

ISLAM and WOMANHOOD, (Part One)

by **Anwar Shaikh**
WOMANHOOD

Of all mundane problems, relationship between man and woman is the most significant. The imbalance causes mutual friction leading to malevolence and misery. One of the major causes of this abrasion is the fact that woman's sexual appeal gives her command over man but his psychological make-up goads him to establish dominance over her. To achieve this end, man has invented religion which requires woman to obey man as god's Will. Here is an excerpt from Anwar Shaikh's unpublished book "Sexual Conflict," which disusses Islamic attitude towards womanhood.

Islam portrays woman as a sexual toy for man. The rise of Benazeer Bhuto in Pakistan to premiership exposes the fallacy of the Islamic doctrine, which has been upheld by the brute force of sheer propaganda over the centuries.

Islam is not a code of life but an emotional trap prepared by the power-seekers to fool an snool their fellowmen. Since it has never been enforced in the entire history of Islam, it cannot be a divine code.

Being an offshoot of Judaism, Islam is governed by exactly the same legend as the Jews and Christians but its interpretation of the Adam-Eve episode is completely different. It does not recognise asceticism. Thus celibacy or contempt of womanhood forms no part of Islam. Though it prescribes a whole month of formal fasting and believers are not allowed to eat or drink from dawn till dusk, are permitted to indulge in sexual gratification from dusk till dawn if they so desire.

Compared to Judaism and Christianity, Islam confers certain rights on woman, and considering the social condition, of that time, it raises the Prophet Muhammad to the status of a reformer. Of course, Islam presented a patriarchal system as it had persisted in the Middle East from time immemorial, but it sought to soften its impact on woman. A father still had the right to dispose of his daughter as he thought fit, but if she became a widow or divorcee, her consent to remarriage had to be secured. It gave certain property rights to women. It also laid down that a divorced woman was a free woman, and the ex-husband must not retain her forcibly, as had become customary. Nor could he deter her from remarrying by exerting pressure. The divorced woman, if pregnant, must be treated with kindness and respect, and had the right to stay in her ex-husband's house at his expense. However, if she chose to leave, he must provide her with sufficient means of sustenance for a year. The prophet raised the prestige of woman considerably by pronouncing that children's paradise lay at their mother's feet, meaning that the key to Heaven lies in respecting and serving one's mother.

Though a husband could divorce his wife at will, Islam gave her the right of Khula, i.e. the legal right of separation, but she had to do so through the Shariah Court and had to prove her husband's cruelty and gross misconduct. The application of this law is to be seen in *Khurshid Bibi v Muhammad Amin* (1967). The Pakistani Supreme Court decided that a Moslem wife could obtain a divorce on demand but she had to pay suitable compensation to her husband.

Khula is a sound Islamic principle but it cannot be exercised on demand; the woman must prove the guilt of her husband. Khula at will is an un-Islamic innovation like many other modifications entered

into the legal codes of Moslem countries in the name of Islam. For example, Tunisia has forbidden polygamy as well as the husband's power to divorce his wife at will, and it is all done on the authority of the Koran.

Except KHULA and a limited right to inherit property, Islamic laws are repressive to the feminine gender. Though the Moslems all over the world talk of Islamic rights of womanhood, the truth is that a Moslem woman has no right except the right to please her man. In fact, she is treated as a bait of conversion, and the reason for a Moslem to hold on to his faith. It is because Islam identifies salvation with the paradise which is a place of sexual merriment and thus the abode of the most beautiful women called houris, who are available to the followers of Islam only. What is a houri?

According to the Hadith TIRMZI (P.135-138).

1. A houri is a most beautiful young woman with a transparent body. The marrow of her bones is visible like the interior lines of pearls and rubies. She looks like a red wine in a white glass.
2. She is of white colour, and free from the routine physical disabilities of an ordinary woman such as menstruation, menopause, urinal and offal discharge, child-bearing, and the related pollution.
3. She is a woman characterised by modesty and flexing glances; she never looks at any man except her husband, and feels grateful for being the wife of her husband.
4. A houri is a loving woman, free from odium and animosity. Besides, she knows the meaning of love and has the ability to put it into practice.
5. A houri is a recreated woman whose virginity has been restored. The lucky believers who will have them, shall find them untouched.
6. A houri is an immortal woman. She speaks softly and does not raise voice at her man; she is always reconciled with him. Having been brought up in luxury, she is a luxury herself.
7. A houri is a girl of tender age, having large rising breasts which are round, and not inclined to dangle. Houris dwell in palaces of luxurious surroundings.

