The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition

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BACKGROUND OF MY WORK IN THE AREA OF THEOLOGY OF WOMAN IN ISLAM

Experientially I have always known what it means to be a Muslim woman since I was born female in a Saiyyad' Muslim family living in Lahore, a historic Muslim city in Pakistan, a country created in the name of Islam. However, it was not until the fall of 1974 that I began my career as a "feminist" theologian—almost by accident and rather reluctantly. I was, at that time, faculty adviser to the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) chapter at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma. This "honor" had been conferred upon me solely by virtue of the fact that each student association was required to have a faculty adviser, and I happened to be the only Muslim faculty member on campus that year. The office bearers of the MSA chapter at Stillwater had established the tradition of having an annual seminar at which one of the principal addresses was given by the faculty adviser. In keeping with tradition I was asked—albeit not with overwhelming enthusiasm—if I would read a paper on women in Islam at the seminar that was to be held later that year. I was aware of the fact that, in general, faculty advisers were not assigned specific subjects. I was asked to speak about women in Islam at the seminar—in which, incidentally, Muslim women were not going to participate—because in the opinion of most of the chapter members it would have been totally inappropriate to expect a Muslim woman, even one who taught them Islamic Studies, to be competent to speak on any other subject pertaining to Islam. I resented what the assigning of a subject meant. Furthermore, I was not much interested in the subject of women in Islam until that time. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation for two reasons. First, I knew that being invited to address an all-male, largely Arab Muslim
group that prided itself on its patriarchalism, was itself a breakthrough. Second, I was so tired of hearing Muslim men pontificate upon the position, status, or role of women in Islam, while it was totally inconceivable that any woman could presume to speak about the position, status, or role of men in Islam. I thought that it might be worthwhile for a Muslim woman to present her viewpoint on a subject whose immense popularity with Muslim men, scholars and non-scholars alike, could easily be gauged by the ever-increasing number of books, booklets, brochures, and articles they published on it. Having accepted the invitation I began my research more out of a sense of duty (knowing that willing the end involves willing the means to the end) than out of any deep awareness that I had set out on perhaps the most important journey of my life.

I do not know exactly at what time my “academic” study of women in Islam became a passionate quest for truth and justice on behalf of Muslim women—perhaps it was when I realized the impact on my own life of the so-called Islamic ideas and attitudes regarding women. What began as a scholarly exercise became simultaneously an Odyssean venture in self-understanding. But “enlightenment” does not always lead to “endless bliss.” The more I saw the justice and compassion of God reflected in the Qur’anic teachings regarding women, the more anguished and angry I became, seeing the injustice and inhumanity to which Muslim women, in general, are subjected in actual life. I began to feel strongly that it was my duty—as a part of the microscopic minority of educated Muslim women—to do as much consciousness-raising regarding the situation of Muslim women as I could. The journey that began in Stillwater has been an arduous one. It has taken me far and wide in pursuit of my quest. When I remember the stormy seas and rocky roads I have traversed, it seems like the journey has been a long one. But when I think of my sisters who, despite being the largest “minority” in the world—more than half of the one-billion-strong Muslim ummah—remain for the most part nameless, faceless, and voiceless, I know that there is no end to the journey in sight.

Despite the fact that women such as Khadijah and 'A'ishah (wives of the Prophet Muhammad) and Rabi'a al-Basri (the outstanding woman Sufi) figure significantly in early Islam, the Islamic tradition has, by and large, remained rigidly patriarchal until the present time, prohibiting the growth of scholarship among women particularly in the realm of religious thought. This means that the sources on which the Islamic tradition is mainly based, namely, the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the Hadith literature, and Fiqh, have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. It is hardly surprising that until now the majority of Muslim women have accepted this situation passively, almost unaware of the extent to which their human (also Islamic, in an ideal sense) rights have been violated by their male-dominated and male-centered societies, which have continued to assert, glibly and tirelessly, that Islam has given women more rights than any other religious tradition. Kept for centuries in physical, mental, and emotional bondage, and deprived of the
opportunity to actualize their human potential, even the exercise of analyzing their personal experiences as Muslim women is, perhaps, overwhelming for these women. (Here it needs to be mentioned that while the rate of literacy is low in many Muslim countries, the rate of literacy of Muslim women, especially those who live in rural areas, where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world.)

In recent times, largely due to the pressure of anti-women laws that are being promulgated under the cover of "Islamization" in some parts of the Muslim world, women with some degree of education and awareness are beginning to realize that religion is being used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation. To understand the strong impetus to "Islamize" Muslim societies, especially with regard to women-related norms and values, it is necessary to know that of all the challenges confronting the Muslim world, perhaps the greatest is that of modernity. The caretakers of Muslim traditionalism are aware of the fact that viability in the modern technological age requires the adoption of the scientific or rational outlook that inevitably brings about major changes in modes of thinking and behavior. Women, both educated and uneducated, who are participating in the national work force and contributing toward national development, think and behave differently from women who have no sense of their individual identity or autonomy as active agents in a history-making process and regard themselves merely as instruments designed to minister to and reinforce a patriarchal system that they believe to be divinely instituted.

