"FOR THE BELIEVING WOMEN": A CLASSIFICATION AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FEMININE SPACE IN ISLAMIC SCRIPTURE

By

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(Under the Direction of Kenneth Lee Honerkamp)

ABSTRACT

The role of women in Islam has become a topic of great interest in recent history and in many cases Muslim women have been portrayed in a negatively stereotypical fashion. Many writers on the topic draw support for these conclusions from Islam's sacred text, the Qur'ān. The purpose of this analysis is to examine verses in the text that address women and place them within a socio-historical and theological framework in light of the Qur'ān's overall message of salvation for the righteous. The majority of this analysis will consist of a variety of commentaries on passages addressing women, either by command or indirectly through other characters in the text. By using the text's goal of salvation and guidance, my research yields strong support of an overall Qur'ānic world-view in which women and men are essentially granted the same rights and commanded to the same responsibilities.

INDEX WORDS: Islam, women, Qur'ān, Muslim women, gender and Islam

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The topic of women and the Islam is a timely one indeed, particularly at this point in history. A stroll down the "Religion" aisle at your local bookstore will confirm this statement. Some of the authors are scholars on the subject, but many are Western journalists whose books are the product of personal observations of Muslim women while the author was stationed in a particular county on a writing assignment. Many of these assignments were to cover conflict such as the Gulf War or the Afghani resistance movement—such political and social turmoil is surely not the appropriate context from which to draw broad conclusions on the status of Muslim women. Among the most egregious accounts, one will find the "tell-all" sagas of the lascivious affairs of some royal family, frequently highlighting the subjugation and objectification of women, such as the "Princess Trilogy."[1] One of the more infamous books on women in the Muslim family has been the autobiography *Not Without My Daughter* by Betty Mahmoody, the wife of a Shi'ite Iranian man.[2] Her book contains a detailed account of the physical and emotional abuse of both her and her daughter by her husband and his family after moving from America to Iran, and a movie was made based upon the book. Another example is Irshad Manji, author of *The Trouble with Islam* and creator of www.muslim-refusenik.com, a controversial site which appears to be an effort on the author's part to expose what she perceives to be major problems in the religion, namely the lack of individualism.[3] Ibn Warraq, author of *The Origins*

[1] This series of books, written by Jean Sasson, documents the life of an anonymous Saudi princess (through her own words) and her struggles with her family's ultra-orthodox position on Muslim women.
[2] Betty Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).
[3] Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2004).

of the Koran and labeled an apostate by himself, has edited and written numerous books which appear to portray Islam as nothing more than a hodge-podge of Judeo-Christian elements in which Islam itself is unoriginal at best.[4] These examples have all been written by Muslims, but much of this genre of literature is written by non-Muslims. *Price of Honor* by Jan Goodwin provides a cross-sectional view of Muslim women's lives in various Middle Eastern countries under the rule of fundamentalist Islam.[5] Gerladine Brooks performs a similar task in *Nine Parts of Desire*.[6] Norwegian anthropologist Tove Stang Dahl delivers a dismal picture of the life of Muslim women as portrayed through her field work in Egypt.[7] These authors rely upon Qur'ānic verses taken out of context in order to prove the author's point. These selected verses tend to, when removed from their conceptual framework, portray women as helpless victims of the hedonistic male will, with no agency or intellectual freedom of which to speak. As Raga' El-Nimr summarizes the issue, "The position of Islam on this issue [women and Islam] has been among the subjects presented to the Western reader with the least objectivity."[8]

From the very beginning of this analysis, I would like to posit the following: men and women are addressed on equal footing in the Qur'ān; they have the same social and religious rights and responsibilities. God commands both equally in regards to human salvation. As a result, it is necessary to look at how women are addressed in the Qur'ān in two ways. First, we must see view the situation of women alongside that of men and not isolate them within the text. Second, we must also contend with verses that address women independently from men, to show how women have their own niche in the grand scheme of the Qur'ānic world-view but how it is

[4] Ibn Warraq, *The Origins of the Koran* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998).
[5] Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994).
[6] Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).
[7] Tove Stang Dahl, *The Muslim Family* (Boston: Scandanavian University Press, 1997).
[8] Raga' El-Nimr, "Women in Islamic Law," in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 89-90.

also not independent of other coherent systems within the text. The combination of coherent systems forms the even larger holistic system of the Qur'ān. The abrogation of this Qur'ānic schema is where much of the problem with Islamic scriptural scholarship lies. Many Western writers maintain that women are in the text but under a separate context from the men; they maintain that there is a world-view oriented by the female perspective. However many of these people believe that this world-view is fundamentally feminine and fundamentally incompatible with that of the "greater" masculine world-view. By comparative study of verses from a variety of commentators and interpreters, I intend to illustrate that the perspective of the Qur'ān is more inclusive than exclusive in terms of gender and that the world-view of the text is universal in regards to gender. The second chapter contains the methodology for this analysis, including a brief outline of the Qur'ānic world-view and the basis for categorization of verses in the Qur'ān concerning women. Chapter three exclusively addresses prescriptive verses in which women are commanded in some fashion in the text. In the final chapter, we will examine descriptions of women in the text as well as concerns regarding Western criticism of Islam and women.

Discourse on gender in Islam reveals negative stereotypes that the West has of Muslims. Men are frequently cut out of the picture or portrayed as villainous, simple-minded, or decidedly ruled by their emotions. Women, on the other hand, are seen as weak-willed and naturally submissive to the naturally dominant male rule. In this particular scenario within Islamic feminist discourse, women are treated as a "special status" group. This view has its benefits; many Muslims feel that by creating a feminine space within all fields of discourse will help them be heard. However, it also tends to result in even sharper divisions between genders in some areas, even where previously there were none. Many modern readings of women in the Qur'ān by those such as Goodwin and Brooks are, in my opinion, a prime example of this trend. By

"trend," I am specifically referring to the isolation and investigation of women as an independent category within the text. This method only presents a fraction of the whole picture, a mere fragment of the text's outlook on the world. Writers of this genre generally present the Qur'ānic treatment of women as a self-supporting micro-theology at its most extreme, but at the very least assert a position of misogyny within the text that is often weakly supported or even blatantly incorrect. In her book *Nine Parts of Desire*, Geraldine Brooks briefly discusses the Qur'ān's "mixed message" about female infants, yet fails to provide support for her position and fails to create a connection between the "daughters of Allah"[9] and the Qur'ān's overall portrayal of women.[10] There are a number of other problems associated with Brooks' position. The separation of women from men with the idea of focusing solely on women theologically and socially goes directly against the grain of a fundamental concept of Islam, that of the *ummah*, or community of Believers and treats Islam as a dichotomous religion with a masculine and feminine arena. If one adopts the position that the Qur'ān's main goal is human salvation and then views the text from this perspective, one sees that women and men are addressed on equal grounds. There are passages that are concerned solely with women, but these verses tend to be either highly contextually dependent or with regards to female physiology.[11]

Another problematic approach to women in the Qur'ān is the failure of some commentators to separate that which the Qur'ān states from that which Muhammad states. In other words, many Western writers on Islam place hadīth, the words and actions of the Prophet, are on the same epistemological level as the Qur'ān, the word of God. Throughout Islamic history, much care has been taken to differentiate between that which the Prophet said and that

[9] Qur'ān, *al-Nahl* 16:57.
[10] Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, 68.
[11] The Qur'ān discusses the duties of motherhood in terms of recommended lengths of time for breast-feeding. See Qur'ān, *al-Baqara* 2:233.

which God revealed. While much can be gleaned from an analysis of Muhammad and his relation to and treatment of women, it is beyond the scope of our present concerns, which are mainly scriptural. I mention this point simply because a sizable population of commentators—scholarly or not—frequently employ *hadīth* to support a theory of Qur'ānic misogyny. Most non-Muslim authors are not familiar with *hadīth* studies, and few actually cite their sources, as there are (and traditionally have been) rigorous criteria set in place to determine the validity of such sayings.[12]

This fragmentary textual approach combined with a lack of understanding regarding the role of tradition creates tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. My attempt at approaching the text from another angle is motivated by this tension. There exists a large void within the milieu of Qur'ānic scholarship in regards to women, one between Western scholars with Orientalist biases and Muslim scholars, as noted by Jane Smith:

> In most general terms it might be possible to distinguish between the studies done by Western observers and the essays of Muslims on the subject of Islamic women by saying that the latter tend to describe roles, responsibilities, and privileges of women as delineated by Islam in its ideal form, Islam as it really should be, while the former are more descriptive of actual practices and situations which may fall short of the Muslim ideal.[13]

This project is, in part, an attempt to fill that gap.