To increase the sexual appeal of Islam, another hadith declares that man's virility shall be increased hundred-fold. Thus, Islam equates salvation with carnal pleasures which houris, the paradisiac women provide, thus confirming woman's role in Islam as the object of sexual pleasures.

Since Islamic appeal to man is based on its colourful concept of paradise, it seeks to place woman under the strict control of man. Before mentioning some of its tenets concerning womanhood, it is desirable to give an overview of the Islamic approach to the fair-sex, which regulates her conduct in relation to man:

1. If a woman's conduct is mischievous or immodest, the husband has the right to beat her up but must not break her bones. She must not allow anybody to enter the house if her husband does not like him. She has the right to expect sustenance of her husband. (TR. P 439)
2. It is forbidden for a woman to be seen by any man except her husband when she is made up or well-dressed. (TR. P 430)

3. A woman is not a believer if she undertakes a journey which may last three days or longer, unless she is accompanied by her husband, son, father or brother. (TR. P 431)
4. A woman must veil herself even in the presence of her husband's father, brother and other male relations. (TR. P 432)
5. She is forbidden to spend any money without the permission of her husband, and it includes giving food to the needy or feast to friends. (TR. P 265)
6. A wife is forbidden to perform extra prayers (NAFAL) or observe fasting (other than RAMADAN) without the permission of her husband. (TR. P 300)
7. If prostration were a legitimate act other than to God, woman should have prostrated to her husband. (TR. P 428)
8. If a man is in a mood to have sexual intercourse woman must come immediately even if she is baking bread at a communal oven. (TR. P 428)
9. The marriage of woman to her man is not substantive. It is precarious. For example if the father of the husband orders his son to divorce his wife, he must do so. (TR. P 440)
10. A woman who seeks KHULA i .e. divorce from her man, without a just cause, shall not enter paradise. (TR. P 440)

On the contrary, a husband can divorce his wife at will.

11. Majority of women would go to hell. (Muslim P 1431)
12. If a woman refuses to come to bed when invited by her husband, she becomes the target of the curses of angles. Exactly the same happens if she deserts her husband's bed. (Bokhari P 93)
13. The women who are ungrateful to their men, are the denizens of hell; it is an act of ingratitude for a woman to say: "I have never seen any good from you." (Bokhari P 96)
14. A woman in many ways is deprived of the possession of her own body. Even her milk belongs to her husband. (Bokhari P 27)

She is not allowed to practise birth control either.

I must emphasise that the above narrative represents the cultural conditions that prevailed in Arabia during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The success of his purpose depended on following and reinforcing them. And so he did through the perpetuation of the existing institutions such as:

1. Purdah,
2. Man's right to divorce at will; and
3. Polygamy.

An analytical look at these institutions reveals the reality of Islamic rights which women are supposed to have:

1a. Purdah or masking a woman's face and other parts of her body, is an old pernicious custom of the Middle East; it prevailed in ancient Babylonia; no woman could go out unless duly masked, and chaperoned by a eunuch or a male member of the family. Even apartments in the household were

separated to practise segregation. Conditions in Assyria were no better. The restrictions that applied to the Babylonian women equally governed the lives of the Assyrian women who had to remain indoors where darkness prevailed and breeze could not get in through the curtained windows. Iran, once a great imperial power, was every bit as strict in practising this custom. Possibly, Purdah originated in Persia, and here imperial influence caused its spread in the other middle Eastern lands. No upper-class woman in Persia was allowed to go out except in a draped litter, attended by eunuchs. This is what made woman a captive of the eastern man to acknowledge his superiority. As the Bible came to the West, it brought male chauvinism with it.