Not too long ago, many women in Pakistan were jolted out of their "dogmatic slumber" by the enactment of laws (such as those pertaining to women's rape or women's testimony in financial and other matters) and by "threatened" legislation (such as proposals pertaining to "blood-money" for women's murder) that aimed to reduce them systematically, virtually mathematically, to less than men. It was not long before they realized that forces of religious conservatism were determined to cut women down to one-half or less of men and that this attitude stemmed from a deep-rooted desire to keep women "in their place," which means secondary, subordinate, and inferior to men.

In the face of both military dictatorship and religious autocracy, valiant efforts have been made by women's groups in Pakistan to protest against the instituting of manifestly anti-women laws and to highlight cases of gross injustice and brutality toward women. However, it is still not clearly and fully understood, even by many women activists in Pakistan and other Muslim countries, that the negative ideas and attitudes pertaining to women that prevail in Muslim societies, are in general rooted in theology—and that unless, or until, the theological foundations of the misogynistic and androcentric tendencies in the Islamic tradition are demolished, Muslim women will continue to be brutalized and discriminated against, despite improvements in statistics such as those on female education, employment, and social and political rights. No matter how many sociopolitical rights are granted to women, as long as they are conditioned to accept the myths used by theologians or religious hierarchs to shackle their
bodies, hearts, minds, and souls, they will never become fully developed or whole human beings, free of fear and guilt, able to stand equal to men in the sight of God. In my judgment, the importance of developing what the West calls "feminist theology" in the context of Islam is paramount today with a view to liberating not only Muslim women but also Muslim men from unjust structures and laws that make a peer relationship between men and women impossible. It is good to know that in the last hundred years there have been at least two significant Muslim men scholars and activists—Qasim Amin from Egypt and Mumtaz 'Ali from India—who have been staunch advocates of women's rights, though knowing this hardly lessens the pain of also knowing that even in this age that is characterized by the explosion of knowledge, all but a handful of Muslim women lack any knowledge of Islamic theology. It is profoundly discouraging to contemplate how few Muslim women there are in the world today who possess the competence, even if they have the courage and commitment, to engage in a scholarly study of Islam's primary sources in order to participate in the theological discussions on women-related issues that are taking place in much of the contemporary Muslim world.

Returning to the time when I began my career as a "feminist" theologian, I remember how stricken I felt when I first began to see the glaring discrepancy between Islamic ideals and Muslim practice insofar as women are concerned. Convinced of the importance of underscoring this discrepancy and believing that most Muslim women (even those who were all too well aware of the reality of their own life-situation) were largely unaware of it, I set out to articulate what I considered to be the normative Islamic view of women. This view is rooted largely in what all Muslims accept as the primary source, or highest authority, in Islam—the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be the Word of Allah conveyed through the agency of the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, who transmitted it without change or error to those who heard him.

In 1979, while I participated in an ongoing "trialogue" of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars (under the sponsorship of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics in Washington, D.C.) who were exploring women-related issues in the three "Abrahamic" faith-traditions, I wrote the draft of a monograph entitled *Women in the Qur'an*. In this study I gave a detailed exposition of those passages of the Qur'an that related to women in various contexts (e.g., women vis-à-vis God; women in the context of human creation and the story of the "Fall"; women as daughters, wives, and mothers; women in the context of marriage, divorce, inheritance, segregation, veiling, witnessing to contracts, economic rights, afterlife, etc.). In particular, I focused attention upon those passages that were regarded as definitive in the context of woman-man relationships and upon which the alleged superiority of men to women largely rested. It was this study that I hoped to finalize when in the spring of 1983 I went to Pakistan and spent almost two years there, doing research but also watching, with increasing anxiety, the enactment of anti-women laws in the name of Islam and the deluge of anti-women actions and literature that swept across the country in the wake of the "Islamization" of Pakistani society and its legal system.
As I reflected upon the scene I witnessed, and asked myself how it was possible for laws that were archaic if not absurd to be implemented in a society that professed a passionate commitment to modernity, the importance of something that I had always known dawned on me with stunning clarity. Pakistani society (or any other Muslim society for that matter) could enact or accept laws that specified that women were less than men in fundamental ways because Muslims, in general, consider it a self-evident truth that women are not equal to men. Anyone who states that in the present-day world it is accepted in many religious as well as secular communities that men and women are equal, or that evidence can be found in the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition for affirming man-woman equality, is likely to be confronted, immediately and with force, by a mass of what is described as “irrefutable evidence” taken from the Qur’an, Hadith, and Sunnah to “prove” that men are “above” women. Among the arguments used to overwhelm any proponent of man-woman equality, the following are perhaps the most popular: according to the Qur’an, men are qawwamun (generally translated as “rulers,” or “managers”) in relation to women; 6 according to the Qur’an, a man’s share in inheritance is twice that of a woman; 7 according to the Qur’an, the witness of one man is equal to that of two women; 8 according to the Prophet, women are deficient both in prayer (due to menstruation) and in intellect (due to their witness counting for less than a man’s). 9

Since I was (in all probability) the only Muslim woman in the country who was attempting to interpret the Qur’an systematically from a nonpatriarchal perspective, I was approached numerous times by women leaders (including the members of the Pakistan Commission on the Status of Women, before whom I gave my testimony in May 1984) to state what my findings were and if they could be used to improve the situation of women in Pakistani society. I was urged by those spirited women who were mobilizing and leading women’s protests in the streets to help them refute the arguments that were being used to make them less than fully human on a case-by-case or point-by-point basis. I must admit that I was tempted to join the foray in support of my beleaguered sisters who were being deprived of their human rights in the name of Islam. But I knew through my long and continuing struggle with the forces of Muslim traditionalism (which were now being gravely threatened by what they described as “the onslaught of Westernization under the guise of modernization”) that the arguments that were being broadcast to “keep women in their place” of subordination and submissiveness were only the front line of attack. Behind and below these arguments were others, and no sooner would one line of attack be eliminated than another one would be set up in its place. What had to be done, first and foremost, in my opinion, was to examine the theological ground in which all the anti-women arguments were rooted to see if, indeed, a case could be made for asserting that from the point of view of normative Islam, men and women were essentially equal, despite biological and other differences.

