

THE ROLE OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD IN CHANGING MORES AND TRADITIONS RELATED TO WOMEN IN ARABIA

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Abstract:

The basis of this research is to analyze the role Islam played in changing the lives of Arab Women. The first part of the research focuses on the events “During the pre-Islamic Era” and how women were treated during this time due to the difficult environment, rough life and mixing with other traditions. The second part “Status of women during the Era of the Prophet” explores how Muhammad changed the roles of women in society compared to the pre-Islamic era. The “Misconceptions about Muslim women today” focuses on human interpretation of texts which are prone to changes and how those changes affect and control the true state of affairs of women today. Lastly, “The role of the family in developing intellectual autonomy and a spirit of independence for the offspring” discusses the important role family’s play in raising and guiding their children. The findings in this research may be useful in understanding the roles women play in Islam.

Keywords: Misconceptions, Muslim women, Arabia, interpretation

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1. During the Pre-Islamic Era

There are different views with regard to the situation of women during the pre-Islamic era as the exact conditions of this period are still ambiguous and references are few and far between. However, we can sense a near consensus that women in that era were subjected to suffering and abuse. Studies describe widespread objectionable practices, including infanticide, depriving women of inheritance, inheritance of the father's wife after his death, polygamy without limitations, and divorce without control or restriction. The Arabs found justifications for such practices and traditions. The harsh desert environment and rough life contributed to the nomadic character of these societies and forced the Arabs to adopt special lifestyles. The tribal life was characterized by instability and continuous travel in search of whatever limited means of living could be found in the desert. This difficult environment opened the way for a chain of defensive practices to protect the limited resources; practices which eventually evolved into persistent traditions.

Of such practices was the absolute loyalty to the tribe and using all available means, including polygamy, to beget more sons in order to protect the tribal entity and increase its strength¹. Women as the weaker sex did not contribute much to the tribe's strength and therefore had less value than the males. Another factor which contributed to the Arab negative viewpoint on women was the brutal warfare between the Arab tribes: a large number of men were killed and the women taken into captivity and slavery (a source of shame to the proud Arabs). In fact, some of the tribal attacks were for the sole purpose of taking women captives and humiliating the defeated tribe.

The French Orientalist Rodinson² says in describing the situation of the weak classes in Makkah at that time:

“The poor, the young, and the honest were suffering from upstart arrogance.”³

¹Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (Rutledge, London, 2003) p. 115

²Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, trans: Anne Carter (Pantheon Books: New York, 1980)

³Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, trans: Anne Carter, (Pantheon Books: New York, 1980) p. 36.

The constancy and invariability of the desert environment helped such traditions to continue across generations and to gain strength and popularity.⁴ The harsh life was reflected in the rough treatment of women and other vulnerable elements in the society.

In summary, we can say that the pre-Islamic society was a male dominated society characterized by continuous warfare and periods of drought in harsh desert conditions.

The viewpoint of pre-Islamic Arab society towards women was not only based on the requirements of the harsh environment, but **was influenced by what was inherited from previous nations and societies** with whom the Arabs had ties such as the Persians, the Indians, the Romans and the Caledonians.⁵

The Arabs were linked to other Semitic nations through language, origin and geographic area. The inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula were not all Arabs but were intermingled with refugees and remnants of conquerors and slaves from different races and faiths such as Persians, Indians and Romans. Therefore, the pre-Islamic Arabs were not devoid of all culture. The Yemeni Arabs, for example, had an important role in forming the Arab civilization.⁶

People of other religions such as Jews and Christians were living alongside Arabs in the Peninsula. *Yathrib* (now called Al-Madinah) was one of the gathering points for many of the Jewish tribes that migrated from Byzantine Syria since the first and second centuries. Migration of Jews to the Arabian Peninsula increased following the failure of the Jewish rebellion against the Roman rule in the year 70 AD. Similar migrations followed in the period between 132 and 135 AD. The Jewish influence in Yathrib was apparent in the economic, political and cultural spheres⁷. Jews inhabited many other villages such as Khaibar, Fadak, Wadi Al-Qura and Taymaa'.⁸

⁴Al Duri, *ibid*.

