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Reading their Stories from a Shia Female Perspective**

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Five Foundational Women in the Qur'an:

Rereading their Stories from a Shia Female Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Pious women's engagement with feminism has popularly included the reclaiming of female voices from scripture to iterate their involvement and subscription to religious thought. This paper presents the narratives of five women from the Qur'an highlighting their pioneering and significant contributions to Islamic doctrine and praxis. Modern Muslim women continue to draw inspiration from their stories to argue for their rights from within their tradition.

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In the spirit of enlightened liberty, and while their sisters advocate fleeing from organized religion, Muslim women are choosing to argue their rights from the Qur'an. Deploying an exegetical hermeneutical approach to the less referenced Shia narrative of Eve, Hagar, Eucabid, Asiya, and Moses's sister, this paper first retells the stories of Adam, Abraham, and Moses on the authority of the women in those stories by replacing their peripheral representation with their foundational role in the establishment of monotheistic doctrine and practices. Then, while presenting two Qur'anic examples that demonstrate how the women of the seventh-century Arabian society were inspired by these stories to exert their concerns, this paper builds on the Third World feminist approach to argue that Muslim women find agency in the continuity of tradition rather than breaking from it, and continue to invoke contemporary revision of Qur'anic interpretation as a reference for their empowerment.

Methodology

Changing times necessitate appraisal of former norms and make it essential to re-evaluate many vital questions. The God-conscious conduct of Muslim women, despite the growing fear of Islam and hostility towards Muslims, is one such question. In the face of Western assumptions that deem Islam as being oppressive towards women, Muslim women are reclaiming their voice by practicing piety as an educated choice thus provoking public anxiety and challenging the common paradoxical construct of modernity and religion. Instead of abating their stamina to maintain their visible piety, the stigmatization of their tradition is intensifying their quest for ethical commitment. They are looking inwards and towards the narratives of women in the Qur'an for inspiration and resilience.

This study builds on the exegetical approach of three contemporary scholars: Asma Barlas, who introduces a "Text and Textualities"¹ method in her work *Believing Women in Islam, Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Quran*; Baraba Freyer Stowasser, who studies scripturalist literature to show the importance of the female symbol in the Islamic formulation of self-identity in her book *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*; and Abdullah Jawadi Amuli, who teaches the thematic exegetical approach at the largest traditional Women's Seminary, Jamiatuz Zahra (Al Zahra Academy) in Qum, Iran. His lectures on the subject of "Woman in the Qur'an" were compiled by his female students and then published under the title *Zan Dar Aaenae Jalal wa Jamal*. (Woman as a Manifestation of Might and Beauty)²

This study deploys Wendy K. Kolmar's and Frances Bartkowski's articulation of Third World feminism. Problematizing the term in their chapter on "Lexicon of the Debates," Kolmar and Bartkowski introduce Third World feminism as a critique of Western feminism that was remiss in engaging the concerns of colored and/or subaltern women. Building on

¹ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 31.

² Throughout this study, Sayyid Ali Quli Qara'i's *The Qur'an: With a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* has been referred to for the English translation of the Qur'an. It includes Shia and Sunni commentators thus offering a broader understanding of some controversial verses in the Qur'an and the phrase-by-phrase translation approach fluidly collates the Arabic text with the English translation.

postcolonial feminist theory, “it seeks a space and discourse in which the knowledge, activism, and subjectivity of Third World women can be articulated.”³ Applauding Third World feminist scholars for making “crucial methodological and epistemological contributions to Anglo-American feminism,” Kolmar and Bartkowski echo Chandra Mohanty’s argument that “histories of third world women’s engagement with feminism are in short supply.”⁴

The first part of this paper presents the Qur’anic narratives of five unnamed women highlighting the imagined stereotypical norm assigned to them, a Shia reading of their lives, and, perhaps most importantly, their foundational role in the stories of prophets. These five women are Eve, the mother of humankind, Hagar, the mother of Ismael, Eucabid (Moses’s mother), Moses’s sister, and Asiya, the wife of the Pharaoh.

The narrative of the first lady, Eve, is commonly mentioned in all scriptures associated with Abrahamic religions. Two notoriously infamous and stereotypical characteristics that emerge from the story of Eve are analyzed while presenting a Shia reading of the saga, which not only offers a different understanding but also assigns distinction to her personality. Such an understanding of her character presents a sharp contrast to the biblical accounts as well as some Muslim traditions that are commonly cited in the Sound Books of the Sunni school of thought.

The second remarkable female is a woman whose undertaking forms the basis for the most sacred and celebrated pilgrimage of Muslims (Hajj), and whose emprise of running between the mountains in search of water is simulated as a mandatory religious ritual. Albeit the narrative of Hagar is solely built on Islamic traditions and not Sacred Revelation, she is undoubtedly “one of Islam’s most important female figures and a symbol of Islamic identity.”⁵ Hagar is credited with a groundbreaking feat that has irrefutably established her role as a vital element in one of the pillars of Islam. Her narrative suggests an independent enterprise because she acted solely on her intuition, relying fully on her trust in God, without any

³ Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, “Lexicon of the Debates,” in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵ Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 49.

directive from Abraham, and a relentless physical and spiritual pursuit of survival. Yet many Islamic traditions reduce her story to that of a victim of female rivalry, attributing her ordeals to the jealousy of Sara (wife of Abraham).

