

From the Introduction of “*The Qur’an and Women: A Reading of Liberation*”

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What kind of liberation are we talking about?

The question of women in Islam has long been seen from within the framework of one of two extreme viewpoints: the one bound by a strict conservative Islamic approach, the other by ethnocentric and Islamophobic Western conceptions.

These two perceptions are, of course, in conflict, but they both end up at the same intellectual dead-end. It is almost impossible to conceive of a debate, or even the hint of one, that could clarify these different viewpoints, so much have the advocates on either side become blinded by their respective convictions.

While throughout centuries of stagnation and decline, the Muslim woman has emerged as the ideal victim, today she continues to survive inside a social system perpetuating oppression to varying degrees, in the name of the sacred. This situation is rarely acknowledged in Muslim countries where Muslims more readily blame the *Other* of wanting to shake or even corrupt an entire social fabric of moral values whose main gatekeeper remains the woman.

“Islam has granted women full rights ... It has honoured women ... It has protected them...”

This is the discourse favoured by many Muslims, very often sincere, but whose reasoning remains, nonetheless, very weak; a recurrent discourse, endlessly on the defensive, running out of steam and which in its failure to convince is rather indicative of a deep and unmistakable distress. An evident anachronism is noticeable between this discourse and the reality of Muslim daily life that both wishes and claims to be respectful of Islamic values, and

yet where one can justify the worst types of discrimination against women. From honour killings and forced marriages to a retrograde jurisdiction that maintains women in the status of a minor for life, the list of abuses is long and unfortunately, remains legitimised by a particular reading of Islam.

Furthermore, it is no secret that women's status, as it is currently conceived and approved in traditionalist and popular readings of Islam, provides the instrument through which a particular Western hegemony can assert itself in order to discredit a whole system of thought. The current meta-discourse of *the veiled Muslim woman, reclusive and oppressed*, is merely a ceaseless reproduction of the Orientalist and colonialist vision continually *en vogue* in contemporary post-colonial representations.

This eternal accusatory discourse serves primarily as a pretext for all the political attitudes of cultural domination reinforcing the binary analysis that counterpoises, like a natural law, the *universal* model of the *liberated* Western woman to the oppressed Muslim woman, who consequently must be *liberated*... These two opposing models not only enable the ongoing categorisation of the Muslim woman as a second class citizen, but also expose her as a *repellent image* in relation to modernity, civilisation and freedom. Through a particular Western discourse that claims to be *liberating* and desires to be *universal*, it is ironic to discover the evident signs of a language of paternalistic domination struggling to break free from its colonialist vocation of *mission civilisatrice*. One does not want to *liberate* the Muslim woman just to emancipate her, but rather to *assert Western liberation* and thus maintain the power relations that continually enables the further domination of the *other*. It is not a matter in these pages of demonising the West and making it the scapegoat for all wrongs. The contribution made by Western values throughout the long process of the world's modernisation is undeniable. But the criticism is directed at a certain current of thought that claims, in the name of its conception of the universal, to hold the monopoly on modernity and

truth. This is not to deny the existence of a culture of female oppression in Muslim lands but rather to denounce the intention of a certain Western hegemonic perspective when it excessively essentialises this culture. This Western vision, in fact, keeps the Muslim woman carefully locked up within a one-dimensional frame - one which promotes the supremacy of Western norms and values, the only ones capable of *freeing* these poor Muslim women!

Between these two diametrically opposed visions, the Muslim woman ultimately remains captive, despite herself, of a discourse that, in both cases, casts aside her being, her aspirations and her will. Between a fossilised Islamic thought fiercely safeguarding the *perimeters* surrounding the woman question and a strand of Western ideology that revels in denigrating Islam through this same question, one struggles to imagine a possible third path, capable of extracting the Muslim woman from this ideological impasse.

The conflict between women and their alleged status in Islam is indeed intense and it is difficult for anyone to deny. But what lies behind this conflict? Is it really religion as a value system that oppresses, or rather a collective social reality that has appropriated religion, in order to reformulate it accordingly to a hierarchal representation that fits it and enables it to assert its powers more effectively?