⁵Zahia Kaddura, *Populism and its Social and Political impact in Islamic Life in the First Abbasid Era* (Lebanese Book: Beirut, 1972) p. 28

⁶ See Abdul Aziz Thaalibi, previous reference, p. 67-106.

⁷Akram Diyâ alUmare, *Madianan Society at the Time of the Prophet: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, Virginia*, 1, 1991, p. 44

⁸Israel and Livinson, *History of Jews in Arab Lands pre and post Islam* (I'timad Publishing: Egypt, 1927), p. 14

Jews who lived in the Arab land assimilated the Bedouin characteristics. They were greatly affected by the Arab way of life to the extent that many of them adopted an Arabic dialect over their Hebrew language.⁹ They also adopted the tribal ways of life and took an interest in poetry. Some of their well-known poets are *KaabIbnul Ashraf*, *ShuraihIbnOmran*, *Al-RabeeIbnAbulAqeeq*, and others.¹⁰

Arabs also took on several Jewish traditions such as certain practices of magic and sorcery. Jews were expert magicians and Arabs used to approach them for spells.¹¹ Many Arab tribes acknowledged the superiority of the Jews in science and knowledge and respected them as a “people of the Scripture” (I.e.Having a Divine message). It was certain Jews who foretold of the coming of Muhammad based on the information in their Book, the Torah.¹²

The influence of neighboring nations on each other cannot be ignored and women did not always fare well. Archaeological investigations show that the pre-Islamic Arabs were not living in isolation.¹³ Some of the Hejaz Arabs even converted to Judaism, including some Arab tribes around *Makkah* such as *Kenanah*, *BanulHarithIbnKaaband BanuKenda*. Also, some of the tribes of *Aws* and the *Khazraj* converted to the religion of their Jewish neighbors in *Yathrib*.¹⁴

Thus, some of the teaching of the Torah spread among the Arabs, including the views on women as guilty of the original sin in seducing Adam to eat what God forbade.¹⁵

In Genesis we are told that Eve ate from the forbidden tree based on advice from the snake:

⁹Zaghlul AbdAlHameed, History of Arabs before Islam, (Arab Nahda publishing: Beirut) 1975, p. 359

¹⁰Akram Diyaa AlOmari, Civil Society at the time of the Prophet, SAWS, Islamic University, Madeena, 1403H/1983AD, p. 57

¹¹Jawad Ali, History of Arabs before Islam, Dar Al Elm for Millions, Beirut, 1976, part 6, 560onward. See also Carl Brokleman, History of Arab Literature, Dar Al-Maaref, Beirut, 2ndEdition, part 1, 121

¹² Karen Armstrong, Muhammad: A Prophet for our Time (Harper Collins, 2007)

¹³Jawad Ali, History of Arabs before Islam, Dar Al Elm for Millions (Beirut, 1976)

¹⁴ Al-Bakri, *Glossary of Nations and Places*, Reviewed by Mustafa AlSaqqa, League of Writing, Translation and Publishing, Egypt, 1945 AD, part I, page 29.

¹⁵Menachem M. Brayer, *the Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychosocial Perspective* (Hoboken, N.J: Ktav Publishing House, 1986) p. 239. Susan W. Schneider, *Jewish and Female*(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984) p.237. Clara M. Henning, “Cannon Law and the Battle ofthe Sexes” in Rosemary R. Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewishand Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) p. 272

The snake was the craftiest of all the animals that God created. The snake said to the woman: “It is true that God told you not to eat from all paradise trees?” The woman said to the snake: “We eat from all the paradise tree fruit except that of the tree in the center of paradise as God told us to avoid it lest we die.” The snake said to the woman: “You will not die but God knows that the day you eat from the fruit of that tree your eyes will be opened wide and you will become like God knowing good from evil.” The woman saw that the tree looked enticing to eat and believed that it would grant knowledge. Thus she took of its fruits and ate it and gave her husband who ate as well.

Hence God punished the woman according to that sin.

