

1982

Women and Islam

Azizah Y. al-Hibri

University of Richmond, aalhibri@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/law-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Law and Gender Commons](#), and the [Religion Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Women and Islam (Azizah Y. al-Hibri ed., 1982).

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Law at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

WOMEN AND ISLAM

Edited by
Azizah al-Hibri



PERGAMON PRESS
OXFORD · NEW YORK · TORONTO · SYDNEY · PARIS · FRANKFURT

EDITORIAL

The interest of the Western World in Islam has been heightened recently by the political developments in the Middle East. Not only do these developments affect the economies of the Western World and the daily lives of its population, they also exhibit an unprecedented return to religious Muslim ideology.

In particular, Western women find the massive return of Muslim women to the veil and to religious ideology incomprehensible. After all, the stereotypical views of Islam in the West present it as especially oppressive towards women, the harem being only one shocking example of that oppression.

In this issue a serious attempt is made to bring the concerned reader a balanced mixture of views concerning women in Islam. The contributors are predominantly Arab women who were either raised as Muslims or who have had a first hand familiarity with Islam.

This collection of essays will raise as many questions as it will answer. However, it will also leave the reader more informed and more aware of the complexity of the issues involved.

In the first essay 'Eve: Islamic Image of Women' Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad surprise us with the claim that Eve was not blamed for the fall of Adam in the Qur'ān. Furthermore, she was neither said to be created of his rib, nor was she pronounced in any other way inferior to him. The claim is surprising because many Muslim women grew up with the saying that 'Eve was created out of a crooked rib of Adam's'. However, Smith and Haddad point out that this saying comes from the ḥadīth (sayings of the prophet) and not the Qur'ān.

Here, the Western reader might wonder what difference it makes where the misogynist views of Eve originated. For, if they did not originate with the Qur'ān, as the authors argue, then they originated from the words of the prophet. And that seems to be as authoritative a source as any in Islam.

But this is not exactly true, and that is why Smith and Haddad's essay is especially valuable. The Qur'ān is the revealed word of God. Thus it is indubitable. However, the same is not true of the ḥadīth. Over the years many ḥadīths were attributed to the prophet. Some of these were obviously false, others were only partially true and so on. Thus a special study of the ḥadīth became necessary, and the religious researchers finally agreed on classifying the ḥadīths in various categories ranging from the certain to the false. If the ḥadīths referred to by Smith and Haddad turn out to belong to the lower categories, then the case for vindicating Eve would have been substantially strengthened. But if they turn out to belong to the highest category, namely that of certainty, then we still have some work to do. The methods and criteria used to classify the ḥadīths in the various categories must themselves be reinvestigated from a woman's point of view. This is quite a complicated task.

Why the concern with the image of Eve? Because, as Smith and Haddad show, the issue is not merely historical. It is deeply imbedded in modern Arab views of women.

In the second essay, Nawal El Saadawi provides an overview of the status of women in pre-Islamic and Islamic society. Her main thesis is that the status of women in pre-Islamic society was better than their status in the Islamic one. She argues that 'the greater recognition accorded by the prophet and early Islam to the rights of women was the direct result of the

comparatively higher position occupied by the Arab woman in the pre-Islamic era'. El Saadawi then presents the Islamic point of view on such issues as polygamy, inheritance, the veil and contraception. She concludes with a study of some problems facing the contemporary Muslim woman.

By the time the reader reaches the end of El Saadawi's article, she will have already come across the major challenge that permeates this collection of essays: in various articles, contributors make claims that contradict those of other contributors. For example, El Saadawi argues that the Qur'anic phrase 'created out of you' in the ayah (Qur'anic verse) 'He it is who created out of you couples . . .' indicates that woman was created out of man. This claim clashes directly with the claim of Smith and Haddad that no Qur'anic passage refers to the creation of Eve from Adam.

Did Smith and Haddad overlook this passage? No, indeed that same passage was considered in their essay in support of their claim (see the sentence footnoted with number 3). How could that be? I propose that Smith and Haddad found no problem with the above-mentioned passage because they were working with a different, and at least equally defensible interpretation, of this passage.

The Qur'anic phrase 'khalaqa lakom min anfusikom azwaja' can be divided into two shorter parts, each of which can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, 'khalaqa lakom min anfusikom' can mean either 'we created from amongst yourselves', or as El Saadawi suggested 'we created out of you'. The first reading is closer to the letter of the original and less ambiguous than the second reading. Second, 'azwaja' often means 'mates' in the Qur'an. However, it is also possible to interpret it as 'couples', as El Saadawi chose to do. Thus, the most damaging interpretation of this passage is not El Saadawi's, but rather the following: 'we created out of you mates'. Patriarchy can now use the passage to reassert the inferiority of women on Qur'anic basis. However, before Patriarchy can succeed in its attempt, it has to do two things. First, it has to show that the passage is addressed to men (or else the claim that Adam was created out of Eve would be equally good), and second, that its interpretation is better than others. Concerning the first point, there is no evidence that the passage is addressed solely to men (El Saadawi's claim to the contrary notwithstanding). Second, the interpretation 'we created from amongst yourselves mates' is superior in its adherence to the letter of the phrase, and fits better the meaning and spirit of the rest of the ayah. It is most probably this latter interpretation that Smith and Haddad worked with.

How could interpretations of the Qur'an vary so widely? For one, as I argue in my essay 'A Study of Islamic Herstory' Patriarchy co-opted Islam after the death of the prophet. This meant, among other things, that many passages in the Qur'an were interpreted by Patriarchy, loosely and *out of context*, in support of a vicious patriarchal ideology. These interpretations were then handed down to women as God's revealed words. Also, the Arabic language is a very rich language, and thus it is not uncommon to run into sentences that can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Today, as feminist activity asserts itself in the Islamic sphere, we find ourselves re-examining these old patriarchal interpretations and shaking them at the root. This is the significance of Smith and Haddad's project, and Zein Ed-Din's classical work from which we have a selection.

