

Caught on the Horns of Political Expediency

Women in Muslim Countries

by Aida Farrag Graff

Dans les pays musulmans, on se sert injustement de la religion pour légitimer certaines pratiques non reconnues par le Qur'an. D'après l'auteure, les femmes musulmanes perdent doublement puisque si elles tentent de résister aux injustices

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légales dont elles sont victimes, on les blâme alors de vouloir renverser l'Islam.

It is truly a tragic irony that although women are deemed the equal of men in the eyes of God, and were, according to the Qur'an created from the same matter as men, the majority of Muslim men themselves do not believe women to be their equals. A telling example of this belief is the way in which the story of creation has been changed from its original version in the Qur'an to reinforce the lower status of Muslim women. The Qur'an clearly states:

O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women. (Surah 4:1)¹

Amina Wadud-Muhsin also notes that while the Qur'an stresses the dualism of creation, it "is not expressed in gender terms" (20). Surah 36:36 in fact reads: "Glory be to Him Who created all the sexual pairs, of that which the earth grows, and of themselves, and of that which they know not!" Yet, after the Prophet's death the story of creation was explicated following the Judeo/Christian tradition, with, however, one added, negative element which was to ascribe to the Prophet the statement that Eve emerged not simply Adam's rib, but from a "crooked" rib! Male exegetes do not seem to have found in the Qur'anic text sufficient support for their own narrow views of the status of women, and have thus accepted into the body of exegetical texts different versions of this ascribed saying (see Ahmed; Al-Hibri; Haddad; Hassah; Mernissi; Sabbah; Stowasser).

During the first few hundred years of Islam interpreters had no religious misgivings about reinforcing weak *Hadiths*

(sayings of the Prophet that do not qualify as one hundred per cent authentic), many of which upheld the lower status of women (see Mernissi). During those early centuries when Islam spread as a political force interpreters had no qualms, also, to help reinforce an autocratic state posited upon a strict hierarchical division in order to serve the current ruler.

That opposing political parties tried to influence public opinion through the medium of the Hadith and used the names of great authorities of Tradition is a fact no one conversant with the early history of Islam may deny. (Fazlur 49)

This was a far cry from the Prophet's vision of a community of equals in which he tried to introduce for women of all classes privileges they did not previously have, and which allowed their voices to be heard regardless of social status (Al-Hibri). Thus, if during the first years of Islam, the seeds of equality between the sexes, and equality between the classes were sown, these seeds were destroyed upon the Prophet's death in favour of an autocratic state premised upon a rigid notion of hierarchy. And, as Fatima Mernissi noted in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, women and slaves lost out. The egalitarianism of that early community was never to be replicated. The voices of women that had been so forceful during the Prophet's lifetime were completely silenced as were the voices of the disenfranchised and the slaves. Examining the Qur'anic passages dealing with women and slavery, Fazlur Rahman makes the following comments:

...that whereas the spirit of the Qur'anic legislation exhibits an obvious direction towards the progressive embodiment of the fundamental human values of freedom and responsibility in fresh legislation, nevertheless the actual legislation of the Qur'an had partly to accept the then existing society as a term of reference. This clearly means that the actual legislation of the Qur'an cannot have meant to be literally eternal by the Qur'an itself. This fact has no reference to the doctrine of the eternity of the Qur'an or to the allied doctrine of the verbal revelation of the Qur'an. Very soon, however, the Muslim lawyers and dogmatists began to confuse the issue and the strictly legal injunctions of the Qur'an were thought to apply to any society, no matter what its conditions, what its structure and what its inner dynamics. (39)

Since Islamic family law, based upon the interpretation of medieval exegetes is the operative law in all Muslim

states, and since the exegesis of such interpreters has been given a *quasi* sacrosanct status which, supposedly, may not be challenged, it becomes extremely difficult to fight against injustices that occur in the name of such laws without incurring the accusation of fighting against Islam itself. What complicates matters is that struggles against injustices arising out of the application of Muslim law are, unfortunately, perceived as attempts to subvert Islam, as plots to undermine the true spirit of Islam.² That the Prophet himself was a political activist who tried to challenge and change the social, political, and economic reality of his day seems to be totally forgotten.

