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## Qur'an and Woman

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Muslims number more than 3 million in the United States and constitute one of the country's fastest-growing religious groups. African-Americans, comprising a third of this Islamic community—most of the rest are immigrants from Islamic countries and their descendants—have traditionally practiced heterodox forms of Islam not recognized as "Islamic" by Muslim scholars in other countries. Since Malcolm X's (1925–1965) famous pilgrimage in 1964, however, many African-American Muslims have adopted more orthodox Islamic practices. At the same time, African-American Muslims have brought their own historical experiences to bear on their Islamic faith.<sup>1</sup> A leading representative of this approach is Amina Wadud-Muhsin (United States, born 1952), a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Wadud-Muhsin combines gendered readings of the Qur'an with the experience of African-American women to argue that Islamic injunctions must be interpreted in relation to specific historical circumstances.

Introduction: How Perceptions  
of Woman Influence Interpretation  
of the Qur'an

My objective in undertaking this research was to make a "reading" of the Qur'an that would be meaningful to women living in the modern era. By "read-

ing" I mean the process of reviewing the words and their context in order to derive an understanding of the text. Every "reading" reflects, in part, the intentions of the text, as well as the "prior text"<sup>2</sup> of the one who makes the "reading." Although each "reading" is unique, the understanding of various readers of a single text will converge on many points.

In this "Introduction" I will give the background to this work. In particular, I will look at how the perception of woman influences the interpretations of the Qur'an's position on women. I will give an overview of my own perspective of woman and of the

1. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Haddad and Smith, "United States of America," in John L. Esposito, editor, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), volume 4, pp. 277–284; Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), especially pp. 126–131.

2. The perspectives, circumstances, and background of the individual. This concept will be discussed at greater length below.

methods of interpretation I used in analyzing the Qur'an which have led to some new conclusions.

No method of Qur'anic exegesis is fully objective. Each exegete makes some subjective choices. Some details of their interpretations reflect their subjective choices and not necessarily the intent of the text. Yet, often, no distinction is made between text and interpretation. I put interpretations of woman in the Qur'an into three categories: "traditional," reactive, and holistic.

The first category of Qur'anic interpretation I call "traditional." Traditional *tafasir* (exegetical works) give interpretations of the entire Qur'an, whether from the modern or classical periods, with certain objectives in mind. Those objectives could be legal, esoteric, grammatical, rhetorical, or historical. Although these objectives may lead to differences in the *tafasir*, one similarity in these works is their atomistic methodology. They begin with the first verse of the first chapter and proceed to the second verse of the first chapter—one verse at a time—until the end of the Book. Little or no effort is made to recognize themes and to discuss the relationship of the Qur'an to itself, thematically. A brief mention of one verse's relation to another verse may be rendered but these are haphazard with no underlying hermeneutical principle applied. A methodology for linking similar Qur'anic ideas, syntactical structures, principles, or themes together is almost non-existent.<sup>3</sup>

However, what concerns me most about "traditional" *tafasir* is that they were exclusively written by males. This means that men and men's experiences were included and women and women's experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective, desire, or needs of woman.<sup>4</sup> In the final analysis, the creation of the basic paradigms through which we examine and discuss

the Qur'an and Qur'anic interpretation were generated without the participation and firsthand representation of women. Their voicelessness during critical periods of development in Qur'anic interpretation has not gone unnoticed, but it has been mistakenly equated with voicelessness in the text itself.

The second category of Qur'anic interpretation concerned with the issue of woman consists primarily of modern scholars' reactions to severe handicaps for woman as an individual and as a member of society which have been attributed to the text. In this category are many women and/or persons opposed to the Qur'anic message (or more precisely, to Islam) altogether. They use the poor status of women in Muslim societies as justification for their "reactions." These reactions have also failed to draw a distinction between the interpretation and the text.<sup>5</sup>

The objectives sought and methods used, often come from feminist ideals and rationales. Although they are often concerned with valid issues, the absence of a comprehensive analysis of the Qur'an sometimes causes them to vindicate the position of women on grounds entirely incongruous with the Qur'anic position on woman. This shortcoming must be overcome in order to make use of a most effective tool for the liberation of Muslim women: demonstrating the link between that liberation and this primary source of Islamic ideology and theology.

The interpretations which reconsider the whole method of Qur'anic exegesis with regard to various modern social, moral, economic, and political concerns—including the issue of woman—represent the final category. It is in this category that I place this work. This category is relatively new, and there has been no substantial consideration of the particular issue of woman in the light of the entire Qur'an and its major principles.

I propose to make a "reading" of the Qur'an from within the female experience and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations. In the final analysis, this reading will confront some of the conclusions drawn on this subject. Because I am analyzing the text and

3. One notable exception in English is Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago and Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980). In addition, see Mustansir Mir, *Thematic and Structural Coherence in the Qur'an: A Study of Islahi's Concept of Nazm* (University of Michigan Microfilms International, 1987), which gives a comprehensive analysis of the significance of theme to Qur'anic organization and, consequently, its exegesis.

4. See Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Reconstructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1990), chapter 1, pp. 13–35, on the significance of inclusion and exclusion of women in religious dialogue.

