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### **Women in Islam. Tradition and modernity**

It should be stated at the beginning that the contemporary family in the Islamic World is basically patriarchal, characterized by the domination of the father—head of the family—followed by adult male members in accordance with their seniority. This very feature is strangely analogical to the early pre-Islamic tribal model of family and social hierarchy. Likewise, women perform now—as in the past—dependent inferior roles. Women are, furthermore, isolated from the male society—also through the imposition of the *ḥiğāb* (veil) and subjection to living (though, sometimes, and not as a rule) within polygamous family.

To trace the source of this phenomenon, in an objective manner, we have to return to both the pre-Islamic tribal society and to early Islam. The political history of the time is assumed to be known and will not be the subject of interest of the present paper.

During the period up to the emergence of Islam in early seventh century, authority in the family in the Arabian Peninsula was in the hands of its eldest member—head of the family. The role of women was limited to taking care of the household, breeding and upbringing of children. Nonetheless, from time to time, women took part in armed campaigns with the aim of maintaining the morale of fighting men, in addition to nursing the wounded.

The basic significance of kinship ties for the tribal community induced its members to select very carefully the person of the future wife. In connection with that, the protection of women was a question of honour, while respect for them—a customarily normal matter. However, harsh conditions of desert life, the rules of incessant battles and anxiety about the eventual enslavement of women, caused family seniors to prefer male children.

The basis for the political organisation of the tribes of Arabia was the adult male population, whose members were united by kinship solidarity (*‘aṣabiyya*), or—naturally—also interests. The adult male tribe member highly appreciated his own individualism and independent personality, which—it should be noted—was not contradictory to the collective inter-

ests—for, in the case of an eventual danger, he stood ready in defence of the community. The tribe was an entirely independent entity, existing in a state of permanent war against other tribes. Invasion of neighbours, was regarded as a natural thing, and practiced for multiple reasons such as the need for booties, desire for expansion or revenge.

Turning to Islam, as a new order of social relationships and over all as a creed born within the mentioned community, the question arises: was it a negation, or else the instrument, of maintaining the inferior role of women? In many aspects Islam was the ideological opposite of the past. There is not enough space here to attempt analysing the relationship between theory and practice in the sense that the practice of the Islamic world throughout the past fourteen centuries had been ambiguous as much as women rights and explicit religious texts are concerned. So many conflicting tendencies within Islam try to find support for their ideas in early tradition! Briefly speaking, Islam was a comprehensive social revolution, and also a qualitative change in women rights.

Hence, what is Islam and what are its fundamentals in connection with the status of women? There is general agreement among Muslims as to two sources of faith: the Koran and Prophet Muhammad's tradition (sunna—i.e. his statements and deeds as communicated by authorities). Let us start with the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ānic vision of women rights should be assessed as a qualitative positive change in comparison with the dominant seventh century tribal status of women. In the first place, attention should be brought to the Qur'ānic story of creation, which—on the whole—keeps in line with the Christian Biblical original model, but with a major difference namely, that it was not Eve but Satan (Iblīs), who induced Adam (and before him Eve) to consume the forbidden fruit. This difference is of cardinal significance, if we bear in mind the history of Christian Europe and the burdensome path of Christian women to overcome doctrinal inequality.

Another positive social innovation introduced by Islam was the acceptance of the idea of the equality of women and men: “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them”<sup>1</sup>. The concept of equality and degree of advantage had been elaborated in a further Qur'ānic verse as follows: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has

<sup>1</sup> Sura 2, verse 228. Qur'ānic quotations from: The Holy Qur'an. Text, translation, commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Dar al-Fath, 3rd ed., Lahore 1938. Here, it should be noted that Islam introduced also the right of women to inheritance by half the amount due to men, and to witness in judicial cases, whereas testimony of two women had the weight of that of one man.

given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in (the husband's) absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first, next) refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly) but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance...)"<sup>2</sup>

