upper classes...Betrothal often took place while one or both of the parties was in the cradle, and marriage when they were scarcely out of the nurses' charge.' The period highlighted was about 1470, soon after Chaucer's time. This also highlights the secondary subservient position allotted to women even in England.

Islam states, "When you ask his wives for something, do so from behind a screen; this is purer both for your hearts and their hearts" (Qur'an 33: 53). This was meant only for Muhammad's wives and not addressed to women in general. It is commonly understood that this verse was intended to protect his wives from the strangers who lived in the mosque which was Muhammad's home. During Muhammad's lifetime no other women in the Ummah (Muslim community) observed the hijab.

Instead, the term for wearing the veil, *darabat al-hijab*, was used synonymously with “becoming Muhammad’s wife” (Ahmed 1992, p.56). As stated by Reza Aslan, “The veil was neither compulsory nor widely adopted until generations after Muhammad’s death, when a large body of male scriptural and legal scholars began using their religious and political authority to regain the dominance they had lost in society as a result of the Prophet’s egalitarian reforms”(Aslan 2005, p.66).

The Hijab helps women to liberate themselves from being simply considered as sexual objects and gives importance to her intellect. The patriarchal society has always considered women as images for promoting consumerism. The Hijab teaches the society to look beyond the procreative function of a woman. The Hijab frees women from the compulsion to adapt to unrealistic clichés and images as have been depicted by the media. It is an act of honour and dignity and hence liberates a woman from her identity as an object of pleasure and judged according to her inner spiritual beauty. The hijab does not symbolize oppression or silence. Rather, it is a safeguard against derogatory remarks, undesirable approaches and unfair discrimination. It is a symbol which helps to create a unique identity which is not merely a source of joy and pride, but also of strength and confidence. The Qur’an states:

“Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful.”(Qur’an 33:59)

In the Quran God tells the believing men and women to be modest in their attire and attitude–

“[Prophet], tell believing men to lower their eyes and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do. And tell believing women that they should lower their eyes, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal.”(Quran 24:30-31)

CONCLUSION:

This continuous debate over the issue of Muslim veil shows the society’s narrow outlook towards Muslim women where their identity has been restricted to their headcovers, as if there is nothing else about their identity. Many of those who do cover are disappointed that their own positive experience of covering is denied; and, like those who do not cover, annoyed that other aspects of their identity are ignored. This is simply a solitarist approach and leads to nothing but a misunderstanding of Muslim women. It is very important to recognise the role of reasoning and choice when we are assessing someone on the basis of her identity.

A person’s identity is who or what he/she basically is. It comprises of primarily his/her pursuits and priorities. A person’s religion may not be his/her exclusive identity. Other aspects like class, gender, profession, language, morals and politics are also majorly important. Laying stress on one identity only basically negates the viability of the rest. We have limited our outlook and this narrow parochial outlook has led to a policy of global confrontation. Hence, to sum up the entire discussion we can aptly quote Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998: “Misdescription and misconception can make the world more fragile than it need be” (Sen 2006, p.46) and this is what we are actually doing by encouraging this baseless discrimination.

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