The Prophet Muhammad reintroduced this custom as a part of the Islamic tenets:

" ... And say to the believing women that they cast down their eyes ... and disclose not their adornment ... and let them wear their veils over their bosom, and not disclose their embellishments except to their husbands not let them stamp their feet, so that their concealed ornament may be known" (Light: 30)

"And when you ask his (Prophet's) wives for anything, ask them from behind a curtain; this is cleaner for your hearts and theirs" (The Confederates 50)

This verse pertains to the believers and commands them not to ask Prophet's wives for any object face to face but from behind a curtain.

"O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women, that they keep their veils tight to them..."
(The Confederates 55)

With the passage of time these laws of veiling (purdah) became more severe. Moslems of the Indian subcontinent provide a good example of the evil influence of purdah. It cut off women from the outside world to make them ignorant of the practicalities of life. Segregation imposed by this custom had the same effect on the lives of women as blinkers exert on a horse which gallops at the behest of the rider without knowing its destination. Women knew only what their fathers, husbands or sons wanted them to know. As the interests of the male members lay in securing maximum fidelity from women, all the male gossip was aimed at inventing stories of female obedience. The Moslem community usually drummed up the sanctity of an apocryphal Hadith (saying of the Prophet) which stated that at noon when one hair of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, became bare, the sun hid itself hurriedly to provide her with the Purdah (mask) of darkness. Women brought up on a diet of such superstitious submission hardly needed any violence from man to shut themselves in their homes which were nothing but private jails. Domination of their religious beliefs made them enjoy the sorrows of self-incarceration. Men, on the other hand, being free from the watchful eyes of their women, indulged in sexual gratification as they desired. Masculine attitudes became more chauvinistic. If any woman ever complained about his sexual behaviour outside the house, she qualified for black eyes, a bleeding nose and the threat of divorce. Yet it is woman who was blamed for the beating: it was her fault because she was not obedient enough to put up with whatever he did! Had she kept her mouth shut, he would not have been provoked. What a logic!

In the countryside, women had some freedom of movement. They did not wear masks because they had to tend to the agricultural needs, in addition to the domestic toils. They were just simple-looking slaves devoid of feminine consciousness, engendered by the feeling of beauty, delicacy and self-adornment. It was the educated urban lady who could protest against women's servitude, but she had been puzzled, muzzled and guzzled by the fear of Hell that was to roast every disobedient woman. And the ladies who did not strictly believe in the existence of Hell, never doubted the effect of the powerful punches that their fathers, husbands and brothers could shower on them, exceeding the profusion of any hailstorm.

Moslem woman's captivity through purdah, deprived her of the economic independence which is the mainstay of western women's freedom. She became a maternal machine charged with the duty of producing chauvinistic boys and submissive girls - all to be brought up in a totally unnatural setting of religious bigotry praising Allah for the promise of Heaven to forget all about Hell, which they dwelt in. Even the Hindu women who had never heard of purdah were affected by this abomination. In the beginning, they thought it fit to veil themselves for evading the lustful eyes of their Moslem political masters, but later on, it was perpetuated by their husbands to enjoy the benefits of male chauvinism.

2a. Man's right to divorce at will, was yet another cause for the misery of Moslem women. I do not think that the Prophet could have abolished this male prerogative which had prevailed in the Middle East since time immemorial. Going as far back as to the reign of Hammurabi (1792 B.C. - 1750 B.C.), the ruler of Babylonia, known for his skill of law-making, we find that the Semitic way of life was based on the superiority of man which automatically spelt contempt for women's low status. For example:

- a. If people suspected a woman of infidelity and raised fingers at her, it mattered not that she was innocent. To satisfy the honour of her husband she was expected to throw herself into the river.
- b. The code of Hammurabi prescribed death by drowning for an adulterous wife and her lover. But her husband could secure her pardon by making her run in the street entirely naked.
- c. Divorce was man's prerogative. All that a husband had to do was to restore his wife's dowry, if any, and utter the magic words: "Thou art not my wife." But a wife could not dream of such conduct. If she said: "Thou art not my husband," the full might of the law descended on her and she had to be drowned in the river!

Islam retained the old Semitic tradition of allowing man to divorce his wife without giving a reason for it. If he repeats repudiation three times at once, that is, "I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee," then the marriage is finally dissolved, but if repudiation is uttered only once, the husband can revoke it within four months to restore his marriage, if he so desires.