Women are thereby protected and maintained by men. These male responsibilities grant them a degree of superiority—above all obedience to them; otherwise men are entitled even to beat their women. In present terms, equality grants women the democratic right of voting, while their subordination to males makes this right merely symbolic. We should, however, always remember that the Islamic vision is directed towards conviction and belief; it subjects the earthly order and postulates to heavenly eternal awards.<sup>3</sup>

Another problem of extreme historical and contemporary importance is the question of polygamy, which is dealt with merely in one single verse: "If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive), that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice"<sup>4</sup>

The arguments against polygamy forwarded by XIX and XX century modernists focus upon the term of "justly" conduct or its opposite: "injustice". They argue that justice towards all possible wives is practically impossible, and therefore polygamy is unwarranted in the strict sense of the Qur'ānic text. An outstanding representative of the renaissance of Arab-Islamic socio-political thought Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), formulated this opinion against polygamy on the following grounds:

Firstly: The precondition of polygamy is the categorical availability of justice, which—if existed even in one out of million cases—cannot be adopted as a rule.

Secondly: The prevailance of the bad treatment of wives by their husbands in the case of polygamous families; and therefore the ruler or jurist is empowered to prevent it as one of ways of avoiding the spread of evil.

<sup>2</sup> Sura 4, verse 34.

<sup>3</sup> Sura 33, verse 35.

<sup>4</sup> Sura 4, verse 3.

Thirdly: There is evidence that the source of evil and enmity among the children is the fact that they come from different mothers each of the children is brought up in the feeling of hatred towards the others...’’<sup>5</sup>

Greater ambiguity and confusion arises in connection with bearing by women of veil (*ḥiğāb*). Is it an explicit, implicit or an occasional ad hoc order? Was it directed to the Prophet’s house or to all believers? Does *ḥiğāb* mean putting a veil on the face or on certain attractive parts of body of every woman, or was it simply an obligation to talk from behind a curtain to Muhammad’s wives?<sup>6</sup>

Here are some of the appropriate verses of the Qur’ān:

—“O ye who believe! Enter not the Prophet’s houses, until leave is given you, for meal, (and then) not (so early as) to wait for its preparation: but when ye are invited, enter; and when ye have taken your meal, disperse, without seeking familiar talk. Such (behaviour) annoys the Prophet: he is ashamed to dismiss you, but God is not ashamed (to tell you) the truth. And when ye ask (his ladies) for anything ye want, ask them from before a screen (*ḥiğāb*): that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs. Nor is it right for you that ye should annoy God’s Apostle, or that ye should marry his widows after him at any time. Truly such a thing is in God’s sight an enormity”.<sup>7</sup>

—“O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested...’’<sup>8</sup>

—“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (most ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their and their husband’s sons, their brothers or their brother’s sons or their sister’s sons or their women, or their slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children

<sup>5</sup> Muḥammad ‘Amāra, *Al-islām wa-āl-mar’a fī ra’y al-imām li-Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, Al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya li-d-Dirāsāt wa-ān-Naṣr, Beirut 1980 (3rd ed.), p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed discussion of the word *ḥiğāb* and circumstances surrounding the problem in early Islam, see: Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam. An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. from French by Mary Jo Lakeland, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1991, pp. 85-101.

<sup>7</sup> Sura 33, verse 53.

<sup>8</sup> Sura 33, verse 59.

who have no sense of the shame of sex; and they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments.”<sup>9</sup>

Leaving aside lengthy discussions about Muḥammad’s collections of ḥadīṡs and their reliability, his statements about women too are inconclusive in elucidating a clear-cut status of women and their social role. Authors of the ṣaḥīḥs (i.e. reliable tradition collections) attribute the following to the Prophet<sup>10</sup>: “Heaven lies at the feet of mothers”, “God calls you to treat women well...”, “The rights of women are sacred, so pay attention to preserve these rights.”