The Lord said to the woman: “Why did you do that?” The woman replied: “The snake seduced me.” The Lord said: “I will increase your weariness when you become pregnant and you will give birth with pain and feel lonesome when you become a slave to your husband.”¹⁶

Eve’s daughters inherited that sin. The theme of woman’s seduction and her sin as well as her ability to tempt man is repeated many times in the Old Testament.¹⁷

Judaism was not the only religion that appeared in the Arab land. Christianity was also there particularly in Syria, where heads of tribes as well as Arab rulers of the Ghassanids and others were converts¹⁸. There were also Christians in Makkah.¹⁹ The call to Christianity increased in the Arab land during the Roman persecution era prior to the official conversion of Roman Empire to Christianity. Many monks were forced to flee and settle in the Arab peninsula. These monks

¹⁶ Genesis 7-2:3.

¹⁷ Leonard J. Swidler, *Women in Judaism: the Status of Women in Formative Judaism*, Metuchen (N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1976) p. 115. Louis M. Epstein, *The Jewish Marriage Contract*, (New York: Arno Press, 1973) p. 149

¹⁸ The Arab converts did not adopt the Roman Orthodox Christianity but followed the Eastern Church which was opposed to the Romans. The Romans considered the Eastern sects heretics. The Eastern Christians concentrated more on the Old Testament instead of the Bibles and were known as Jacobites, i.e. believers of the one nature of Christ.

¹⁹ Many Christians lived in pre-Islamic Mecca, mostly from the remnants of refugees, slaves or traders. This may be one of the reasons the Polytheists accused the Prophet SAWS of copying his religion from the Christians.

appeared frequently in the markets and communities and preached the Christian faith, reminding people of the resurrection and the Day of Judgment.²⁰

Thus, efforts combined to form this culturally inherited view toward women in the Arab tribal mentality. Arabs were well known for the sanctification of their customs and inherited traditions. This reverence for the ways of their forefathers became a barrier between them and the acceptance of Islam in its early days. The reason for their survival and uniqueness as a nation lay in these traditions. Thus, a struggle began between the polytheists and the followers of the new call who found the stubborn attachment to tradition a form of blind imitation to be rejected.²¹

Notwithstanding the above, some women of the elite classes in the pre-Islamic era had high positions and enjoyed some civil rights such as the choice of a husband. However most were forced into marriage.²² References quote that many women were characterized by wisdom and sound opinions to the extent that their tribes took on the mother's name (instead of the father's) such as Mazyaha, Bageelah and Bahelah tribes.

Some women assumed professions and practiced trade for financial gain. Others engaged in fortune telling and witchcraft. Some practiced medicine and midwifery. Others were beauticians. Such work was performed for a fee and women were able to amass personal fortunes.²³

Marriage, for men, was without limitations as was divorce. Men had the right to divorce and to restore their wives whenever they wanted. In case of the husband's death the woman stayed home for a whole year and refrained from wearing perfume or new clothes, and from combing her hair or trimming her fingernails.²⁴

In general women in pre-Islamic times were subjected to tremendous suffering in many aspects of life, except in the rare case where the woman was of prominent social or economic status. This, however, varied by tribe and depended on the economic status of the woman as well as her

²⁰ Yaqut Al-Hamawi, previous reference, part 5, 266 and Ahmad Amin, previous reference, 27.

²¹ Al-Duri, previous reference 40.

²² Allsaba in Tamyeez Assahaba, part 7, page 613.

²³ Al-Hawafi, previous reference, page 399.

²⁴ Al-Bukhary (5337) and Muslim (1489).

personal characteristics as in the case of Lady Khadijah (the Prophet's wife) who was a respected businesswoman in Quraysh.²⁵

Women and children in *Jahiliyah* (pre-Islam) were also denied inheritance. The continuous travel, numerous wars, and the absence of a central authority did not allow for restoring rights or application of law and order. Women and children were deprived of inheritance because of their inability to assume responsibility in defending the tribe. Rights were closely connected with the extent of the role assumed in the protection and defense of the big family which is the tribe.²⁶ This overrode factors of family kinship and social relationship. The tribe normally assumed all religious and political duties.²⁷

Thus, in general, prevailing situation of the time was to deny the female of inheritance completely and this was a widespread practice among the various Arab tribes. The justification was that women were in need of special protection in a harsh environment characterized by constant attacks and warfare and that only the man can assume such role.

