

Male Superiority in Quran: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

The role of a woman as an individual in many Muslim societies has been undermined. When the Quran uses the word 'Nafs' or person, it describes the relation of the individual with Allah without taking into account any difference of male or female. Quran is the last revelation on Earth has to be interpreted in its best meaning. The superiority of male in the Quran must be read with conditions attached to it. Only those men who are breadwinners are preferred. Secondly, faddala does not mean preference of all men overall women, but the word ba'd have been specifically used in the said verse. Moreover 'Daraba' interpreted as beating or scourging of a wife by husband in order to make her obedient is not supported by any tradition of the Prophet (SAW). Ijtihad or independent reasoning must be encouraged for the revival of Islamic jurisprudence.

Key Words: Daraba, Ijtihad, Nafs, Nushuz, Preference, Qanitat, and Qawwamuna.

Introduction

During the days of ignorance, i.e. before the advent of Islam, a woman was deemed as a dejected part of the society. Female infanticide was in vogue. She was always denied the right to hold the property of her parents. She was not given a right to give her consent or refusal on her marriage. She was looked as a burden of society. At the rise of Islam, she was granted the right to live. She started inheriting from others. She was given the right to take *Mahr* from her husband during her marriage. Islam gave her empowerment. It means that obstacles are removed from her way to make her weak. It further means that she is given a choice of her own, self- independence with self- reliance and to cope with the challenges she might face with a brave heart. [\(Lone 2015\)](#)

Shari'ah asks for maintaining a harmonious relationship between a husband and a wife. Social independence means that she takes part in every sphere of life but not in somewhere she becomes prey for the predators. She should restrict to what is recommended for her if she is a true believer. She must not cross the limits. Islam gives high regard to a woman. It is envisaged in the phrase that 'Paradise lies beneath the feet of a woman.' Unlike many other scriptures, Islam does not make tag woman as a creation of evil or some shape of a devil. Islam does not put a man in a dominant position over woman where the latter has no choice but to surrender to the dominance of the other. The notion that man is superior to a woman is vastly misunderstood not only among the non-Muslims but also in the majority of Muslim masses. Islam considers woman as an equal partner with her counterpart. There is no gender discrimination. Their rights and duties are demarcated according to their physical and psychological differences. As far as religious duties are concerned, she is as equal as a man. She is rather 'privileged' in the form of exemption from daily prayers and fasting during days of her menstrual intervals. She needs not to repeat or make up for the

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missed-out prayers later on. Similarly, there is no obligation on her to take part in *Jihad* (Fighting with enemies of Islam); instead, she is given protection along with children and old aged people, unlike men where they have no other choice but to participate. There is no exemption for men in this regard; otherwise, they will be considered transgressors in the eyes of Allah, resulting in their punishment in life after death. [\(Lone 2015\)](#) On the other hand, the modern scholars of Islam do not challenge the *Ayats* of the Quran, but the interpretations derived out of them. Here is a discussion below in which they assert in the following words;

There are two aspects of women in the Quran when it comes to the difference or equality between men and women. First, the distinction between man and woman as an individual and secondly, woman as a member of the society and it is this latter status which is being centred upon most in the Qur'anic view of the woman. It is so important to look at how Quran treats the woman as an individual because the Quran treats every individual on the same footing whether male or female and that is the reason why Allah uses the word "Nafs" for an individual when it comes to the relation between an individual and Him without using it in specific gender terms [\(Wadud 1999\)](#). The term Nafs has been used in the Quran in a number of places, "O mankind! Reverence to your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single nafs ["Person"] ... At another place, Allah says, "On no nafs does Allah place a burden greater than it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns..." [\(Ali 2004\)](#). Nafs [\(Ansari 1992\)](#), is used in the meaning of "Self" or "Person" and not in the meaning of Soul as it was interpreted by early Muslim scholars under the influence of Greek theologians who attributed spirit (having highest place) to men while soul (having lower rank) to women [\(Barlas 2002\)](#). There is hardly any concept of a woman being an individual or being an independent entity among the traditional scholars who rarely admit that a woman has any rights as an individual person like males to get educated and become an active member of the society [\(Mayer 1999\)](#). Although they accept the Qur'anic concept of "social justice" but narrow their meaning of this notion when it comes to the question of women [\(Wadud 1999\)](#).