However it is also attributed to him to have said: “Those, who entrust power to a woman will never know prosperity”, “Three things bring bad luck: houses, woman and horse.”

We can devote ample time and space to the analysis of Qur’ānic and Prophet’s statements but the core of the problem is still there: the position of women remained inferior, in spite of the establishment by Islam during later centuries of great empires and highly developed civilization. With the passage of time, especially with the decline of Islamic states power, the domination of tribalists in the field of male-female relationships (and not only) became increasingly evident and less veiled. Sanctified traditions were treated in an instrumental manner. It seems that early Islamic reformism lost the battle with tribalism in many fields, and women were the most inferior prey of the regressive process.

In present times, we can describe the family model and society of Islamic countries as patriarchal with dependent and inferior roles of women, characterised also by the existence of two worlds of men, i.e. the unbounded wide world, and of women, i.e. the closed, restricted to the house. Women cannot leave the house without permission alone.<sup>11</sup> They have to be veiled, their marriage is usually prearranged by the parents, and the old customs of redemption/dowry payments still function. The following married life is usually confined to the breeding of children and caring for the household, which means incessant work in the isolated world. In case of a clash of characters, the husband has an easy divorce. Very seldom, the woman could be

<sup>9</sup> Sura 24, verse 31.

<sup>10</sup> Among them: Al-Buḥārī, *Saḥīḥ al-Buḥārī*, Cairo 1348 a.H. (also: Beirut 1978, Dar al-Ma’rifa).

<sup>11</sup> See the first of the known trilogy of the Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 1988, *Bayna ʿl-Qaṣrayn*, Cairo 1956, where the author presents to us the story of Amīna, who did not leave her house for 25 years, i.e. since her marriage, and when she visited the nearby Al-Ḥusayn Mosque without the knowledge of her husband she had to leave the house, in spite of having children and long duration of marriage.

granted divorce at her will, while social safeguards for the divorced woman are nullified—in spite of explicit judgements in the Qur’ān.

Since early XIX century (in the aftermath of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, Muḥammad ‘Alī’s seizure of power in that country and reformist attitudes of that ruler), an intellectual liberal movement was initiated, dealing also with women rights and status. The acknowledged father of Arab-Islamic modernism Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ at-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1873) devoted chapters of his Parisian impressions<sup>12</sup> to the presentation of woman’s role in French society—of course, as compared to the socially dysfunctional role of Egyptian women.

The remedy chosen by at-Ṭaḥṭāwī was the need for the education of the society in the spirit of respect for women together with reforming the educational system in the direction of teaching girls as well as boys.<sup>13</sup>

The ideas and work of at-Ṭaḥṭāwī and the earlier mentioned Muḥammad ‘Abduh were continued by the latter’s disciple Muḥammad Rašīd Riḍā (1865-1935).<sup>14</sup> and particularly by Qāsim Amīn (1865-1908)—the author of historically important books on feminine rights<sup>15</sup>, which raised and still raise protest among conservative theologians. In his book *Tahrīr al-mar’a* (“The Emancipation of Woman), Amīn wrote: “A woman is a full human being, only if she disposes of herself and enjoys the freedom granted to her by the šarī‘a and nature alike, and when her capacities are fully developed. Polygamy was for him tantamount to the lack of respect for women wishes or opinion, because no woman would from her free will share her husband with another woman. Confronted with protests, he answered by writing yet another book entitled this time *Al-Mar’a al-ḡadīda* (“The New Woman”), in which it was emphatically asserted citizens are free only when women are free.

Since early XIX century, improving the position of women became a theme of Middle Eastern nationalist movements; women activists, social organisations and congresses became a part of the scene. One of the final important developments was the general acceptance of female education—be it in the segregated societies of Iran and Saudi Arabia or in the mixed societies of Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

Becoming independent after World War II, many Islamic countries introduced to their constitutions specific clauses about the status of women—on

<sup>12</sup> Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ at-Ṭaḥṭāwī, *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila li-...*, ed. by Muḥammad ‘Amāra, *Al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li-d-Dirāsāt wa-ān-Našr*, vol. II, Beirut 1973 pp. 7-266.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269 and later on the reform of the education entitled *Kitāb al-muršīd al-amīn li-l-banāt wa-āl-banīn*.