My inquiry into the theological roots of the problem of man-woman inequality in the Islamic tradition led to the expansion of my field of study in at least two significant areas. First, realizing the profound impact upon Muslim consciousness
of Hadith literature, particularly the two collections *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* (collectively known as the *Sahihan*, which the Sunni Muslims regard as the most authoritative books in Islam next to the Qur’an), I examined with care the women-related hadith in these collections. Second, I studied several important writings by Jewish and Christian feminist theologians who were attempting to trace the theological origins of the antifeminist ideas and attitudes found in their respective traditions.

As a result of my study and deliberation I came to perceive that not only in the Islamic, but also in the Jewish and Christian traditions, there are three theological assumptions on which the superstructure of men’s alleged superiority to women (which implies the inequality of women and man) has been erected. These three assumptions are: (1) that God’s primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man’s rib, hence is derivative and secondary ontologically; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as the “Fall,” or man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence all “daughters of Eve” are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt; and (3) that woman was created not only from man but also for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance. The three theological questions to which the above assumptions may appropriately be regarded as answers, are: How was woman created? Was woman responsible for the “Fall” of man? Why was woman created?

Given the profound significance—both theoretical and practical—of these three questions in the history of ideas and attitudes pertaining to women in the Islamic (as well as the Jewish and Christian) tradition, I hope to write a full-scale book in response to each. However, at this time I would like to focus on the first question, which deals with the issue of woman’s creation. I consider this issue to be more basic and important, philosophically and theologically, than any other in the context of woman-man equality, because if man and woman have been created equal by Allah who is the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot become unequal, essentially, at a subsequent time. On the other hand, if man and woman have been created unequal by Allah, then they cannot become equal, essentially, at a subsequent time.

**MADE FROM ADAM'S RIB? THE ISSUE OF WOMAN'S CREATION**

The ordinary Muslim believes, as seriously as the ordinary Jew or Christian, that Adam was God’s primary creation and that Eve was made from Adam’s rib. If confronted with the fact that this firmly entrenched belief is derived mainly from the Bible and is not only extra-Qur’anic but also in contradiction to the Qur’an, this Muslim is almost certain to be shocked. The rather curious and tragic truth is that even Western-educated Muslims seldom have any notion of
the extent to which the Muslim psyche bears the imprint of the collective body of Jewish and Christian ideas and attitudes pertaining to women.

The Biblical account of the creation of the first human pair consists of two different sources, the Yahwist and the Priestly, from which arise two different traditions, subject of much Jewish and Christian scholarly controversy. There are four references to woman’s creation in Genesis: (1) Gen. 1:26–27, 5th century B.C.E., Priestly tradition; (2) Gen. 2:7, 10th century B.C.E., Yahwist tradition; (3) Gen. 2:18–24, 10th century B.C.E., Yahwist tradition; (4) Gen. 5:1–2, 5th century B.C.E., Priestly tradition. A study of these texts shows that the Hebrew term “Adam” (literally, “of the soil,” from adamah: “the soil”) functions mostly as a generic term for humanity. Pointing out that the correct translation of this term is “the human,” Leonard Swidler observes: “It is a mistake to translate it [“ha Adam’}] in Genesis 1 to 2:22 either as man in the male sense or as a proper name, Adam (until Genesis 4:25 the definite article “ha” is almost always used with “Adam,” precluding the possibility of its being a proper name: in 4:25 it becomes a proper name, “Adam” without the “ha”). Moreover, it is clearly a collective noun in Genesis 1 to 2:22, as can be seen in the plural ‘let them be masters’ (Genesis 1:26).” Of the four texts referring to creation, undoubtedly the most influential has been Genesis 2:18–24, which states that woman (ishshah) was taken from man (ish). From this text it has generally been inferred that: (1) Adam was God’s primary creation from whom Eve, a secondary creation, was derived, hence Eve is inferior and subordinate to Adam; and (2) Eve was created simply and solely to be the helpmate of Adam.