In her book, "Gospel According to Women", Karen Armstrong says:

We find that some women in the dawn of Islam enjoyed a great deal of freedom and that Islam started the practice of "*the Harem*" only after its interaction with Byzantine Christianity which treated its women thus.²⁸

We do not see the necessity for generalization with regard to the issue of female infanticide. There is no scientific evidence to show a clear shortage in percentage of females in comparison

²⁵ Abu Abdullah Mohammad Ismail Al-Bukhary, previous reference, part 5, 2197. See also the quote: "In pre-Islamic times a woman was considered nothing, until Allah decreed our rights in Islam", part 4, 1866. Narrated also by Abu AlHussain Muslim bin Al-Hajaj Al-Qushairi (261), Sahih Muslim, Reviewed by Mohammad Fual Abdul-Baki, Tradition Revival House, Beirut, part 2, p. 1108.

²⁶ Muhammad Ali Kattan, A Study of the Badia, Country, and City Societies (Dar Al-Jeel, Cairo, 1979) p. 73.

²⁷ However, it is said that the first people to give women in Jahiliya equal inheritance was a man called Thu Al-Majased Al-Yashkari bin JashamIbnHabib. See also Ahmad Mahmoud Al-Shafii: Inheritance in Islam, University Cultural Establishment, Egypt, 1983, p. 19

²⁸ K. Armstrong, The Gospel According to Woman, (Em Tree Books, London, 1986) p.2-3.

with males in pre-Islamic Arab communities. This clearly shows that female infanticide was not common among the Arab tribes.

Wikipedia states:

In pre-Islamic Arabia the roles of the genders was never explicitly defined, and varied widely among the numerous tribes. For example, in the prosperous southern region of the Arabian Peninsula the religious edicts of Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism held sway among the Sabians and Himyarites, whereas in cities such as Makkah, the city where the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was born, a tribal set of rights was in place, in particular amongst the Bedouin, which varied from tribe to tribe. Thus there was no single definition of the roles played, and rights held, by women prior to the advent of Islam. There were instances where women held high positions of power and authority; there were also patterns of homicidal abuse of women, including instances of men killing female infants considered to be a liability.²⁹

2. Status of women during the Era of the Prophet

The Era of the Prophecy and the dawn of Islam were characterized by the birth of faith-based legislative systems and the emergence of new values in the Arab society: values of succor for the weak and the oppressed as well as human equality between all members of the community without distinction in all its forms.

The polytheists of Quraysh resisted these new principles which they perceived as a revolution against their inherited social, political and tribal system; a system revered and sanctified despite all its injustices and flaws, it being the system of their fathers and forefathers. Nonetheless, the Islamic faith succeeded in the eradication of many abnormal practices towards women and other vulnerable members of society. This was accomplished by declaring equality and rights for all human beings with no distinction. Differences in class, sex, race, color, and wealth were ignored. The only allowable difference between people was in their degree of piety: an acquired rather than an inherited quality.

²⁹Wikipedia, Gender roles in Islam. Retrieved (n.a), from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_roles_in_Islam

The Noble Qur'an, in more than one place, emphasizes the unity of origin for women and men:

O mankind! Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul. He created its mate from it and from the two of them spread countless men and women [throughout the earth]. Fear Allah, in whose name you appeal to one another, and be mindful of your obligations in respect of ties of kinship. Allah is always watching over you. (TMQ, 4:1)

There is no reference whatsoever in the Qur'an to the "original sin" by Eve (or Adam) passed on to their children:

But Satan caused them both to slip through this and thus brought about the loss of their former state. We said, "Go down from here as enemies to each other; and on earth you shall have your abode and your livelihood for a while!"(TMQ, 2:36).

Both Adam and Eve committed a sin and but Allah guided Adam to the way of repentance and forgave them both:

Then Adam received some words [of prayer] from his Lord and He accepted his repentance. He is the Forgiving One, the Merciful. (TMQ, 2:37).

In general the Qur'anic message for Adam and his children revolves around the following principles:

1) Human beings are honored beings.