<sup>14</sup> His articles on women rights published in the periodical “*Al-Manār*”, vol 32, October 1931—October 1932.

<sup>15</sup> Qāsim Amīn, *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila* ed. by Muḥammad ‘Amāra, *Al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li-d-Dirāsāt wa-ān-Našr*, Beirut 1976.

the whole, postulating equality of men and women, social justice and equal opportunities for all citizens. The enfranchisement of women went ahead in Egypt, where women held ministerial posts, gained the right to elect their representatives to parliament. In Syria and Iraq, the percentage of women to men in the general assemblies was in certain times higher than in the British House of Commons.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, there is a clear setback in this respect since the late 1970's—i.e. with and after the take-over of power in Iran by the Islamic Revolution headed by Ḥomeynī in early 1979. Islamic radicalism became an increasingly powerful factor in many Islamic societies; treating women rights as manifestations of rejected “westernisation”, and imposing upon women a role of clothing (*ḥiğāb*) as well as behaviour—described to be allegedly compatible with the Qur'ān and tradition.

On the whole, radical Islamists (called by mass media “fundamentalists”) uphold the following viewpoints:

- the verbal reiteration of judgements and statements of Islam's tradition on women: that they are equal to men, they bear equal responsibilities, they have the right of education, freedom of thought and expression;
- disapproval of feminism, treating it as a sign of decadence;
- acceptance of polygamy as a voluntary and not obligatory state; Islam, in this view, only limited hitherto existing polygamy to four wives;
- successive wives enjoy all the privileges of the first;
- polygamy is in the interest of women themselves, since their number exceeds the number of the male population;
- polygamy resolves the question posed by female impotence or incapacity to perform marital obligations;
- polygamy is justified by sexual needs of males during travels, and also by male excessive erotism resulting from hot climate and early adolescence;
- the veil (*ḥiğāb*) is a testimony of the woman's honour, high esteem for her, her humbleness, ascetism and reliability<sup>18</sup>;

<sup>16</sup> *Handbook of the Modern World. The Middle East*, ed. by Michael Adams, Facts on File Publications, New York—Oxford 1988, p. 812.

<sup>17</sup> Hani Ramaḍān, *Al-Mar'a fī ʾā-l-islām* (cf. Polish translation: *Kobieta w islamie*, n.p. 1993 Society of Muslim Students in Poland); Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus* (Polish translation: *Spojrzenie w islam*, n.p. 1993, Society of Muslim Students in Poland); Abu al-A'la al-Maududi, *Niḡām al-ḥayāt fī ʾā-l-islām* (Polish translation: *Życie w islamie*, n.p. 1993, Society of Muslim Students in Poland); Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd Allāh Ibn Sulaymān 'Arafa, *Ḥuqūq al-mar'a fī ʾā-l-Islām*, 3rd ed., n.p. 1980, al-Maktab al-Islāmī; Sa'īd al-Afḡānī, *Ā'iṣa wa-ʾās-siyāsa*, 2nd. ed., Beirut 1971, Dār al-Fikr.

<sup>18</sup> A movement was inaugurated for the defence of women right to wear the *ḥiğāb*—also among Muslim minorities in Europe such as in the case of France and Britain, where school girls had to be granted the right to attend the school in veil. See: *Islam in Focus*, pp. 290-291,

—(in conclusion) the status of women in Islam, it is argued, is incomparably high and realistic—in addition to being in conformity with their nature.