Source from the Holy Quran

There is one major verse in the Quran, which is often quoted by the traditionalists to prove the inherent supremacy of men over a woman. It can be best explained by quoting Amina Wadud's rephrasing Pickthall's translation of 4:34 verse of the Quran as follows,

"Men are [qawwamuna' ala] women, [on the basis] of what Allah has [preferred] (fadala) some of them over others. And [on the basis] of what they spend of them property (for the support of women). So good women are [qanitat], guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those 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" [\(Wadud 1999\)](#).

In the above-mentioned verse, there are two conditions attached, i.e. 'preference' and that men support women from their means. If the above conditions are not fulfilled, then men cannot be considered as "qawwamuna 'ala women" [\(Wadud 1999\)](#). Qawwamun "linguistically means "breadwinners or those who provide a means of support or livelihood" [\(Barlas 2002\)](#). The first sentence of this verse as Hassan (1999, 354) mentions, should be taken as 'normative rather than descriptive' "since obviously there are at least some men who do not provide for women" (p.187). The fact that the Quran puts the responsibility of providing bread does not mean that the "women cannot or should not provide for themselves" [\(Wadud 1999\)](#). Al-Tabri says that the payment of dower by husband at the time of marriage shows his financial responsibility to his wife, which is only a monetary preference of a man over woman and not a privilege. Moreover, Al Hibri translates 'qawwamuna' also as 'providers to guidance' (according to an old Arabic dictionary definition) instead of "protector" or "manager". Some translate it as referring to duty rather than leadership or control [\(Eissa 1999\)](#). Abul Ala Maududi translates this verse in a notoriously extreme manner that "Men are the managers of the affairs of the women because Allah has made the one superior to other",

ignoring another verse where both men and women are 'awliya,' i.e. the "mutual protectors" of each other. God would not have mentioned it if men were really superior to women [\(Barlas 2002\)](#).

Amina Wadud argues that 'faddala' or preference used in the Quran at different places is not 'absolute'. Verse 4: 34 does not say that all men are preferred over all women, but it speaks of 'ba'd (some) of them over 'ba'd (others). Surely all men cannot excel all women in all manners or fields. Some men have got preference over some women in certain matters. Likewise, some women have got an advantage over some men in certain similar or different matters (Wadud, 1999). The best example can be given of Hazrat A'isha, wife of the Prophet (SAW), who had immense knowledge of Islamic law having great command over understanding issues and therefore was undoubtedly much better than many men or women surrounding her at that time [\(Eissa 1999\)](#). Rehman says that the wife's economic independence and contribution to the household minimise the superiority of husband "since as a human, he has no superiority over his wife" [\(Barlas 2002\)](#). In fact, the position adopted towards women reveals a strong cultural differentiating role, which is not even mentioned in the Quran or Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW). Khadijah, the first wife of Prophet not only supported her own home but she was equally responsible for paying the Prophet's wages. This arrangement was made because Khajida was a leading businesswoman at that time, who hired Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to manage her business affairs [\(Eissa 1999\)](#).

Other words, which are important in the above verse, are "Qanitat" and "Nushuz". The former is interpreted not only as 'obedient' but also 'obedient to husbands' though it is used in so many places for both males and females [\(Ali, 2004\)](#). Similarly, the word "Nushuz" (disloyalty or ill-conduct) has also been used both for male and female in the Quran. Therefore, it cannot be meant as 'disobedience to husband'. The term used in this verse, along with several other verses in this context refers to obedience to God and not husbands as a general rule. Al-Hibri goes even further that attributing the term Ta'a, i.e. obedience to husband is contrary to the concept of Tauhid as ta'a is purely 'owned to God' [\(Eissa 1999\)](#). Qanitat is used here as 'good' women. Similarly, the word 'daraba' (scourge) which is normally misinterpreted as 'to beat', does not necessarily refer to force or violence rather it restricts those practices indirectly reported repeatedly at the age of companions which were condemned in the Quran. Daraba also means "to strike" or "to set an example". Wadud says that the Quran never compels a woman to obey her husband. It does not say either that obedience to the husband makes her enter paradise. There is no established source even at the time of revelation, which can prove a husband beat her wife to make her obedient. The Quran never ordered even the wives of the Prophet (SAW) to be obedient to Him. Those husbands who are unwilling or unable to provide for their wives are still considered masters and are privileged to be obeyed if it is presumed that only breadwinners or maintainers (males) deserve the right to be obeyed. Finally, she says that the issue of domestic violence is not based on this verse of the Quran because very few men would follow this verse to bring harmony within their matrimonial relations rather the intention of rest of men is not "harmonial but harm" for which they cannot justify their actions [\(Wadud 1999\)](#). Having so many different interpretations of this verse has really made it open for debate, and the result as Asma Barlas should be adopted in the 'best meaning' of it so that the Quranic view of marriage based on "love, forgiveness, harmony and Sukun" is not violated [\(Barlas 2002\)](#).