The final three women chosen for this paper appear in the Qur'anic narrative of Moses. They are the mother of Moses, whose given name in tradition is Eucabid, (Jochebed), Moses's sister, and Asiya, Moses's foster mother. While recounting the story of Moses, the Qur'an highlights the brave and synchronized struggle of these three women who rescued him from being murdered in infancy and secured the means for his upbringing. Their united effort dislodged the despotic scheme of the Pharaoh by positioning Moses in the sanctuary of the very man who was on a murderous and maniac hunt to prevent his birth.

The second part of this paper presents two examples from the Qur'an that demonstrate how women during the time of Prophet Muhammad (p)⁶ were emboldened and inspired by these narratives to question the position of women in Islamic doctrine and law. The first example is of Asma bint Umayy who asked for a gender inclusive rendition of the divine message. The second example is of Khawla who complained to the Prophet about the unjust cultural practice of *zihar*, a form of abandoning women in a marital relationship. In both these cases, a new revelation was received to address their concerns. Even though all Muslims believe that the Qur'an marks the end of all divine revelation, contemporary Muslim women are claiming their stake in the interpretation of the text in matters that effect their spiritual, cultural, and jurisprudential life.

Qur'anic Narratives of Five Women

Although Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an, "woman" as a concept appears concurrently alongside spiritual, legal, and social discourses in the text, thus facilitating the study of "woman" as an independent theme. The first section of this paper

⁶ In the Islamic tradition it is customary to invoke "peace and benedictions on Muhammad and his family" each time he is mentioned by his proper name. Throughout this paper such a benediction is referred to by a '(p)' next to his name.

presents the narratives of five unnamed women in the Qur'an to understand the imagined stereotypical norm assigned to them, to present a Shia reading of their lives, and, perhaps most importantly, to highlight their foundational role within the mega-narratives of the men in their lives. These five women are Eve, the mother of humankind; Hagar, the mother of Ismael; Eucabid, the mother of Moses; Moses's sister, whose name is not known and is referred to as *ukhtuhu* (his [Moses's] sister) in the Qur'an; and Asiya, the wife of the Pharaoh.

Eve, the Mother of Humankind

The narrative of the first lady, Eve, is commonly mentioned in all scriptures associated with Abrahamic religions. While presenting a Shi'ite reading of the saga, two notoriously infamous and stereotypical characteristics that emerge from the story of Eve are analyzed not only to offer a different understanding of the narrative but also assign distinction to her personality.

First, the common assertion that Eve was created from the rib of Adam has been successfully refuted by many Muslim scholars. While Murtaza Mutahhari denounces any Qur'anic mention of such a notion, thus disregarding any "parasitic and leftist aspect" imagined for women,⁷ Wadud suggests that the misunderstanding comes from the reliance of Muslim scholars (like Zamakhshari) on Biblical accounts that popularized a patriarchal reading among the Muslim exegetes.⁸ Inasmuch as Barlas endorses Wadud's suggestions by mentioning that "Muslim exegetes... have borrowed wholesale from Biblical accounts,"⁹ she goes a step further by explaining how political and religious hegemonies "shaped not only how Muslims came to read the Qur'an but also how they came to define method, meaning and even historical meaning itself."¹⁰

⁷ Murtaza Mutahhari, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, fifth edition, 1998), 44.

⁸ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20.

⁹ Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*, 139.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 76.

While Muslim modernists deny the doctrinal validity of women's inferior nature by viewing it as "medieval extraneous interpretative lore,"¹¹ Islamic traditions endorsing the creation of Eve from Adam's rib are still found in the soundest books of the Muslims today. *Sahih Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, and *Jami al-Tirmidhi* unanimously trace this notion to a tradition narrated by Abu Huraira and attributed to the Holy Prophet, stating that "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."¹² The presence of such traditions inevitably influences the perception of Woman by the Muslim laity. She has been religiously condemned to an inextricable "crookedness" that somehow makes her of benefit to the Man but at the same time renders her plight unworthy of consideration or rescue. Such traditions should be read with skepticism especially when they are supposedly attributed to the Prophet who held women in high regard. Of notable example is Khadija, the Prophet's former employer, sole wife of twenty-five years, his companion, and principal financier who was held in high esteem by him even after she died. He fondly remembered her as the one who believed in him when others denied him.¹³

Furthermore, despite living in a society that detested daughters, the Prophet loved and respected his daughter Fatima, much to the amazement of the people of the times.¹⁴ Whenever she visited him, he would rise from his place, kiss her hands, and offer his seat to her.¹⁵ He proclaimed, "Fatimah is a part of me, whoever pleases her pleases me and whoever hurts her hurts me."¹⁶ Such public regard for a female was unimaginable in that society. Contrary to the social norms, she accompanied her father into

¹¹ Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 36.

¹² Muhammad al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari* (<https://sunnah.com/bukhari/67>) Book 67 Hadith 119; Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim* (<https://sunnah.com/muslim/17/77>) Book 17 Hadith 77; Muhammad ibn Isa at-Tirmidhi, *Jami' at-Tirmidhi* (<https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/13>) Book 13 Hadith 15.

¹³ Syed A.A Razwy, *Khadijatul Kubra: A Short Story of Her Life* (www.feedbooks.com, 2012), 306.

¹⁴ Ali Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima* (Tehran: The Shariati Foundation, ebook by <http://www.playandlearn.org>), 15.