In some cases of conflicting claims the distinction between Islam and Islamic tradition and culture may be crucial. There is no doubt that Islamic tradition and culture is patriarchal. But the important question is whether Islam, as revealed through the Qur'an is patriarchal.

One example of the importance of this distinction comes from Alya Baffoun's 'Women and

Social Change'. In this article Baffoun traces the status of women in Maghreb from the tribal era to the present day, with a special emphasis on socio-economic developments. At one point she asserts that the double standard of morality 'was unknown in the life of the Maghreb berber before the advent of Islam.'

Is Baffoun suggesting that revealed Islam, as opposed to Islamic tradition and culture, preaches the double standard of morality? That is unclear. If she is, then her position would conflict with others in this collection, otherwise not. For, by the time Islam reached Maghreb, the patriarchal grip on it was almost complete.

But in another passage Baffoun argues that 'In Islam, although a woman has the same rights and religious duties as a man, an imbalance is introduced through sexual and economic inequality (polygamy, unequal inheritance rights, and male monopoly of the production of commodities).' Here, it seems as if Baffoun is discussing revealed Islam and not Islamic patriarchal traditions. And yet, as is argued in various places in this collection, these examples of sexual and economic inequality involve patriarchal interpretations of Islam. The strongest evidence for this argument comes from Kenneth Dorph's article 'Islamic Law in Contemporary North Africa'. Thus either there is here a genuine disagreement on this issue or else Baffoun is indeed talking about Islamic patriarchal tradition.

Dorph examines the present Islamic legal codes in Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, which are based on the same Maliki school of thought. It turns out that the legal codes of these countries differ significantly. For example, Tunisia has outlawed polygamy. The argument used by Bourguiba to justify this move is identical to the one detailed in my essay for the convenience of the reader.

But neither Algeria nor Morocco followed suit. In fact the 'Ulama' in Tunisia itself denounced Bourguiba's ruling. (Also see Leila Ahmad's discussion of the issue of polygamy in Egypt.) This goes to show, first, that there is much room for interpretation in the Qur'an resulting in a variety of possible Islamic traditions; and second, that the ruling patriarchal establishment is not going to stand by while we engage in feminist interpretation of the Qur'an.

However, feminist Muslims should not be intimidated by the Muslim patriarchal authority. Instead, they should be guided by the fact that there is no clergy in Islam, each person being responsible directly to God for her own beliefs. Furthermore, if patriarchy itself was able to justify within its ideological bounds the existence of five different schools of thought, then feminists can surely justify the addition of at least one more.

Looking at Arab history, we find that attempts at Muslim feminist theorizing abound. Most notable is the landmark attempt by Nazīrah Zein Ed-Dīn which was so successful that the patriarchal establishment in Lebanon suspected it to be the work of a committee of men!

In a selection from her famous book *Removing the Veil and Veiling* we come face to face with her claim that the differences in inheritance, the veil, monogamy and other discriminatory practices are merely the result of the inferiority and aggressiveness of males.

Zein Ed-Dīn was writing in a very conservative atmosphere. Passages in her work indicate that she was well aware of her situation and its limitations. One wonders what would her arguments really have looked like had she been free to express herself.

Despite her limited self-expression, Zein Ed-Dīn was cruelly attacked on *ad hominem* bases. Many other women in other circumstances met with similar fate. Leila Ahmad in 'Feminism and Feminist Movements in the Middle East' details a hair-raising account of patriarchal oppression of Muslim women demanding their God-given rights. Her contribution provides a valuable historical context for this discussion.

Fatima Mernissi in 'Virginity and Patriarchy' focuses on one major mode of patriarchal oppression in the Arab world. She carefully explains the patriarchal interest in the female's hymen, the world-view it presupposes, and the alienation it spawns. The issue of virginity has been traditionally viewed as tightly linked with righteousness and the fear of God. Mernissi skilfully disentangles the various patriarchal elements permeating this theme.

The emphasis on virginity is pre-Islamic. The prophet himself did not seem to have attached much importance to it. Of his wives only 'Aisha was a virgin. For example, Khadija, his first wife and a major female figure in his life, was not.

But the basic issue concerning virginity is not whether a woman is a virgin or not, but rather how she lost her virginity. The way in which she did so could involve both the honor and pride of her family. This is when tribal customs take over. Islam, which addressed adultery, was not particularly concerned with this issue. In my essay I have addressed this issue if only to respond to the relatively recent barrage of misinformation concerning the question.

Finally, Muslim women were able to find a space of their own in Sufism. Annmarie Schimmel discusses the contribution of women to Sufism in 'Women in Mystical Islam'. But we must not jump to the conclusion that Sufism was a haven untainted by patriarchy. Or else, how can we explain Schimmel's quote 'He who seeks the Lord is male'?

The truth of the matter is that Sufi doctrine and disposition was more accessible to sexual transcendence than other forms of worship. Also, women were able to make their contributions in this field with less resistance from the patriarchal establishment because the latter regarded mysticism as a peripheral and harmless movement.

The selections are followed by a review of Samira Rafidi Meghdessian's book *The Status of the Arab Woman: A Select Bibliography*. Written by Basima Qattan Bezirgan, a librarian as well as author and researcher in the area of Women and Islam, the review is quite valuable and enlightening.

In conclusion, the collection is rich with information and interpretation. It is also challenging and dynamic, representing the modern interaction between feminism and Islam. And, last but not least, it is one of the few of its kind in the English language. I hope that it will give the reader valuable insights into 'Islam and Women'.

AZIZAH AL-HIBRI