

Islām and the Education of Muslim Women

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Al-Islām is the final way of life bestowed on mankind by revelation from *Allāh* (*subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*). The revelation is preserved in two basic sources: the *Qur'ān* – the pure, eternal word of *Allāh*, and the *Sunnah* – the explanation of the *Qur'ān* by the final messenger of *Allāh*, Muḥammad ﷺ through his words, deeds and his approval of the deeds of others. *Allāh* has endowed His word with the quality that no one has the power to tamper with it. As He said in His Book (the *Qur'ān*),

*We have, without doubt, sent down the Message;
And We will assuredly guard it (from corruption).¹*

The same, to a certain degree, is true of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet.

UNIVERSALITY OF THE MESSAGE

One of the basic attributes of *Allāh* is that He is the Most Compassionate. His compassion, as the Creator of the universe, is to be extended to all of His creation. That was one reason why, when the Prophet was preaching in the tiny town of Makkah, with just a few converts around him, the *Qur'ān* stressed that its mission and message was not confined to Makkah alone, or the Arabian peninsula or the Arabic-speaking communities elsewhere. Rather, it was for all human beings:

*We have not sent you but as a universal Messenger to men
giving them glad tidings and warning them.²*

*Blessed is He, Who sent down the Criterion to His servants
that it may be an admonition to all creatures.³*

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

From an Islāmīc perspective, religion is not a personal matter to be confined to the area of the God-man relationship; of course, this is the core of all the revealed religions but it cannot function properly if limited to such a narrow area. Man is created with two important elements - the physical and the spiritual.

*Behold, Your Lord said to the angels,
"I am about to create man from a sounding clay,
from mud moulded into shape.
When I have fashioned him (in due proportion)
and breathed into him from My spirit,
fall you down in obedience to him."⁴*

These two basic components of man need to be satisfied in a proportionate manner to prevent one from starving the other or denying it its due consideration. That means religion has to be comprehensive in nature to cater for the spiritual as well as the physical needs of man. If this proposition were true for the earlier, periodic messages from *Allāh*, then it is even more relevant for a message which is going to remain the moulding factor for humankind until the end of this earthly life.

THE TWO SECTIONS OF HUMANITY

If a religion represents the real force of change in human society, it cannot, rationally speaking, address itself solely to one section, the male of the species, leaving out of its

jurisdiction the more influential section, the female. Society may be able to limp along on one leg, but it cannot move forward steadily and successfully without the other leg. Or, put another way, there is an Arabic proverb which says, "A single hand cannot clap."

The concept of the creation in Islām is one of a partnership of two equal parties with varying functions. In chapter four of the *Qur'ān*, *Allāh* says,

*O mankind! Reverence your Guardian Lord,
Who created you from a single person,
created of like nature his mate
and from them twain scattered (like seeds)
countless men and women.*⁵

Every time *Allāh* states in the *Qur'ān* 'O you who believe!' or 'O mankind!', He is calling the attention of both men and women. One Qur'ānic verse mentions no less than ten good basic characters in both the masculine and feminine sense:

*"Surely the men who submit and the women who submit,
and the believing men and the believing women,
and the devout men and the devout women,
and the truthful men and the truthful women,
and the patient men and the patient women,
and the humble men and the humble women,
and the charitable men and the charitable women,
and the fasting men and the fasting women,
and the men who guard their chastity
and the women who guard their chastity
and the men who remember Allāh much
and the women who remember Allāh much,
Allāh has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward."*⁶

From a theoretical point of view, in Islām, what is good for men is, generally, good for women. There are few exceptions to this maxim. However, such exceptions deal with the nature and function of the female rather than reflect badly upon her competence morally or rationally.

THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

This outlook of Islām was the reason for the great moral, social and financial eminence exhibited during the golden era of Islām. Men and women were the recipients of the guidance of *Allāh* and His revelation at the hands of the Prophet, peace be upon him. He was entrusted by *Allāh* to teach people the Book and Wisdom and this the Prophet did to both male and female. The sister of 'Umar was, by the Grace of *Allāh*, responsible for his acceptance of the faith; Sumayyah, the wife of Yāsir (the father of 'Ammār) was the first martyr in Islām.

After the establishment of the faith and the teaching of the Islāmic way of life with full strength, women were present in the mosque of the Prophet along with the men. When it became difficult for women to gain a private audience with the Prophet they complained to him; he directed the women to chose a suitable day upon which he could meet them regularly. "Some women requested the Prophet to fix a day for them as the men were taking all his time. On that he promised them one day for instruction."⁷ It is also recorded that the Prophet gave the good news that "if a man had a slave girl and educated her in the best possible way, then gave her her freedom and married her, he will be rewarded twice."⁸

Muslims are aware of the great contribution of the Mother of the Faithful, 'Ā'ishah to

the spread of Islāmic knowledge. She is considered to be among the great seven *muftis* of the companions. Umm Salama, another Mother of the Faithful, is considered to be one of the thirteen *muftis* after the premier seven. She is classed amongst Abū Bakr, Abū Hurairah and ‘Uthmān. Allama Al-Gilāni, in his explanation of *al-Adab al-Mufrad* (The Unique Manner) by Al-Bukhārī, said that Abul Walīd At-Tayalisi, one of the great traditionists, reported *ahādīth* from no less than seventy female *muḥaddithah*. This was at the beginning of the 3rd century after the *Hijrah*.

One of the nice stories about the great Hanafī scholar Al-Kasāni, nicknamed ‘The King of the Scholars’, was that he married Fāṭimah, daughter of As-Samarqandi, the teacher of Al-Kasāni. Fāṭimah was a great pupil of her father and used to sign *fatwas* alongside him. Showing admiration for his bright pupil, As-Samarqandi gave his daughter to Al-Kasāni. Afterwards, *fatwas* would be signed by all three of them. When her husband was mistaken, Fāṭimah would correct him. If he was called the ‘King of the Scholars’, then she, as of right, deserves to be their Queen!