5. For example, Fatma A[it] Sabbah in her book *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland from the French (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984), discusses valid points with regard to this issue, but when she discusses the Qur'an, she fails to distinguish between the Qur'an and the Qur'anic interpreters.

not the interpretations of that text, my treatment of this issue differs from many of the existing works on this topic.

*Methodology: A Hermeneutical Model*

A hermeneutical model is concerned with three aspects of the text, in order to support its conclusions: (1) the context in which the text was written (in the case of the Qur'an, in which it was revealed); (2) the grammatical composition of the text (how it says what it says); and (3) the whole text, its *Weltanschauung* or world-view. Often, differences of opinion can be traced to variations in emphasis between these three aspects.

I argue against some conventional interpretations, especially about certain words used in the Qur'an to discuss and fulfill universal guidance. I render some discussions, heretofore considered as gendered, into neutral terms. Other discussions, heretofore considered as universal, I render specific on the basis of their limitations and on the expression in terms specific to seventh-century Arabia. Some historical information with regard to occasions of revelation and the general period of revelation was considered here.

Thus, I attempt to use the method of Qur'anic interpretation proposed by Fazlur Rahman [Pakistan-United States, 1919-1988]. He suggests that all Qur'anic passages, revealed as they were in a specific time in history and within certain general and particular circumstances, were given expression relative to those circumstances. However, the message is not limited to that time or those circumstances historically. A reader must understand the implications of the Qur'anic expressions during the time in which they were expressed in order to determine their proper meaning. That meaning gives the intention of the rulings or principles in the particular verse.

Believers from another circumstance must make practical applications in accordance with how that original intention is reflected or manifested in the new environments. In modern times this is what is meant by the "spirit" of the Qur'an. To get at that "spirit," however, there must be some comprehensible and organized hermeneutical model.<sup>6</sup>

6. For details of Fazlur Rahman's discussion of the above double movement methodology—"from the present situation to Qur'anic times, then back to the present"—for particular communities, see his *Islam and Modernity: Transformation*

The initial question behind my research was, why does the Qur'an specify males and females on some occasions (like "Believing males and Believing females"—masculine plural followed by feminine plural forms), while on other occasions it uses a more generic ("Oh you who believe . . ."—masculine plural) form? From my perspective on the Qur'an, every usage of the masculine plural form is intended to include males and females, *equally*, unless it includes specific indication for its exclusive application to males.

The plural in Arabic is used to denote three or more rational beings. Thus the following Arabic sentences:

- A. *Al-tullab fi al-ghurfa* (masculine plural noun) means
  - (1) three or more students in the room—including at least one male
  - (2) three or more *exclusively* male students in the room.
- B. *Al-talibat fi al-ghurfa* (feminine plural form) means
  - (1) three or more female students in the room.

As there is no form exclusively for males, the only way to determine if the masculine plural form (*al-tullab fi al-ghurfa* [A]) is exclusively for males (2) would be through some specific indication in the text. Thus:

- C. *Al-tullab wa al-talibat fi al-ghurfa* indicates that the use of the masculine plural (*al-tullab*) refers exclusively to males since the inclusion of the female plural form distinguishes the female students present.<sup>7</sup>

All the verses which contained any reference to women, separately or together with men, were analyzed with the traditional method of *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* (interpretation of the Qur'an based on the Qur'an itself). However, I elaborated these particular terms of this method. Each verse was analyzed: (1) in its context; (2) in the context of discussions on similar topics in the Qur'an; (3) in the light of similar language and syntactical structures used

*of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), Introduction, especially pp. 4-9.

7. This is a direct contradiction of the classical models which propose that the masculine plural form means male (exclusively). Thus, language is used to make male the norm, and by implication, the female must be abnormal.

elsewhere in the Qur'an; (4) in the light of overriding Qur'anic principles; and (5) within the context of the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*, or world-view.

#### *Language and Prior Text*

One unique element for reading and understanding any text is the prior text of the individual reader: the language and cultural context in which the text is read. It is inescapable and represents, on the one hand, the rich varieties that naturally occur between readers, and, on the other hand, the uniqueness of each.

Prior text adds considerably to the perspective and conclusions of the interpretation. It exposes the individuality of the exegete. This is neither good nor bad in and of itself. However, when one individual reader with a particular world-view and specific prior text asserts that his or her reading is the only possible or permissible one, it prevents readers in different contexts from coming to terms with their own relationship to the text.

To avoid the potential of relativism, there is continuity and permanence in the Qur'anic text itself as exemplified even through various readings by their points of convergence. However, in order for the Qur'an to achieve its objective to act as a catalyst affecting behavior in society, each social context must understand the fundamental and unchangeable principles of that text, and then implement them in their own unique reflection. It is not the text or its principles that change, but the capacity and particularity of the understanding and reflection of the principles of the text within a community of people.

Thus, each individual reader interacts with the text. However, the assertion that there is only one interpretation of the Qur'an limits the extent of the text. The Qur'an must be flexible enough to accommodate innumerable cultural situations because of its claims to be universally beneficial to those who believe.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, to force it to have a single cultural perspective—even the cultural perspective of the original community of the Prophet—severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself.