With a few notable exceptions such as Amina Wadud, current trends in Qur'ānic exegesis in regards to women appear to fall in one of two different camps. In one group are scholars that want to isolate women within the text and talk about women categorically. Much of this desire, which is a noble intent, is motivated by the fact that women have, as a category, been seemingly absent from history in its retelling in general. However, this particular perspective frequently

[12] Frederick Mathewson Denney, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), 161-162.
[13] Jane I. Smith, "The Experience of Muslim Women: Considerations of Power and Authority," *The Islamic Impact*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad et al. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 89.

tends to rob Muslim women of their agency while portraying Muslim men as hyper-masculine as well as hypocritical. In one vivid account, Brooks describes meeting a conservative Saudi executive.[14] After espousing his traditional views on women, he takes Brooks to meet some of his acquaintances, who are drinking and engaging in lewd behavior. This is just one of many examples that Brooks and other writers in her genre give to support the idea of anti-woman Islam. My intent is not to prove or disprove the speciousness of these stories but rather to question the methodology of these Western writers. How do they encounter the scenarios and find the information they use, both which seem to cohere most closely to their preconceptions? It is important to note that in spite of the fact that the voice behind this type of exegesis is overwhelmingly female, many feminist Islamic scholars view this approach as a form of victimization of the Muslim woman which is ultimately restrictive, rather than liberating.

In the second camp are scholars who want to read the Qur'ān traditionally, and this approach generally incorporates stereotypical gender roles.[15] This particular line of exegesis is carried out exclusively by men and looks to classical Islamic commentators. According to Amina Wadud:

> …one similarity in these works is their atomistic methodology. They begin with the first verse of the first chapter and proceed to the second verse of the first chapter—one verse at a time—until the end of the Book. Little or no effort is made to recognize themes and to discuss the relationship of the Qur'an to itself, thematically.[16]

This view has been accused of leaving women out of the text altogether; and many Muslim women have felt alienation as a result: "In the final analysis, the creation of the basic paradigms

[14] Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, 47-48.
[15] Commentators within this category would include Muhammad Bāqir Behbūdī, an Iranian Shi'i commentator, and Muhammad Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī, PhD, a Moroccan scholar who taught at a university in Al-Madīna Al-Munawwara, Saudi Arabia.
[16] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, reprint; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Penerbit Fajar Bakati Sdn. Bhd., 1992), 2.

through which we examine and discuss the Qur'an and Qur'anic interpretation were generated without the participation and firsthand representation of women."[17] Many female Muslims, including Wadud, feel that the message of gender equality in the Qur'ān should be reflected in its exegesis.

Interpretation and the Impact of Orientalism

One must look at the historical and cultural context of revelation in order to fully understand its implications. While revelation has a definite quality of universality, we must not forget that the revelation of the Qur'ān and its message had a different meaning to the first Muslims than it does to Muslims today. Likewise, we cannot assume that the relationship between Muslim women and their interpretation of and relationship to the text has remained immutable. The Qur'ān was intended to be at once universal and local, atemporal yet firmly rooted in the soils of history. The danger in divorcing the text from history is evident, particularly with regards to a feminist reading of the text.

Once isolated and out of context, certain verses appear to contradict one another (as in the case of polygamy within the text), which the Qur'ān professes not to do.[18] Amina Wadud concisely states the importance of studying the text diachronically with an eye on gender roles:

> The Qur'an is not a manual of directives which only commands the individual reader to perform certain actions or fulfill particular characteristics. By citing concrete events, it makes conceptual ideas tangible. The female and male characters are particularly important to demonstrate certain ideas about guidance. The character and events in the Qur'an should always be examined in the light of this overall goal.[19]

[17] Ibid, 2.
[18] Ghada Karmi, "Women, Islam and Patriarchalism," in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 73.
[19] Amina Wadud, *Qur'ān and Woman*, 32.

The difficulties resulting from a failure to take history into account when examining the Qur'ān is compounded by the fact that many writers charge into feminist Qur'ānic and Muslim critiques without even familiarizing themselves with the cultural context, historical or modern. A prime example of this is Jan Goodwin's passage regarding female titles:

> Yet in the Muslim society where I now lived, women were rarely addressed by their rightful names. Instead, throughout a woman's life she was usually referred to, even by close friends and relatives, by the name of her father, husband, or son, as in 'mother of Abdul[lah].' Her own name is seldom used since, as a woman derives her status from the men in her family, it is considered insignificant.[20]

It is questionable as to whether or not Goodwin actually consulted any Muslim women on the practice of being named in honor of your children, or *kunya*. Surely if she had, she would have found that parenthood is an honor bestowed upon women by God, from the Islamic perspective. The mother from Goodwin's example would be called "Umm Abdullah." What Goodwin also fails to note is that Muslim men are named in a similar manner upon the birth of their children for the same reasons—Abdul's father would be called "Abu Abdullah." This practice is also a cultural one that existed in the *jāhiliyya*, the "era of ignorance" prior to the arrival of Islam in Arabia and one that affirmed the importance of genealogy. Fatima Mernissi notes: "Not having an illustrious genealogy meant scarcely existing socially in tribal and aristocratic Arabia."[21] Being able to trace one's descent back several generations, through the use of the possessive titles which Goodwin finds so demeaning, was in, essence, a status symbol for both men and women alike. It was, and still is in some cases, a sign of elevated importance to be able to engage in such a task, as slaves and many orphans were unable to attain honor in this manner, to their detriment. In a society in which familial bonds and tribal affiliation were pertinent to survival, this practice was an honorable tradition practiced by both genders as opposed to yet

[20] Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, 94-95.
[21] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1991), 52.

another form of female subjugation. Unfortunately, this example is one of many in which an outsider fails to delve below the surface of orthopraxy to determine the reason behind the act, which commonly has an historical or cultural context within which we generally find a coherent explanation.

However, there is still the tension between Goodwin and Mernissi's positions that remains unresolved in spite of a more holistic, contextual approach to the topic of women in the Qur'ān. Specifically, what many Muslims contend are practices rooted in tradition that serve to elevate one's position as a woman are seen by the West as convenient rationalizations of religious modes of systematic female devaluation. This tension is a reality that we cannot escape and is, in many ways, the focus of the intent of this project. Goodwin's point piques the curiosity of Western feminist scholars, and Mernissi's point, while contextually invaluable, fails to address many of the key concerns for Western women. There is a question as to why Western women need to have these concerns addressed. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that the West is instrumental in forming global perceptions as evidenced in the concept of Orientalism.[22] In many ways this power can be dangerous, particularly with our penchant for trying to place foreign concepts and practices within our framework and then declaring them "backwards" or "outdated" when they do not quite fit in our model, particularly within the realm of the religious. It is essential to view religious practices and beliefs as part of a coherent system, and one of many. Stripping a practice of any trace of context and then proceeding to try to confine it and make it conform to one's own framework results in frustration, disappointment and sometimes

[22] I would like to briefly define Orientalism as the non-systematic approach of the West to use its own cultural development as a yardstick by which to measure "the East" over the past several hundred years, in effect dominating the culture. Orientalism differs from your average cultural hegemony in that the West has enforced its own perceptions of the Middle East *upon* the Middle East for so long that the culture, in some aspects, unconsciously defines itself in relationship to Western ideals. For a more complete discussion on the theoretical implications of this concept, please see Edward Said's *Orientalism*, considered a seminal work in the field of Islamic studies. See also *Orientalism* by A.L. Macfie as well as *Orientalism: A Reader*, edited by A.L. Macfie.

anger. Our own conceptions of how we believe systems should operate blind us to the larger picture and prevent us from 1) being critical of our own sphere and 2) seeing our own system as part of a greater system alongside others. With these factors in mind, I would like to approach the topic of women in the Qur'ān from an outsider's perspective, but with a more culturally and historically holistic view of the treatment of this group within the text than most outsiders deomonstrate.

A Note on Translation

My interests lie mainly within reading the Qur'ān from a gendered perspective based upon the original Arabic text. These concerns have naturally guided the choice of the particular English translation used for the majority of Qur'anic citations throughout this work. While I will rely on traditional interpretations such as the ones from 'Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Marmaduke Pickthall, I have opted to bypass traditional favorites used by academic scholars in favor of *The Qur'an: The First American Version* translated by T. B. Irving.[23] Irving renders a fairly literal meaning in a relatively gender-neutral context in terms of both language and commentary. However, it is important to note that Arabic is a nuanced language, and many translators have taken certain liberties with the text in accordance with the intended purpose(s) of their work. Many different commentators have widely varying translations of the same Qur'ānic verse. It is for this reason that I will also cite different translations at many points during this analysis.[24] All quoted citations preserve the original grammar and punctuation of the author.