Without delving here into the histories of the countries that form the Muslim world, it is enough to state that they are all ruled by repressive regimes, and many of them are engulfed in one form of conflict or another. As a reaction to the acute socio/economic disparities that exist in the poorer Muslim countries, populist Islamist

movements have sprung up venting their frustrations through acts of violence rationalized under the guise of religious sanction. Not to be outdone in religious legitimacy, many governments have also used what I call the pseudo-religious card, and both sides have played out their political and actual tug-of-war upon the weakest in their societies, namely women, making them the scapegoats of all the ills of these societies. Hence the revival of the veil, the call for a reaffirmation of a true Islamic culture whose guardians are deemed to be the women of that society, and who must remain well guarded and controlled in order to keep that tradition pure.

Thus, both the populist Islamic discourse and state religious discourse seem to converge when it comes to the status of women. This is not surprising and is reminiscent of the fascist discourse of the 1930s, as well as the discourse of the right heard today in "democratic" countries. Such phrases as "family values" have become globally only too familiar smoke screens for reactionary and anti-social views.

Since the human rights of individuals living under these repressive governments are not respected, it goes without saying that the rights of women will be given scant attention. Muslim women are not only battling an entrenched patriarchal system, but one that both constitutes and is bolstered by the apparatus of repressive states. That is why the struggle to improve the status of women

becomes a dual struggle. On the one hand, in fighting for equal access, women are challenging the political system itself which does not even award its male citizens equal access. On the other hand, since women's repression is validated through misogynist misinterpretations of Qur'anic texts, women fighting for their rights are accused of promoting non-Muslim values. This is one explanation for the severe backlash against women in Muslim states, a backlash cleverly aided and abetted by the governments themselves. For the struggle for the human rights of women implies a fight for the human rights of the rest of the population. So if repressive regimes were to acquiesce

to the demands of women, they would have to introduce for everyone some modicum of democratic rule, equity, and justice. As for the popular western contention that "human rights" of the individual are incompatible with Qur'anic injunctions, I refer the reader to Riffat Hassan's work.

I realize that there now exists a

climate in some Muslim countries in which *fatwas* (authoritative legal opinions) against individuals who are seen to have transgressed against Islam are issued freely. People do not realize that there is a highly structured and codified method of issuing such edicts (see *Adaby*), and that one of the most famous of Qur'anic verses currently ignored states that "There is no compulsion in religion" (Surah 2:256), while Surah 4:137 tells us that :

Lo! those who believe, then disbelieve and then (again) believe, then disbelieve, and then increase in disbelief, Allah will never pardon them, nor will He guide them unto a way.

All verses dealing with apostasy leave the matter of punishment to God, the implication being quite clear that it is for God and not for man to dispose of the fate of apostates.

I am focusing so far on some Islamic tenets because all the ills of Muslim societies are generally blamed upon it. Furthermore, as I stated above, religion is grossly misused in Muslim countries to legitimize practices not condoned by the Qur'an. I find it ironic that those who purport to go to the fundamentals of Islam somehow always miss the Holy Text and seem to focus only upon medieval interpretations of that Text. And when they invoke the Text they only seem to see its punishing injunctions. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the application of the 1979 Hudood



el-Haraniya, Cairo, Egypt, 1985.

Photo: Aida Farrag Graff

Ordinance in Pakistan in its sections dealing with adultery and rape.

Adultery is one of the most difficult transgressions to prove in Islam. Four respectable men in the community have to witness the actual act of penetration, or the offender has to admit the transgression freely which he/she may retract at any time, which would then invalidate the accusation. The punishment prescribed in the Qur'an is 100 lashes for both parties (Surah 24:2). Yet we hear of cases in which women have been stoned to death, and many Muslims and most non-Muslims are of the firm belief that stoning is a Qur'anic injunction. Even Egypt's well known feminist, Nawal el-Saadawi erroneously believes stoning to be a Qur'anic directive (198). The origin of this belief is another example of male manipulation of tradition. 'A'ishah, the Prophet's wife, is supposed to have reported

that just before his death, a verse of the Qur'an was revealed ordering the stoning to death of adulterers. During the shock and disturbance at the Prophet's death, so the report goes, the piece of paper containing this verse was devoured by a stray goat (Rahman 65).