On the other hand, the Traditionalists assert that men are the protectors and breadwinners for women. They add, in Islam, a woman is emancipated rather than subdued. Men and women are equal in terms of their rights and obligations. In above- mentioned verse, 'daraba' is used to strike very mildly by not hitting her on the face and sensitive organs. This should be given the very last resort if the wife disobeys after being warned and separating the bed from her. [\(Lone 2015\)](#). Imam Fakhar al-Din al-Rarazi argues that men are preferred over women in the inheritance because they spend more and are the 'care-taker' of the whole family, including his wife. Allah has given her the role of childbearing and hence did not overburden her with the financial obligations of the family. Imam Fakhar says that striking must be not very harsh or severe so that it causes harm to the wife. It should be with a 'folded handkerchief' or his palm, and he must not strike her with a hard material. [\(Ghuri 2014\)](#) In pre-Islamic society, women were treated

like cattle. She was the most neglected portion of society. She had neither any right of inheritance, nor could she hold property in her name. It is Islam that gave her empowerment and independence. She was given a right to marry of her own choice. There are several *ahadith* in which Prophet Muhammad (SAW) urged his fellow companions to treat women with kindness. Hazrat Aisha, the wife of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), reported: The Prophet (SAW) never struck a servant or a woman. (Sunan Abu Dawud 4786) (Lone 2015).

Suggestions and Recommendations

The possibility of lapses or failures of most proper hermeneutics of the Quran is evident within the Book itself and which God refers to, "Those who pervert the Truth in Our Signs are not hidden from Us" (Ali 2004), as rightly pointed out by Asma Barlas (Barlas 2002). She further adds that the Quran requires us to interpret it for its 'best meaning'. At the same time, it also admits that not all meanings derived would be completely befitting. Citing Abdoul Karim Soroush, an Iranian Intellectual, "last religion is already here...the last understanding of religion has not yet arrived". He makes a distinction between "din (religion) and ma'refat-e-din (religious knowledge)"; to him, the latter is always bound to "contraction and expansion" (pp. 206-208). Quranic interpretations done at the exegetical level can remove 'individual perceptions' when interpreting the Quran on the one hand, while this approach towards the Divine book can become "more objective" on the other hand. The repeated and varied hermeneutics of the Quran from time to time and place to place has been proved historically, and this is perhaps a healthy sign of this continued process to discover and implement the real wisdom of this Book. Quranic Text being a universal guideline cannot be applied "narrowly" to all communities to come as no community can exactly be like its predecessor. The words in the Quran should be analyzed in the background of all "Quranic Weltanschauung" as these words used in the Quran were "part of existing language and culture of seventh-century Arabia. Yet sometimes, the Quran interpreted them in a difficult manner to reflect its greater intent and purpose of guideline to humanity" (Wadud 1999).

Islamic law can be divided into two basic components, the Shari'ah and the science of Fiqah (Hijh 2003). Shari'ah is the direct utterance of God which cannot be altered while Fiqah is a manmade law formulated by jurists in the light of Quran and authentic Ahadiths or sayings of the Prophet (SAW). As Shari'ah is purely divine and cannot be altered, it needs the most proper interpretation of its words so that the egalitarian concept of Quran is truly realised. The fiqh are those rules which were made from time to time by exercising Ijtihad (Ratiocination or independent reasoning), one of the major sources of Islamic law. Many Muslim reformists stress on Ijtihad for the revival of Islamic jurisprudence. Ijtihad was banned during the Abbasid Caliphate and replaced by Taqlid (following a particular school) which no doubt in the view of many scholars, made Islamic law static and dogmatic. If reinterpretation stops, the society becomes either stagnant or else revolts towards "secularism" (Rehman 1982). Many scholars assert that the doors of Ijtihad were never closed because even the founders of four schools "never claimed finality" for their judgements (Shah 2006). Quran 4: 83 speaks itself of independent judgement. Imam Ghazali defines Ijtihad as, "The perfect Ijtihad would mean that one has spent so much effort in the pursuit of the knowledge of Shari'ah that further pursuit is humanly impossible" (Madani 2005). In more simple words, Ijtihad "is the maximum effort expended by a jurist to master and apply the principles and rules of legal theory for the purpose of discovering God's Law (Shah 2006). A person who can exercise Ijtihad is known as Mujtahid. He must carry some qualifications, i.e. have knowledge of Quran and Sunnah, be well versed in grammar and rhetoric of Arabic language and at the same time be well acquainted with the knowledge of science, technology and modern studies (Workshop 2004). 'Education' blended with both scientific and religious ethics plays an important role in a 'wise re-interpretation (Ijtihad)', which can keep pace with the rapidly changing world (Esposito 1982). Ijtihad can be attracted in matters not arisen before, e.g. environmental, computer and Internet-related issues etc.