¹⁵ Abbas Qummi, *House of Sorrows* (Kitchener, ON: Islamic Publishing House, 2010), 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

the streets of Mecca as he preached to a hostile audience. Shariati remarks, "People who see this thin, weak girl, alone, beside her champion father, see how she comforts him. She supports him through his troubles and sufferings. With her pure, child-like behavior, she sympathizes with him. It is because of this that she comes to be called *ummi abiha*, the mother of her father."¹⁷

A less cited authentic Shia reading on this subject offers a remarkably different perspective. In his book, *Man La Yahzuruhul Faqih*,¹⁸ Sheikh Saduq¹⁹ reports that Imam Sadiq²⁰ was asked about the creation of Eve. He in turn questioned the narrator regarding the popular belief on that matter and was told that people believed God created Eve from the lowest bones of Adam's left rib. To this Imam Sadiq responded,

Glorified is God above the performance of such an act! Do the believers of such theory assume that God is not able to create a spouse for Adam, but from his rib? Such notion would allow the diabolical folks to say that Adam married a part of his own body?!... Verily, God the Most High created Adam from clay...then He created Eve and placed her by his side... Adam asked her, "Who are you?" She replied, "A creation created by God, as you can see." Then Adam said, "O Lord! What a beautiful creation is this! Looking at her makes me yearn for her company?" God said, "O Adam, this is my servant Eve, would you like her to be with you, accompany you, talk to you and follow you in your affairs?" Adam replied, "Yes O Lord! I would praise you and be thankful for as long as I remain." ...God then married Adam to Eve...So Adam called to her, "Come to me." She said, "No, you come to me." God commanded Adam to rise and move towards her, so that women be spared from going to men for their desires...²¹

¹⁷ Ali Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima* (Tehran: The Shariati Foundation, 1971), 76.

¹⁸ One of the Four Major Books of the Shiate Hadith Collection.

¹⁹ Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Babawaih al-Qummi, referred to as Ibn Babawaih or Al Shaikh Al Saduq (the truthful scholar), died 991 CE.

²⁰ Imam Jafar bin Mohammad Al Sadiq is the sixth Holy Imam of the Twelver Shia School. He is the fourth generation grandson of the Holy Prophet of Islam and lived from 702-765 CE.

²¹ Sheikh Sadooq, *Man La Yahzuruhul Faqih* (Beirut: Mu'assat Al Alami Lil tatbu'at, 1986), 247-248.

Although the above tradition places Eve's creation after that of Adam's, it can be argued that such a placement is merely a chronological second and not second in worth. It clearly repudiates the "creation from rib" notion and allows for woman to be viewed as a desirable friend and companion in the affairs of man.

Second, there is the matter of the scandalous rendering of a woman as a satanic temptress which follows from the contemptuous theory that Satan misled Eve and she in-turn misled Adam into committing the first sin. It is important to scrutinize the authenticity of this theory in Qur'an and Hadith. While tracing the lineage of Islamic exegetical literature, Barlas remarks that the collaboration of scholars and political rulers with the intention of controlling religious tradition and legitimizing caliphal authority led to the incorporation of ideas and practices that contradicted the teachings of the Qur'an. These ideas were imported from Muslim culture, which is different from Islamic culture, and also from Judaism and Christianity. Thus, Barlas concludes that "it was *Ahadith* [Prophetic traditions] that introduced into Islam images of women as morally and religiously defective, evil temptresses, the great *Fitna* [temptation] for men."²² Barbara Stowasser, in her reading on the Qur'anic narrative of women in sacred history, remarks that as a result of Islamic conquests, Zoroastrianism and Orthodox Christianity left their imprint on Islamic civilization including those affecting women's social status. Consequently, medieval theologians "while formulating normative interpretations of the Qur'an's women parables...embraced and canonized preexisting [non-Islamic] traditions in scripturalist language." Thus, concludes Stowasser, the theme of "woman as threat to the male and society, dominated the Islamic scripture-based paradigm on gender."²³

While analyzing the Qur'anic narrative of the first sin, Mutahhari highlights the verse that says, "Then Satan tempted them [both]..." (7:20) He maintains that nowhere in the Qur'an is Eve singularly blamed for the deed. In fact, the Qur'an opposes this false notion and has thus "absolved

²² Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*, 45.

²³ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 23.

woman from the charge that she was the prompter of sin.”²⁴ In her grammatical analyses of the verse, Wadud notes that the Qur’an uses the Arabic dual form to narrate how Satan tempted both Adam and Eve. In doing so, she maintains “the Qur’an overcomes the negative Greco-Roman and Biblical-Judaic implications that woman was the cause of evil and damnation.”²⁵ In addition to Mutahhari and Wadud, Jawadi Amuli also rejects this allegation in the grammatical clarification of Qur’an 2:36, which states that, “The Satan caused them to stumble from it...” Satan deceived them both directly without employing one as a medium of deception for the other.²⁶

Although the phraseology of the Qur’an sufficiently refutes the temptress notion, a sentence from a supplication narrated on the authority of Imam Sadiq further ennobles the lofty and sacred position of Eve as understood through Shia tradition. This supplication is recorded by Sheikh Abbas Qummi²⁷ in his famous work, *Mafatihul Jinan*.²⁸ It is called the supplication of Um Dawood after the woman who was taught this prayer by Imam Sadiq. Her name was Fatima, and she had nursed the Imam in his infancy. During the Abbasid Era, when Shias were being persecuted by the government, her son, Dawood, was arrested and imprisoned by Mansoor Dawaniqi, the then Abbasid Caliph. She came to the Imam in sheer distress, and he taught her the supplication that would rid the supplicant of her worry and fulfil her legitimate desire. She did as she was told, and soon enough her son was set free along with compensation for wrongful confinement.²⁹ This prayer is performed in congregation at Shia mosques and shrines worldwide every year on the fifteenth day of the Islamic month of Rajab. It makes a worthy mention of Eve as follows, “...O Allah! Send blessings upon our mother Eve: the one purified from every filth, the one

²⁴ Mutahhari, *Woman and Her Rights*, 45.