With the rise in violence in Pakistan, and with what seems to be a total breakdown in civil law and order, physical attacks on unprotected women have become commonplace. If a woman should happen to report her rape to the police, "she can by her own admission be prosecuted for adultery while the rapist goes free for lack of evidence" (Mumtaz and Shaheed 101). However, as has been noted, the majority of victims of these Ordinances belong to the poorest segments of society (Jalal).

It is also the poor who suffer in the Sudan with the government's implementation of some of the most medieval aspects of Shari'ah laws. By introducing the more repressive aspects of Shari'ah, the rulers of Sudan keep their population busy and pit the stronger among them against the weaker, the men against the women. However, when the Sudanese government was given a gift of thousands of black *chadors* by Iran, and when it tried to force Sudanese women to wear them, the latter staunchly refused to give up their *thob* (Sudanese national dress befitting the hot climate) and took to the streets (Ibrahim). When the same injunction to wear black Iranian chadors

was issued in Algeria by the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut), women also took to the streets and refused the orders. Ironically, the wearing of the *haik*, which is the traditional white cover, has become for Algerian women a sign of resistance.

These examples point to the fact that in some countries it is the state that imposes pseudo-Islamic injunctions, or what Val Moghadam calls "state-sponsored Islamism" (139) while in others it is the Islamist forces of opposition that seek to impose their own ideology. The first wishes to maintain power, while the second wishes to acquire power. Both, as I noted earlier, try to gain legitimacy by imposing

their repressive version of Islam upon women by disenfranchising them. Governments use the law to legitimate their repression; Islamist oppositional forces use violence to terrify women into acquiescence, as in Algeria. Educated women as well as men who voice progressive views are at risk.

The National

Assembly in Egypt watered down the 1979 amendments to the Personal Status Law which were the first changes introduced in 50 years that were marginally favourable to women. Their excuse was that these were introduced and passed in an unconstitutional manner (see Hussein). Had this legislation been favourable to men, the unconstitutional manner of its introduction into the House would most certainly not have bothered the majority. To this day, a statute exists in family law in Egypt that allows a husband to force his wife back through the police. Although rarely invoked now, it still exists even despite the fact that the *Mufti* (the highest Islamic jurisprudent who issues *fatwas*, i.e., legal opinions) has pronounced it to be un-Islamic and non-existent in Islamic law.

Women "must be retained in honour or released in kindness" (Surah 2:229) is another verse which seems to have slipped the mind of most Muslim men. Many are also amnesiac when it comes to inheritance laws especially as they pertain to land, and refuse to give their sisters their Qur'anic share (see Pastner). Since Qur'anic inheritance law favours the male by giving him twice the share of the female, I find it ironic that Christian Arab men have never protested the application of these laws to them. Why give up such a lucrative position!

The backlash against women in Muslim countries is part and parcel of the global right wing backlash that we are currently witnessing. It is the fruit of the disturbing



el-Haraniya, Cairo, Egypt, 1985.

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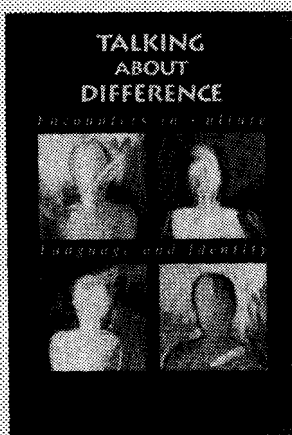
socio/economic conditions of many Muslim countries. It is the fodder for the vicious conflicts that are needed to keep a global war machinery alive and profitable. It helps prop up tyrannical regimes that have no intention of allowing their citizens any democratic rights. As the winds of despair blow across Muslim countries, and as fragile democratic attempts are crushed by internal and external forces, the status of women, ever at risk, becomes a pawn between equally repressive positions. Voices attempting the songs of freedom are silenced by governments who brook no opposition, and by those who pretend to wish to impose the "true" religion. As ignorance and obscurantism hold sway, women's rights will suffer as will the rights of the disenfranchised because the fight for the rights of women in Muslim countries, as in other countries with repressive state systems, becomes a fight for democracy.

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¹I have used Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall's rendition of the Qur'an.

²See, for example Valentine Moghadam's *Modernizing Women, Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, in which she describes the Iranian concept of *gharbzadeh*, that is "Westoxication" or "Occidentosis," pp 139-40.

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