When your Lord said to the angels, 'I am putting a successor on earth,' they said, "Will You place someone there who will cause corruption on it and shed blood, while we glorify You with Your praise and extol Your holiness?" [Allah] answered, "Surely, I know that which you do not know."

2) Humans have a tendency to succumb to desire and seduction.

But Satan caused them both to slip through this ... (TMQ, 2:36).

3) **Human beings also have the capability to resist and rise above their desires:**

Then his Lord had mercy on him, accepted his repentance and guided him.(TMQ, 20:122).

4) Because of this quality Allah gave Man dominion over Earth. This dominion is for both men and women. They are both accountable for this responsibility as they come from one origin and it is worth repeating this particular passage:

O mankind! Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul. He created its mate from it and from the two of them spread countless men and women [throughout the earth]. Fear Allah, in whose name you appeal to one another, and be mindful of your obligations in respect of ties of kinship. Allah is always watching over you. (TMQ, 4:1)

In this regard, Sir Thomas Arnold³⁰ says:“No Arab – he argued- has offered to his nation more precious advantages than those I bring you. I offer you happiness in this world and in the life to come.”³¹

Thus, the Arabian Peninsula witnessed an ideological and social transformation; more like a mutation or revolution in modern terminology as Karen Armstrong indicates:

....in fact the emancipation of women was dear to the Prophet’s heart. We must remember what life had been like for women in the pre-Islamic period when female infanticide was the norm and when women had no rights at all. Like slaves, women were treated as an inferior species, who had no legal existence. In such a primitive world, the very idea that a woman could be a witness or could inherit anything in her own right was astonishing. We must recall that in Christian Europe, women had to wait until the nineteenth century before they had anything similar: even then, the law remained heavily weighted towards men.³²

The Qur’an started by strongly condemning the attitude of some tribes with regard to the birth of females; i.e. female infanticide. This started the change of the society from a patriarchal one to

³⁰Thomas Arnold, *The spread of Islam in the World* (Goodword books: India, 2003)

³¹Thomas Arnold, *The spread of Islam in the World* (GoodwordBooks: India, 2003) p. 13.

³²Karen Armstrong. *The Gospel According to Woman* (London 1986).

one based on cooperation and solidarity between the two sexes: man and woman. The Qur'an also attacked all forms of social injustice that fell upon the helpless people such as slaves, children and women. It declared the principle of equality to uproot all such practices. The teachings of Islam caused a huge leap in the social and legislative stature of women and removed the signs of the prevailing injustices. It declared an equality of integration and not of equivalence as each sex has its own unique characteristics.

In another verse the Almighty emphasizes Man's responsibility and ties it to righteousness which is the foundation for the role that both men and women are entrusted with.

There are signs in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day for people of understanding; who remember Allah while standing, sitting and [lying] on their sides, and who ponder over the creation of the heavens and the earth, saying, "Lord, You have not created all this without purpose. Glory be to You! Save us from the torment of the Fire. Lord, those whom You condemn to enter the Fire You have surely brought to disgrace. Wrongdoers will have no supporters. Lord, we have heard a caller calling to the true faith, saying 'Believe in your Lord,' and we believed. Lord, forgive us our sins and remove from us our bad deeds and make us die with the virtuous. Our Lord! Grant us what You have promised to us through Your messengers, and do not humiliate us on the Day of Resurrection. Surely, You never fail to fulfill Your promise." Their Lord accepted their prayer, saying, "I will deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labors. You are members one of another. I will certainly forgive the sins of those who emigrated and were expelled from their homes, who suffered persecution in My cause, who fought and were killed. I will certainly admit them to Gardens through which rivers flow, as a reward from Allah: with Allah is the best reward." (TMQ, 3:190-195).

In the above verses, the goal and purpose of human existence are defined. Man is responsible for acknowledging Allah's oneness and worshipping Him alone. The verses have also define the good deeds of various kinds are rewardable acts of worship for men and women.³³ The Almighty says:

³³Deniz Kandiyoti, Women, Islam and the State, Middle East Report, Gender and Politics. 173, 1991, pp. 9-14.
John Esposito, Islam: The Straight Path 3rd Edition. (Oxford University Press, 2005) p.99.

