Annotated Translation of Selected Chapters From

The House of Obedience

Women in Arab Society

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Introduction

Feminists tend to tackle the status of women throughout the world as if it was one issue, not paying any attention to historical factors and other differences which have a great deal of influence on women. Young women from the third world, having come to Europe to pursue their studies, return back home with new Western feminist ideas which they try to introduce in their societies in a wrong way. Therefore, neither they nor their Western attitudes are understood by the women of their country, and they are looked at as Westerners. What Arab feminists actually demand is equality before the law and in daily life which the society cannot grant, for reasons linked to tradition and religion and also to certain political and economic problems. It is taken for granted in many places in the Arab world that women are subordinate, and the society tends to forget all about the social reforms which are carried out by women which actually make them equal to men.

Most pre-industrial societies are unfortunately similar in many ways when it comes to the status of women. The status of women in Arab society has not been so different from the status of women in other societies, other civilisations in the mediterranean, Asia Minor and the Near East are there to prove it. The only problematic issue concerning women in the Arab society is that while other women started to liberate themselves gradually, Arab women have remained subordinate despite the undeniable efforts made by the governments to grant greater equality for women, in keeping with the desire for modernization.
1. The Qur'anic Law:

   It is actually very difficult to distinguish between traditions and what is said to be the Qur'anic Law. People in the Arab world in general tend to refer everything to religion pretending to be very religious, and their attitudes are all according to the Islamic Law. Throughout time the Quran remained unchanged with its norms and values, but changes did take place in societies and women are supposedly catching-up with the developments and changes.

   When Islam came during the 7th century, it was not only a religion but a social reform with relevance to the status of women. (Minces 1982 P.15) in the pre-Islamic period women were sold and inherited like any other thing, polygamy was unlimited, but acceptable at the time of the prophet. Infanticide of baby girls was very common. When Islam came to the fore, it gave women legal status with rights and duties, the women at the time of the prophet acquired a legal personality. They were no longer sold and bought, and marriage became more like a contract between a husband and a wife. Polygamy after Islam became very restricted and the man's right to divorce a women was also restricted and offered protection for the woman.

   "Marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four, and if ye fear that ye can't do justice (to so many) then one only."

   (Sura IV Verse 3)

   It was theoretically restricted to the maximum of four wives and the husband had to treat all of his spouses equitably.

   Women in Islam were entitled to own and inherit property, they were also authorised to go into trade and business. The Quran of course, contains many other important reforms, but
as it spread it became impregnated with local pre-Islamic traditions, some of which survived to this day. (Minces 1982 P.16)

The veil for example is one of these notable traditions which is still practiced by women in the Moslem world.

"And let them wear their head coverings over their bosoms."

(Sura XXIV, Verse 31)

There is of course a clear distinction between the Qur'an's legacy and what is assumed to be mere tradition and customs. Regarding the issue of the veil for example, it was interpreted in so many ways: the hands and the face to remain uncovered. (Mahadari 1983). Other sects of the Moslem's interpreted that as covering all the body including the face and the hands as is the case of Syria for example.

The intellectuals must break down the barriers imposed on women in the name of religion which was laid down to provide justification for the practices of every kind, including pre-Islamic practices such as female circumcision which the ordinary people think of as prescribed by the holy books. One of the specific features of Islam especially as far as women are concerned, is that it has created a set of rules which are very difficult to modify. The evolution of customs took place in town at first although it was very much affected by the rural exodus, but amongst the poor, the peasantry, traditional attitudes remained in force.

The Arab world is characterized by the clan or the family which is strictly regulated by the Quranic Law. Endogamous marriages for example, were seen more preferably to
exogamous marriages. A girl's virginity is of great importance to her family, even today there is an enormous importance which is placed on women's fertility which is a fundamental source of security, and for those women who are considered not fertile or give birth to girls, it is considered a misfortune since it is actually a motive for the husband for repudiation, divorce, or the introduction of a new wife. Amongst the rural poor this desire for many sons continues to have a real basis in the fact that children's labour in the fields is necessary especially for harvesting. Older women transmit men's authority and are equally important to men in maintaining customs.

Some of them will accept some changes brought about by education. Marriage in the countryside becomes an economic necessity because the family system there reflects a certain tradition which casts the house and the field as a single economic unit.

The family therefore is the real centre of most activities, social, economic, religious, educational or political, and a married woman's status depends on her ability to have children, the larger the family, the greater its prestige and power.

Sexuality in Islam has a legitimate function within the framework of marriage, whereas adultery is severly punished. and the Quranic Law suggests that both men and women are stoned to death. Any method of birth control is forbidden by the Quran, and many women reject it anyway, because the more the number of her pregnancies is, the less the opportunity is for repudiation.

Islam has actually improved the status of women in many aspects but the woman still has an inferior status no matter what
she is; a daughter, a mother or a wife. Actually, there is no aspect of Islam more widely misunderstood than the role and status of its women. (Gauher 1978 P 247).

Closer examination of the role assigned to women in the teachings of the Qur’an reveals quite a different picture, in which women lead a balanced role, between freedom and protection possibly more fitting to their needs than the competitive struggle which the more ‘liberated’ women are embarking on in the west. (Gauher 1978).

Knowledge about women status in Islam has always been based on false information: the non-Muslims believe that the woman in Islam is totally a non-person existing in a world of shadows suppressed and oppressed. In Islam both women and men are credited with the capacity for learning, understanding and teaching. Men and women are quite equal to each other in their origin, their abode as well as their place of return and are such entitled to similar and equal rights. (Qutb 1972 P.96) One of the aims for this knowledge is to be more conscious of God, all that matters according to Qur’an is what good things a person does whether male or female.

"Who so ever doeth right, whether male or female and is believe in him verily we shall quicken with good life and we shall pay them a recompense in proportion to the best of what they used to do."

(Sura XVI Verse 97)

In the Moslem family the man is in charge of running the house, he takes decisions in all matters, but that does not mean that the woman is totally ignored, she can express her opinion give her suggestions concerning some of the matters,