8. This is the Scripture wherein there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward off (evil), who believe in the unseen, establish worship, and spend of that We have bestowed upon them. . . . (Sura 2, Verses 2-3)

#### *The Prior Text of Gender-Specific Languages*

The significance of masculine and feminine forms, whether used distinctively or to make generic indications, was an important part of my analysis. Perspectives on gender, particularly on the understanding of what constitutes feminine or masculine behavior, and the roles of men and women in society, are based on one's cultural context. Gender-specific languages, such as Arabic, create a particular prior text for the speakers of that language. Everything is classified male or female. English, Malay, and other languages do not share this prior text with Arabic. This results in a distinction between the various readings of the Qur'an. This distinction becomes apparent in the interpretation of the text and the conclusions drawn from the function of the text with regard to gender.

With regard to Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, I approach the text from the outside. This frees me to make observations which are not imprisoned in the context of a gender-distinct language.

There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture. This idea, as I have said, is one-sided. Of course, a certain entry as a living being into a foreign culture, the possibility of seeing the world through its eyes, is a necessary part of the process of understanding it; but if this were the only aspect of this understanding, *it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching*. Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, and in culture.<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

A new look at Qur'anic language with regard to gender is especially necessary in the light of the absence of an Arabic neuter. Although each word in Arabic is designated as masculine or feminine, it does not follow that each use of masculine or feminine persons is necessarily restricted to the mentioned gender—from the perspective of universal Qur'anic

9. M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, translated by Vern W. McGhee, edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 6-7.

guidance.<sup>10</sup> A divine text must overcome the natural restrictions of the language of human communication. Those who argue that the Qur'an cannot be translated believe that there is some necessary correlation between Arabic and the message itself. I will demonstrate that gender distinction, an inherent flaw, necessary for human communication in the Arabic, is overcome by the text in order to fulfill its intention of universal guidance.

#### *Perspectives on Women*

"Most men have at one time or another heard, or perhaps even believed, that women are 'inferior' and 'unequal' to men."<sup>11</sup> I worked against the backdrop of common prejudices and attitudes among Muslims towards women which have not only affected the position of women in Muslim societies but also affected the interpretation of the position of women in the Qur'an. One such belief is that there are *essential* distinctions between men and women reflected in creation, capacity and function in society, accessibility to guidance (particularly to Qur'anic guidance), and in the rewards due to them in the Hereafter.

Although there are distinctions between women and men, I argue that they are not of their essential natures. More importantly, I argue against the *values* that have been attributed to these distinctions. Such attributed values describe women as weak, inferior, inherently evil, intellectually incapable, and spiritually lacking. These evaluations have been used to claim that women are unsuitable for performing certain tasks, or for functioning in some ways in society.

The woman has been restricted to functions related to her biology. The man, on the other hand, is evaluated as superior to and more significant than woman, an inherent leader and caretaker, with exten-

sive capacity to perform tasks that the woman cannot. Consequently, men are *more* human, enjoying completely the choice of movement, employment, and social, political and economic participation on the basis of human individuality, motivation, and opportunity. This is actually an institutionalized compensation for the reverse situation.

Woman alone gives birth to children, nurses them, and is their primary nurturer in their early formative years. Moreover, the social and economic roles that commonly have been defined as the province of the male have never been performed exclusively by men. Subconsciously, men are aware of this fact. . . . *The male has never had an exclusive social or economic role that woman could not participate in too. . . .*

Awareness of woman's monopoly was psychologically repressed and overshadowed by institutionalizing and socially legitimating male values that had the effect of creating self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>12</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

#### *Distinctions between Men and Women*

The Qur'an acknowledges the anatomical distinction between male and female. It also acknowledges that members of each gender function in a manner which reflects the well-defined distinctions held by the culture to which those members belong. These distinctions are an important part of how cultures function. For this reason, it would be unwise if the Qur'an failed to acknowledge and, in fact, sympathize with culturally determined, functional distinctions.

As they are divided, so genders are also interwoven differently in each culture and time. They can rule separate territories and rarely intertwine, or they can be knotted like the lines in the Book of Kells. Sometimes no basket can be plaited, no fire kindled, without the collaboration of two sets of hands. Each culture brings the genders together in its unique way.<sup>13</sup>

The Qur'an does not attempt to annihilate the differences between men and women or to erase the significance of functional gender distinctions which help every society to run smoothly and fulfill its needs. In fact, compatible mutually supportive functional relationships between men and women can be seen as part of the goal of the Qur'an with regard to

10. This recurrent problem in "reading" the Qur'an causes readers to justify limiting to women statements made using feminine forms and figures; see chapter 3 below concerning Bilqis. [Not included in this excerpt.—Editor] Although she is a good leader—that happens to be a woman—she is not taken as a universal example of leadership. Statements using masculine forms or figures are limited to men and extended to women only by *qiyas* (analytical reasoning).

11. Alvin J. Schmidt, *Veiled and Silenced: How Culture Shaped Sexist Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1989), Introduction, p. xiii.

12. Schmidt, *Veiled and Silenced*, pp. 59–60.

13. Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), pp. 106–107.

society.<sup>14</sup> However, the Qur'an does not propose or support a singular role or single definition of a set of roles, exclusively, for each gender across every culture.