While in Genesis specific reference is made to the creation of Adam and Eve, there is no corresponding reference in the Qur’an. In fact, there is no mention of Eve (Hawwa’) at all in the Qur’an. The term Adam occurs twenty-five times in the Qur’an, but there is only one verse (Surah 3: Al-‘Imran:59) that refers to the creation of Adam: “Certainly with Allah the likeness of ‘Isa [Jesus] is as the likeness of Adam. Allah created him from the earth, then said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was.” Here it needs to be mentioned that the term “Adam” is not an Arabic term but a Hebrew term, and the description of Adam as a creature of earth in the verse cited above is no more than an explication of the meaning of the term. There are three other verses (Surah 3: Al-‘Imran:35; Surah 19: Maryam:58; Surah 5: Al-Ma‘idah:30) in which the term “Adam” is used as a proper name for an individual who was probably a prophet. Since Arabic has no capital letters, it is often not possible to tell whether a term is used as a proper name or as a common noun without looking at the context in which it occurs. However, there is no categorical statement in the Qur’an to the effect that Adam was the first human being created by Allah. The term is used most frequently in reference to more than one or two human beings. That the term “Adam” functions as a collective noun and stands for humankind is substantiated by an analysis of several verses in which this term occurs. It is also corroborated by the fact that all human beings are assimilatively addressed as “Children of Adam” (Bani
Adam) in Surah 7: Al-‘Araf:26, 27, 31, 35, 172, Surah 17: Bani Isra’il:70, and Surah 36: Ya-Sin:60, and also by the fact that the Qur’an sometimes replaces the term “Adam” by al-insan or bashar, which are both generic terms for humanity. Here it is important to note that though the term “Adam” mostly does not refer to a particular human being, it does refer to human beings in a particular way. As pointed out by Muhammad Iqbal:

Indeed, in the verses which deal with the origin of man as a living being, the Qur’an uses the word “Bashar” or “Insan,” not “Adam,” which it reserves for man in his capacity of God’s vicegerent on earth. The purpose of the Qur’an is further secured by the omission of proper names mentioned in the Biblical narration—Adam and Eve. The word “Adam” is retained and used more as a concept than as the name of a concrete human individual. This use of the word is not without authority in the Qur’an itself.

It is noteworthy that the Qur’an uses the terms bashar, al-insan, and an-nas while describing the process of the physical creation of human beings. It uses the term “Adam” more selectively to refer to human beings only when they become representative of a self-conscious, knowledgeable, and morally autonomous humanity.

Instead of “Adam and Hawwa’,” the Qur’an speaks of “Adam and zauj” in Surah 2: Al-Baqarah:35, Surah 7: Al-‘Araf:19, and Surah 20: Ta-Ha:117. Muslims, almost without exception, assume that “Adam” was the first human being created by Allah and that he was a man. If “Adam” was a man, it follows that “Adam’s zauj” would be a woman. Hence the zauj mentioned in the Qur’an becomes equated with Hawwa’. Neither the initial assumption nor the inferences drawn from it are, however, supported in a clear or conclusive way by the Qur’anic text. The Qur’an states neither that Adam was the first human being nor that he was a man. The term “Adam” is a masculine noun, but linguistic gender is not sex. If “Adam” is not necessarily a man, then “Adam’s zauj” is not necessarily a woman. In fact, the term zauj is also a masculine noun and, unlike the term “Adam,” has a feminine counterpart, zaujatun. (Here, it may be noted that the most accurate English equivalent of zauj is not “wife” or “husband,” or even “spouse,” but the term “mate.”) The Qur’an uses the term zauj with reference not only to human beings but to every kind of creation, including animals, plants, and fruits.) However, neither the term zaujatun nor the plural form zaujatun is used anywhere in the Qur’an, which consistently uses the masculine forms zauj and azwaj. It has been pointed out by the authoritative Arabic lexicon Taj al-‘Arus that only the people of Al-Hijaz (Hejaz) used the term zauj in reference to women, and elsewhere the usage was zaujatun. Also, Arabic legal terminology always uses the term zaujatun in reference to women. Why, then, does the Qur’an, which surely was not addressed only to the people of Al-Hijaz, use the term zauj and not zaujatun if the reference is indeed to woman? In my opinion, the reason why the Qur’an leaves the terms “Adam” and zauj deliberately unclear, not only as regards sex but also as regards
number, is because its purpose is not to narrate certain events in the life of a
man and a woman (i.e., the Adam and Eve of popular imagination), but to refer
to some life experiences of all human beings, men and women together.

The Qur'an describes human creation in thirty or so passages that are found
in various chapters. Generally speaking, it refers to the creation of humanity
(and nature) in two ways: as an evolutionary process whose diverse stages or
phases are mentioned sometimes together and sometimes separately, and as an
accomplished fact or in its totality. In the passages in which human creation is
described “concretely” or “analytically,” we find that no mention is made of
the separate or distinct creation of either man or woman, as may be seen, for
instance, from the following: Surah 15: Al-Hijr:26, 28, 29; Surah 16: An-Nahl:4;
Surah 32: As-Sajdah:7–9; Surah 36: Ya-Sin:77; Surah 38: Sad:71–72; Surah 39:
Az-Zumar:6; Surah 40: Al-Mo'min:67; Surah 55: Ar-Rahman:3, 4, 14; Surah 71:
Nuh:14, 17; Surah 76: Ad-Dahr:2; Surah 77: Al-Mursalat:20–22; Surah 82: Al-
Infitar:6–8; Surah 86: At-Tariq:5–7; Surah 95: At-Tin:4; and Surah 96: Al-
'Aalaq:1–2. In some passages (e.g., Surah 49: Al-Hujurat:13; Surah 53: An-
Najm:45; Surah 78: An-Naba:8), though reference is made to Allah’s creation
of human beings as sexually differentiated “mates,” no priority or superiority
is accorded to either man or woman.