REACTION

However, not very long after the great reform of the social and cultural position of women in Islāmic society had begun, a reaction against this trend arose.

There are two traditions, of different authorities, said to be attributed to the Prophet ﷺ through ‘Ā’ishah and Ibn ‘Abbās; the wording of both is nearly the same. The great *muḥaddith* Shaikh Shamsul Ḥaqq al-Azimabadi wrote an article dealing with the question of teaching women to read and write. He affirmed the permissibility of that but before reaching this conclusion he had to deal with the said statements of the Prophet related by the Mother of the Faithful and Ibn ‘Abbās. The alleged statements read: “Do not accommodate your women in the upper floors, nor teach them reading and writing. Teach them how to spin and the chapter of The Light (*Al-Nūr*).” (allegedly related by ‘Ā’ishah) And, “Do not teach them (women) writing. Do not accommodate them in the upper rooms (or places). The best amusement of the woman is the spindle and the best amusement of the man is swimming.” Other versions are nearly the same.

The great *muḥaddith* Shaikh Abadi, true to his profession, traced the line of all such narrations, those who narrated them and what had been extensively said about them and came to the conclusion that they are false statements which have no basis whatsoever. Nevertheless, this has not prevented many eminent scholars of *tafsir* from quoting such statements. What does this reflect? It reflects a deep-rooted bias against women. ‘Ā’ishah, the intelligent, adept and witty scholar – who is supposed to be a supporter of women’s rights – is reported to have said: “If the Prophet had witnessed what women invented, he would have stopped them coming to the mosque!” This notion was strongly opposed by Ibn Ḥazm who said, “If we accept such an argument, everyone would say, ‘If the Prophet had seen this, if the Prophet had seen that’ and the rules of *Sharī’ah* would be eroded one after the other. *Allāh* Most High knew what women were going to do, but He did not tell His Messenger to stop them going to the mosque.”

Shaikh Abadi mentioned the sound hadith in which a clear request on the part of the Prophet was made to a female companion to teach Ḥaḥṣah, daughter of ‘Umar, and his wife how to use a charm. In Abū Dāwūd’s *Sunan* it is recorded that Ash-Shafa, daughter of ‘Abd Allāh, said, “The Prophet ﷺ entered Ḥaḥṣah’s place while I was there. He said, ‘Will you not teach her how to use the ant charm, as you taught her how to write?’” The ant is a sort of boil which appears on the side of the body which causes the sensation of an ant walking and biting the skin.

After a thorough investigation of those who reported the *hadīth*, Muslim scholars came to the conclusion that it is sound and it can be taken as a basis for the permissibility of teaching women to read and write.

The reason I have had to deal at some length with the statements ‘prohibiting’ such teaching is to dispel the baseless notion that Islām forbids the education of girls. Once this point is clear, what remains is the basic Islāmic attitude towards knowledge, represented in the first revelation speaking about the value of knowledge and the many Qur’ānic verses to the same effect. As far as ahadith are concerned, it is enough to remember that in every manual of *hadīth*, there is a section known as ‘The Book of Knowledge’ dealing extensively with knowledge in its widest sense.

Again we have to remember that in the area of knowledge there is no discrimination between male and female. The well-established *hadīth*, “Seeking knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim” is much clearer in its English translation, there being no gender involved; in Arabic it is in the male gender, although Muslim scholars say that “...upon every Muslim” includes the females too. From a juristic point of view, the male gender in such a sentence construction includes the female because both are addressed by *Sharī‘ah* injunctions.

A CASE OF NECESSITY

It is a well-established rule that Muslim society is under a collective obligation – *Fard Kifayah* – to have enough professional personnel to cater for the needs of the society. Muslim jurists say that there has to be enough tailors, bakers, teachers, *Imāms*, judges, medical people and midwives, etc. to satisfy the needs of the community. Muslims prefer female doctors for examining females, males to examine males. From a professional point of view this is much better. From a religious point of view it is essential. Unless, therefore, we have females in such professions we will be failing in our religious duty.

SELECTIVE EDUCATION

Questions about the Islāmic attitude towards educating Muslim girls may appear to be irrelevant at this time; even the most ‘rigid’ regimes are educating their girls, with the advancement of technology making it easy for those wealthy enough to buy the best in education for their daughters.

However, the question of selectivity has never been more relevant than it is today because Muslims are following, in the words of the Prophet, “the ways of the people before you, step after step. Even if they entered into a narrow hole you are going to enter it.” The obsession of ‘education for all’ is affecting our systems of education and we now see our universities graduating miners, car repairers and painters.

For the future happiness and stability of the Muslim family, the question of selectivity is an essential question which has to be dealt with from a practical, as well as a decency, point of view. As Muslims we should not lose sight of the basic duty of a Muslim woman. She is a mother first, and only then does her profession or whatever come into the picture. Her success will be measured by her success in bringing up stable, integral, happy and morally-sound generations. Any achievement in addition to that is a bonus. You cannot claim a bonus when you haven’t had your basic ‘wage’.

“*And Allāh says the truth and guides to the right way.*”

1. *Al-Qur’ān*, chapter 15, verse 9.
2. *Ibid.*, chapter 34, verse 28.
3. *Ibid.*, chapter 25, verse 1.
4. *Ibid.*, chapter 15, verses 28-29.
5. *Ibid.*, chapter 4, verse 1.
6. *Ibid.*, chapter 33, verse 35.
7. *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, The Book of ‘*Ilm* (Knowledge).
8. *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*.