²⁵ Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 25.

²⁶ Amuli, *Aurat Jalal Aur Jamal Ke Aainey mey*, 131.

²⁷ Abbas Qummi was a Shia scholar, historian and hadith narrator of Persian origin who lived from 1877-1940.

²⁸ *Mafihul Jinan* is the indispensable book of supplications compiled by Sheikh Abbas Qummi and is found in every Shia mosque and shrine.

²⁹ Shaykh Abbas Qummi, *The Prayer’s Almanac: English Version of the Mafaateeh’ Al Jinaan* (Karachi: Peermahomed Ebrahim Trust Publications, 1992), 272.

cleansed from every dirt, the one favored from among humankind, the frequently present among the stations of sanctity...”³⁰

The four attributes mentioned above depict a dignified position for the first lady Eve. After the honorable mention of her as “...our mother...” (*ummuna*), she is referred to as cleansed from filth (*rijs*) and purified from pollution (*danas*). According to Hans Wehr, a dictionary of modern written Arabic, both terms—*rijs* and *danas*—include forms of material pollution, the profanity of character, and committing of shameful acts.³¹ She is then called the preferred one (*al mufazz’ala*) among humankind.³² The term *al-ins* used in the supplication is used to mean all humankind, hence she is preferred over all men and women by being chosen to be their mother. Lastly, her mention as the dweller of sacred stations (*mahaallil quds*) could be a reference to the exquisite opportunity of being in heaven with the angels and then being sent as a co-vicegerent of God to Earth. Such an understanding of her character presents a sharp contrast to the biblical accounts as well as the common Muslim traditions that are commonly cited in the Sound Books of the Sunni school of thought.

Hagar, the Pioneer of Hajj

The second remarkable female of this chapter is a woman whose undertaking forms the basis for the most sacred and celebrated pilgrimage of Muslims (Hajj), and whose emprise of running between the mountains in search of water is simulated as a mandatory religious ritual. Although the narrative of Hagar is solely built on Islamic traditions and not Sacred Revelation, she is undoubtedly “one of Islam’s most important female figures and a symbol of Islamic identity.”³³ Her role as a participant in Abraham’s mission is recognized in his prayer recorded in the Qur’an (14:37): “Our Lord! I have settled part of my descendants in a barren valley, by Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may maintain the prayer. So make the hearts of a part of the people fond of them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks.”

³⁰ Ibid., 276.

³¹ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980), 294, 327.

³² Ibid., 719.

³³ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 49.

Exegetes place this verse at the time that Abraham brought Hagar and the young baby Ismael to an uninhabited desert. The phrase “part of my descendants” refers to the infant Ismael, and since history states that the child was left in the desert with his mother, this verse indirectly acknowledges the role of Hagar, the exiled mother of Ismael. The “barren valley” where they were left was destined to be the birthplace of monotheistic worship for all time to come. What ensued was the sole experience of Hagar, which made her the pioneer of the civilization that became the first House of God on Earth.³⁴ Her ambitious and daring pursuit for water between the mountains of Safa and Marwa awarded them (the mountains) the honor of being called *Shaaer Allah* (signs of God) in the Qur’an.³⁵ Her building of the well around the miraculous spring of Zam Zam transformed the abandoned desert into a mandatory stopover for nomadic travelers, inviting trade and eventually causing it become a bustling settlement of the tribe of Bani Jurhum.

Hagar is credited with a groundbreaking feat that has irrefutably established her role as a vital element in one of the pillars of Islam. Her narrative suggests an independent enterprise powered by a relentless physical and spiritual pursuit of survival, because she acted solely on her intuition, relying fully on her trust in God, without any directive from Abraham. Yet many Islamic traditions reduce her story to that of a victim of female rivalry, attributing her ordeals to the jealousy of Sara (wife of Abraham).³⁶ Such traditions seem problematic in the light of the following two considerations.

First, in the absence of direct Qur’anic revelation, such traditions are susceptible to flawed understandings especially because “palpable tensions embodied in the scripturalist tales on Sara and Hagar have to do with the Islamic processes of acceptance of the Biblical heritage.”³⁷ The tensions arise from the interpretation of the “great sacrifice” mentioned in Qur’an 37: 101-109 which narrates:

³⁴ Ali Quli Qara’i, *The Qur’an* (3:96) ‘Indeed the First House to be set up for mankind is the one at Bakkah, blessed and a guidance for all nations.’

³⁵ *Ibid.*, (2:158) ‘Indeed Safa and Marwah are among Allah’s sacraments...’

³⁶ Ibn Kathir. *Qasas al-anbiya*, ed. Mustafa Abd al Wahid (Cairo: Dar al kutub al Haditha, 1968), Vol. 1: 200.

³⁷ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 49.