It is inevitable that religion, upon encountering a social order already assigned in terms of gender, can only merge, in spite of itself, with this order. It is also obvious that people are entitled to question themselves and remain perplexed, when confronted by the genuine contradiction that exists between the spiritual message of the Qur'an and the daily lives of Muslims. On the one hand, Islam is the bearer, like other monotheistic religions, of a message of peace, love and justice emanating from God, who by creating human beings, men and women alike, created them inescapably free, equal and dignified. On the other hand, the traditionalist Islamic interpretation seems to contribute to a certain dominance of man within social reality, and as a result is recognised as one of the main tools of discrimination against

women. Large sections of the interpretative readings of the Qur'an contain classical patterns of masculine domination wherein women are marginalised or even excluded in the name of religion. One can understand that the different religious interpretations can carry the footprint of their geopolitical context as well as the socio-cultural environments that produced them. But what is harder to understand is how, in the long run, these same interpretations have themselves become immutable and totally sealed off from any critical reflection. These interpretations, which have obscured the deeper meaning of the message, have through time become insurmountable barriers for those who desire to return to the *original essence* of the Text and to find the answers to the key contemporary issues. The confusion is such that it is almost impossible to distinguish what belongs to the sacred Text from what belongs to the realm of subjective human interpretation. And yet, between the humanist spirit of the Qur'an, favouring the human being (*insan*), irrespective of gender, and certain classical interpretations disparaging women, there is a gross misunderstanding that explains why the daily realities of Muslims have become so detached from their spiritual references.

The spiritual message, as it is described in several passages of the Qur'an, is one of "remembrance", or *dhikr*, aimed at awakening the noblest part of the human being's conscience, so that the person remains in continual proximity to the Creator. And through this remembrance, there is this intimate certainty in divine justice. Nothing in the Qur'anic text can justify or support any form of discrimination against women. It is this conviction, emanating from a deep faith, but struggling to materialize itself in our Muslim life today, that needs to be reformulated and put into practice in every day life.

This is where Islamic thought should evolve in order to redefine and rethink itself, and to make the necessary distinction between the spiritual message and certain interpretations that have frozen the Text, occasionally suffocating its true message.

And this is currently happening in the Muslim world where, God willing, the foundations for a serene and reflective change are beginning to emerge. Despite a fairly chaotic general picture throughout the Muslim world, one can detect the definite, although timid, manifestation of an innovative discourse attempting to reform a religious thought that is both deeply impoverished and almost entirely focused on its own moralizing tendency.

It is indeed comforting to note the current emergence of an Islamic thought, admittedly still relatively marginal, that whilst nascent is a contributory factor in the reshaping of new spaces where the religious debate can evolve without, however, losing its soul.

Within these new spheres of reflection, the one related to the status of women in Islam is increasingly shaping and asserting itself day by day. Indeed, the woman issue in Islam has always been at the heart of the debate, if not of all debates, within the Islamic world. However, the real novelty today is that within this intellectual vitality, some Muslim women are trying to *make their voices heard* in order to *re-appropriate for themselves* what has always been in the hands of men, namely their own destiny!

Indeed, today many Muslim female intellectuals, living both in Muslim societies and in Western countries, through their academic, social and theological research, but above all in the name of their faith, are challenging a vast array of prejudices on this issue. In particular, they dispute the classical analysis stipulating that inequality between men and women and its corollary of discriminatory measures are an inherent part of the sacred Text, by demonstrating that it is, in fact, certain tendentious readings endorsed by patriarchal customs which have instead legitimised these very same inequalities.

It is crucial to emphasize that these new positive forms of resistance are being generated by Muslim women who, while holding a critical perspective on certain religious readings, are practicing believers, and it is in the name of their faith that they claim the right to have their say. Here, however, it is a matter of distancing oneself from the feminine trend emerging from

Muslim women who are calling for changes but from outside any religious frame of reference. One should respect their willingness to define themselves within a non-religious space, but it is unfortunate to see that these Muslim women, who rebel against the supposed dictates of the religion, are the ones most listened to and those granted the largest media coverage. This, in itself, is fairly unsurprising as the only acceptable, if not highly predictable criticism, in the Western milieu today is that exercised against the Islamic tradition.¹

Yet the originality of this new form of female contestation in Islam – which should be remembered is subject to a notorious indifference in the West - is precisely that it is taking shape both within and in the name of the Islamic tradition. Muslim women are embarking, in the name of their own convictions, on a process which questions misogynistic readings of Islam, and disputes the interpretations that legitimize the subordinate condition of woman in Islamic societies. They have been described by some as the “female dissidents from within”. Indeed, this project is intrinsic to Qur’anic teachings and demands, in the very name of this teaching, the promotion of an egalitarian ethics in both theory and practice.