[23] T. B. Irving, trans., *The Qur'an: The First American Version* (Vermont: Amana Books, 1985).
[24] From this point forward, all verses quoted from Irving's translation will be footnoted as "Qur'ān," followed by the chapter and verse. Other translations will include the chapter and verse' followed by the translator/commentator's name.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD AND ORGANIZATION OF ANALYSIS

Introduction

The Qur'ān, unlike the texts of Judaism and Christianity, is primarily non-narrative, automatically inferring that we must approach it from a different angle than we would in textual studies in other religions. In outward form and structure, the Qur'ān does not present a unified and coherent book with a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, it reflects a gradual and often circumstantial process of revelation. It is neither a story with a well-defined and developed plot nor a well-argued philosophical or theological treatise. Below the surface of this apparent disunity and incoherence, however, there is a clearly discernible unity of message, purpose, and worldview.[25] In this section, we will define two broad categories of analysis (prescriptive and descriptive) for Qur'ānic verses based upon the goal of highlighting gender equality within the scripture, but we must first examine the world of the Qur'ān and the relationship of humanity to the Divine. Our grouping of verses is based upon common characteristics as derived from an analysis of the textual worldview and goals—namely that of salvation.

Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung*

Divine revelation, from the Islamic perspective, is a call to action of human beings by God in the interest of human salvation by way of the Qur'ān. The very fact that a message was sent down implies God's concern with the ultimate fate of humanity. As a result, much of the

[25] Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Islamic Tradition" *World Religions: Western Traditions.* ed. Willard G. Oxtoby, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 357.

Qur'ānic view of humanity and God's interaction with mankind becomes the focus of the text's message: "What God is, says and does, becomes a problem chiefly, if not exclusively, in connection with the problem of how man reacts to it. The Koranic thought as a whole is concerned with the problem of the salvation of human beings."[26] The methodology for achieving salvation is through *islām*, surrender to God. *Islām* as an action is the appropriate response demanded from mankind in Qur'ānic terms, and it is achieved by a variety of methods. One who surrenders is a Muslim and is named as such based upon divinely determined criteria (both in action and belief) sent down by God to humanity in the form of the Qur'ān. These criteria, according to Toshihiko Izutsu, fall into one of two categories:

> The Qur'ānic outlook divides all human qualities into two radically opposed categories, which…we might simply call the class of positive moral properties and the class of negative moral properties, respectively. The final yardstick by which this division is carried out is the belief in the one and only God, the Creator of all beings. In fact, throughout the Qur'ān there runs the keynote of dualism regarding the moral values of man: the basic dualism of believer and unbeliever. In this sense, the ethical system of Islām is of a very simple structure. For by the ultimate yardstick of 'belief' one can easily decide to which of the two categories a given person or a given act belongs.[27]

With this dualistic nature, we are able to classify commands by God into either of these two categories, with the understanding that each path leads to a final destination: the Garden or Hell; salvation or damnation. These are the broad criteria that we will be dealing with, albeit in a gendered context.

The terms "believer" and "non-believer" are generally universal in terms of gender, with a few exceptions to be discussed later, and appear within a variety of forms.[28] In many cases, the

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[26] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* (North Stratford, NH: Ayer Publishers, Inc., 1998), 75.
[27] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Canada: McGill University Press, 1966), 105.
[28] Here I would like to note that, in essence, *all* verses of the Qur'ān are criteria sent down by God. The main discourse of the text revolves around God's desire for humanity's salvation and the Qur'ān was sent down by God to humans as a "roadmap", so to speak, to this salvation as the methodology. From an Islamic perspective, the revelation in its entirety works as a coherent system, whole with all parts necessary. Not one verse, be it a command or seemingly simple speech, is left out of the Qur'ānic worldview because every word is from God. However, for

Qur'ānic view of human characteristics does indeed tend to be dichotomous, as noted above. Izutsu discusses this dichotomy at length, as from the evidence he presents, it would seem that:

> …this basic confrontation of the two major poles with each other constitutes the most important conceptual opposition in the Koran that, together with others, goes to create that intense dynamic atmosphere of spiritual tension which, as I have just said, characterizes the Koranic Weltanschauung. [29]

Izutsu discusses the concept of the *ummah* and its evolution from pre-Islamic times to present. Prior to the advent of Islam, people of the *jāhiliyya* had a far different concept of the term *ummah* in that the concept was based primarily on familial relations. Once Islam entered the picture, the definition shifted from that of a blood-relation basis to that of a religious basis. The *ummah* became the community of believers, tied together by faith, all kinship ties eligible for abrogation by way of conflict with this new bond.[30] The new context for this word created sharp divisions between the believers and the non-believers. Within these categories, further divisions were created: the believers who are Muslims and the *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book); the non-believers who claim to believe (*munāfiqīn*) and the ones who reject the faith completely (*kafirūn*).[31] Within this framework, two different relationships became evident as major themes in the Qur'ān: that between God and humans and the relationships among humans. In the text, these two varieties of interaction serve as important vehicles for understanding God's preference. It is through the portrayal of these types of relationships and the value judgments placed on them that God directs humanity on the "straight path." This path is determined by standards as outlined within the Qur'ān, usually in the form of divine command.

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our purposes we will be dealing with verses that have a gender-explicit context, those that juxtapose the rights and responsibilities of women against those of men.

[29] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man*, 1998, 75.

[30] Ibid, 78.

[31] Ibid, 81.

The perspective from which we are looking at the Qur'ān necessarily affects the categorization of the particular verses of concern. There are a number of ways to organize these verses; however, I have chosen categories that have a bearing on the purpose of this particular analysis. There are two main categories of criteria that are of primary concern at this point in time: prescriptive verses and descriptive verses.[32] The organization of these categories is based upon overall Qur'ānic agenda of human salvation by means of *islām*. As a result, all verses are couched within the framework of the concept of "God's preference," raising God to the status of what I prefer to call the "Ultimate Signified."[33] By this term I am referring to God's role in human intra- and interaction from the Qur'ānic perspective.

Prescriptive verses are those verses that are essentially divine commands: God's call to humanity for action based upon the necessity of salvation. Commands flow from God to women in three general ways with which we shall concern ourselves: to all of humanity, to women in particular, and to men in regards to their behavior towards women. For immediate purposes the phrase "all of humanity" is inclusive of verses in which women and men are addressed separately but equally; in these cases the text explicitly places the onus of action upon all believers, male and female alike. Also note that I have subdivided the category of human-human commands into gendered terms, as there are unique situations that require careful attention. Within all three of these contexts, I wish to show that the location of women in the text juxtaposed to men is, in most essential aspects, equal to that of men. However, it is still noteworthy that the category of "women" exists by itself within the realm of Qur'ānic scholarship. In this case, it is important to look at the context in which these prescriptive verses occur. Generally speaking, these verses refer to gender-based physiological functions for which

[32] The creation of these categories is also based upon the gendered angle that I am taking in my approach to studying specific verses and then place them within the context of Izutsu's "Koranic *Weltanschauung*."
[33] The term *signified* is used in reference to the direction of human response to God's commands.

men have no counterpart. It is important to note that in many instances, however, particularly with regards to childbirth and rearing, men are not wholly excluded from the equation, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Verses in this category will include, broadly, instruction regarding childbirth, nursing, or menstruation.

The number of verses included in the descriptive category is small. The obvious inclusion would be those verses in which one's behavior and/or beliefs are described. However, depending upon *who* is providing the description, the impetus of the verse changes. God's preference for one type of behavior obviously carries more theological weight than, say, Joseph's or Lot's preferences, from the Islamic perspective. Therefore, the majority of verses in which God's opinion is expressed, by virtue of the fact that they signify God's will, fall under the prescriptive category outlined above. Essentially, if God's will is revealed within the verse, it can be classified as prescriptive. Verses relating to divine preference can be further broken down into two types of verses: explicit commands and implicit commands. Explicit commands, many of which share the grammatical construct of the direct imperative, are directed from God to humankind and demand action of the utmost immediacy. Even a quick scan of the Qur'ān will easily yield a verse of this nature. "**Mankind, heed your Lord Who has created you from a single soul, and created its mate from it**…."[34] Implicit commands include verses in which God places value judgment upon one in regards to his or her actions, but does not verbally require or demand direct action from one. While the command may not be literal, the choice of action of the individual determines his or her eschatological end. Many of these verses are, in essence, verses of "Divine preference." While the actual response that is demanded by God remains tacit, God's will is still explicit within such passages. An excellent example of this verse: "**Yet We will give any of you who is devoted to God and His messenger, and act**

[34] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:1.

honorably, her earnings twice over. We have reserved a generous provision for her."[35] While the women who are spoken to (Muhammad's wives in this particular case) are not commanded to do anything, clearly God shows a preference for one type of behavior above others. This act is recommended but not required: the Prophet's wives were looked favorably upon if they were amenable to behaving themselves and remaining loyal to God and Muhammad. While there is no specific command given in this instance, God clearly shows a preference and this preference has a direct correlation with salvation. Other, more general examples in the text can be found as well: "**We shall let anyone who act honorably, whether it is a man or a woman, provided he is a believer, live a happy life and reward them with their earnings for the finest deeds they have been doing**."[36] Here we can see that there is a preference in one type of behavior over another in terms of one's lot in the Hereafter.