To whoever does good deeds, man or woman, and is a believer, We shall assuredly give a good life; and We will bestow upon them their reward according to the best of their works. (TMQ, 16:97)

Islam guards rights as well as responsibilities. *For every right a human being enjoys, it is his duty to guard this right for others.* Islam also calls for honoring women and treating them well so that they can fulfill their role.

Under this respectful and inclusive viewpoint on women in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, Muslim women flourished in various fields. They played important roles in the establishment and construction of the Muslim nation. Muslim society did not justify any kind of preferential treatment based on sex with concern to duties, responsibilities, or rewards.

In describing this great leap in the status of women, the well-known Orientalist Walt Montgomery³⁴ says:

It is true that Islam is still, in many ways, a man's religion. But I think I've found evidence in some of the early sources that seems to show that Muhammad made things better for women. It appears that in some parts of Arabia, notably in Mecca, a matrilineal system was in the process of being replaced by a patrilineal one at the time of Muhammad. Growing prosperity caused by a shifting of trade routes was accompanied by a growth in individualism. Men were amassing considerable personal wealth and wanted to be sure that this would be inherited by their own actual sons, and not simply from an extended family of their sisters' sons. This led to a deterioration in the rights of women. At the time Islam began, the conditions of women were terrible - they had no right to own property, were supposed to be the property of the man, and if the man died everything went to his sons. Muhammad improved things quite a lot. By instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education and divorce, he gave women certain basic

Fatima Mernissi, *Women in Muslim History: Traditional Perspectives and New Strategies*, From Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory (Zed Books Ltd, 1996)

³⁴William Montgomery Watt, *The Coracle, the Iona Community*, 3, 51, 2000, pp. 8-11. Retrieved from http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/2000_watt.htm

safeguards. Set in such historical context the Prophet can be seen as a figure who testified on behalf of women's rights.³⁵

The Prophet (SAWS) encouraged Muslim women to seek knowledge. He made it a duty of every Muslim. He said (SAWS): "Seeking knowledge is the duty of every Muslim." That is to say; each individual: man and woman.

Education is the basic factor for the advancement of any nation. Thus, many Muslim female figures emerged who contributed to the preparation of generations of scientists and scholars. They were led by the Mothers of Believers (the Prophet's SAWS wives) such as the Ladies Aysha, Um Salama, and Hafsa, Allah be pleased with them all. Muslim women also had a prominent role in war.

Across the centuries, history has immortalized the names of several women as witnesses for the scientific and cultural status of women in the Islamic era. This fact was not denied by historians.

The writer Fatima Al-Mernisi says:

The first decades of Islam, as we have seen, are very eloquent on women's contribution at that time and produce models of femininity like the active businesswoman Khadijah, or the first *shari'a*-teacher A'isha, the Prophet's third wife, or women who exercised political power within the Muslim civilization. Data on women in the first decades of Islam is vital since conservative regimes and fundamentalists base their policies on women in Muslim tradition. *SakinaShihabi's* editing of the comments of Imam Ibn 'Asakir's special volume on women, *TarikhDimashq* (History of Damascus), is probably one of the best examples of this research. This text contains 196 biographies of famous Muslim women who either lived in or visited Damascus and it gave Ibn 'Asakir an opportunity to summarize all existing data until his time (12th century AD) on some of the most active and forceful women of our civilization. The volume on women is the last of an 80-volume history of Damascus, the editing of which SakinaShihabi made her life's work. She carried out what is called in Arabic *tahqiq* (verification) which means that she did extensive

³⁵William Montgomery Watt, *The Coracle*, The Iona Community, 3, 51, 2000, pp. 8-11. Retrieved from http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/2000_watt.htm

background research so that the modern reader could identify, by a simple glance at the reference at the bottom of the page, all names and events quoted. She explains her motives, since most of the rest of the volumes are still in manuscript form, for prioritizing the text on women: 'I preferred to bring alive Imam Ibn 'Asakir's volume on women because it highlights a dimension of our Muslim civilization which is still totally obscure, that concerning women'. She summarizes the importance of the work by saying that Ibn 'Asakir's women' make vibrant five centuries of the political, social, literary and religious life of our civilization.³⁶

