

Does Islam Really Degrade Women?

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Abstract: Islam religion is generally alleged to be responsible for the degrade status of women in Islamic society. This paper is a sincere attempt to show that the real Islamic teaching i.e., the teaching of *Qur'an* and *Hādīth* is not responsible for the degraded and inferior status of the Islamic women, rather it is the lack of the practice of the teaching of the *Qur'an* and *Hādīth* on the one hand and the practice of the teaching of the ideology of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle on the other hand led to the degraded and inferior status of women.

Keywords: Al-Farabi, Aristotle, Equality, *Hādīth*, Ibn Sina, Plato, *Qur'an*, Women.

1. Introduction

Western thinkers often claim that Islam has secured a disgraceful status for women than that of men and excluded their activity and contribution to society. Some of them also criticise that Islam, in a social sphere is a completely failure because it degrades women. They claim that women in Muslim community generally face gender-based inequalities by the so called “patriarchal gender system”. Muslim women also struggle by male domination, early marriage, restriction in their behaviour and veiling and polygamous family structure etc.

Now-a-days, people generally consider Islam as one of the major sources of women’s subordination. According to them, Islam often represents women as an inferior class and tries to justify and maintain men’s domination in society. Though their criticisms were made against the entire major religions in general but Islam, in particular, is considered responsible for holding the ‘anti-women’ view. Though, Islam provides significant rights for women in the *Qur'an*, in present time, Muslim women faces various difficulties to acquire their rights.

2. Reason Behind the Degradation of Women in Islam

In present day scenario, we have seen that most of the Muslim women are generally subordinated by the so-called patriarchal society. Thus, naturally questions raised that does Islam degrade women in its religious text i.e., in the *Qur'an* and *Hādīth*? If the answer is negative then why Muslim women have struggled so much for their rights? Why they were considered inferior to men? And why women considered only as a means of procreation method? To find the answer I have traced back to Islamic philosophy. In the medieval period, Islamic philosophers were influenced greatly by the ancient Greek philosophy especially Plato and Aristotle for which the status of women have been changed. So, for me it is the main

reason behind the degradation of the status of women in the Islamic society.

The Medieval Islamic philosophers took their inspiration from the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition, especially from Plato and Aristotle and their syncretism. It is not wrong to say that the image of the woman in the Islamic philosophical tradition is presented as a phenomenon or a continuation of the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition. Thus, its connections with reality are only expressed in the mind depending on metaphysical principles. Islamic philosophical tradition also represents a metaphysical and conceptual structure for the development of women. Like Ancient Greek philosophical tradition, Islamic philosophy has a similarity to represent the women; they both expressed its connections to nature depending on the metaphysical principles.

At that time, the social situation of women has not secured too much in Islamic society. They should not represent the conditions of women through the principles or set of rules followed by the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*. Islamic philosophical traditions more likely passed through us from Ancient Greek, though some philosophers said that Islamic culture and tradition are influenced by the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition. It takes a lot of places in the Islamic culture, religion and philosophy, so, we need to know Plato and Aristotle very well to understand Islamic philosophy.

A. Plato’s view on women

Though Plato was known as the founder of sex unity theory, but there are many aspects of sex polarity in his work, especially on *Republic* and *Timaeus*. Plato believed that man has superiority over women [1] and women are weaker than men. To explicit the status of women, Plato used a metaphor in his *Republic*, with comparing women to a watchdog: “Female watchdogs do just what the male ones do, except that they are weaker, and their lives are interrupted by giving birth. By analogy, the same is true of women; they are weaker than men and their lives are interrupted by childbirth [2].” What we can see here is that Plato set a clear-cut distinction from women to men in the above passage. He has polarized the conception of women and men.

In another passage, in his *Republic*, (453^{b5}, 453^{b10-11}), Plato puts forward a serious objection to the idea of women being guardians. For him, each and every person has the capability to do his own work by his nature. The women should behave differently as they were different in nature from men [3]. Plato

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again poses a serious question at passage 455^{a9-b2}, the question is - are there any occupations that only a woman can do? The answer is no. For Plato, men are better equipped both mentally and physically. So, in every place, men can do better than women [4]. Comparing male and female with the gifted nature and the ungifted nature, Plato made a distinction between these two types of nature. For him, the gifted learn quickly to make discoveries of their own while learning is difficult for the ungifted; the gifted nature that means male put their thought into action but the ungifted i.e., female are clumsy (455^{b4-c6}) [5]. In so far, it is clear that there are many aspects that illustrated the sex polarity in his thought.