Both of these categories speak to humanity in one of the two ways that I have previously mentioned, and they will be the focus of this project: to human beings in terms of their relationship with God and to human beings in terms of their relationship to one another. These two relationships are of primary importance within the text and are therefore two essential yet fundamentally different modes of expression through which humanity achieves salvation. By this distinction I am referring to verses in which God commands one or more persons with regards to their behavior towards another person or party. These two relationships will heretofore be referred to by terms of my creation, "God-human" and "human-human" commands. In essence, the difference between the two categories is as follows: in the former, God demands action directed towards God. In the latter category, God's demands necessitate action from one human to another, thus making it primarily a human-human interaction rather

[35] Qur'ān, *al-Ahzāb* 33:31.
[36] Qur'ān, *al-Nahl* 16:97.

than a God-human interaction. Both scenarios situate God as the ultimate recipient of the action; based upon this scenario, Ghada Karmi contends that the Qur'ān is essentially two books in one.[37]

From this perspective, the text may be categorized on a grand thematic scale in terms of divine command: verses that are concerned with immediate response to a socio-political context and those that are concerned with more general ethico-religious concepts meant to apply to all of mankind without being bound to a specific context. We will consider an analysis of verses in light of this categorical approach in the proceeding chapter. Regardless of from whom the action is demanded, decrees of either nature may be in regards to action or belief and include both positive and negative moral judgments. *Al-Baqara* 2:35 serves to illustrate as a verse in which God demands action (or inaction, in this case) directly from humans:

> **We said: "Adam, settle down in the Garden, both you and your wife, and eat freely from it anywhere where either of you may wish. Yet do no approach this tree lest you become wrongdoers**.[38]

For contrast, we may look at *al-Nisā'* 4:127:

> **They will consult you concerning women. Say: "God advises you about them, and what is recited to you from the Book concerning orphan women whom you have not given what was assigned to them while you are disinclined to marry them; and minor children, and supporting orphans with [all] fairness. God is Aware of any good you do."[39]**

The latter verse is quite explicit as to whom it refers ,and, as a result, we now have two signified parties involved in this command, although only one party, the men, are the one actually called to action. In this instance, God demands a specific method of interaction with women, thus creating a situation of a human-human command. Note that the latter variety of command does not involve God directing one human being to command another human being. One of the

[37] Ghada Karmi, "Women, Islam and Patriarchalism," 80-81.
[38] Qur'ān, *al-Baqara* 2:35.
[39] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:127.

common misconceptions that people have of women in the Qur'ān is that God commands men, who in turn command women. Juliette Minces is one author who holds such a view: "Father, older brothers, uncles, or guardians, even cousins, exercise absolute authority over the women and girls of the family; then the husband and his family take over."[40]

In addition to verses of the previously mentioned class, we have verses in which human opinion is expressed. These passages tend to be related to a specific story within the text. Verses of this nature tend to have little to no bearing on the Qur'ānic goal of salvation. To combat confusion in this arena, we may use this goal as a yardstick for determining the classification of these verses. In other words: what is the effect of these surahs on human redemption? In some cases, we find that the human opinion expressed is in accordance with God's will as cited in the text. "**When Lot told his fold: 'Do you indulge in sexual misconduct with your eyes open? Do you approach men passionately instead of women? Indeed you are a folk who act out of ignorance**."[41] In this particular excerpt, Lot's opinion is in accordance with God's will, as God punishes the whole town. Still, we have instances in which human preference has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on human salvation; in some cases, God's will is not even of concern. For example:

> **It was not long in coming, and said: 'I have just acquired some information you have not picked up, for I bring you reliable news from Sheba. I found a woman ruling over them, and she has been given everything and has a splendid throne….**[42]

These instances are rare in their occurrence and can be considered negligible with regards to our present concerns. Also included in this category are stories including specific women whose main role appears to be marginal in terms of paradigmatic importance, yet still central to the

[40] Juliette Minces, *Veiled: Women in Islam*. S. M. Berrett, trans. (Watertown, MA: Blue Crane Books, 1994), 27.
[41] Qur'ān, *al-Naml* 27:54-55.
[42] Qur'ān, *al-Naml* 27:22-23.

story. According to Amina Wadud, such "women are inconsequential to the overall Qur'anic purpose of guidance…The Qur'an does not portray them as universal examples."[43]

Women in Qur'ānic Exegesis: a Tradition of Marginalization?

Just as we cannot divorce the text from its historical context, we cannot divorce the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis from a modern interpretation of the text. Wadud has delineated three different trends in Qur'ānic exegesis with regards to women: "traditional, reactive, and holistic."[44] These three categories provided the basis for the three exegetical approaches introduced in the previous chapter. The traditional approach, which correlates to Hasan Hanafi's term of "longitudinal commentary," consists of a linear reading of the text, from beginning to end in the canonized order.[45] The major criticism of this approach is that it provides an obstacle to the interpreter attempting to determine thematic structure; Wadud notes that it is only the male voices that are being heard within the framework of this commentary.[46] Muhammad Bāqir Behbūbī is one commentator who fits into this category. One can easily find male critics of the traditional approach, such as Asghar Ali Engineer, who contends that opponents to reform within the law are either doing so for political/personal reasons or because they believe that *sharī'a*, or Islamic law, is decreed by God and therefore not subject to reinterpretation.[47]

Wadud's second category, "reactive," consist mainly of a group mentioned in the introduction—outsiders who present Muslim women as subjugated creatures and take a position that is starkly negative in reference to Muslim male treatment of Muslim females. Borne of good

[43] Amina Wadud, *Qur'ān and Woman*, 32.
[44] Ibid, 1.
[45] Hasan Hanafi, "Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an," *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 195.
[46] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 2.
[47] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Quran, Women and Modern Society* (New Dehli: Sterling Polishers Pvt. Ltd, 1999), 43.

intentions, this movement seeks to focus on the "plight" of the Muslim woman, yet inevitably ends up robbing women of their fundamental human (and most certainly Islamic) right to be an agent of one's own will and action while portraying Muslim men as demonized caricatures within the context of an overwhelmingly male Islamic theology. Proponents of this line of thought, such as the Western journalists, ultimately come to the conclusion that a feminist interpretation and application of the text is incompatible with Islam as a whole. Unfortunately, this is due mainly to a simple category mistake: such critics fail to make a distinction between *praxis* and doctrine or address the many levels of interpretation applied to such passages in the text. As in the traditional approach, reactive commentators are frequently guided by their own political or social agendas, but the tone of these critics is overwhelmingly anti-Islam: "They use the poor status of women in Muslim societies as justification for their 'reactions.'"[48] In many cases, authors confuse Islamic fundamentalism with Islam at large. Goodwin's book is an example of this tendency; her writings come from her experience as a reporter in Afghanistan, a known Islamic fundamentalist nation at the time with a record as one of the world's worst violators of human rights in regards to women. Afghanistan cannot be assumed to be representative of Islam as a whole just as no one state in America could serve as a representative of beliefs and practices of the entire nation. The danger is that Goodwin continues to make broad generalizations regarding the socio-cultural situation of Muslim women based upon her experiences within this one unique scenario. The further danger is that this highly contextualized perspective is neatly packaged and presented to the Western public as the status quo. In addition to examining traditional exegesis, I would like to present commentaries of this nature, which I

[48] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 2.

realize may garner criticism for the lack of reliability of sources of this nature; they are, nonetheless, worthy of attention.[49]

The final category, within which Wadud places her own work, seeks the perspective of the woman within the framework of the Qur'ānic world view. This holistic approach removes the filters of traditional Qur'ānic exegesis—in this particular instance, the Islamic experience of women as filtered through the eyes of men. Wadud proposes "to make a 'reading' of the Qur'an from within the female experience and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations."[50] My intent is essentially a corollary to Wadud's proposition: I would like to look at the Qur'ān from both a Muslim and non-Muslim female perspective with the intent of eliminating Western stereotypes of women in Islam. For this reason I will focus some attention on the stereotypes at work for much of the current Western interpretation of the topic at hand. In this section I intend to present all three perspectives of Qur'ānic interpretation for comparison, where possible.

[49] At this point, it is important to note that some of the reactive commentators are not held in high esteem by Muslims or academics in terms of Qur'ānic sciences. The interpretation of the Qur'ān is a rigorous process requiring excellent language cognitive, and deductive skills as well as a strong command of Islamic theology—many commentators spend the majority of their lives working on it. The "reactives," for our purposes, include the well-meaning journalists and others, many of whom are Western and very few of whom are Muslim or have any background in Islamic Studies. As I noted in the introduction, these reactives are the ones producing the literature that is most readily available and easily accessible to outsiders. It is for this reason that I would like to provide examples of this type of commentary alongside that of Muhammad Asad, 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Ali, Majid Fakhry and other more reputable scholars as we are also examining the Western view of women in the Qur'ān and the misconceptions of and incompatibility with the Qur'ānic view of women.