The Qur'an acknowledges that men and women function as individuals and in society. However, there is no detailed prescription set on how to function, culturally. Such a specification would be an imposition that would reduce the Qur'an from a universal text to a culturally specific text—a claim that many have erroneously made. What the Qur'an proposes is transcendental in time and space.<sup>15</sup>

Gender distinctions and distinct gender functions contribute to the perceptions of morally appropriate behavior in a given society. Since the Qur'an is moral guidance, it must relate to the perceptions of morality—no matter how gender-specified—which are held by individuals in various societies. Yet, the mere fact that the Qur'an was revealed in seventh-century Arabia when the Arabs held certain perceptions and misconceptions about women and were involved in certain specific lewd practices against them resulted in some injunctions specific to that culture.

Some prevailing practices were so bad they had to be prohibited explicitly and immediately: infanticide, sexual abuse of slave girls, denial of inheritance to women, *zihar*,<sup>16</sup> to name a few of the most common. Other practices had to be modified: polygamy, unconstrained divorce, conjugal violence, and concubinage, for example. With regard to some practices, the Qur'an seems to have remained neutral: social patriarchy, marital patriarchy, economic hierarchy, the division of labor between males and females within a particular family.

14. See Sayyid Qutb [1903–1966], *Fi zīl al-Qur'an [In the Shade of the Qur'an]* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1980), volume 2 (of 6), pp. 642–643, where he discusses the shared beliefs and responsibility between men and women in the Islamic social system of justice.

15. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 5–7, discusses the moral values of the Qur'an in "extra-historical transcendental" terms; that is, the moral value extracted from a particular verse goes beyond the time and place of the specific instance at which that verse and its injunction was occasioned.

16. The practice of stating that one's wife was as "the back of my mother," which would make conjugal relations impossible, but would not totally free the woman for remarriage.

Some women activists today openly question this neutrality. Why didn't the Qur'an just explicitly prohibit these practices? If the evolution of the text and its *overall* objective is consumed under one—albeit important—aspect of social interaction, say consciousness-raising with regard to women, then the Qur'an is made subservient to that aspect, rather than the other way around. There is an essential acknowledgment of the relationship between men and women as they function in society, but it is not the sole nor primary objective of the text.

In addition, certain practices encouraged by the Qur'an may be restricted to that society which practiced them, but the Qur'an is "not confined to, or exhausted by, (one) society and its history. . . ."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, each new Islamic society must understand the principles intended by the particulars. Those principles are eternal and can be applied in various social contexts.

For example, in Arabia at the time of the revelation, women of wealthy and powerful tribes were veiled and secluded as an indication of protection. The Qur'an acknowledges the virtue of modesty and demonstrates it through the prevailing practices. The principle of modesty is important—not the veiling and seclusion which were manifestations particular to that context. These were culturally and economically determined demonstrations of modesty.<sup>18</sup> Modesty is not a privilege of the economically advantaged only: all believing women deserve the utmost respect and protection of their modesty—however it is observed in various societies.

Modesty is beneficial for maintaining a certain moral fiber in various cultures and should therefore be maintained—but on the basis of faith: not economics, politics or other forms of access and coercion. This is perhaps why Yusuf Ali [1872–1952] translates Sura 24, Verse 31 "what (must ordinarily) appear"<sup>19</sup> (with regard to uncovered parts), to indicate that (ordinarily) there are culturally determined guidelines for modesty.

17. Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud, *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam and Its Implications for Education in a Developing Country* (London: Mansell, 1989), p. 7.

18. See William Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, edited by Stanley A. Cook (London: A. and C. Black, 1907).

19. Translation by A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, U.S. edition (Elmhurst, N.Y.: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1987).

This method of restricting the particulars to a specific context, extracting the principles intended by the Qur'an through that particular, and then applying those principles to other particulars in various cultural contexts, forms a major variation from previous exegetical methodologies. The movement from principles to particulars can only be done by the members of whatever particular context a principle is to be applied. Therefore, interpretation of the Qur'an can never be final. . . .

Rights and Roles of Women: Some Controversies

*Woman Is Not Just Biology*

Because woman's primary distinction is on the basis of her childbearing ability, it is seen as her primary function. The use of "primary" has had negative connotations in that it has been held to imply that women can only be mothers. Therefore, women's entire upbringing must be to cultivate devoted wives and ideal mothers in preparation for this function.

There is no term in the Qur'an which indicates that childbearing is "primary" to a woman. No indication is given that mothering is her exclusive role. It demonstrates the fact that a woman (though certainly not all women) is the exclusive human capable of bearing children. This capacity is essential to the continuation of human existence. This function becomes primary only with regard to the continuity of the human race. In other words, since only the woman can bear children, it is of primary importance that she does.

Although it does not restrict the female to functioning as a mother, the Qur'an is emphatic about the reverence, sympathy, and responsibility due to the female procreator. "O humankind . . . have *taqwa*<sup>20</sup> towards God in Whom you claim your rights of one another, and (have *taqwa*) towards the wombs (that bore you)." (Sura 4, Verse 1) This verse is often interpreted as indicating respect for women in general.<sup>21</sup> I specify this verse as indicating respect for the needed procreative capacity of women. I do not diminish

respect from women as a class, but I do specify, from the Qur'anic perspective, the significance of the function of child-bearing, which is exclusively performed by women.<sup>22</sup> The reverence given to the fulfillment of this function helps explain how the Qur'an explicitly delineates a function for males which creates a balance in human relations.<sup>23</sup>

No other function is similarly exclusive to one gender or the other. This brings to mind the popular misconception that since only males have had the responsibility of *risala*,<sup>24</sup> it indicates something special about that class. Both men and women have been included in divine communication as the recipients of *wahy*,<sup>25</sup> but there is no Qur'anic example of a woman with the responsibility of *risala*. However, all those chosen for this responsibility were exceptional.