However, one must remember that the Prophet declared emphatically: "Of all the lawful things, divorce is the least liked by God." Again, the Koran laid a moral duty on the believers that divorce was not for fun, to realise lusty dreams or political ambitions:

"... Do not expel them from their houses, not let them go forth except when they commit a flagrant indecency." (Divorce: 1)

Islam also provides a safeguard for the crumbling marriage: "And if you fear a breach between the two, bring forth an arbiter from his people and from her people an arbiter, if they want to set things right." (Women: 35)

Islam gave women certain rights which marked a definite improvement on the Jewish, Christian and Hellenistic attitudes towards the fair-sex, yet these rights were far inferior to those of man:

"Women have such honourable rights and obligations, but their men have a degree above them." (The Cow: 225)

"A degree above them" (Qawam) has been a source of debate among the Moslem jurists for centuries. To be brief, the male is held superior to the female: he can divorce her at will; he

can have four wives at the same time; he is twice as reliable in a court of law as a woman and he receives twice as much by way of inheritance as a woman.

Man's absolute discretion to divorce woman kept her in a lasting tremor like the molecular dance. It was an act of making man a despot. It is well known that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is what humbled, tumbled and jumbled women's rights though they were supposed to be real; the inability to wield a sword renders it useless even if it were made of the finest steel.

Those who know the world of Islam, are aware of the fact that absolute repudiation (thrice) is always done when a husband's temper reaches the level of insanity. Instead of allowing the husband to revoke such a repudiation, Islam made reconciliation impossible by laying down a retributive law:

"If he divorces her finally, she shall not be lawful to him after that, unless she marries another husband. If he (the second husband) divorces her, then it is no fault in them to return to each other, if they suppose they will maintain God's bounds." (The Cow: 230)

It means if a husband divorces his wife, he cannot marry her unless she weds another man first. Even then it is permissible only if the other man divorces her of his own free will. It is no good saying that the purpose of this restriction is to make man think twice before he divorces her finally. The despotic powers of a Moslem husband are the fountain of this evil. Had he not been equipped with this authority, he would not have been able to divorce at will.

3a. Now, I may say a few words about the Islamic institution of polygamy:

In practice, the rights that Islam gave women proved very unreal and untenable. Purdah cut off woman from social life and turned her home into a prison. Her prestige, if any, was preyed upon by polygamy which the Prophet imported into his religious system. There is no doubt that women all over the world have been subjected to polygamy in the name of God, but this is one Divine Command they have loathed, and obeyed most reluctantly. Islam, in many ways, is a carbon copy of Judaism, but Muhammad executed it sagaciously. This is the reason that the Arabs succeeded in building a magnificent empire but the Jews, despite being a great people, ended up as the target of international hatred, havoc and humiliation, quite contrary to Yahwe's promises of pomp, prestige and paramouncy.

Polygamy, an old Jewish institution, was perfected by Solomon, through demonstration of his sexual prowess to one thousand female beauties excluding the Queen of Sheba. It was a luxury of the rich and was not available to the poor Jews who dreamt of it but could not afford it. Matters were made worse by Yahwe, the Jewish God, who is more stern and less supple and whose retribution far exceeds his propensity of remission. If a Jew wanted something he had to toil for it or hoodwink the gentile at his own peril, but Allah, the Moslem God, on the contrary, promised every faithful a seat in paradise fulgent with female beauty, where he would be given no fewer than seventy-two hours (ravishing young maidens) just for waging holy wars to murder the infidels who refused to acknowledge the spiritual hegemony of the Prophet. To a virile man, especially during his prime, desire for sexual fulfilment ranks as faith. Therefore, access to easy sex counts as the greatest bait. To gratify man, Islam created a considerable disparity between the rights of the opposite sexes:

1. Men are superior to women. (The Cow: 225)
2. "Your women are a tillage for you, so come unto your tillage as you wish." (The Cow: 220)

Having raised the prestige of man way above women's station by declaring her man's tillage whose only purpose is to act as a maternal machine and meet his carnal demands, Islam authorises him to administer her a dose of violence whenever she refuses him the pleasure of dalliance:

" Chastise, banish them to their couches and beat them (women); if they then obey you, look not for any way against them." (Women: 35)

This is how Islam gradually prepares woman for the eventual surrender, i.e. voluntary acceptance of polygamy, to escape the threat of roasting Hell by playing up to man's sexual exorbitance:

"Marry such women, as seem to you, two, three, four; but if you fear you will not be equitable, then only one.." (Women: 1)

Here the word "Equitable" is understood to mean that the husband must show equal love and care for all his wives.