[50] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 3.

CHAPTER 3

PRESCRIPTIVE VERSES

Introduction

Now that we have outlined the goals and methods of this analysis, we shall turn to the text of the Qur'ān. This chapter will demonstrate how prescriptive verses regarding women do not serve to subjugate women. We must first discuss in greater detail the different "voices" of commentary that will accompany each verse. I have modeled these categories on Amina Wadud's categories of commentary as described in the previous chapter.

There are several key issues of debate over the status of women in the Qur'ān: inheritance, marital roles (including polygamy), divine preference, veiling and the concept of female rebellion (*nushūz*) are the current major topics among Islamic feminist discourse, as well as Western feminist dialogue on the subject. The latter group has demonstrated a trend in portraying Muslim women as disempowered agents, often infantilizing them. The essential problem with Western perspectives of gender in the Qur'ān lies within our tendency to jump to conclusions before placing divine decree within a socio-historical framework while simultaneously using Western female progress as the yardstick by which we measure. It does not work because the histories are distinct. Western feminism has historically been within the secular realm whereas Muslim feminism clearly falls within the religious. Our long tradition of separating church and state colors our perspective on the female experience in the Muslim world. However, the Muslim feminist approaches the Qur'ān from a female perspective in an effort to find a fresh interpretation and application of law that is both modern and meaningful because it is

from this law, the Qur'ān, that much of the modern law in the Muslim world is derived. In many ways this means reclaiming, renaming, and redefining different aspects of Muslim life for women. For Western scholars of Islam, this means restructuring our presuppositions in a manner that reflects the agency and autonomy of Muslim women. This proves difficult as Qur'ānic verses regarding gender seem to foster an atmosphere of inequality on the surface. In each of these distinct situations, women are clearly given a fraction of the rights and/or more restrictions than men have in these same instances. This section will examine some of these controversial *ayāt* (verses) and provide a brief survey in scholarship on these verses. My intent is to illustrate not only how traditional Muslim exegesis has contended with the issue of women's rights in Islamic law as well as how feminist scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have addressed the same issues. Many of the verses contained within this section have proven to be problematic for feminist approaches to the Qur'ān, and many authors and scholars have been quite vocal about this situation. However, I would like to show that, when studied in conjunction with the socio-historical situation of the particular revelation, we can find flexibility within the scripture with which we can shape a positive space for women within Qur'ānic exegesis that has long been absent from traditional scholarship.

Gender and the Divine: Explicit Differentiation and Equality

One of the most frequent occurrences of women in the Qur'ān is within verses in which women and men are addressed equally. There are three primary ways in which the Qur'ān addresses women and men as a single entity: with the masculine plural and as separate categories. The latter group may be further categorized, as we shall discuss. As the Arabic language is a gendered language (i.e. masculine and feminine varieties of verbal conjugations

and nouns), groups of mixed gender are referred to in the masculine plural, whether there is only one female in the group or one-half of the group is comprised of women. Qur'ānic commentators do not traditionally interpret the use of the masculine plural to the exclusion of women.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are some verses in which women are mentioned with men as a category; this is done in one of two ways. First, it is quite common within the text to find *ayāt* which address men and women separately but equally:

> **God has promised to believers, whether they are men or women, gardens through which rivers flow to line in for ever, and goodly dwellings in the gardens of Eden. Yet approval by God is greatest; that will be the supreme Achievement![51]**
>
> **Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, devout men and devout women, truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, reverent men and reverent women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, and men who safeguard their private parts and women who safeguard [theirs], and men who remember God often and women who remember [Him]—for [all of] them God has prepared forgiveness and a splendid wage.[52]**

This latter context I have taken to be an "all-inclusive" one in which the text takes pains to point out that the command applies to both categories without exception, regardless of gender. In other words, the text calls one's attention to the gender distinction in order to illustrate the insignificance of gender on the grander theological scale. The second manner in which both genders are addressed is a bit of a stumbling block for Qur'ānic interpreters sensitive to the woman's position in the text: one can find verses in which men are seemingly given rights and privileges over women. *Al-Baqara* 2:282 is one such passage, and it addresses the mode of operation in the case of contracting a loan:

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[51] Qur'ān, *al-Tawbah* 9:72.
[52] Qur'ān, *al-Ahzāb* 33:35.

> **…If the borrower is feeble-minded or incapacitated or cannot manage to dictate himself, then let his guardian dictate it in all fairness, and seek out two witnesses from among your men-folk to act as witnesses. If there are not two men [available], then one man and two women [may serve] as witnesses from anyone you may approve of, so that if either of them should slip up, then the other woman may remind the other.[53]**

Engineer notes that the traditional interpretation of the worth of a woman's word being one-half that of a man is falling more and more under the critical eye of Islamic feminists, and traditional Qur'ānic scholars are stepping away from this tradition.[54] This verse is frequently taken out of context in order to support the idea that Islam is inherently misogynistic. Let us see what happens once we contextualize this *ayāt*. The verse is very explicit in the type of situation to which it refers to, which is contracting debts or making loans. This verse is of economic concern as laws of Islamic banking are based upon *al-Baqara* 2:282. The woman's role within this *ayāt* is of secondary concern on the greater scale of the Qur'ānic world view. Traditionalists have applied this one specific situation in a general way, rendering it so that a woman's testimony is less than that of a man's in all scenarios of both civil and criminal nature. Modern interpreters insist that this application of such a unique situation limits women and that its original intent "refers to financial matters only and its application cannot be extended to non-financial matters."[55]

Male-Female Dynamics in Marriage

Generally speaking, one of the most obvious ways in which to determine the status of women in comparison to men is within the realm of matrimony. The way in which the Qur'ān approaches marriage can tell us much about male-female dynamics and the general view of the

[53] Qur'ān, *al-Baqara* 2:282
[54] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Quran, Women and Modern Society*, 76.
[55] Ibid, 77.

treatment of women from the perspective of the text. In most traditional commentary on and translation of verses involving marriage, men and women are addressed on equal footing:

> **Among His signs is [the fact] that He has created spouses for you from among yourselves so that you may console yourselves with them. He has planted affection and mercy between you; in that are signs for people who think things over.**[56]

> **And of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy. Surely in that are signs for a people to consider.**[57]

We can see from both of these translations that women and men are addressed and commanded equally—there is no pronoun referent which determines the gender of the audience being specifically addressed in this verse. However, other translators give a more specific (and in many respects, more literal) translation of the word *azwāj*:

> **And among His Signs is this, that He created for you *wives* from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed signs for a people who reflect.**[58]

Azwāj is the plural form of *zawj*, which can mean either husbands or wives depending upon context, but carries the notion of one in a pair, or couple. It literally means spouses or mates. While the last translation renders a somewhat more technically correct translation of the word *azwāj*, it is simultaneously limiting. In this instance, translation becomes precarious in that the translator has made the decision to locate the word in a particular semantic niche when in reality it is a much more fluid concept. This is a common event in Qur'ānic translation; however, other commentators approach the text from a completely different angle which appears to place the verse within a far more gender-neutral context. Behbūdī gives an interesting spin on the verse with his interpretation:

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[56] Qur'ān, *al-Rūm* 30:21.
[57] Qur'ān *al-Rūm* 30:21, Arberry.
[58] Qur'ān *al-Rūm* 30:21, Al-Hilali.

> **Another of God's Signs is that He created mates for you from among your own kind so that your mind and body might find peace and tranquility with them. He established love and mercy between you and your *fellow men* so that you might coexist in peace and harmony…**[59]

In this instance, Behbūdī translates the plural possessive pronoun suffix (-*hum*) to mean "your fellow men," and not just husbands and wives or men and women. While the first half of the *ayāt* refers to men and women, the second half could be interpreted in one of two ways: either "fellow men" could refer to men and only men, or it could be referring to humanity at large in much the same way that we refer to human as "mankind." The latter definition is most likely what is intended by this rendering of the verse as the former contradicts the general spirit of the Qur'ānic worldview. While the tone of the last translation was of a very different nature in terms of our own immediate concerns for this analysis, I would like to illustrate that many interpretations of this verse espouse equality between partners. Another example: "**And of His Signs is that He created for you, from yourselves, spouses to settle down with and He established friendship and mercy between you…**"[60]

The foundations for equality in marriage appear to be neatly laid out by the text. However, there are a number of verses that have proven to be problematic for women in the specific situation of marriage. Polygyny, the marriage of one man to two or more women, is a practice condoned in the Qur'ān:

> **If you are afraid you will not deal fairly with orphans, then marry off such women as may seem good to you, in pairs, or three or four [at a time]. If you [still] fear you will not act justly, the [marry] one woman [only] or someone your right hand controls. That is more likely to keep you from committing an injustice.**[61]

[59] Qur'ān *al-Rūm* 30:21, Turner.
[60] Qur'ān *al-Rūm* 30:21, Fakhry.
[61] Qur'ān *al-Nisā'* 4:3.