So We gave him the good news of a forbearing son. When he was old enough to assist in his endeavor, he said, "My son! I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. See what you think." He said, "Father! Do whatever you have been commanded. If Allah wishes, you will find me to be patient." So when they had both submitted [to Allah's will], and he had laid him down on his forehead, We called out to him, "O Abraham! You have indeed fulfilled the vision! Thus indeed do We reward the virtuous! This was indeed a manifest test." Then We ransomed him with a great sacrifice, and left for him a good name in posterity: Peace be to Abraham!³⁸

Quli Qarai, in his translation of the Qur'an, mentions that this great sacrifice refers to Ismael, Abraham's first-born son. He supports this view by noting that the verses pertaining to the birth of Isaac come after the mention of the sacrifice.³⁹ Nonetheless, Stowasser remarks, during the medieval period, exegetes were divided as to whether the great Sacrifice in the scriptures referred to Ismael or Isaac (son of Sara), and therefore these sons' mothers were then also ambiguously ranked.⁴⁰ There is good evidence then, that the jealousy and female rivalry notion is a peripheral reading of the Israeli-Arab polarity where Sara is viewed as the mother of the Israelites and Hagar as "the mother of the Arabs."⁴¹

Second, there is only one place in the narrative where Hagar specifically poses a question to Abraham as he prepares to leave, asking him in whose care was he entrusting them. He said, "I am leaving you in the care of the One who has ordered me to leave you here."⁴² This clearly identifies Divine command as the reason for bringing Hagar and her child to Mecca and not the command of a jealous wife. This reading resonates better with that of the sincerely monotheistic character of Abraham. After all, he was the one who had daringly propagated worship of One God,

³⁸ Ali Quli Qara'i, *The Qur'an*, 629-630.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 629.

⁴⁰ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴² Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Hayatul Qulub*, Vol. 1: Stories of the Prophets (Qum: Ansariyan Publications): 215. Available at www.islamicmobility.com

annoying the tyrant of his time by breaking idols, and exhibiting his faith confidently even as he was being thrown into the fire prepared to punish his felony. It is hard to imagine such a champion of monotheism being driven to banish Hagar, the mother of his son, based on the dictates of Sara, his wife.

The struggles of Hagar are often deemed a tragedy resulting from female rivalry in a patriarchal household when in fact, her struggles were “part of a Divine plan to reestablish God’s true sanctuary and its pure rituals.”⁴³ In executing that plan, her role is that of a Divine agent who responds to the Divine call and endures hardship while working for a higher cause. Her legacy has been immortalized by the establishment of her work within ritualistic worship and by the presence of her grave within the holy precincts of the Ka’ba, the black cubical edifice situated in Mecca that is the holiest mosque for Muslims, which is often referred to as the house of God. Abraham was ordered to construct the house, and the Prophet of Islam was honored with the mandate of removing the idols from within it. It is the direction towards which all Muslims orient themselves to perform their ritual prayers and circumambulate during the Hajj pilgrimage. But even though the Ka’ba is central for Muslim faith and all prophets have served this house, only one individual has the honor of being buried there. Shariati puts it well when he writes:

The God of Abraham chooses a woman from among this great human society as his unknown soldier, a mother, and a slave. In other words, God chose a creature who, in all systems of humanity, lacks nobility and honor...God orders Abraham to build the greatest house of worship for humanity, and alongside it, the grave of this woman [Hagar]. Humanity must forever gather around the tomb of Hagar and circumambulate there.⁴⁴

If prophets are leaders of humanitarian reform and social justice, then women are the dedicated agents and comrades that support them in executing their Divine mission. Adam’s title as father of humanity would

⁴³ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 44.

⁴⁴ Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, 169.

have been meaningless without his pure companion Eve and Abraham's recognition as champion of monotheism would be incomplete without the courageous enterprise of Hagar. Similarly, in Muslim understandings of Jesus, Jesus owes his claim to be the Savior to his mother, Mary, who audaciously became the sole female worshipper in a house of worship reserved for men, and Muhammad's (p) movement that mesmerized the world with his spiritual and political acumen depended heavily on the support of his selfless companion, Khadija, and his activist daughter, Fatima. Such fundamental function by females is especially apparent in the narrative of Moses as well.

Three Prominent Women in Story of Moses

The final three women of the five celebrated women in this study appear in the Qur'anic narrative of Moses. They are the mother of Moses, whose given name in tradition is Eucabid (Jochebed); the sister of Moses; and Asiya, the foster mother of Moses.⁴⁵ While recounting Moses's story, the Qur'an highlights the brave and synchronized struggle of these three women who rescued him from being murdered in infancy and secured the means for his upbringing. Referencing the scholarship of Amuli, Wadud, and Stowasser, I analyze the narratives of Eucabid, Asiya, and the sister of Moses, highlighting the central role they played in his mission to bring justice and liberation to an oppressed people (the Israelites). Their united effort dislodged the despotic scheme of the Pharaoh by positioning Moses in the sanctuary of the very man who was on a murderous and maniac hunt to prevent his birth.

The Qur'an says, "We revealed to Moses's mother, (saying) Nurse him, then, when you fear for him, cast him into the river, and do not fear or grieve for We will restore him to you and make him one of the apostles." (28:7) While discussing this verse, Wadud highlights the significance of the revelation to Moses's mother, "thus demonstrating that women as well as men have been recipients of *wahy*" (Divine revelation).⁴⁶ Building on this significant observation, it can be argued that it is not just the receiving of

⁴⁵ Ahmed Bahishti, *Qur'an, Hadith aur Tarikh ki Mithaali Khawateen*, (Qum: Ansariyan Publication, 2008), 248.