This is not a biological association with males representing their primary function and expressing a universal norm for all men. In fact, given the difficulty they have faced in getting others to accept the message when these exceptional men have come from poor classes, the likelihood of failure for the message might have been greater if women, who are given so little regard in most societies, were selected to deliver the message. It is strategy for effectiveness, not a statement of divine preference.<sup>26</sup>

Besides the two functions discussed above, every other function has real or potential participation by both males and females. However, there is still a wide range of functional distinctions between individuals considered in the Qur'an. The questions that must be asked then are: What is the value of the functional distinctions between individuals? Do these functional distinctions and the values placed on them delineate specific values for males and females in society? Are these values intra-Qur'anic or extra-Qur'anic?

22. To further substantiate this point of view, see the discussion of Mary, Mother of Jesus, in chapter 2. [Not included in this excerpt.—Editor]

23. Which I will discuss in detail below.

24. There is a distinction between *wahy*, receiving divine communication, and *risala*, receiving divine communication concerning the destiny of humankind, which includes the obligation to transmit the information of that *wahy* to humankind at large.

25. Maryam [Mary, the mother of Jesus] and Umm Musa [the mother of Moses] among the women.

26. See, for example, Sura 22, Verse 75.

20. [Fear of God.—Editor]

21. It should not be overlooked in my literal interpretation, that "the wombs that bore you" is also used as a metaphor for the blood ties of family relations in general.

In particular, several verses from the Qur'an have frequently been used to support the claims of the inherent superiority of males over females. These verses contain two terms which have been used to indicate value in the functional distinctions between individuals and groups on earth. I will review these terms, how they have been used in the Qur'an, and in the overall context of Qur'anic justice.

The first term is *daraja* (plural: *darajat*), "step, degree or level." A *daraja* exists not only on earth between people but also between the Hereafter and earth,<sup>27</sup> between levels in Heaven and in Hell. The other term, *faddala*, is often used in conjunction with *darajat*. I have translated *faddala* "to prefer," with a verbal noun (*tafdil*) meaning "preference." Often the preference given is spoken of in terms of *fadl*, which I translate as (God's) "benevolence."

### *Daraja*

An individual or group can earn or be granted a *daraja* over another. The Qur'an specifies, for example, that by striving in the way of God with one's wealth and one's person (Sura 4, Verse 95) or by immigrating for God (Sura 9, Verse 20), one can obtain a *daraja*. However, most often the *daraja* is obtained through an unspecified category of doing "good" deeds (Suras 20, Verse 75; 6, Verse 132; 46, Verse 19).

Distinguishing between individuals or groups on the basis of "deeds" involves problems with regard to the value of women in society and as individuals. Although the Qur'an distinguishes on the basis of deeds, it does not set values for particular deeds. This leaves each social system to determine the value of different kinds of deeds at will. They have always done this and "every society has distinguished men's work from women's work."<sup>28</sup> The problem is that "Men's work is usually regarded as more valuable than women's work, no matter how arbitrary the division of labor."<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand, the Qur'an supports distinctions on the basis of deeds, but on the other hand, it does

not determine the actual value of specific deeds. This leads to the interpretation that the Qur'an supports values of deeds as determined by individual societies. Actually, the Qur'an's neutrality allows for the natural variations that exist.

With regard to the *daraja* obtained through deeds, however, the Qur'an has stipulated several points which should affect evaluation in society. First, all deeds performed with *taqwa* are more valuable. Second, "Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned." (Sura 4, Verse 32) The deeds may be different, but recompense is given based on what one does. It does not matter how the deeds are divided between the males and the females in a particular social context.

Another implication of a "fortune from what one earns" is that whenever anyone performs tasks normally attributed to the other gender in addition to his or her own normal tasks, he or she will earn an additional reward. For example, Moses meets two women from Madyan, where ordinarily the males tended the animals. However, because there was no able-bodied male in the family to perform this task according to the norm (the father being an old man), the women were required to be *extraordinarily* useful.

There is no indication that these women were immoral in their performance of this task, because fulfilling the tasks needed for survival takes precedence over socially determined roles. Similarly, in post-slavery America, the Black female was given employment instead of the Black male. In many families, she became the sole supporter. This necessity, in addition to her fulfillment of the ordinary tasks of bearing and rearing children, should have given her more. A flexible perspective on the fulfillment of necessity would have benefited her. Instead, she was subject to a double burden and, often, violence at home from a husband who felt displaced.

Each social context divides the labor between the male and the female in such a way as to allow for the optimal function of that society. The Qur'an does not divide the labor and establish a monolithic order for every social system which completely disregards the natural variations in society. On the contrary, it acknowledges the need for variations when it states that the human race is divided "into nations and tribes that you might know one another." (Sura 49, Verse 13) Then it gives each group, and each member of the

27. "See how We prefer one above another, and verily the Hereafter will be greater in *darajat* and greater in preference [*tafdil*]." (Sura 17, Verse 21) [Bracketed terms in Qur'anic quotations are the author's, not the editor's.—Editor]

28. Carol Tarvis and Carole Wade, *The Longest War: Sex Differences in Perspective*, second edition (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 3.