This particular verse is a favorite of critics bent on pointing out inherent Islamic misogyny. Anwar Hekmat refers to the practice as a "humiliating institution." Frequently critics cite many cases in which the husband takes another wife in order to have sons when the wife had provided only daughters or simply because the husband wanted a younger, prettier wife.[62] There are two basic interpretations of this verse, and they both agree that polygyny, according to the Qur'ān, is legal under Islamic law. The traditionalists claim that God unequivocally intended for Muslim men to be polygamous. Even more conservative interpreters claim that Muslim men may take more than one wife—regardless of stipulations of justice. More moderate commentators claim that this practice is highly conditional: marriage of up to four wives is permissible only if the husband is capable of treating each wife "justly." The exact definition of this word, as we shall see in a moment, is quite fluid and has provided room for a variety of commentaries on the verse.

Another factor influencing exegesis on this verse is context: many scholars stress the fact that in many ways the Qur'ān is specific with regards to behavior at certain points in history but that the details of these contexts were not intended to be universal. Specifically, this verse is reported to have been revealed shortly after the Battle of Uhud in which many of the women were left without husbands and therefore without protection: "The Koran permitted polygyny only in exceptional cases, principally for war widows, whom the Prophet feared would become impoverished or 'unprotected' once their husbands were dead."[63] Others contend that the verse specifically relates to the treatment of orphans and that the word "orphans" actually refers to female orphans specifically and exclusively, and marriage to them became an option in order to insure their inheritance and dowry rights: "Some male guardians, responsible for managing the wealth of orphaned female children, were unable to refrain from unjust management of that

[62] Anwar Hekmat, *Women and the Koran* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 129.
[63] Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, 33.

wealth (4:2)."[64] In a more general context, some scholars maintain that the verse was intended to protect women. While invoking the historical situation during the time of the specified revelation is one way in which moderates have interpreted this verse, others have a different view. Wiebke Walther argues: "Modern Muslims often interpret this verse as essentially an exhortation in favor of monogamy, since at another point the Koran states that a man who is married to several wives at the same time cannot be equally just to all of them."[65] The verse Walther refers to is *al-Nisā'* 4:129:

> **You will never manage to deal equitable with women no matter how eager you may be [to do so]; yet do not turn completely aside [from one] so you leave another in suspense. If you (all) come to terms and do your duty, God will be Forgiving, Merciful.[66]**

Walther makes a case against the unquestionable acceptance of polygyny by stating that *al-Nisā'* 4:3 ultimately reflected the Prophet's concern and tenderness towards orphans, as he himself was one.[67] From any perspective we can see that once we take the socio-historical context into account, the verse becomes less of a threat to the agency of wives and more of a temporary solution to a dangerous social situation created by the havoc of war. Asghar Ali Engineer supports Walther's claims: "Thus it was with a view to protect the interests of orphans and widows that polygamy was permitted with certain stringent conditions."[68]

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[64] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 83.
[65] Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam*. C. S. V. Salt, trans. (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1993), 57.
[66] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:129.
[67] Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam*, 57.
[68] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, 10.

Preference and Submission: an Analysis of a Qur'ānic Paradigm

Another of the more problematic *ayāt* for modern scholars is *al-Nisā'* 4:34, with which many have a difficult time reconciling due to the use of two words: the noun *qawwam* and the verb *faddala*.

> **Men are the ones who should support women since God has given some persons advantages over other, and because they should spend their wealth [on them]. Honorable women are steadfast, guarding the Unseen just as God has it guarded. Admonish those women whose surliness you fear, and leave them alone in their beds, and [even] beat them [if necessary]. If they obey you, do not seek any way [to proceed] against them. God is Sublime, Great.**[69]

Other commentators portray the physical punishment of a wife as a course of last resort: "**…As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) spank them (lightly)…**"[70] However, the two words of primary concern for this section are *qawwam* ("protectors") and *faddala* ("preferred"). We will return to the latter portion of this verse latter in this chapter. Barbara Stowasser confronts the text by framing it within an historical context, that of early ideas of the family structure in Islam as presented by Muhammad Abduh, a turn-of-the-century theologian from Egypt. "The husband's qiwama over his wife consists not of acts of tyranny but of guidance toward righteous behavior, education, domestic efficiency, houseboundness, and fiscal responsibility to his budgetary guidelines."[71] The man is granted dominion of the domestic realm in terms of providing a safe and stable environment in which to raise a family. Many scholars argue that since the husband is, in most cases, the primary income-earner, he is, by default the protector of those for which he provides. His status as the breadwinner is offset by

[69] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:34.
[70] Qur'ān *al-Nisā'* 4:34, 'Alī.
[71] Barbara Stowasser, "Gender Issues and Contemporary Quran Interpretation," *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35.

the fact that women bring their dowry, provided by the husband, to the marriage.[72] Ghada Karmi takes note of the immediately surrounding verses (concerning the economic role of certain groups within society) and comes to a similar conclusion: "It is not unreasonable, therefore, to see it only as a part of an economic arrangement suited to the time when it was written."[73] Many Qur'ānic interpreters render a translation complementary to this notion. Rashad Khalifa[74] presents a reading of this verse along the same vein as Stowasser's:

> **The men are made responsible for the women, since GOD endowed them with certain qualities, and made them the bread earners. The righteous women will cheerfully accept this arrangement, and observe GOD's commandments, even when alone in their privacy….[75]**

His commentary is as follows:

> This expression simply means that God is appointing the husband as "captain of the ship." Marriage is like a ship, and the captain runs it after due consultation with his officers. A believing wife readily accepts God's appointment, without mutiny.[76]

Muhammad Asad renders the same general meaning in his translation:

> **MEN SHALL take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions. And the righteous women are truly devout ones, who guard the intimacy which God has [ordained] to be guarded….[77]**

However, there are commentaries of a very different tone, such as Behbūdī's:

> **Men are the protectors of their women, for they surpass them in strength intellectual acumen and social skills. A male doctor is better than a female doctor, a male labourer better than a female labourer, and so on. Furthermore, men are the protectors and maintainers of their women, for it is the men who must provide dowries and support their women financially**

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[72] Ibid, 33.
[73] Ghada Karmi, "Women, Islam and Patriarchalism," 74.
[74] Rashad Khalifa is a controversial interpreter who has been declared a heretic by the Sunni sect of Islam for declaring portions of the Qur'ān as fraudulent additions. He also declared himself to be a prophet, in direct conflict of the Islamic tenet that Muhammad is the final prophet of God. He was killed in 1990 for his radical beliefs.
[75] Qur'an, *al-Nisā'* 4:34, Khalifa.
[76] Rashad Khalifa, trans., *Quran: The Final Testament* (Tucson: Islamic Productions, 1989), 84, cf.
[77] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:34, Asad.

> **throughout their married life. Therefore, it is incumbent upon righteous women that they obey their husbands.**[78]

Initially, Behbūdī's commentary has a distinctly misogynistic tone, as nowhere does the text address the intellectual capabilities (or incapabilities, in this case) of women, particularly in relation to those of men. In fact, this verse by itself stands as one of the very few verses in the Qur'ān in which men and women are addressed in hierarchical terms, and it is a curious verse. One can easily find far more verses addressing men and women as equal partners in terms of human relations and in religiously responsibilities. With this information at hand, one is led to wonder from what sources Behbūdī culled his information on the inferior nature of women, especially since the Qur'ān itself, in a broader thematic context, does not address women in this manner. In *al-Nisā'*4:1, the text explicitly states the opposite of what Behbūdī posits refer to an earlier verse:

> **Mankind, heed your Lord Who has created you from a single soul and created its mate from it, and propagated so many men and women from them both. Heed God through Whom you hold one another responsible, as well as any ties of kinship. God is watching over you.**[79]

We can see that, once again, in one verse the Qur'ān summarizes the relationship between wife and husband. It is a bond of equal partnership in which they support one another through faith. Husbands and wives are viewed as a source of strength and comfort on the path of life. Particularly in the relationship between husband and wife, the Qur'ān stresses mutual love, respect, and support: "**Among His signs is [the face] that He has created spouses for you from among yourselves so that you may console yourselves with them. He has planted affection and mercy between you; in that are signs for people who think things over**."[80] From this passage we can see that women and men are equally bound to one another emotionally

[78] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:34, Turner.
[79] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:1.
[80] Qur'ān, *al-Rūm* 30:21.

within the context of a marriage; they are to provide in the same manner for one another. The same holds true for other familial bonds between men and women. It makes no difference how the man is related to the woman; he is still enjoined to treat her with tenderness and respect.