There are, however, some verses in the Qur'an that are understood in such a
way that they appear to endorse a version of the Genesis 2 story of woman’s
creation from man. These verses can be grouped into two categories. The most
important verses in the first group are: Surah 16: An-Nahl:72; Surah 30: Ar-
Rum:20–21; and Surah 35: Al-Fatir:11. Muslim arguments that women were
created from and for men are supported as follows: (1) Surah 30: Ar-Rum:21
uses the term ilaiha to refer to “mates” created from, and for, the original
creation. Since hā is a feminine attached pronoun, the “mates” it refers to must
be female (thus making the original creation male); (2) all three verses cited use
ekum as a form of address. Hence these verses are addressed not to humanity
collectively, but only to men, since the term used is a masculine attached pronoun
(second person plural). Men are, therefore, the primary creation from and for
whom the “mates” were created. Regarding (1), ilaiha literally means “in her”
and not “in them” and refers not to women (who are not mentioned here) but
to azwaj (masculine plural used in the Qur'an for both men and women). If the
“mates” were clearly designated as women, the term used would be hunna, not
hā. The use of hā here is consistent with the Arabic grammatical rule that permits
the use of feminine singular terms for a class or collectivity. The fact that the
creatures to whom the passage is addressed are referred to as bashar further
supports the argument that the “mates” created by Allah are not only women
(for men), since bashar obviously has a bisexual reference. Regarding (2), Arabic
usage permits the use of kum in reference to men and women together. When
women alone are concerned, kunna is used. Here it is of interest to note that in
his book Haquq-e-Niswan (The Rights of Women, 1898), Mumtaz 'Ali pointed
out that the Qur’an uses the masculine form of address to prescribe fundamental duties (e.g., salat, zakat, fasting) to Muslim men and women. If masculine terms of address are understood by the entire Muslim ummah to apply to both men and women in highly significant contexts, such as the prescription of basic religious duties, then it cannot consistently be argued that these terms apply to men invariably and exclusively.

Regarding the second group of verses that are cited to prove man’s ontological priority and superiority to woman, the following are of exceptional importance: Surah 4: An-Nisa:1; Surah 7: Al-‘Araf:189; and Surah 39: Az-Zumar:6. In these verses (as also in Surah 6: Al-An’am:98 and Surah 31: Luqman:28) reference is made to the creation from one source or being (nafsin wahidatin) of all human beings. Muslims, with hardly any exceptions, believe that the one original source or being referred to in these verses is a man named Adam. This belief has led many translators of the Qur’an to obviously incorrect translations of simple Qur’anic passages. For instance, Surah 4: An-Nisa:1, if correctly translated, reads as follows: “O an-nas be circumspect in keeping your duty to your Sustainer who created you [plural] from one being [nafsin wahidatin] and spread from her [minhā] her mate [zaujāhā] and spread from these two beings many men and women.” However, most translators (e.g., Hashim Amir-‘Ali, Muhammad Ali, A. J. Arberry, A. K. Azad, A. M. Daryabadi, N. J. Dawood, S. A. Latif, A. A. Maududi, M. M. Pickthall, George Sale, and M. Y. Zayid) translate the feminine attached pronoun hā in minhā and zaujāhā as “his” instead of “her”. How is such a mistake possible? Could it be the case that given their preconceptions and psychological orientation, these interpreters of the Qur’an (who all happen to be men) are totally unable to imagine that the first creation could have been other than male? Or are they afraid that a correct translation of hā might suggest the idea—even for an instant—that woman, not man, was the prior creation (and therefore superior if priority connotes superiority) and that man was created from woman and not the other way around (which, in a reversal of the Eve from Adam’s rib story would give Eve the primacy traditionally accorded to Adam)? Certainly no Qur’anic exegete to date has suggested the possibility that nafsin wahidatin might refer to woman rather than man.

Summing up the Qur’anic descriptions of human creation, it needs to be emphasized that the Qur’an evenhandedly used both feminine and masculine terms and imagery to describe the creation of humanity from a single source. That Allah’s original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman (who appeared simultaneously at a subsequent time) is implicit in a number of Qur’anic passages, in particular Surah 75: Al-Qiyamah:36–39, which reads:

Does al-insān think that he will be left aimless? Was he not a drop of semen emitted then he became something which clings; Then He [Allah] created and shaped and made of him [minhā] two mates [zaujāin] the male and the female.
If the Qur'an makes no distinction between the creation of man and woman, as it clearly does not, why do Muslims believe that Hawwa' was created from the rib of Adam? Although the Genesis 2 account of woman's creation is accepted by virtually all Muslims, it is difficult to believe that it entered the Islamic tradition directly, for very few Muslims ever read the Bible. It is much more likely that it became a part of Muslim heritage through its assimilation in Hadith literature, which has been, in many ways, the lens through which the Qur'an has been seen since the early centuries of Islam.