29. Tarvis and Wade, *The Longest War*, p. 20.

group—the males and the females—recompense in accordance to deeds performed.

This is an important social universal in the Qur'an. It allows and encourages each individual social context to determine its functional distinctions between members, but applies a single system of equitable recompense which can be adopted in every social context. This is also one reason why certain social systems have remained stagnant in their consideration of the potential roles of women. The Qur'an does not specifically determine the roles, and the individual nations have not considered all the possibilities.

As for the *daraja* which is "given" by God, it is even more illusive than the *daraja* for unspecified deeds. There is a distinction on the basis of knowledge: "God will exalt those who believe among you, and those who have knowledge, to high ranks [*darajat*]." (Sura 58, Verse 11) "We raised by grades [*darajat*] (of mercy) whom We will, and over all endued with knowledge there is one more knowing." (Sura 12, Verse 76)

There are also social and economic distinctions: "We have apportioned among them their livelihood in the life of the world, and raised some of them above others in ranks [*darajat*] that some of them may take labor from others; and the mercy of God is better than (the wealth) that they amass." (Sura 43, Verse 32)<sup>30</sup> It is also clear, however, that wealth is not a "real" distinguishing characteristic, but a functional distinction apparent to humankind and valued within society.

The *daraja* given by God serves another significant function—to test the inhabitants of the earth: "He it is Who has placed you as viceroys of the earth and has exalted some of you in ranks [*darajat*] above others, that He may try you by (the test of) that which He has given you." (Sura 6, Verse 165)

Finally, it is necessary to discuss the one verse which distinguishes a *daraja* between men and women:

Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three (monthly) courses. And it is not lawful for them that they conceal that which God has created in their wombs if they believe in God and the Last Day. And their husbands would do better to take them back in that case if they desire a reconciliation. And [(the rights) due to the women are

similar to (the rights) against them, (or responsibilities they owe) with regard to] the *ma'ruf*, and men have a degree [*daraja*] above them (feminine plural). God is Mighty, Wise. (Sura 2, Verse 228)

This verse has been taken to mean that a *daraja* exists between all men and all women, in every context. However, the context of the discussion is clearly with regard to divorce: men have an advantage over women. In the Qur'an the advantage men have is that of being individually able to pronounce divorce against their wives without arbitration or assistance. Divorce is granted to a woman, on the other hand, only after intervention of an authority (for example, a judge).

Considering the details given, *daraja* in this verse must be restricted to the subject at hand.<sup>31</sup> To attribute an unrestricted value to one gender over another contradicts the equity established throughout the Qur'an with regard to the individual: each *nafs* [soul] shall have in accordance to what it earns. Yet, the verse is presumed to state what men have believed and wanted others to believe: that society operates hierarchically with the male on top. Finally, this verse states: "[the rights) due to the women are similar to (the rights) against them, (or responsibilities they owe) with regard to] the *ma'ruf*". The term *ma'ruf* occurs in other instances with regard to the treatment of women in society. [Muhammad Marmaduke] Pickthall [Britain, 1875–1936] translates it as "kindness," but its implications are much wider than that. It is a passive participle of the verbal root "to know," and as such indicates something "obvious," "well known," or "conventionally accepted."<sup>32</sup> However, with regard to treatment, it also has dimensions of equitable, courteous and beneficial.<sup>33</sup>

In this verse (Sura 2, Verse 228), it precedes the *daraja* statement to indicate its precedence. In other words, the basis for equitable treatment is conventionally agreed upon in society. With regard to this, the rights and the responsibilities of the woman and the man are the same. Again, the expression places

30. This is one of the verses which demonstrates that an Islamic society allows for economic classes.

31. In addition, the preceding verses 221–227 discuss at length other details related to marriage, divorce, and widowhood.

32. Edward William Lane, *An Arab-English Lexicon* (London: Librairie du Liban, 1980), part 5, p. 2017.

33. As defined by Milton J. Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, third edition, edited by Hans Wehr (Ithaca, N.Y.: Spoken Language Services, 1976).

a limitation rather than a universal perspective on this issue because convention is relative to time and place.

### *Faddala*

As with *daraja*, the Qur'an states explicitly that God has preferred [*faddala*] some of creation over others. Like *daraja*, this preference is also discussed in specific terms. First, humankind is preferred over the rest of creation (Sura 17, Verse 70). Then, occasionally, one group of people have been preferred over another.<sup>34</sup> Finally, some of the prophets are preferred over others (Suras 2, Verse 253; 6, Verse 86; 17, Verse 55). It is interesting to note, however, that "preference" is not absolute. Although the Qur'an states that some prophets are preferred over others, it also states that *no distinction* is made between them (Sura 2, Verse 285). This indicates that, in the Qur'anic usage, preference is relative.

Like *daraja*, *faddala* is also given to test the one to whom it is given. Unlike *daraja*, however, *faddala* cannot be earned by performing certain deeds. It can only be given by God, Who has it and grants it to whom He wishes and in the form He wishes. Others do not have it and cannot give it. They can only be recipients of His *fadl*.