Therefore, it is at the heart of those debates and developments that rests the challenge of a new reading of the sacred Text; a reading adapted to our own context and to a constantly evolving human reality; a reading that insists on remaining faithful to a basic principle in Islam, claiming the validity of the Qur’an at all times and in any context.

So how can one be contented with an exegesis compiled centuries ago that in relation to women has most often been characterised by an appalling literalism? Why continue to remain imprisoned inside customary readings while the Text itself, within its guiding principles, provides crucial scope for each social reality to adapt itself and to comfortably navigate its

¹ One has just to see the success of French publishers concerning the testimonies of Muslim women, and the *titles* that speak volumes on this obsession of representing the Muslim woman as an ineluctable victim of Islam: *Burned Alive* by Souad; *Married by Force* by Leila; *Mutilated* by Khady; *The Stoning of Soraya M.* by Freidoune Sahebjam; *Disfigured* by Rania al-Baz; *I was Born in the Harem* by Choga Regina Egbeme ... most of them released in the same year (2005).

own way? How can we stand idly by dwelling on outmoded commentaries thereby overlooking the real purposes of a Text that in each different context gives meaning to our own life on earth? It is deeply dispiriting to observe that instead of remaining faithful to the objectives of the Divine message, we have rather remained faithful to human interpretations and readings that deliberately, or otherwise, have contributed to the blossoming of a culture devaluing women, a culture that is endlessly undermining our Muslim societies.

It is in this sense that a re-reading of the Qur'an, from a feminine perspective, draws all of its importance. It will enable the creation of a genuine dynamic of liberation from within the Islamic sphere aimed towards the enhancement of the status of Muslim women.

This liberating reading will also enable the development of a real autonomy and a genuine Islamic female identity with its fully-fledged rights and responsibilities. It will also promote the right of the Muslim woman to establish herself as an active partner in the process of reform and religious re-interpretation that is currently under way in the Muslim world. Indeed as a believer, one is entitled to question the assertion, according to which only men have the authority to interpret what God has pronounced in His Book. Throughout the history of Islam, why has no one single exegesis ever been made by a Muslim woman?

It is not a matter here of promoting an exclusive feminine hermeneutic at the expense of a fourteen century old tradition of classical exegesis. The classical exegesis constitutes an extremely rich heritage for the Islamic memory; its input is indeed essential for any in-depth study of the Text. Thus, this is not about excluding the considerable contribution of this religious science for the understanding of the sacred Text. It is, rather, a matter of revealing the historical prejudices and inequalities conveyed by a human, and therefore imperfect, understanding of the Qur'anic message. Its aim is to deconstruct a whole patriarchal model of reading, which has consigned women to a corner of Islamic history, in order to return to women a part of their severed memory.

This is obviously not about a movement that due to its feminine perspective will pit all women against men according to a confrontational paradigm. Admittedly, the new feminine approach does challenge alleged male superiority, but without promoting itself on the basis of rivalry. It is a new perspective that can only be enriching, and that takes into account the spiritual experience of women, so often absent within the Islamic frame of reference. Spirituality, of course, has no gender, but there is a certain relational experience with God that is perceived differently by both women and men. This is where the input of the feminine experience can be an essential *addition* to the human spiritual experience. And besides, from the early days the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) has initiated us to live this female / male difference as an equality within God's fraternity. It is for this reason that within the Islamic reformist project, a number of Muslim men have long been engaged in the process of re-reading and of women's liberation according to the principles of Islam. This derives precisely from their deep conviction in divine justice and the absolute insistence on impartiality towards all human beings. It is a conviction that induces in the believer, whether male or female, a critical awakening to all forms of subservience. Moreover, refusing to endorse subjugation, which Muslim women are the victims of, is an act of devoutness, piety and faithfulness to the Creator.

This is thereby the liberation we are referring to: A feminine liberation that claims a spiritual return to the roots of the Qur'an, the divine, eternal word, and an inexhaustible source of strength, freedom and hope; A liberation that above all else privileges authenticity, inwardness and probity; A liberation whose relationship with the transcendent is a relationship deeply liberating since it liberates from all other servitude; A liberation free from conformity to any model *en vogue*; that aspires to be neither necessarily Western, nor typically Oriental, but autonomous and independence; A feminine liberation that should be free to make its own choices, to rewrite its history and to define its own spaces of freedom; A

liberation firmly rooted in its spiritual belonging, but that aspires to be open to all forms of human richness and ready to share with others, all others, the genuine universal values of ethics and justice.