⁴⁶ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 39.

revelation that grants her distinction, but also her intellectual clarity that identifies this sound in her head as a Divine directive rather than just a depressive thought of throwing her child into the river. Also, her acting upon this directive is an indication of her spiritual strength and unswerving trust in God's promise that He will restore Moses to her.

As Amuli points out, "it was no ordinary task to put the baby in a casket and throw him in the river, nor was it an ordinary task to commission his sister to follow the casket."⁴⁷ The Qur'an (28:11) states, "She said to his sister, Follow him...". This verse depicts how a mother's trust in God does not stop at passive reliance but translates into an active plan, one that was bravely executed by her daughter, Moses's sister. Although there are no details in the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition, it must have been a physically challenging job to pursue on foot a casket that was swiftly moving with the currents in the river and at the same time conceal herself from the henchmen of the tyrant. Despite history's silence on how she infiltrated the palace of the Pharaoh in her pursuit of the casket, it must have been a witty and heroic strategy.

Moses's sister was operating in hostile territory during testing times. She was an Israelite in the precinct of a tyrannical Pharaoh who sought to murder the Israelites' male new-born infants, threatened as he was by the prophesy that one of them would eventually overthrow him. His henchmen were even going around ripping open the bellies of expecting mothers. Under such circumstances, her presence of mind and her unhesitating action should not be underestimated. She courageously suggested a solution to a perplexing problem in the Pharaoh's harem when the babe refused to suckle from any of the nurses of the court. The Qur'an (28:13) lauds her timely intervention thus, "So she said, 'shall I show you a household that will take care of him for you and will be his well-wishers?'"

Undoubtedly, the introduction of her mother to the court of Pharaoh would have put her under the risk of an official enquiry and interrogation about the birth of the child that rendered her fit for being a nurse, since no woman can suckle a child until she herself has given birth to one. Notwithstanding such thoughts that might have rushed through her mind, she bravely took the risk by trusting her core belief in the Eternal God and

⁴⁷ Amuli, *Aurat Jalal Aur Jamal Ke Aainey mey*, 164.

thus became the agent, chosen by God to fulfill His promise made to the mother of Moses. The Qur'an (28:13) continues with the narrative stating, "Thus We restored him to his mother so that she might be comforted and not grieve, and that she might know that Allah's promise is true, but most of them do not know." The "thus" in this verse may be read to include the untold story of the heroic effort of the sister of Moses that brought joy to her mother by reuniting her with her son, validating "that Allah's promise is true"; yet she is confined to the periphery of the saga, perhaps suggested by the last few words of the verse, "but most of them do not know."

In the interim, the Qur'an talks of the intervention of a third woman, the wife of Pharaoh, upon whom "exegetical literature places the greatest emphasis."⁴⁸ Asiya, as her name appears in tradition,⁴⁹ was the wife of the Pharaoh who is portrayed as a blood thirsty despotic tyrant in verse 49 of chapter 2 in the Qur'an, "...Pharaoh's clan [who] inflicted a terrible torment on you, and slaughtered your sons, and spared your women..." While the Qur'anic text mentions Pharaoh as the villain in the story of the Israelites, it awards his wife, Asiya, the position of a good example for people of faith in chapter 66. This chapter (called *Al Tahrim*) was revealed admonishing the jealousy of Ayesha and Hafza, two wives of the Prophet Muhammad (p).⁵⁰ The chapter encourages goodness of character by narrating the examples of two women, Mary, mother of Jesus, and Asiya, wife of Pharaoh. They are presented as role models for believing men and women in verses 10 and 11 of this chapter which states:

Allah draws an example for those who have faith: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord! Build me a home near you in paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct, and deliver me from the wrongdoing lot.' And Mary daughter of Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our spirit. She confirmed the words of her Lord and His Books, and she was one of the obedient (66:10,11)

⁴⁸ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 59.

⁴⁹ Baqir Al Majlisi, *Hayatul Qulub*, 366.

⁵⁰ Shirazi, *Tafsir Namuna*, Vol. 14: 70.

Ahmed Bahishti, in his book *Mithaali Khawateen* in which he has compiled narratives of ideal women in the Qur'an, hadith and Islamic history, considers Asiya to be a woman of prophetic descent⁵¹ who was installed in the home of the tyrant as part of a Divine plan to offer secret support to the oppressed people. Stowasser also supports this view when she states that, "...she [Asiya] was an Israelite of Moses's tribe, perhaps his paternal aunt or first cousin. She was one of the four most beautiful women ever created. Miraculous events surrounded her birth and early life. Her marriage to the infidel Pharaoh was a sacrifice she made for the safety of her people..."⁵² Even though she lived in an extravagant palace, she maintained the purity of heart and constantly sought ways to assist the movement that would rid the Israelites of their deprived condition. Bahishti argues that her faith is evident from the supplication she makes in the above-mentioned verse (66:10). She asks for three blessings, each one an indication of the pure state of her belief. First, she asks for a home in the proximity of God. This indicates that she was not one of those women who desired the pomp and pleasure of the material world that was abundant in the house of Pharaoh. Living in that luxury had suffocated her humble soul, making her yearn for the mercy and proximity of her Lord. Second, she asks for deliverance from Pharaoh and his conduct. This is an indication of her detesting the tyrant and his tyranny, thus clarifying that although she was espoused to him physically, she was not a partner in his deeds. Third, she asks for deliverance from the entire wrongdoing lot, vociferously denouncing all oppression everywhere and clearly indicating her stand for justice. While quoting *Tafseer Al Mizan*⁵³, Bahishti goes a step further saying that as Asiya would recite this supplication, angels would descend upon her showing her the fruition of her prayers in paradise, and consoling her during her struggles. This makes her a *Muhaddatha*, a person who communicates with angels.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ahmed Bahishti, *Mithaali Khawateen*, 256.