The progressive nature of Islam appears in its encouragement for the education for women in opposition to existing laws and traditions of the time. Greek Laws, which were considered by historians as the most democratic of ancient times, limited education to males and closed it completely for females! Aristotle, stated in his book, "Politics", that *nature did not provide women with any significant mental readiness, therefore they should only be prepared for home, nursery and maternal affairs*. Aristotle was not expressing his personal opinion but rather recording public opinion and practices in Athens; considered the most civilized democratic nation in the pre-Islamic world.³⁷

Therefore, when Plato, in his Platonian City, decreed the principles of equality between men and women and the right to education, culture and employment for both, his opinions were ridiculed by other Greek scholars, philosophers, and poets to the extent that Aristophanes, the Dean of Greek comedian poets wrote two comedies to ridicule his opinions: "The female parliament" and "Plutos". One of the stars of the plays was quoted as saying: "It is not proper for a woman to waste her time on education and culture since her basic duties, which should consume her time, effort and philosophy should not go beyond raising kids, housekeeping, provision of family needs and economizing family expenditure."³⁸

³⁶Fatima Mernissi, *Women in Muslim History: Traditional Perspectives and New Strategies, From Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (Zed Books Ltd, 1996)

³⁷Dobbs, D. 1996, *Family Matters: Aristotle's appreciation of women and the plural structure of society*, *American Political Science Review*, 90, 1, 1996.

³⁸Mohammad Mitwali Asha'rawi, *Fatawas*, Modern Library, Egypt, 2001, p. 207

At the end of the seventeenth century A.D. some faint voices rose in Europe calling for the education of women within very narrow boundaries. These calls were led by the scholar Fenelon³⁹ in his book, titled “*L’Education des Filles*”, which appeared in 1680 A.D. However, such calls did not receive any appreciable response from most European nations of that time.

In view of the openness of Islamic societies, it was inevitable that the rising role of women witnessed in the early decades of Islam should become influenced by the backward views of women in other cultures and civilizations. This is especially true during the decades of recession in the Muslim countries and the invasions and wars that the Islamic countries were subjected to. The result was the intrusion of several traditions and behaviors foreign to Islam and far removed from the essence of its teachings. Backward ideas on the nature of women and their role in the community became widespread in the Muslim societies.

This influence appeared clearly in the new attitudes of some Muslims towards women; such as depriving women of the right of education in the name of religion. This led to the spread of ignorance and myths among a rising number of uneducated women who became easy prey for superstitions, witchcraft and other warped beliefs and behaviors.

Thus, the status of women in the Muslim community became governed by importing deviant behaviors that had lost their historical significance at the expense of Islam which came to eradicate such habits and behaviors. Unfortunately the situation continued to worsen until the present time. Some modern Western writers and scholars use the current abysmal circumstances of Muslim women as proof of the backwardness of Islam and Muslims and use the excuse of “liberating women” as false justification for their aggressive and imperialistic policies in Muslim countries.

³⁹François Fénelon 1651-1715, in: François de Salignac de laMothe Fénelon.” Encyclopedia of World Biography, 2nd ed. Gale Research, 1998

“In the Middle East, the treatment of women provided Europeans with an excuse to declare the inferiority of Muslims and their religion, and also justification for Europe’s imperialist and colonialist policies and practices”.⁴⁰

A large number of the injustices inflicted on women in Muslim societies are the result of imported foreign ideas and habits or from a misinterpretation by Muslims of some Qur’anic verses or Hadith.⁴¹

On this John Esposito⁴² says:

The study of women in Islam and Muslim society is complex, reflecting the diverse and varied realities of Muslim women and Muslim societies throughout the ages. Alongside ideals embodied in the Qur’an and the traditions (hadith) of Muhammad, one must look at the actual condition of Muslim women in diverse time periods and socio-historical contexts. The status of women in Islam was profoundly affected not only by the fact that Islamic belief interacted with and was informed by diverse cultures, but also, and of equal importance, that the primary interpreters of Islamic law and tradition were men (religious scholars or *ulama*) from those cultures.⁴³

In summary, we can say that whatever is falsely linked to Islam in terms of deviant behavior or erroneous interpretations of Qur’anic or Sunnah texts by some Muslims; all of this cannot hide the fact that not a single Islamic text or ruling denigrates women in any way, shape or form.