B. Aristotle's view on women

Aristotle, the founder of sex polarity argued that there are philosophically significant differences between men and women and by nature, man is superior to woman. The theory of sex polarity is mainly developed in his books – *Generation of Animals*, *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Politics* [6]. Aristotle said that men's souls are more forceful than women [7]. According to him, the relation between man and women are just like the ruler and ruled. For him, those who can intellectually anticipate things are called nature rulers and masters; and those who can physically do things are called nature subjects and slaves [8] In the area of generation, Aristotle argued that the women only provided a passive material to the fetus while the men provided the active seminal cause. He also argued that the menstrual fluids of women can produce the fetus only if men provide the fertile seed. So, in the process of generation men provide the necessary part though no one can refuse the material element [9] According to Aristotle, a male is the provider of fertile seed, where a female is a passive receptacle for seed. So, for him, the woman just played a passive role in the generation [10].

C. Plato and Aristotle's influence on Islamic philosophy

The negative approach of the Pythagorean tradition to a woman does not take much part in the Islamic philosophical traditions. But Plato and Aristotle's view played an important role in the Ismaili tradition, especially the Islamic philosophy of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā and many more [11]. Al-Rāzī also influenced by Platonic thoughts. According to the Platonic tradition, women are nothing but an object of love and desire; and this loving relationship gives more priority to desire than the intellect [12]. Taking the advantage of the Platonic point of view al-Rāzī argued that it should be better not to be married and be in love with someone (here someone refers to women because women degrade the intellectual power of man). So, it follows that women were regarded as an object which to inactivate intellectual faculties in Islamic Pythagorean philosophy. Society has been determined by an *idea* in the Platonic tradition. According to Plato, men are just like a form or a source of wisdom where women are considered as a matter or a source of ignorance [13]. According to Plato, there is a social role or a social mind and he also considered woman as an element of social role [14]. From this point of view, it is said that Islamic philosophical tradition is very much influenced by

the Platonic conception of the state, especially the conception of morality and politics. It is known that Plato's conception of state occurred more impact in the Islamic world. At that time, Plato's *Republic* dominated the Islamic world completely. Some reason for this such as Plato's *Republic* was very much familiar to them than Aristotle's *Politics* in the Islamic world. We can trace the concept of Ideal State or Philosopher king in Abu Nasr Al-Farabi's most notable philosophical works *Al-Madina al-Fadila*. Al-Farabi theorized an ideal state like Plato did in *The Republic* and argued that religion rendered truth through symbols and persuasion. Following Plato, he further said, it is the duty of a philosopher to guide the state. Al-Farabi borrowed the Platonic idea, and draws a parallel form within the Islamic context, in which he regarded the ideal state to be ruled by the prophet-imam, instead of Plato's Philosopher king. For instance, Al-Farabi argued that the ideal state was the city of Medina when it was under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad, as the laws of Allah directly revealed to him. In the absence of the Prophet-imam, when Muhammad has died it was very difficult to answer the question, who will be the successor of the Prophet? Al-Farabi considered democracy as the closest to the ideal state, regarding the republican order of the Sunni Rashidun Caliphate (rightly guided ruler) as an example within early Muslim history. Thus, Plato had influenced al-Farabi in particular and medieval Islamic philosophers, in general, a lot to build their idea.

Islamic philosophical tradition is dominated by means of integration the Platonic conception of the state and the Aristotelian *Nicomachean Ethics* which dominate in the field of morality [15]. The Islamic conception of society and politics even the Islamic philosophy based on that morality which actually nothing but the morality of Aristotelian thought. According to Plato, there is no place for women in society; the reason is that the culture of the Ancient Greek society reflects on his philosophy. Since, at that time there is a patriarchal family structure in Greek culture, where women were treated as a being, who comes to the family and dependent on the family; not only that the position of women is located after the slaves of the family. According to him, she only comes to the fore with her fertility, for which she obliged to work in that family only in a certain division of labour. Despite that Plato also said that women should be educated in her State, though they (women) have no place in the state administration; because he thought that women give more prioritize their emotions and desires than their intellectual faculties. For Plato, a woman only can be a part of the military class or makes her a protector, but this also has certain conditions [16].