A more categoric opinion about women is expressed in the Islamic Republic of Iran. An example is an official booklet published in Tehran in 1984 under the title *Status of women in Islam*.<sup>19</sup> According to it, the religion of Islam regards the woman as a full member of the society and does not raise any barrier between herself and the male with respect to human virtues (p. 20). However, the male differs substantially from the female from a psychological point of view; woman are usually more emotional, while in the case of men the intellect dominates upon emotions (p. 9). The unnamed author adds that the woman's brain is smaller than man's, and that is the reason for the higher intelligence of the latter (p. 12).

The author of the mentioned publication attempts to rationalise polygamy (p. 28-29) in this way:

- the male is on the average two times longer fertile than the female;
- the woman has menstruation, in which time sexual activity is not possible, whereas the man is sexually active (capable) without interruption;
- women adolescence comes earlier than men, and for that reason there are more women in marriage age;
- men get killed during wars; hence—there are many widows, who need to be cared for.

The discussion about women in the Islamic world is mainly taking place without female participation. Far from ignoring the complexities of this social phenomenon, the most ready practical proposal/solution could be the introduction of a representative system, in which women parliamentarians could find the optimal definition of their situation and status in the society.

Meanwhile, let us listen to the opinions of two contemporary Muslim women-specialists about their dilemma:

May Ghasoub writes<sup>20</sup>: “In these days, when Islamic fundamentalism goes ahead with the glorification of the early symbolic past, it is worthwhile for us to return and find that women were not fully subjugated at those days. So, if Aisha—the preferred wife-of the Prophet and intelligent-woman, who had enough wisdom and capabilities allowed herself to express sharp objec-

261 and later. Also: Jamila Brijbhustan, *Muslim Woman in Purdah and out of it*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, cf. Ikramullah Shaista, *From Purdah to Parliament*, London 1963, Pub. Crescent Press.

<sup>19</sup> *Status of Women in Islam*, Islamic Propagation Office, Tehran 1984.

<sup>20</sup> May Ghasoub, *Al-mar'a al-'arabiyya wa-dukūriyyat al-aṣāla*, London 1991, Dar al-Saqi.

tions about the multiplicity of wives (polygamy) in the Messenger's house, and to the divine endorsement to such polygamy—supposedly facilitated by Allah's love for His Messenger (p. 16).

She continues that, in modern times, not only fundamentalist, nationslist and leftist movements have had viewed change, modernism and female freedom as synonyms of the rival colonialist West; while respect for traditions, return to roots and subordination of the female to the male or to family requirements as proofs of indigenous affinity, sovereignty and cultural or national identity (p. 37). She further writes: "It is strange that whenever an intellectual option is adopted nearly at once the question is inserted in the context of opposition to the 'West', or—in best cases—in the context of independence from it ..." (p. 63).

May Ghasoub concludes her books "Decades of viewing oneself and the world within the dualism of East-West, or indigenous affinity-westernisation, have led to the stagnation of the Arab feminist movement and to its closure within a vicious circle. Is there any other perspective?" (p.69)

Finally, Fatima Mernissi<sup>21</sup> sums up her study of the past and present of the Islamic attitude to women: "The fundamentalist movement, from its beginning, challenged and rejected the idea of the people as the origin of political decision or legislative power, since only Allah makes such decisions. His will is law, and He has revealed it once and for all for everyone. This leads me to conclude that it is not the fundamentalists who are the absurd ones on the contemporary scene; it is the Muslim left, which believed that it could exist without considering the fundamental secular issue—the transfer of power from the sacred to the human, from a transcendent divine being to an ordinary individual living an everyday life.[...] The traditional entrenchment of women [...] has forced the Muslim in a few decades to face up to what Westerners took centuries to digest (and which they still have difficulty doing): democracy and equality of the sexes. To call into question social, political and sexual inequalities at the same time is enough to make one's head spin."(pp. 22-23).

<sup>21</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam...*, op.cit. Of particular interest for our analysis are: the Preface to the English Edition, pp. VI-IX), Introduction (pp. 1-11), and Conclusion (pp. 189-195).