Hadith literature, which modernist Muslims tend to regard with a certain skepticism, is surrounded by controversies, centering particularly around the question of the authenticity of individual ahadith as well as the body of the literature as a whole. These controversies have occupied the attention of many Muslim scholars since the time of Ash-Shafi'i (d. A.H. 204/A.D. 809). Fazlur Rahman has pointed out that "a very large portion of the Hadiths were judged to be spurious and forged by classical Muslim scholars themselves," but goes on to add that "if the Hadith as a whole is cast away, the basis for the whole historicity of the Qur'an is removed with one stroke." Noted Islamicists such as Alfred Guillaume, H. A. R. Gibb, and M. G. S. Hodgson have underscored the importance of the Hadith literature, which not only has its own autonomous character in point of law and even of doctrine, but also has an emotive aspect, hard to overstate, relating to the conscious and subconscious thought and feeling of Muslims, both individually and as a group. That the story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib had become part of the Hadith literature is evident from the following Hadith related from Ibn 'Abbas and Ibn Mas'úd, which is referred to by authoritative commentators on the Qur'an, including Fakhr ud-Din ar-Razi, Isma'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathir, and al-Fadl ibn al-Hasan al-Tabarsi:

When God sent Iblis out of the Garden and placed Adam in it, he dwelt in it alone and had no one to socialize with. God sent sleep on him and then He took a rib from his left side and placed flesh in its place and created Hawwa' from it. When he awoke he found a woman seated near his head. He asked her, "Who are you?" She answered, "Woman." He said, "Why were you created?" She said, "That you might find rest in me." The angels said, "What is her name?" and he said, "Hawwa'" They said, "Why was she called Hawwa'?" He said, "Because she was created from a living thing."

Another Hadith, related from Ibn 'Abbas and cited by Ibn Kathir in his Tafsir, which also refers to the creation of Hawwa' from Adam's rib, reads as follows:

After Iblis had been chastised and Adam's knowledge had been exhibited, Adam was put to sleep and Hawwa' was created from his left rib. When Adam awoke he saw her and felt affection and love for her since she was made from his flesh and blood. Then Allah gave Hawwa' in wedlock to Adam and told them to live in al-jannah.

Both of the above ahadith clash sharply with the Qur'anic accounts of human creation, while they have an obvious correspondence to Genesis 2:18–33 and
Genesis 3:20. Some changes, however, are to be noted in the story of woman’s creation as it is retold in the above hadiths. Both mention “the left rib” as the source of woman. In Arab culture great significance is attached to “right” and “left,” the former being associated with everything auspicious and the latter with the opposite. In Genesis, woman is named “Eve” after the Fall, but in the above hadith she is called Hawwa’ from the time of her creation. In Genesis, woman is named Eve because “she is the mother of all who live” (thus a primary source of life), but in the first of the aforementioned hadith, she is named Hawwa’ because “she was created from a living thing” (hence a derivative creature). These variations are not to be ignored. Biblical and other materials are seldom incorporated without alteration into hadith. The above examples illustrate how in respect of woman, Arab biases were added to the adopted text.

The citing of the above hadiths by significant Muslim exegetes and historians shows the extent to which authoritative works both of Qur’anic exegesis and Islamic history had become colored by the Hadith literature. In course of time, many hadith became “invisible,” the later commentators referring not to them but to the authority of earlier commentators who had cited them, to support their views. This made it very hard to curtail their influence since they became diffused throughout the body of Muslim culture. A typical example of how the Qur’anic account of human creation is distorted by means of inauthentic hadith (which identify nafsin wahidatin from which all human beings, including Hawwa’, originated, with Adam the man), even when these hadith are not mentioned or affirmed directly, is provided by A. A. Maududi, author of a well-known modern commentary on the Qur’an and one of contemporary Islam’s most influential scholars. In commenting on Surah An-Nisa’, Maududi observes:

“He created you of a single soul.” At first one human being was created and then from him the human race spread over the earth.... We learn from another part of the Qur’an that Adam was that “single soul.” He was the first man from whom the whole of mankind sprang up and spread over the earth. “And of the same created his mate”: we have no definite detailed knowledge of how his mate was created of him. The Commentators generally say that Eve was created from the rib of Adam and the Bible also contains the same story. The Talmud adds to it that she was created from the thirteenth rib of Adam. But the Qur’an is silent about it, and the Tradition of the Holy Prophet that is cited in support of this has a different meaning from what has been understood. The best thing, therefore, is to leave it undefined as it has been left in the Qur’an, and not to waste time in determining its details.”

In the above passage, Maududi has no difficulty in affirming what has traditionally been made the basis of asserting woman’s inferiority and subordination to man, namely that woman was created from man. Having made the deadly affirmation, however, he is reluctant to explicate it further, nor does he reveal what he considers to be the “true” meaning of the Hadith pertaining to Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib. His justification for not discussing the issue of woman’s creation is that the Qur’an has deliberately left it undefined. But this is
simply not the case. The creation of woman is as clearly defined in the Qur’an as the creation of man, and the Qur’anic statements about human creation, diverse as they are, leave no doubt as to one point: both man and woman were made in the same manner, of the same substance, at the same time. Maududi (like the majority of Muslim exegetes, who happen to be all men) does not want to face this fact, so he declares that the discussion of the issue of woman’s creation is a waste of time. If the issue in question was not worthy of serious theological reflection, or one that had no significant effect on the lives of human beings, particularly of women, one would, perhaps, be less critical of a scholar who has had massive impact on the minds of the Muslim masses, for dereliction of scholarly duty. But theologically the issue of creation of woman is of such import that it cannot be allowed to be dismissed in the manner in which Maududi has done.