The foregoing research earnestly points to the fact that there is a compelling case in modern times for the exercise of Ijtihad regarding Shari'ah laws, especially those pertaining to women. We are further encouraged by the positive results obtained by the application of this method of reasoning and law-making. For example, Yusuf al- Qaradawi has recently declared that it is not essential for a Muslim woman to be accompanied by her male relative during air travel. He argues that this rule was formulated in "pre-modern times" with the purpose to ensure "physical and moral safety" of the woman and the arrangements provided at this modern age fulfil this obligation. Ijtihad can be institutionalised as a permanent law-making source in Muslim countries as it has been done in the case of Pakistan where Article 203D of the 1973 Constitution empowers all the superior courts particularly the Federal Shari'at Court to exercise "Judicial Ijtihad." In Abdul Majid's case (PLD 2004 FSC 1); the Federal Shari'at Court declared that Islamic Shari'ah "empowers" the authorities to legislate on matters not covered by Quran and Sunnah [\(Shah 2006\)](#).

Ijtihad can also be institutionalized by having an independent and permanent group or 'body of Mujtahids' having the force of law behind its constitution and comprising of both men and women. In a Muslim country, such a body or group can have a great impact on legislation if its recommendations are made binding on the government. The Council of Islamic Ideology in Pakistan is a similar institution set up by the Constitution, and although it mainly has an advisory role as regards legislation, its recommendations are usually taken seriously by the government. The scope of activity of such existing institutions can be broadened so as to include recommendations based on the practice of Ijtihad in matters that need reform. Similar arrangements can also be made possible through political will of the authorities in communities where Muslims are in the minority. This can be done by accommodating Muslim family and personal laws in the national laws and by providing opportunity to Muslim Mujtahids and jurists to introduce reforms in these laws whenever there is such a need. However, in any case, great care needs to be taken so as to allow only qualified Mujtahids to exercise Ijtihad or give Fatwa and not everyone in charge of a mosque or madrasa be allowed so that the chances of exploiting such a system can be minimised.

Asghar Ali points out that it is a regrettable reality that the Shari'ah laws are always strictly attracted when it comes to the issues of women and very readily the same laws are applied to other Land laws issues 'like property, contract laws, financial transactions' etc. The main opposition invariably comes from the dominant male force when someone talks about the better status of women in Shari'ah [\(Engineer 2001\)](#). It is quite shocking to see the imperious attitude of those people who has set a high standard of dignity and respect for themselves but deny it to their other fellow beings solely on gender basis [\(Wadud 1999\)](#).

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be reasonably deduced that it is not the Quran but the interpreters of the Quran who have either erred or knowingly made this interpretation under a deep influence of patriarchy. Such interpretations, which "carry cultural influences", need not be adopted by the Muslim Ummah. Also, the interpretation done in any particular age cannot be applied to all issues in the same spirit in all times to follow especially when Islam has been chosen for all times to come, and there is no Divine book after Quran that can be sent for the guidance of the whole humanity [\(Madani 2005\)](#). We, the Muslim males, have made our women subservient to us in complete violation of the injunctions of the Quran, the traditions and *Ahadith* of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). In many respects, even the pre-Islamic society was a more woman-friendly set-up. It is true that the position of women during Jahiliya (Days of ignorance) was much worse than at present, but it was not the case with every woman even at that time as it has been wrongly portrayed particularly by the traditionalists. In the words of Leila Ahmed; "Khadija's economic independence, her marriage overture, apparently without a male guardian to act as an intermediary; her marriage to a man many years younger than herself; and her monogamous marriage all reflect Jahiliya rather than Islamic practice" [\(Ahmed 1992\)](#). Let us be honest and fair to ourselves and accept the truth that women are not inferior to men in any way by allowing them full access to participate both actively and equally in every sphere of life provided she maintains her chastity and modesty, which the Quran requires

of her as a woman. Only this way, the Quranic Worldview or egalitarian concept is best achieved on the one hand, while on the other, we can hand over to our next generation a society which is liberated and free of any kind of prejudice and discrimination against women.

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