⁴⁰Wiebke Walther, InIslam Women: From Medieval To Modern Times. (Markus Wiener Publishing: New York, 1993) p. 8

⁴¹ Dar ASHuruq, Beirut and Cairo, 1410H/1991AD.

Marwan Ibrahim AlQaisi, Muslim Women between Fatwas and Current Practices, Islamic Institute for Education, Science and Culture, Morocco, 1411H/1991AD, p. 19

AbdAllah Fahd AlNufaisi, InThe Saddle of the Word, Kuwait, 1411H/1991AD, p. 164

Amira El AzharySonbol, Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islam in History(Syracuse University Press: New York, 1996) p. 34.

⁴² Professor John Esposito, The Islamic World: Past and Present, The Oxford Encyclopedia for Modern Islamic World. Oxford Islamic Dictionary, Islam and the West after 9/11, and What Everyone Should Know about Islam.

⁴³Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito. Islam, Gender, and Social Change (Oxford University Press, 1998) p.163

3. Misconceptions about Muslim women today

Interpretations based on customs and traditions granted legitimacy to unsanctioned practices.

Many of those customs contradict the sanctions of *sharia*. With time, these practices controlled the true state of affairs of women, and were practiced under the name of religion.

We have to distinguish between the absolute authority of the texts which is not prone to change, and the human interpretation of texts which are prone to change (due to time and space) and error.

The necessity is to appreciate the contexts (social, cultural and historical, etc.) surrounding the emergence of interpretations! Absolute texts were descended to change adverse practices and mores not the opposite.

Reference of *Mutashabih* (not of well-established meaning) to the *muhkam* (basic or fundamental)!

The Qur'an itself has given us a basic rule of understanding:

"It is He who has sent down the Book to you. Some of its verses are clear and precise in meaning-they are the basis of the Book-while others are allegorical. Those with deviation in their hearts pursue the allegorical, so as to create dissension by seeking to explain it: but no one knows its meaning except Allah. Those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say, 'We believe in it: it is all from our Lord.' But only the wise take heed." (TMQ, 3:7)

The 'precise' verses are the ones where the message needs NO extra work and where the verse carries no ambiguity or loss of information on its own (e.g. ALLAH is One, honor your parents, do not commit adultery, do not lie, do not steal, do not be a tyrant, do not oppress, etc. While the 'allegorical' verses are mixed into the Book like a jigsaw puzzle.

The Qur'an has two types of verse: those whose meanings are clear and decisive, forming the bases of Qur'anic teachings, called *muhkamat*, and those with allegorical meanings, called

mutashabihat and refer to a phenomenon that mankind does not yet know, like Resurrection, Heaven, Hell, or even the Creation of man and the universe.

Texts were revealed to achieve certain purposes. The texts should not be detached from these purposes when interpreting them.

Meanings should not transcend from without to within the texts such that a presupposed judgment would seek justification from the text.

4. Conclusion:

With all the evidence shown, we should ask “what role did Prophet Muhammad play in changing Women’s condition in Arabia?” With times changing and the traditions which once opposed women from taking part in roles regarded for men. It can be said Prophet Muhammad improved the lives of women compared to the pre-Islamic era. He introduced rights for women to inherit, have ownership of property, divorce and gave woman and children a basic safeguard. Furthermore, The Prophet made it a duty for all Muslims to seek knowledge, including women, giving them a way to be educated which was a taboo in the past.

In some aspects of Islam it is still in many ways a man’s religion. This is due to different factors such as misinterpretation of some Qur’anic verses by some Muslims. Some of these interpretations are based on customs and traditions, which contradict the laws of *sharia*. This has been apparent in recent times were the attitude of some Muslims towards women is to deprive them of some of their rights in the name of religion. As the world faces many challenges with many ideas of what is the right way, it is the family’s duties to provide moral discipline when bringing up their children. As The Prophet played a huge role in teaching equality and morality to all (be it women or men), so do families have the responsibility to protect the foundations of this basic unit of human life.

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