With regard to *faddala*, men and women, the following verse is central:

Men are [*qawwamuna 'ala*] women, [on the basis] of what God has [preferred] (*faddala*) some of them over others, and [on the basis] of what they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are [*qanitat*],<sup>35</sup> guarding in secret that which God has guarded. As for those from whom you fear [*nushuz*], admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them. (Sura 4, Verse 34)

Needless to say, this verse covers a great deal more than just preference. This is classically viewed as the single most important verse with regard to the relationship between men and women: "men are *qawwamuna 'ala* women." Before discussing this,

34. For example, the Children of Israel were preferred over "other creatures" (the same term has been translated in chapter 1, the Fatiha, as "the worlds") in Sura 2, Verses 47 and 122; and Sura 7, Verse 40. This preference is usually understood to mean that they were chosen to receive prophets and the revelations.

35. [Obedient.—Editor]

however, I want to point out that this correlation is determined on the basis of two things: (1) what "preference" has been given, and (2) "what they spend of their property (for support of women)," that is, a socioeconomic norm and ideal.

The translation I have inserted, "on the basis of," comes from the *bi*<sup>36</sup> used in this verse. In a sentence, it implies that the characteristics or contents before *bi* are determined "on the basis" of what comes after *bi*. In this verse it means that men are *qawwamuna 'ala* women only if the following two conditions exist. The first condition is "preference," and the other is that they support the women from their means. "If either condition fails, then the man is not '*qawwam*' over that woman."<sup>37</sup>

My first concern then is *faddala*. The verse says the position between men and women is based on "what" God has preferred. With regard to material preference, there is only one Qur'anic reference which specifies that God has determined for men a portion greater than for women: inheritance.<sup>38</sup> The share for a male is twice that for the female (Sura 4, Verse 7) within a single family. The absolute inheritance for all men will not always be more than that for all women. The exact amount left depends on the family's wealth in the first place. In addition, if Sura 4, Verse 34 refers to a preference demonstrated in inheritance, then such a materialistic preference is also not absolute. This connection is often favored because the other condition for *qiwama* is that "they spend of their property (for the support of women)." Thus, there is a reciprocity between privileges and responsibilities. Men have the responsibility of paying out of their wealth for the support of women, and they are consequently granted a double share of inheritance.

However, it cannot be overlooked that "many men interpret the above passage" as an unconditional indication of the preference of men over women. They assert that "men were created by God superior to women (in strength and reason)."

36. This is the *ba al-sababiyya* known in Arabic as the *bi* for a reason or purpose. It establishes a conditional relationship between two parts of a sentence or clause. The first part is conditional upon, and cannot be attributed without, the second part.

37. Azizah al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or How Did We Ever Get into This Mess?" *Women and Islam: Women's Studies International Forum*, volume 5, number 2, 1982, p. 218.

38. Which I will discuss in detail below.

However, this interpretation . . . is (i) unwarranted and (ii) inconsistent with other Islamic teachings. . . . [T]he interpretation is unwarranted because there is no reference in the passage to male physical or intellectual superiority.<sup>39</sup>

*Faddala* cannot be unconditional because Sura 4, Verse 34 does not read "they (masculine plural) are preferred over them (feminine plural)." It reads "*ba'd* (some) of them over *ba'd* (others)." The use of *ba'd* relates to what obviously has been observed in the human context. All men do not excel over all women in all manners. Some men excel over some women in some manners. Likewise, some women excel over some men in some manners.<sup>40</sup> So, whatever God has preferred, it is still not absolute.

If "what" God has preferred is restricted to the material (and specifically inheritance), then the extent and nature of the preference is explained by the Qur'an. Even if "what" God has preferred is more than just the preference given in inheritance, it is, nevertheless, still restricted to "some of them" over "some others" by the wording in this context:

Men are "*qawwamun*" over women in matters where God gave *some* of the men more than *some* of the women, and in what the men spend of their money, then clearly men as a class are not "*qawwamun*" over women as a class.<sup>41</sup>

However, further understanding of this distinction requires further explanation of *qawwamuna 'ala*. What does it mean, and what are the parameters of its application?

As for the meaning, Pickthall translates this as "in charge of." [Abu'l Qasim Mahmud] Al-Zamakhshari [1075-1144]<sup>42</sup> says it means that "men are in charge of the affairs of women." [Abul A'la] Mawdudi [1903-

1979]<sup>43</sup> says, "Men are the managers of the affairs of women because God has made the one superior to the other. . . ." Azizah al-Hibri [Lebanon, born 1943] objects to any translation which implies that men are protectors or maintainers because "the basic notion here is one of moral guidance and caring"<sup>44</sup> and also because:

only under extreme conditions (for example, insanity) does the Muslim woman lose her right to self-determination. . . . Yet men have used this passage to exercise absolute authority over women. They also use it to argue for the male's divinely ordained and inherent superiority.<sup>45</sup>

Some questions beg asking concerning the parameters of application: Are all men *qawwamuna 'ala* all women? Is it restricted to the family, such that the men of a family are *qawwamuna 'ala* the women of that family? Or, is it even more restricted, to the marital tie such that only husbands are *qawwamuna 'ala* wives? All of these possibilities have been given.