Perhaps no better proof can be given of how totally ahadith such as the ones cited above have penetrated Muslim culture than the fact that the myth of the creation of Hawwa’ from Adam’s rib was accepted uncritically even by Qasim Amin (1863–1906), the Egyptian judge and feminist whose books *Tahrir al-Mara’* (The Emancipation of Women, 1899) and *Al-Mara’ al-Jadida* (The Modern Woman, 1900) were epoch-making in the history of Muslim feminism. Amin’s romantic interpretation of the myth, reminiscent of Milton’s, shows that he did not realize how fundamentally the issue that concerned him most deeply, namely, woman’s social equality with man in a strongly male-centered and male-dominated Muslim society, hinged upon the acceptance or rejection of a creation story that asserted woman’s derivative status and had been interpreted traditionally to affirm her inferiority and subordination to man. It is unfortunate that many present-day Muslim advocates of women’s rights also do not realize the profound implications of this myth that undergirds the anti-women attitudes and structures they seek to change.

Anti-women ahadith are found not only in the significant secondary sources of Islam but also in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (compiled by Muhammad ibn Isma’il al-Bukhari, A. H. 194–256/A.D. 810–870) and *Sahih Muslim* (compiled by Muslim bin al-Hajjaj, A. H. 202 or 206–261/A.D. 817 or 821–875), the two most influential Hadith collections in Sunni Islam. Cited below are six ahadith, the first three from *Sahih al-Bukhari* and the last three from *Sahih Muslim*, that have had a formative influence upon the Muslim mind:

1. Abu Karaith and Musa bin Hazam related to us: Husain bin ‘Ali told us that he was reporting on the authority of Zai’dah who was reporting on the authority of Maisarah al-Ashja’i who was reporting on the authority Abu Hazim who was reporting on the authority Abu Hurairah (with whom may Allah be pleased) who said: Allah’s Rasul29 (may peace be upon him) said:

   Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so if you should try to
straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat woman nicely.\(^{21}\)

2. 'Abd al-'Aziz related to us that he was reporting on the authority of 'Abd Allah who said: Malik had told us that he was reporting on the authority of Abu Zinad who was reporting on the authority of al-'Araj who was reporting on the authority of Abu Hurairah (with whom may Allah be pleased) who said: Allah’s Rasul (may peace be upon him) said:\(^{22}\)

   The woman is like a rib, if you try to straighten her, she will break.
   So if you want to get benefit from her, do so while she still has some crookedness.\(^{23}\)

3. Ishaq bin Nasr related to us: Husain al-Jo’fi related to us that he was reporting on the authority of Za’idah who was reporting on the authority of Maisarah who was reporting on the authority of Abu Hazim who was reporting on the authority of Abu Hurairah (with whom may Allah be pleased) who said: The Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him) said:\(^{24}\)

   Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should not hurt (trouble) his neighbor. And I advise you to take care of the women, for they are created from a rib and the most crooked part of the rib is its upper part; if you try to straighten it, it will break, and if you leave it, it will remain crooked, so I urge you to take care of woman.\(^{25}\)

4. Harmalah bin Yahya related to me: Ibn Wahb informed us: Yunus informed me that he was reporting on the authority of Ibn Shihab who said: Ibn al-Musayyab told me that he was reporting on the authority of Abu Hurairah (with whom may Allah be pleased) who said: Allah’s Rasul (may peace be upon him) said:\(^{26}\)

   Woman is like a rib. When you attempt to straighten it, you would break it. And if you leave her alone you would benefit by her, and crookedness will remain in her.\(^{27}\)

5. 'Amr an-Naqid and Ibn 'Umar related to us saying: Sufyan related to us that he was reporting on the authority of Abu Zinad who was reporting on the authority of al-'Araj who was reporting on the authority of Abu Hurairah (with whom may Allah be pleased) who said: Allah’s Rasul (may peace by upon him) said:\(^{28}\)

   Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so if you wish to benefit by her, benefit by her while crookedness remains in her. And if you attempt to straighten her, you will break her, and breaking her is divorcing her.\(^{29}\)

6. Abu Bakr bin Abu Shaibah told us: Husain bin ‘Ali told us that he was reporting on the authority of Za’idah who was reporting on the authority of Maisarah who was reporting on the authority of Abu Hazim who was reporting on the authority of Abu Hurairah (with whom may Allah be pleased) who said: The Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him) said:\(^{30}\)
He who believes in Allah and the Hereafter, if he witnesses any matter he should talk in good terms about it or keep quiet. Act kindly towards women, for woman is created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its top. If you attempt to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it, its crookedness will remain there so act kindly towards women.\textsuperscript{31}

While it is not possible, within the scope of this chapter, to give a detailed critical analysis of either the \textit{isnad} (list of transmitters) or \textit{matn} (content) of the above hadith, a few comments on both may be useful. With regards to the \textit{isnad} the following points may be noted: (1) All these hadith are cited on the authority of Abu Hurairah, a Companion who was regarded as controversial by many early Muslim scholars, including Imam Abu Hanifah (A.D. 700–767),\textsuperscript{32} founder of the largest Sunni school of law. Here it is pertinent to point out that though a more critical attitude toward Hadith and Hadith-transmitters prevailed during the earliest phase of Islam, later, as stated by Goldziher,\textsuperscript{33} it became “a capital crime” to be critical of any Companion; (2) All six of the above hadith are \textit{gharib} (the lowest grade of Hadith classification) because they contain a number of transmitters who were single reporters. (Al-Hakim Abu 'Abd Allah al-Naysaburi and Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, who were eminent scholars of Hadith, defined a \textit{sahih} or sound Hadith as one that is related in the first place by a well-known Companion, in the second place by at least two Followers, and thereafter by many narrators.);\textsuperscript{34} (3) All of the above hadith are \textit{da'if} (weak) because they have a number of unreliable transmitters (e.g., Maisarah al-Ashja'i, Harmalah bin Yahya, Zaidah, and Abu Zinad).\textsuperscript{35}

