

## MUSLIM WOMEN STEER A NEW REVOLUTION

By Moin Qazi

*"Learn this now and learn it well, my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always."*

In Khaled Hosseini's novel about life in Afghanistan, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the character Nana, a poor unwed mother, gives this grim advice to her five-year-old daughter, Mariam. In 25 words, she tries to sum up the way the world thinks Muslim men govern the lives of women in the world of Islam

Too much thinking about Muslim women is done along predictable, clichéd lines. This is true of all shades of opinion, perception and scholarship. This opinion profiles Muslim women in stubborn stereotypes: supposedly powerless and oppressed, behind walls and veils, demure, voiceless and silent figures, discriminated against and bereft of even basic rights. This picture reinforces itself because this is how the Western media caricatures women in Islam. Recurring images beamed into our homes and phones keep strengthening the belief that Muslim women are being denied access to education, social space and privacy.

In societies trapped in poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, women continue to receive oppressive treatment. But then, this is true of all societies. Muslims cannot be singled out for such a flawed social order. They have much to do with illiteracy, ignorance and sometimes dire poverty. In several cases, the plight of Muslim women is a direct consequence of a repressive and highly discriminatory state

Vested interests in all societies, particularly those driven by patriarchal values, have resisted women's empowerment and have failed to concede to them the legitimate rights their faith, community and state have guaranteed them. However, this distortion should not deflect our focus from some path-breaking and stellar contributions of Muslim women to Islamic civilization and secular society.

Muslim women across South Asia are slowly getting empowered to stand up to patriarchal practices that undermine their dignity. In literate societies, Muslim women are an empowered community like their counterparts of other creeds. First, they challenge cultural norms that deny Muslim women rights and visible roles within their communities. They believe that rights have been accorded to them in foundational Islamic texts but that cultural interpretation of these same texts disallow what is rightfully theirs. They do not call this a feminist struggle but describe this as a reclamation of their faith. Muslim women's activism around education and equal opportunities are often underpinned by their emancipatory readings of foundational Islamic texts. Muslim women are also challenging the patriarchy that all women experience around unequal power hierarchies in society and the objectification of women's bodies in some sections of the media.

The fully empowered Muslim woman sounds like a self-assured, post-feminist type. She draws her inspiration from the example of Sukayna, the brilliant, beautiful great-granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad. She was married several times and, at least in one of her marriages, stipulated in writing that her husband was forbidden to disagree with her about anything.

Few Muslim women outside the urban areas may want to behave like western women. The high rate of divorce and sexual disease are common consequences of the reckless drive to equate the sexes and 'free' sexual relationships. The comparison may mean little outside the cultural context, but it is important to point out that, until 100 years ago, western women had virtually no rights in law or practice.

Over 1,000 years before the first European suffragette, Islam gave women far-reaching rights and a defined status. But these western attitudes have undoubtedly helped to stimulate discussions of the problem in Muslim urban society, thereby revealing the gap between the talk of the Islamic ideal and the actual situation of women.

They feel the key is to do so within Islamic paradigms. We now have female politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs and educators, urban and rural, who are making impressive inroads and carefully handling challenging issues within Islam's paradigm.

Western thinkers and practitioners are also seriously reconsidering their assumptions about the role of Islam in women's rights and approaching this topic with a more nuanced lens. They must understand the necessity of recognizing and consciously accepting the broad cultural differences between western and non-western conceptions of autonomy and respecting social standards that reflect non-western values.

How did a religion that initially offered women greater freedom than they had known in traditional societies come to be associated with their repression? Muslim feminists are claiming again the independence and respect that was accorded to women during the early centuries of Islam.

**WE** cannot judge the era of the founding of Islam by the values of our own time: and, indeed, what we understand as the emancipation of women was never really considered by any of the great monotheistic religions. Some of the West's Christian establishments have accepted relatively equal rights, contraception, abortion and divorce only under pressure from women's associations and after long battles. Islam is aware of these changes. It is inclined to blame the Koran or canon law for the prevailing misogyny in the Muslim world.

The problem is less religion itself than the way commentators have interpreted it. The Koran has multiple teachings with many meanings, and Muslims have always been free to comment on them according to circumstances. The texts have been interpreted over centuries to endorse conservatism and intolerance and promote openness, freedom, forgiveness and intellectual revival.

There is plenty of historical evidence for the servitude of women and the contempt and hatred they have suffered. Women's inequitable legal and social situation in most Muslim countries is deplorable. But is this situation directly attributable to a religion seen as sexist, or is it the result of religious or civil authorities interpreting that religion according to a male desire to dominate. It could have a sexist bias because; because otherwise, the Qur'an repeatedly insists on the equality of genders.

Islam was the first religion to formally grant women a status never known before. The Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Islam, contains hundreds of exordiums and commandments that apply

to men and women alike. The moral, spiritual and economic equality of men and women, as propagated by Islam, is unquestionable. In Islam, men and women are moral equals in God's sight and are expected to fulfil the same duties of worship, prayer, faith, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca. The triumph of Islam in the seventh century codified the position of women with its laws of spiritual and civic conduct. It banned female infanticide, limited polygamy to four wives, forbade sexual relations outside marriage and spelt out women's rights in marriage and inheritance.

By the seventh-century Muslim women were granted rights not granted to European women until the 19th century, such as property ownership, inheritance and divorce. Muslims who codified the Qur'an and *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) into Islamic law failed in expunging the patriarchy of the pre-Islamic world from their practices.