Generally, an individual scholar<sup>46</sup> who considers *faddala* an unconditional preference of males over females does not restrict *qiwama* to the family relationship but applies it to society at large. Men, the superior beings, are *qawwamuna 'ala* women, the dependent, inferior beings.

Sayyid Qutb,<sup>47</sup> whose discussion I will consider at length, considers *qiwama* an issue of concern for the family within society. He restricts Sura 4, Verse 34, in some ways, then, to the relationship between the husband and the wife. He believes that providing for the females gives the male the privilege of being *qawwamuna 'ala* the female.

He gives *qiwama* a decided dimension of material maintenance. The rationale behind restricting this verse to the context of husband and wife is partly due to the fact that the remainder of the verse discusses other details of concern to the marital relationship.

39. Al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory," pp. 217-218.

40. I have translated *ba'd* in its usual meaning of "some" or "a portion of." However, there is also usage of *ba'd* plus masculine plural noun plus *ba'd*, which means "each other" with no particular number or gender implied. In other words, a degree of vagueness surrounds this statement. It could also mean women have a preference over men.

41. Al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory," p. 218.

42. *Al-Kashshaf 'an haqqa' iq al-tanzil wa 'uyun al-aqawil fi wujuh al-ta'wil* [The Revealer of the True Meanings of the Revelation and Select Opinions concerning Interpretations of the Text] (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Ma'arif, no date), volume 1 (of 4), p. 523.

43. *Al-Kashshaf*, volume 2, p. 117.

44. Al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory," p. 217.

45. Al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory," p. 218.

46. For example, I would include Pickthall because he translates this passage as unrestricted "men are in charge of women." Al-Zamakhshari, in *Al-Kashshaf*, volume 1, p. 523, states the terms he believes of God's preference of men over women. 'Abbas Mahmud Al-'Aqqad [1889-1964], *Al-Mar'a fi al-Qur'an* [Woman in the Qur'an] (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1962), p. 7, states the same. Finally, Mawdudi interprets it this way.

47. *Al-Kashshaf*, volume 2, pp. 648-653.

In addition, the following verse uses the dual, indicating that it is concerned with the context between the two: the husband and wife. However, preceding verses discuss terms of relations between male members of society and female members of society.

I apply this verse to society at large but not on the basis of inherent superiority of men over women, or of God's preference of men over women. Rather, I extend the functional relationship which Sayyid Qutb proposes between the husband and the wife towards the collective good concerning the relationship between men and women in society at large. My main consideration is the responsibility and right of women to bear children.

Sayyid Qutb says, "The man and the woman are both from God's creation and God . . . never intends to oppress anyone from His creation."<sup>48</sup> Both the man and the woman are members of the most significant institution of society, the family. The family is initiated by marriage between one man and one woman. Within the family, each member has certain responsibilities. For obvious biological reasons, a primary responsibility for the woman is childbearing.

The child-bearing responsibility is of grave importance: human existence depends upon it. This responsibility requires a great deal of physical strength, stamina, intelligence, and deep personal commitment.<sup>49</sup> Yet, while this responsibility is so obvious and important, what is the responsibility of the male in this family and society at large? For simple balance and justice in creation, and to avoid oppression, his responsibility must be equally significant to the continuation of the human race. The Qur'an establishes his responsibility as *qiwama*: seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities which jeopardize that primary demanding responsibility that only she can fulfill.

Ideally, *everything* she needs to fulfill her primary responsibility comfortably should be supplied in society, by the male: this means physical protection

as well as material sustenance. Otherwise, "it would be a serious oppression against the woman."<sup>50</sup>

This ideal scenario establishes an equitable and mutually dependent relationship. However, it does not allow for many of today's realities. What happens in societies experiencing a population overload, such as China and India? What happens in capitalistic societies like America, where a single income is no longer sufficient to maintain a reasonably comfortable life-style? What happens when a woman is barren? Does she still deserve *qiwama* like other women? What happens to the balance of responsibility when the man cannot provide materially, as was often the case during slavery and post-slavery U.S.?

All of these issues cannot be resolved if we look narrowly at verse Sura 4, Verse 34. Therefore, the Qur'an must eternally be reviewed with regard to human exchange and mutual responsibility between males and females. This verse establishes an ideal obligation for men with regard to women to create a balanced and shared society. This responsibility is neither biological nor inherent, but it is valuable. An attitude inclined towards responsibility must be cultivated. It is easy enough to see the cases in which it has not been acquired.

However, such an attitude should not be restricted to mere material *qiwama*. In broader terms, it should apply to the spiritual, moral, intellectual, and psychological dimensions as well. Such a perspective on *qiwama* will allow men to truly fulfill their *khilafa* (trusteeship) on the earth, as ordained by God upon human creation. Such an attitude will overcome the competitive and hierarchical thinking which destroys rather than nurtures.

Men are encouraged to fulfill their trusteeship of the earth—especially in relationships with women, the child-bearers and traditional caretakers. What women have learned through bearing and caring for children, men can begin to experience, starting with their attitudes to and treatment of women.

48. Qutb, *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*, volume 2, p. 650.

49. Qutb, *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*, volume 2, p. 650.

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