In the Platonic tradition, women are considered as the common property of society and keep living from any kind of a shame. This situation of women is somewhat more softened in the Islamic philosophical tradition. If we look upon the conception of the state of *al-Madīna al-Fāḍila* (which is a commentary of Plato's *Republic*) by al-Fārābī then it would be clear that the woman is not represented anywhere on that commentary. He does not mention anywhere that commentary about the woman or more specifically the role of the woman in the state. Now, if we consider that in the Islamic tradition, there

is a Rashidun Caliphate (*al-khulafā' al-rāshidun* [17] or rightly guided ruler) or *imam* who represented the same thing with a concept of the Prophet as the head of virtuous state or society, then it would be clear to all that there is no role for the woman in that state. Because, the intellectual faculty helps us to determine whether we would prefer the emotion or the desire. According to Al-Fārābī, a woman can never become a *Caliph* or a *Head* [18] of the state and they can never attain a wise personality within the administration of the state by means of her emotional entity and crushing drop in her desires.

If we look at Ibn Sina, we can see that he gives more importance to power which is a representation of the Platonic tradition. Here we see that at that time the Islamic philosopher has a negative attitude towards women which goes contrary to the Islamic holy text *Qur'an* and *Hadith* [19]. One of the main reasons for this is undoubtedly the impact of Greek thought in his philosophy. That's why he also did not give the right which has not been given by Platonic tradition to the women. Based on some *Qur'anic* verses such as *Sura al-Nisa*, verse 34, which provides men as a protector for women, Ibn Sina said that the place for women only is home and they have no power of representation out of the home. For him, women have no place in the administration due to being weak-minded, giving her emotions prominence and being fanciful [20].

The conception of a "weak-minded woman" that inherits from Greek philosophy plays an important role in Ibn Sina's perception of the woman in society. Not only that, since women have no place to involve with any administration due to their lack of reason. He told that woman is a being that works only in terms of fertility; but for this fertility, there is no obstacle for her to get married to an elite man. To get married to an elite man like a philosopher, a woman has to be educated at home to achieve the quality of bride of her philosopher groom. In such a way, women would become the honourable wife of a certain man. According to Ibn Sina, the divorce right should not be given to women, because they are emotional and weak-minded. In this respect, it is stated that, for Ibn Sina, women should not be considered as any social personality; and they do not have any social position. In his Philosophy, the most important thing of a woman is her chastity, honour and obedience to her husband and being a good wife and raising good children for her husband.

Another Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazālī, says that the marriage contract between men and women is assimilating to slavery. She should not ignore her husband in a single moment [21], even there is a pointless matter or no matter. It is necessary for a woman to obey her husband what he says to do. Influenced by Aristotle, he accepted women as a being, who does not have a rational soul with the authority over the irrational soul [22]. This thought implies that a woman is considered weak-minded for her insufficient and unstable reasoning. They both argued that women depend on the men for their education and maintained protection at home; not only that the lack of reason women depend on the men to pursue their desires and ambitiousness.

In the same way, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī said that woman should be used as a slave and must obey her husband fully. He

assimilates the house holdings to the state administration. He also argued that the house should be ruled by reason just like the state ruled by reason [23]. According to him, since, women does not have reason, women should not be the head of the family. For him, the purpose of marriage is to protect the property and ensure the continuation of the generation to give birth to children. Thus, to become a housewife, women must have the important qualification of the fertility with other qualifications such as being a gentle, modest, chaste, obedient and religious person. For al-Tusi, beauty should not be the main cause to get married women, because her beauty can often be a trap and cruel due to her weak mind.