Analysis of the \textit{matn} of the above hadith leads to the following statements: (1) Woman is created from a rib or is like a rib; (2) The most curved and crooked part of the rib is its top; (3) The crookedness of the rib (and of the woman) is irremediable—any effort to remove it will result in breakage; and (4) In view of the above, an attitude of kindness is recommended and those who wish to benefit from women are advised to do so “while crookedness remains in her.” Concerning these statements the following observations are made: (a) The rib story obviously originates in Genesis 2, but no mention is made in any of these hadith of Adam. This eliminates the Yahwist’s androcentrism but also de-personalizes the source of woman’s creation (i.e., the “rib” could, theoretically, be nonhuman); (b) The misogynist elements of the hadith, absent from Genesis, clash with the teachings of the Qur’an which describes all human beings as having been created \textit{fi ahsan-i taqwim} (most justly proportioned and with the highest capabilities); (c) I cannot understand the relevance of making the statement that the most crooked part of the rib is at the top; (d) The exhortation to be kind to women would make sense if women were, in fact, born with a natural handicap and needed compassion. Is “irremediable crookedness” such a handicap? (e) The advice to benefit from women without making any effort to help women deal with their “crookedness” (in case it is a natural handicap) smacks
of hedonism or opportunism and is hard to appreciate even if women were indeed “irremediably crooked.”

The theology of woman implicit in the above ahadith is based upon generalizations about her ontology, biology, and psychology that are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Qur’an. These ahadith ought to be rejected on the basis of their content alone. However, “matn-analysis” (which was strongly urged by Ibn Khaldun, A.D. 1332–1406) has received scant attention in the work of many Muslim scholars, who insist that a Hadith is to be judged primarily on the basis of its isnad. It is not difficult to see why isnad-criticism—particularly if it excludes a scholarly scrutiny of initial reports of a Hadith—is not a sufficient methodological tool for establishing the reliability of a Hadith. Not all initial reporters of ahadith were the Prophet’s close Companions whose word would be difficult to question. (The word “Companion” has come to be applied rather loosely to a variety of persons, some of whom spent only a limited amount of time with the Prophet and cannot necessarily be presumed to have known him well.) Furthermore, it is not always possible to say in the case of a Hadith whether its isnad (including the name of the Companion initially narrating the Hadith) is authentic and not fabricated. In such cases references to the matn of other ahadith ascribed to the same initial narrator, or to other ahadith with similar content, become critically important in determining the degree of reliability of both the narrator and the Hadith in question.

CONCLUSION

To sum up the foregoing discussion on the issue of woman’s creation, I would like to reiterate that according to the Qur’an, Allah created woman and man equal. They were created simultaneously, of like substance, and in like manner. The fact that almost all Muslims believe that the first woman (Hawwa’) was created from Adam’s rib shows that, in practice, the Hadith literature has displaced the teaching of the Qur’an at least insofar as the issue of woman’s creation is concerned.

While all Muslims agree that whenever a Hadith attributed to the Prophet conflicts with the Qur’an it must be rejected, the ahadith discussed in this chapter have not only not been rejected, they in fact remained overwhelmingly popular with Muslims through the ages, in spite of being clearly contradictory to the Qur’anic statements pertaining to human creation. While being included in the Sahihain gives the ahadith in question much weight among Muslims who know about the science of Hadith, their continuing popularity among Muslims in general indicates that they articulate something deeply embedded in Muslim culture—namely, the belief that women are derivative creatures who can never be considered equal to men.

Even the courageous Muslim women presently leading women’s movements in oppressively conservative Muslim societies, which in the name of “Islamization” are systematically legitimizing the reduction of women to a less than...
fully human status, are not aware of the far-reaching implications of the ahadith that make them derivative or devious creatures. It is imperative for the Muslim daughters of Hawwa’ to realize that the history of their subjection and humiliation at the hands of sons of Adam began with the story of Hawwa’s creation, and that their future will be no different from their past unless they return to the point of origin and challenge the authenticity of ahadith that make them ontologically inferior, subordinate, and crooked. While it is not a little discouraging to know that these ahadith (like many other anti-woman ones) represent not only the ideas and attitudes regarding woman of the early generations of Muslims (whose views were reflected in the Hadith literature), but also of successive generations of Muslims until today, it is gratifying to know that they cannot be the words of the Prophet of Islam, who upheld the rights of women (as of other disadvantaged persons) throughout his life. Furthermore, regardless of how many Muslim men project their own androcentrism and misogyny upon the Prophet of Islam, it is valid to question how, being the recipient of the Qur’an, which states that all human beings were made from a single source (i.e., al-insan, bashar, or nafsin wahidatin), the Prophet of Allah could say that woman was created from a crooked rib or from Adam’s rib.

NOTES

1. Saiyyad: a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.
3. Sunnah: practical traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.
5. Fiqh: jurisprudence.
9. Reference here is to ahadith from Sahih al-Bukhari.


20. Rasul: a Prophet sent by God with a message. Reference here is to the Prophet Muhammad.