⁵² Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 59.

⁵³ *Tafsir al-Mizan* is a Shia exegesis of the Qur'an written by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (died 1981) consisting of twenty volumes initially written in Arabic. Vol. 19, pages 398-402 discuss the prayer of Asiya.

⁵⁴ Ahmed Bahishti, *Mithaali Khawateen* (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2008), 259.

Asiya also played an instrumental role in rescuing Moses by protecting him from the Pharaoh's murderous intentions and securing for him a princely upbringing till he could become capable of leading the Israelites. It must have required an extraordinary amount of courage for a woman in her position to insist that the life of the baby be spared when the Pharaoh and his minister Haman were unanimously determined to assassinate him. The Qur'an (28:8-9) depicts this, continuing the narration from when the casket carrying the infant Moses found its way into the palace, "The Pharaoh's kinsmen picked him up that he might be to them an enemy and a cause of grief. Indeed, Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts were iniquitous. Pharaoh's wife said [to Pharaoh], '[This infant will be] a [source of] comfort to me and to you. Do not kill him. Maybe he will benefit us, or we will adopt him as a son.' And they were not aware."

Admitting Amuli's commendation of Asiya's intervention as "no ordinary task," it can be further lauded as a well-articulated one.⁵⁵ For it to succeed in dissuading the murderous wrath, the intervention had to be more than a mere plea by a distressed woman, for surely Pharaoh and his henchmen were immune from such pleas having killed thousands⁵⁶ of innocent women and children. A closer reading of this verse suggests that her intervention was not just prompt but also eloquent, given the haughty audience she was addressing. It must be noted that she uses "us" to present her proposal as a matter of mutual benefit and quickly substantiates her suggestion by addressing valid concerns, hence establishing considerable credence to what could be easily read as an emotional outburst. Pharaoh's impotence not only took away spousal pleasure but also left him without the prospect of an heir.⁵⁷ She shrewdly employed these two factors, as is apparent in the verse, "comfort to me and to you...we will adopt him as a son" to make an irrefutable case. Her victory secured a princely upbringing for Moses in the palace of the dictator who he was destined to overthrow.

Later on, Asiya revealed her belief in God and the prophethood of Moses, much to the annoyance of her arrogant husband, thus

⁵⁵ Amuli, *Aurat Jalal Aur Jamal Ke Aainey mey*, 164.

⁵⁶ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 58.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

demonstrating that “neither spouse nor relatives stand in the way of true devotion to God,” a devotion for which she was horrendously punished by nails driven into her body, awarding her a martyr’s death.⁵⁸ The Prophetic tradition that speaks of the four virtuous women, reserves her place among them. It states that the Prophet Muhammad (p) said, “Khadija daughter of Khuwaylid, Fatima al-Zahra, Maryam the daughter of Imran, and Asiya the wife of the Pharaoh are the four ladies of paradise.”⁵⁹

The Inspired Women of the Prophet’s Time

By telling the stories of women like Eve, Hagar, Eucabid, Asiya, and Moses’s sister, the Qur’an not only documented their excellent and efficient efforts in the establishment and preservation of Abrahamic religions, it also presented them as role models that inspired the women who heard their stories in later times. Women during the time of Prophet Muhammad (p) acquired voice and boldly raised issues around female concerns within Islamic doctrine and law. On more than one occasion, their petition would lead to revelation that clarified their doubts and even reformed the law. Two such occasions are briefly presented in this section to highlight the celebrated position of the women mentioned in the Qur’an.

Asma bint Umays and the Revelation of Qur’an 33:35

Asma bint Umays was one of the early Meccans who embraced Islam. Soon after their marriage, she and her husband Jaffer bin Abu Talib accompanied the first Muslim migrants to Abyssinia (Ethiopia). All their children were born there, and they moved to Medina in the sixth year after the Prophet’s migration there. Jaffer was killed in the year 8 AH (after hijrah) during the battle of Mu’tah. Asma then married Abu Bakr and had a son by the name of Muhammad. Following Abu Bakr’s death in the year 13 AH, she married Imam Ali, first holy Imam of the Twelver Shias. She is held in high regard as “one of the companions of the Messenger of God and a narrator of his traditions” by both Shia and Sunni scholars.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁹ Baqir al-Majlisi, *Hayatul Qulub*, 394.

⁶⁰ Nahleh Gharavi Naeeni, *Shi’ah Women Transmitters of Hadith: A Collection of the Biographies of the Women who have Transmitted Tradition*, (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2011), 53.