In spite of the body of literature supporting the idea that men and women are equitable partners, we must turn our attention back to Behbūdī and to another word in *al-Nisā'*: *faddala*, or preferred. This word plays an important role in Behbūdī's exegesis in that it introduces a degree of inequality on quite a large scale. Essentially, the specific phrase of concern translates into: "**…God preferred some of them above/over others**."[81] While the specific gender of the "some" and "others" remains unclear when taken out of context, we must remember that immediately prior to this phrase the verse declared men *qawwamūn*—protectors—of women. A question emerges: why does the Qur'ān refer to women as subordinate to men in this verse yet adamantly affirms the notion of equality and partnership between the sexes in other verses? To answer this, Wadud addresses this issue by closely examining the Arabic text. She contends that this preference, which is doubtlessly a divine one and not human, is highly contextual and cannot be taken as a universal ruling that men are generally preferred over women. In fact, Wadud continues, a literal translation renders two genderless pronouns.[82] What many translate into gendered terms ("men are preferred over women," as cited above, is really much more vague: God prefers some of them over others of them. No gender distinction is made in this specific instance. Wadud contends that the interpretation of this verse as a dictum of gender inequality is erroneous: women ensure the continuation of humanity through their role as child-bearers and thus it is fundamentally important to protect them and provide for them everything they may need. Wadud takes this idea one step further: "For simple balance and justice in creation, and to

[81] This is my own translation from the original Arabic text without the added pronoun inferences of most commentators. "Them" is presented in the masculine plural.
[82] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 71.

avoid oppression, his responsibility must be equally significant to the continuation of the human race."[83]

Some moderate Islamic Qur'ānic commentators have approached this verse from a different angle. Muhammad Abdul-Rauf contends that Muslim men have rights over women since they are traditionally the financial providers of the family. He claims that requiring (not allowing) women to be financial contributors to the household will lead to conflict between the couple and goes against his view of feminine nature.[84] He continues to say that in spite of this, women are still allowed to contribute to the household, but only by their own volition—the husband should never require a wife to support the family. Abdul-Rauf, in his rendering of the verse, supports the idea of the male-headed household based upon "inherent" gender differences—men have a "tougher nature" and are imbued with a "sense of manliness," while women fundamentally crave security.[85] This traditional portrayal of the two genders is not unique to Islam by any means. Western men and women have been assigned these same roles by society. Western feminists have fiercely criticized this hierarchy. However, it would appear that some Westerners, while throwing off the mantle of these stereotypes at home, continue to impress them upon Muslim women in much more limiting ways than Muslim men such as Abdul-Rauf. Jan Goodwin states:

> From the time a girl is five or six, preparation for the only acceptable role for her—wife and mother—begins. She is groomed to be a good wife: docile obedient, and self-sacrificing. She will learn that her brothers come first in everything, and that even her younger ones hold sway in her life.[86]

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[83] Ibid, 71.
[84] Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, *The Islamic View of Women and the Family* (Alexandria, VA: Al-Saadawi Publications, 1995), 28.
[85] Ibid, 28.
[86] Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor*, 45.

Commentaries such as Goodwin's and Abdul-Rauf's are something of an anomaly when placed within the sphere of Qur'ānic exegesis and even within Islamic feminism. For every opinion such as Goodwin's, one may find scores of commentaries to the contrary. The examples cited above are just a small sampling. In order to demonstrate the overall gender equality as exemplified in the Qur'ān, we must examine the historical situation of the time of revelation, as in the case of veiling.

Modesty, Veiling and Gender

The topic of veiling in Islam is one of the most controversial and highly visible within the realm of Islamic gender studies. Muslims and non-Muslims alike have berated this age-old tradition. I first would like to take a look at one of the key words in this section: *hijāb*, veil, barrier or covering. This word is derived from the verb *hajaba*, meaning to cover or veil; the definition is fairly straight-forward. Scholars overwhelmingly agree that veiling existed before the emergence of Islam, usually practiced by the noble class within Mecca, but it was also existent in other countries that later fell under Islamic rule, such as Persia:[87] "In the Ancient Near East, among the Assyrians and Babylonians, the veil was a symbol of class distinctions. It was the right of free women to wear it."[88] Leila Ahmed discusses veiling as a practice of the upper class, generally within cities, and its primary significance was that of social status. She also points out that it was only the Prophet's wives who were required to veil, or speak to one from behind a curtain.[89] The actual logistics of veiling are, surprisingly, only loosely defined within the Qur'ān, as we shall see.

[87] Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam*, 70.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 55.

There are a few main verses of interest for this section: *al-Nūr* 24:30-31 and *al-Ahzāb* 30:53:

> **Tell the believers to avert their glances and to guard their private parts; that is chaster for them. God is Informed about anything they may produce. Tell believing women to avert their glances and guard their private parts, and not display their charms except what [normally] appears of them. They should fold their shawls over their bosoms and show their charms only to their husbands, or their fathers or their fathers-in-law, or their own sons or stepsons, or their own brothers or nephews on either their brothers' or their sisters' side; or their own womenfolk, or anyone their right hands control, or male attendants who have no sexual desire, or children who have not yet shown any interest in women's nakedness. Let them not stomp their feet in order to let any ornaments they may have hidden be notices. Turn to God, all you believers, so that you may prosper![90]**
>
> **You who believe, do not enter the Prophet's [private] quarters unless and invitation has been extended to you for a meal, though still without watching how it is prepared. However, once you have been invited, then go on in; and once you have been fed, then disperse, not indulging in conversation. That has been disturbing the Prophet and he feels ashamed [to tell] you so. Yet God is not ashamed [to raise] the Truth. Whenever you ask (his wives) for any object, ask them for it from behind a curtain. That will be purer for your hearts as well as for their hearts. It is not proper for you to annoy God's messenger, nor ever to reveal anything or hide it, God is Aware of everything.[91]**

It is necessary to include the entirety of these verses in order for us to gain an appreciation for context. These are the three verses pointed to in support of female veiling, or *hijāb*. Let us start with the latter verse.

Fatima Mernissi contextualizes this verse by outlining the particular social situation which prompted the revelation—a situation concerning Muhammad, his new wife Zaynab and his companion Anas Ibn Malik: "The Prophet had just gotten married and was impatient to be alone with his new wife…He was not able to get rid of a small group of tactless guests who remained lost in conversation. The veil was to be God's answer to a community with boorish

[90] Qur'ān, *al-Nūr* 24:30-31.
[91] Qur'ān, *al-Ahzāb* 30:53.

manners…"[92] This verse is said to have been revealed when Muhammad entered his nuptial chamber, letting a curtain fall between him and Anas Ibn Malik. However, Mernissi contends that this immediate context alone is not enough to explain why the Prophet, known as a patient man by most reputable accounts, would suddenly behave out of character and define separate gendered space among Muslims when he was known to have been equitable with not only his wives, but women in general. According to Mernissi, the verse was revealed within a context of military failure (immediately following the Battle of Uhud) and provided guidance at a time of relative political disorganization—hence the final section on forbidding anyone to marry the Prophet's wives after his death: "In addition to the incident about the lack of politeness of the guests at the wedding [referring to the idea that they had overstayed their welcome], it seems that the *hijāb* came to give order to a very confused and complex situation. The *hijāb* was to be the solution to a whole web of conflicts and tensions."[93] Leila Ahmed contends that, according to varying accounts, some of the Prophet's Companions touched the hands of his wives, thus necessitating a revelation making Muhammad's wives *harām*, or forbidden.[94] By any account, many modern Islamic scholars agree that this verse referred to Muhammad's wives exclusively and came about in the political situation of a religious leader who was gaining favor and power: "By instituting seclusion Muhammad was creating a distance between his wives and this thronging community on their doorstep—the distance appropriate for the wives of a powerful leader of a new, unambiguously patriarchal society."[95]

The first verses quoted in this section are those from which the '*ulama* draw their support for the modern practice of veiling in Islam. There is a variety of commentary from all sides

[92] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1991), 86.
[93] Ibid, 92.
[94] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 54.
[95] Ibid, 55.

regarding the reasons for and implications of *al-Nūr* 30-31. Let us return to Behbūdī's translation and commentary:

> **Tell the female believers among you that they too are to lower their gaze when in the company of others and preserve their own modesty. They are not to make display of either their natural beauty or their artificial ornaments: their legs are to remain covered, except for those parts exposed naturally when walking, and they are to keep their hair covered with a scarf or shawl which should be tied or pinned under their chin…**[96]

Behbūdī is clearly much more explicit in defining what should be covered; however, none of his particulars are included in the actual text. The bulk of his translation of this verse is, in fact, his own commentary, which strays from the original nature of the verse--particularly when compared to numerous other commentaries on the same verse, many of which fall more closely in line with Irving's translation. Commentators who seek to render this verse in a more egalitarian light claim that *al-Nūr* 24:31 was revealed in order to protect women, not oppress them. The Muslim women of Medina were advised to veil as it distinguished them from prostitutes and thus saved from unwarranted harassment by those seeking fleeting pleasures.