3. Rights and Duties of Women in *Qur'an* and *Hādith*

Islam has secured various rights in its religious texts i.e., the *Qur'an* and *Hādith* for women to restore the dignity and honour of women in the society. Islam perhaps is the first religion who states that women are as worthy and precious as men in our human society. Hence, Islam establishes equality between men and women. Islamic scholars often cited the *Qur'anic* verse in favour of this equality; this *Qur'anic* verse runs as,

*"It is He Who created
You from a single person,
And made His mate
Of like nature, in order
That he might dwell with her
(In love) When they are
United"* [24]. (*Qur'an* 07:189)

Thus, we can see that God created us both male and female from the same soul and made us in races and tribes just because the purpose to know each other. Muhammad (pbuh) the Prophet of Islam had repeatedly said that "all people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. There is no claim of merit of an Arab over a non-Arab or of a white over a black person or of a male over a female. Only God-fearing people merit a preference with God." [25]

According to Islam, women are equal to men in all respects; either in rights or duties. Allah does not give any priority to either man over women or women over men and both of them will be equally punished or rewarded with respect to their deeds. So, according to the *Qur'an*, men and women both are equally morally responsible for their actions. For example, we can say the *Qur'anic* verse, 05:41 which stated as-

*"As to the thief,
Male or female,
Cut off his or her hands
A punishment by way
Of example, from God,
For their crime
And God is Exalted in power"* [26]. (*Qur'an* 05:41)

So, from the above *Qur'anic* verse, it can be conferred that Allah made it clear that the punishment has to be applied equally on the thief either it is male or female. In each and every

place both men and women have to enjoy equal punishment or reward in respect to their deeds.

Islam has allowed certain rights to women that help them to establish their equality in society. These rights, which a Muslim woman can enjoy, are following.

A. The Right to Education

Behind every strong civilisation, education is the main pillar, which lays down the foundation of civilisation securely. Both the *Qur'an* and *Hādīth* advocate the equality of men and women in our society and they emphasise on equal rights to seek knowledge. The *Qur'an* commands to all Muslim men and women to put their effort in order to attain knowledge [27]. The Prophet had also encouraged for education to both men and women, irrespective of their sex. Even the Prophet once announced and ordered that every slave girl should be educated [28]. According to Islam, everyone irrespective of their sex should learn properly. His teachings were widely accepted by both men and women and it was reported that at the time of his death there were many women scholars.

The *Qur'an* says, they are losers who want to keep their children away from acquiring knowledge. This *Qur'anic* verse states as –

*Lost are those who slay
Their children, from folly,
Without knowledge* [29] (*Qur'an*: 06:140)

So, neither the *Qur'an* nor the Prophet prohibits women from having an education. Prophet himself was used to teach the women along with men. The importance of women was thus manifested in the following *Hādīth* – “If A man teaches his slave-girl good manners properly, educates her properly, and then manumits and marries her, he will get a double reward” [30] (Bukhari: 3446).

B. The Right to Marriage and Divorce

In Islam, marriage is a “voluntary civil contract between a man and a woman”. In every marriage life, both men and women have some rights and duties with responsibilities. Islam permits a woman the right to marry any man whom she likes and it also permits her to end that relationship according to her will. In Islam, the consent of two partners is essential to start a happy and stable marriage life. According to Prophet, “A matron should not be given in marriage except after consulting her; and a virgin should not be given in marriage except after her permission.” [31] (Bukhari: 5136).

In Islam, a woman has the right to divorce her husband, if she feels uncomfortable with him. The *Qur'anic* legislation regarding divorce allows time for reflection about their relation and prays a kind treatment to women. According to the *Qur'an*, if a woman is divorced by her husband, then he has to pay her back a reasonable amount of money as her maintenance. He is further advised to take care of her (wife) throughout the *iddah* [32] period (three months and ten days) to determine whether she is pregnant or not. If she got pregnant then he is legally obliged to look after her until she delivers and nurses the baby

to a certain age. [33]

C. The Right to Inheritance

According to the *Qur'an*, women have allotted a share from the inheritance of their parents and kinsmen. Her share is secured by Islamic law. This share is completely her own, no one has the right to claim on it. According to the *Qur'an*, both men and women shall have a share in their inheritance or what their parents or kinsmen leave; even if it is too little or much more, this is legally theirs’. It would be clear if we look at the *Qur'anic* verse 04:07, which runs as –

*“From what is left by parents
And those nearest related
There is a share for men
And a share for women,
Whether the property be small
Or large, -a determinate share”*. [34] (*Qur'an* 04:07)