Upon her arrival in Medina from Abyssinia, she went to visit the wives of the Prophet and enquired if any verse had been revealed regarding women. In Arabic (which is the language of the Qur'an), the masculine form is utilized to address a group that consists of females and males. Therefore, although most verses of the Qur'an address believers from both genders, the masculine form is excessively used. The feminine form appears in topics regarding specific women's issues such as menstruation. From a female perspective, Asma was concerned and wondered why there were no direct references to female spirituality. Hence, during her conversation with the wives of the Prophet, she asked if any revelation had descended with a specific mention of women. When they answered in the negative, she came to meet the Prophet to voice her concern "Are women at a loss?" she asked him. "Why do you ask?" replied the Prophet. Asma continued, "Why is it that the virtues of women are not mentioned as often as those of men?" Responding to her, God revealed a verse enlisting ten moral human virtues making a specific reference to female believers.⁶¹ The verse reads,

Indeed the Muslim men and the Muslim women, the faithful men and the faithful women, the obedient men and the obedient women, the truthful men and the truthful women, the patient men and the patient women, the humble men and the humble women, the charitable men and the charitable women, the men who fast and the women who fast, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, the men who remember Allah greatly and the women who remember [Allah greatly]—Allah holds in store for them forgiveness and a great reward (Qur'an 33:35)

The above verse spells out ten virtues that highlight doctrinal, ritual, and moral equality between women and men thus positing that gender difference does not apply to human spiritual. Women and men are equal when it comes to expressing their faith verbally, holding it firmly in their hearts, and practicing it with their bodies. An egalitarian message such as this was unheard of in seventh-century Arabia, and for that matter, in most

⁶¹ Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *Tafsir Namuna* (Lahore: Misbah al-Qur'an Trust, 1996), Vol. 9: 636.

parts of the world. It is important to note that the revelation of this verse was prompted by Asma's conversation with the Prophet. This not only demonstrates her agency in voicing her concern about female representation in the Qur'an, but also indicates God's benevolence in addressing her concern by communicating this verse through Gabriel to the Prophet. Although Muslims firmly believe that the Qur'an marks the end of divine revelation, Asma's initiative inspires contemporary Muslim women to re-read their sacred text from a female perspective and seek agency from within their tradition.

Khawla, "The Arguing Woman" in the Qur'an

Similarly, the Qur'an mentions the powerful female petition in the area of religious law. It was the insistence and prayer of a woman named Khawla that invoked revelation that reformed marital law with regards to the practice of *zihar*. *Zihar* was a kind of repudiation of marital relationship among pre-Islamic Arabs which came into effect when a husband would say to his wife, "you are to me like my mother's back." This would annul their spousal relationship, and the man would never be able to resume relations with his wife. The plight of a woman subject to *zihar* was worse than that of a divorcee because she would be in a suspended situation, neither married nor free to marry another. The case of Khawla played an important role in the gradual abolishment of this practice.

Khawla was married to Aws bin Samit who, in a fit of anger, subjected his wife to *zihar*. When his rage subsided, he regretted his actions and wanted his wife back. Since they could not resume their relationship, Khawla asked her husband to take their case to the Prophet to look for a solution but, seeing as her husband felt embarrassed to initiate dialogue, she took the initiative and briefed the Prophet about her predicament. She was informed that she could no longer go back to her husband. Yet, she pleaded for reconsideration and was told that only God could amend the law. Undaunted, Khawla turned to God, pleading for the plight of her children, complaining against the temper of her husband, and supplicating for an amendment to be revealed. Her success came as the revelation of the first few verses of chapter fifty-eight which proclaimed, "Allah has certainly heard the speech of her who pleads with you [O

Prophet] about her husband and complains to Allah. Allah hears the conversation between the two of you. Indeed, Allah is all-hearing, all-seeing” (58:1).

She was delighted when the Prophet summoned her husband and informed him of the amendment to the law that permitted them to resume their marital law upon paying a penalty in the form of buying freedom for a slave. The husband complained of constricting finances. He was offered the option of fasting for sixty days and he said that he was too weak physically to comply. He was offered yet another option of feeding sixty destitute, upon which he asked that the Prophet support him financially to pay the penalty. The Prophet purchased some barley to help him return to his wife.⁶² This amendment to the law is evident in the verse that states, “Those who repudiate their wives by *zihar* and then retract what they have said, shall set free a slave before they may touch each other...He who cannot afford [to free a slave] shall fast two successive months before they may touch each other. If he cannot [do so], he shall feed sixty needy persons. This, that you may have faith in Allah and His Apostle...” (58:3,4) The petition of Khawla not only rescued her from her plight but also paved the way for the emancipation of other women.

Conclusion

In summation, women have a rightful stake in the interpretation of the Qur’an and religious canonical texts such as the hadith in order to claim the protection of their interests in the process of deriving religious law. Eve must be understood in her position as a woman who is an independent creation of God and not just a derivative of man. She is the noble mother of humankind and not the temptress who led man to sin. Hagar is the early pioneer of the Meccan civilization whose actions become canonized in Islamic tradition and form the opus of the Hajj rituals that are incumbent upon every believer. Her enterprise was inspired by her faith and dedication and were not the result of female spousal rivalry. Eucabid trusted the good in herself and received revelation from God and obeyed it with confidence and reliance. The sister of Moses displayed her physical

⁶² Ibid., Vol. 13: 414-415.

stamina and tactical acumen in working as God's agent to fulfill His promise of uniting the infant Moses with his mother. Asiya courageously rescued Moses in his infancy and during his prophetic mission. She became a God-sent ally for Moses in the house of his enemy.

The stories of these five women, among stories of other women in the Qur'an, are an inextricable part of Islamic scriptural and traditional literature. Not only did their stories inspire the women in the Prophetic era, such as Asma and Khawla, but they continue to inspire women in current times. While contemporary scholars argue the rights of women by advocating a reinvestigation of the methodology employed in the interpretation of the Qur'an, the female Muslim laity continue to emulate these celebrated women in the Qur'an by choosing to practice God-consciousness as their right.

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