This is against the psychological truth because some people are more loveable than others. The woman who is more vivacious shall be loved more than the vindictive woman. Thus, the law is basically defective.

In this connection, one should bear in mind that even a superman is not free from the influence of his native culture, which his mother imparts him right from the cradle and he grows up as a member of a particular society. Even if he loathes most of its traditions and develops an ardent desire to reform them, yet he unconsciously remains under the sway of its several customs which govern his life one way or another. Without this tendency he is bound to feel a void in his personality.

The Prophet was a reformer but he was born and bred in an essentially patriarchal society where man was held superior to woman and thus acted as the dominant force. It is not surprising that the Quranic laws of male superiority are fully supported by the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet, which carry religious and legal authority in the world of Islam. This fact proves one thing beyond a shadow of doubt, that is, though he wanted to improve the lot of women, he did not think that it needed raising their status to that of man's. Not only the excessive privileges of a Moslem man prove it but the following sayings of the Prophet also illustrate his views on the subject:

1. "The world and all things in it are valuable, but the most valuable thing in the world is a virtuous woman."

A virtuous woman represents the apex of humanity. However, the virtue of a Moslem woman is directly proportionate to the pleasure she yields to her husband. After all, her status, according to the Quran is that of "man's tillage." This is the reason that a woman cannot enter paradise unless she has been a source of delight to her husband.

2. "Every woman who dieth, and her husband is pleased wrth her, shall enter into paradise."

Woman is there to serve man. This is the criterion of her righteousness. It is for this reason that Islam entitles man to chastise his wives:

3. "Admonish your wives with kindness; for women were created out of a crooked rib of Adam, therefore, if ye wish to straighten it, ye will break it; and if ye leave it alone, it will be always crooked."

It shows the basic doctrine of Islam about womanhood, that is, she is basically crooked, and man has the right to keep her under his constant vigil; she must never be left alone. In fact, another hadith expresses woman's position bluntly:

4. "I have not left any calamity more hurtful to man than woman."

In Islamic culture, woman is nothing but an object of pleasure. The purpose of purdah or hajeab (mask) is to restrict woman's freedom, for keeping her every movement under close guard. It is a

shrewd attempt to cut her off from the rest of the world and persuade her to accept imprisonment within the four walls of her home in the name of piety. Obviously, a woman who ignores her human rights to be free, also surrenders her entitlement to monogamy, that is, one man, one wife.

Of course, Moslem women have accepted polygamy but that is under duress, or more properly under spiritual blackmail. They have been told that this is the command of Allah and disobedient women will roast in hell. In the case of the Moslem woman, the concept of paradise looms far more important because this is the place which is chiefly meant for man's pleasure. Men who believe in the prophethood of Muhammad, sooner or later will be housed in this land of the blessed where they will be endowed with a "healthy appetite" and given seventy-two ever-young, most beautiful virgins with roving wide eyes and large heaving breasts. But what will happen to women? The Quran is mainly silent about this issue except at two occasions:

- a. "He may admit the believers, men and women alike, into gardens ..." (Victory: 5)
- b. "Enter paradise, you and your wives, walking with joy!" (Ornaments: 70)

It is quite obvious from these verses that paradise is not a place of delight for a woman. If anything, it is another name for hell in relation to her because she will have to share her husband with no fewer than seventy-two houris (the paradisiac women) who are bound to be much prettier than her. In such a situation, a Moslem wife will end up as a menial servant in paradise. In fact, her position will be far worse than a slave because as a general rule, all women find polygamy singeing, suffocating and shattering. A woman's basic requirement is man's love but her chances of getting it in a crowd of seventy-two female rivals are quite slim, if not non-existent. And even when it is likely, the machinations of the co-wives are sure to destabilise the equanimity of her mind, the true source of happiness. And what about the houris themselves? Seventy-two of them being tied to one man! Woman cannot be anything but a play thing in Islam.

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[Islam And womanhood, \(Part Two\)](#)

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