The traditional structure of Islamic society is based not on quantitative equality but on the reality of complementarity. However, there are exceptions .in these complementarities of functions, man is seen as the protector and provider of his family and its imam. The woman is the real mistress of the household, and the husband is like a guest. Her primary duty has been seen as that of raising children and attending to their earliest education, as well as being the buttress of the family .like all the traditional societies, Islam has honoured the work of homemaker and mother as being of the highest value, to the extent that the Prophet said that "heaven lies under the feet of mothers". Islamic society has never thought that working in an office is of a higher order of importance for society than bringing up one's children.

In a climate where we are constantly warned about a 'clash of civilizations' and the West's strategy of perpetual war with Muslim countries, there is a fundamental need to dehumanize the 'enemy'. The overemphasis on the Muslim man's perceived misogyny overshadows the complete lack of scrutiny of the West's oppression against Muslim women, which has become the centrepiece to airbrush the now irrelevant issue of Muslim misogyny.

Contrary to the Eurocentric viewpoint, Muslim women are not a blank slate. When given the opportunity, Muslim women integrate, participating in civic, economic and social life while raising children who are productive members of society. The distorted picture is due to the deliberate attempt to highlight the negative aspects and gloss over the positive developments. The Western world must understand that the new generations of Muslim girls are now in the vanguard of a revolution propagating the learning and understanding of the Qur'an. There was a time when a preliminary reading and understanding of the Qur'an was discouraged, and whatever Qur'anic education was imparted was only through secondary sources. The education had an ideological spin and the youth grew up with a coloured Islamic worldview.

The newer generation of Muslim women is trying to understand their social position from the Qur'an. Across the Muslim world, Islamic feminists are combing through centuries of Islamic jurisprudence to highlight the more progressive aspects of their religion and also asserting the Quran's rights of these women

These women embody a spirit of critical enquiry that has led them to raise questions about Islam which their predecessors would shudder to ask. Social networking has given these women a collective identity, and they now have a transnational network. Critical questions raised in

one corner are creating ripples across the world. Social networking sites have far broader and faster reach than the sermons of the mullahs. It will no longer be possible to subjugate women, particularly when they are enlightened about Islam and all religions and creeds. The new Muslim woman no longer depends on their household males for clarification on religious issues from the local mullahs. The internet gives her access to the most authentic information. She is now a truly empowered woman. Her intellect has an identity independent of her family

Far from being powerless, they are making small choices that could lead to significant changes in the Arab world. Officially, Islam allows women to choose whom they marry. In Saudi Arabia, the woman gives her assent at the shawfa, which means "viewing." The prospective groom, his father, older brothers, and uncles come to the girl's father's to propose to her for marriage

The Muslim world is not a monolithic body but comprised not just of diverse but of populations equally diverse in similar mosaics set of economies, cultures and geographies. Most of the world's Muslims live in emerging markets, where most of the population is.

The challenge for all women, and especially Muslim women, is to move from a reactive mindset, in which women must assert their autonomy over patriarchal opposition, to a proactive mindset, in which they can speak of themselves as full and independent human beings with minds and spirits as well as bodies. Much as men.

Muslim women's activism around education and equal opportunities are often underpinned by their emancipatory readings of foundational Islamic texts. They are also challenging the patriarchy that all women experience around unequal power hierarchies in society and the objectification of women's bodies in some sections of the media. In this regard, they stand with their sisters of all backgrounds. Feminism in Islam is grounded in Qur'anic values and not notions of western sociology.

Muslim scholars insist that nothing in Islam is incompatible with technological advances or industrial development. In the days of the caliphs, Islam led the world in scientific and intellectual discoveries. Muslims object to the evils associated with modernization: the breakdown of the family structure, the lowering of moral standards, and the appeal of easygoing secular lifestyles. At the same time, Muslims are demanding the positive best of the West: schools, hospitals, income avenues and technology. Several scholars and organizations are trying to articulate proper responses to enable Muslim women to adapt to unfamiliar situations without being submerged in the currents of the new civilization. All these facilities will benefit women more because they have far lower access.

If the early Muslim women icons are to serve as prime examples of Islam's Golden Age, Muslim women have to strive to live up to their ideals. The pride which permeates our current generation has had to be harnessed into equally spectacular achievements. If Muslim women could attain such great merit at a time when they, what impedes us from emulating those lives?

How can people believe that a society which produced such significant figures cannot offer models who are even a faint shadow of their predecessors? The tragedy is that we are only relying on achievements that may be historically authentic but creates doubts when they examine the lives and achievements of today's women. If the past glory has any significant

relevance for us it should spur us towards efforts to redeem the entire community before they fade from the documented history, which is already biased at the hands of the prejudiced commentators.

It is clear that Muslim women's empowerment, like many things, cannot be imposed on a country or a culture from the outside. Men and women within these conservative communities must find their reasons and justifications to allow women a fuller societal role. Increasingly, they are finding those reasons within Islam. Like men, women deserve to be free. In today's increasingly global world, the stakes are higher than ever—for everyone. Societies that invest in and empower women are on a virtuous cycle. They become more prosperous, stable, better governed, and less prone to fanaticism. Countries that limit women's educational and employment opportunities and their political voices get stuck in a downward spiral. They are poorer, more fragile, have higher levels of corruption, and are more prone to extremism.