Though in reality, we hardly experience that a woman can possess her rights of inheritance in the property like a male member do in her family. Islam strictly prohibits this type of injustice or inequality in our society. *Qur'an* does not discriminate between woman and man concerning the rights of inherited property. [35]

D. The Right to Equal Respect

Islam advocates the equality of men and women in society, emphasises on the mutual understandings and respect between them. For Islam, as women are half of the society, they should be treated carefully. The Prophet constantly encourages His followers to behave kind and compassionate with women. He says, “Fear Allah regarding women. Verily you have married them with the trust of Allah and made their bodies lawful with the word of Allah. You have got (rights) over them, and they have got (rights) over you.” [36] So, according to Islam, every woman is an individual worthy of dignity and respect and she is a social person, a legal person, a responsible citizen, a servant of God and a free individual human being like any other male human being. Thus, Islam grants her the fundamental equal right to flourish her potentialities in all areas that a male human being generally enjoys.

E. The Right of Independent Ownership

According to Islam, a woman has the right to manage her own property independently. Regarding the property, ownership female has the equal rights to the male. She has the liberty to buy, sell, mortgage, lease, borrow or lend, and sign contracts and legal documents. Also, she can donate her money as her wish or she can set up a business or company to act as a trustee. In another *Qur'anic* verse where it is stated that women also have a portion of what they earn just like a man. This *Qur'anic* verse runs as –

04:32 *“And in no wise covet
Those things in which God
Hath bestowed His gifts
More freely on some of you*

*Than on others to men
Is allotted what they earn,
And to women what they earn
But ask God of His bounty
For God hath full knowledge
Of all things” [37].*

So, from the above *Qur’anic* verse and other Islamic textual references, we can conclude that *Qur’an* secured an independent economic status for its women. The concept of *Zakat* is also a gem in Islamic teaching that advocates the independency of economic rights for women. *Zakat* encourages the women to invest, save and distribute their own earning according to their prudence. It also encourages enacting their right to participate in different economic activities. [38]

F. The Right to Keep Her Own Identity

In Islam, there is no process of changing the names of women. She may know by her own name as an indication of her individuality and her own identity. She is not obliged to change her maiden name. Thus, Islam permits a woman to keep her maiden name unchanged even if she is married, divorced or widowed [39]. Here, Islam gives equal rights to women what it allows to men.

G. The Right of Political Participation

In Islam, women have the right to participate and involve in politics. In fact, Islam is the first religion that acknowledges and encourages women to play an active role in politics. [40] In its early history, Islam had given the opportunity to women to express their opinion and argument on public issues. [41] They led delegations [42], mediated between others and sometimes granted refuge and protection to those who need. [43] Aisha and Abi Umayya (the wives of the prophet) are two great examples, whose opinions and arguments were highly appreciated by the Prophet and other scholars at that time. The Prophet had often shared His political problems and discussed them with Abi Umayya. In the same manner, Aisha had also played a dominant role in the political domain where she lived. She raised complaints and criticized the policies of the rulers there. Abi Umayya and Aisha both together helped to compile the traditions of the Prophet that considered the main source of Islamic Jurisprudence. [44]

4. Conclusion

So far as our forgoing discussion is concerned it is seen that *Qur’an* and *Hādith* do not degrade the status of women. Both of them (*Qur’an* and *Hādith*) have given equal status in all respects to men as well as women. But after the death of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) the teaching of the *Qur’an* and *Hādith* were not properly implemented and practiced our society by any worthy person. On the other hand, Islamic society was greatly influenced by the philosophical ideology of Plato and Aristotle. In the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, male have been given a superior status to that of the women. Woman has been considered inferior to men in all respects. After the death of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) the Islamic Philosophy as well as

Islamic society was influenced and governed by Al-Farabi, Al-Tusi etc. who were motivated by the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. The practice of the philosophical ideology of Plato and Aristotle in Islamic society led to the degraded and inferior status of women. I think the whole Islamic society can overcome these problems if the actual teaching and ideology provided by *Qur’an* and *Hādith* are implemented properly in Islamic society. If the present ideology of the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy is replaced by the actual teaching of the *Qur’an* and *Hādith* then the women of Islamic society will regain their equal status to that of man.

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