Among the "reactive" commentators on veiling, the predominant attitude is that the practice is one which primarily seeks to oppress women. Juliette Minces portrays the practice of veiling as an anachronistic hold-over that is the direct result of Islamic society's collective arrested development.[97] In the same vein, many others insist that the veil is nothing more than a visible symbols of Muslim women's oppression—these cries have come from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Engineer believes that the far-reaching interpretations of these verses used to support "cultural practices like confining women to the home…."[98] While many critics point to *al-Nūr* 24:31 to support the idea of Islamic misogyny, many fail to note that the verse

[96] Qur'ān, *al-Nūr* 24:31, Turner.
[97] Juliette Minces, *Veiled*, 58.
[98] Asghar Ali Engineer. *Islam, Women and Gender Justice*, 41.

immediately preceding addresses men and their call for modesty by God. Men, just as the women, are commanded to "**lower their gaze and guard their modesty**."[99] In fact, the exact same grammatical construct and vocabulary (allowing for adjustments in the gender referent) are used to command men and women to modesty in *al-Nūr* 24:30-31. So if men and women are commanded the same in these verses, how is there an inherent inequality in God's call for modesty from Muslim women and men? The fact of the matter remains that textually there is no difference. However, centuries of patriarchal notions of women's roles in society have contributed to the interpretation of these verses as more strict for women than for men. Indeed, much of the commentary focuses on female modesty rather than that of the male. In this practice, we see a universal stereotype of women emerge. A range of commentators maintain that women are the guardians of sexuality and have a certain "carnal" power over men. Advocates of women's Islamic equality and misogynists alike use this same argument to support their theories. Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, for example, refers to women in the following manner in his explication of female modesty:

> A woman is a sweet creature, and can easily be seductive. Her gaze can be seductive; so is her voice, her gait, her bosom, her legs and the form of her feet and shape of her ankles. If you leave a sweet thing uncovered, you will be inviting swarms of dirty creatures to prey upon it and corrupt it.[100]

This argument, the general concept of which is not at all foreign to Western feminists, places the onus of society's sexual responsibility upon the women. The men are portrayed as weak-willed, unable to contain their carnal desires; therefore, it is up to the decidedly more asexually-inclined women to tell the boys "no." What has become more apparent in recent years is that this form of interpreting sex roles is detrimental not only to women, but to men as well. "The political

[99] Qur'ān, *al-Nūr* 24:30, 'Ali.
[100] Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, *The Islamic View of Women and the Family*, 26.

ideology of the Islamic state views men as the weaker partner and in need of protection to control their sexual desire."[101] It is interesting to note that this is a role reversal compared to other verses placing men as the protectors of women. In fact, this interpretation of the role of women in terms of sexuality oddly places women in a position of supreme power: women control the very event that produces life and ensures the continuation of culture and religion.

Disobedience and Marriage

In terms of the Qur'ān's egalitarian message, a large blow appears to be dealt when we turn to *al-Nisā'* 4:34:

> **Men are the ones who should support women since God has given some persons advantages over other, and because they should spend their wealth [on them]. Honorable women are steadfast, guarding the Unseen just as God has it guarded. Admonish those women whose surliness you fear, and leave them alone in their beds, and [even] beat them [if necessary]. If they obey you, do not seek any way [to proceed] against them. God is Sublime, Great.[102]**

We have already discussed at length the first half of this verse; we will now turn our attention to the latter half, specifically the word Irving translates as "beat": *wa-dribū*. In Arabic the verb from which it is derived means to beat or strike or to turn away or separate. In this particular conjugation, it is in the imperative with a plural feminine pronoun affix to signify the direct object of the action. Even the most liberal translators translate the word as "strike." Others, such as 'Alī, render "spank them lightly."[103] This verse is a favorite of critics of Islam, especially since it is in the imperative form and specifically refers to women. Included in most books on Islam written by Westerners, particularly women, is at least one personal account of domestic

[101] Zahra Kamalkhani, *Women's Islam: Religious practice among women in today's Iran* (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1998), 135.
[102] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:34.
[103] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:34, 'Alī.

violence perpetrated by a husband or father. While I have maintained that the predominant Western feminist view of Islam as misogynistic is founded upon a conflation of extreme situations and selective empirical sampling, this section is in no way intended to trivialize the experience of those victims of domestic violence, whether religiously motivated or not. Perhaps the apparent focus on *Islamic* domestic violence by Western writers is essentially motivated by modern-era reactions to emergence of spousal abuse as an alarmingly common attribute of a sizeable portion America families as well. Speculations aside, the topic of "wife beating," as it is commonly referred to, remains a sensitive topic to Muslim women, as noted by Geraldine Brooks.[104]

This verse is curious in light of other passages in the text which stress good will and kind treatment between spouses, many of which have already been discussed earlier in this chapter. While we have already established that analysis of *hadīth* are beyond the realm of this paper, we can also find many *hadīth* in which the Prophet disdains spousal abuse. Asma Barlas notes that the "Qur'ān did not force even the wives of the Prophet to obey him, nor did he force obedience on them; no, indeed, did he deal with marital discord by abusing or beating them."[105] Why then a Qur'ānic injunction allowing for violence against women? Wadud, along with Barlas, once again points to the social context of the *jāhiliyya* in order to explain this verse. The injunction was not, according to them, intended to create the option of beating one's wife as a means to achieve marital harmony. Rather, it was an injunction *against* abuse as a first resort, which may have been quite common in the *jāhiliyya*. The goal of *al-Nisā'* 4:34 was to present a reasonable

[104] Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, 193.
[105] Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, 187.

means of matrimonial reconciliation without resulting to violence; rendering it "not permission, but a severe restriction of existing practices."[106] Barlas contends "that *dharaba* is a symbolic, and not a punitive gesture…"[107]

Under what circumstances may a wife be punished by physical means? The term that Irving translates as "honorable women" is *qanitāt*, "obedient" in the feminine plural. Wadud, Engineer and Barlas all claim that many Qur'ānic commentators translate this word as specifically meaning obedience to the husband. This interpretation does not seem to be implied in the Arabic text; as Engineer asks, "obedient to whom?"[108] One such example of this commentary is demonstrated by Behbūdī: "**…Therefore, it is incumbent upon righteous women that they obey their husbands…**"[109] Anwar Hekmat indulges in a similar interpretation of the word *qanitāt*, although he does so with the intent of vilifying Qur'ānic codes of marital conduct and even introduces his discussion of the term with the example of a woman rebelling by not responding to her husband's sexual advances—which is not even remotely referred to in the original text.[110]

Wadud notes that the word *qanitāt* occurs elsewhere in the text, in reference to both men and women.[111] Verses of example include *al-Baqara* 2:238, *al-'Imrān* 3:17, and *al-Ahzāb* 30:35. In each of these passages the term refers to obedience specifically to God—no mention of obedience to another human, man or woman. From these similar contexts, we can deduce that *qanitāt* in *al-Nisā'* 4:34 refers to obedience to God, contrary to Behbūdī's exegesis.

[106] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 76.
[107] Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women"*, 188.
[108] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Quran, Women, and Modern Society*, 56.
[109] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:34, Turner.
[110] Anwar Hekmat, *Woman and the Koran*, 215-216.
[111] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 74.

The second term of concern is *nushūz*, translated as rebellion or disobedience. Once again, commentators who hold that *qanitāt* refers to the wife's obedience to the husband maintain that *nushūz* is specifically the wife's rebellion against the husband's wishes. However, the word is also used to refer to men in *al-Nisā'* 4:128 in a similar context:

> **If some woman fears abuse or desertion [*nushūz*], it should not be held against either of them if they should try to come to terms: coming to terms is best, while greed is ever present in [our] souls. If you act kindly and do your duty, God will be Informed about anything you do…**[112]

Wadud claims that since the same word is used to refer to both men and women, it cannot be implied that women's rebellion is specifically in relation to her husband's will. These attempts at explaining such a difficult passage within a text that promotes equality and kindness between the sexes are somewhat futile as the real question is much bigger: why does the text advocate a man beating a woman, rebellious or not, and why is the reverse situation not addressed? Wadud, Barlas, and Engineer all declare that the bottom line is that *daraba* is in the text, and this particular text is considered to be the literal word of God for Muslims.

Scholars of Islam, I think, have taken for granted the foundations of the revelation of the Qur'ān, that it is the direct word of God. Western scholarship has raised questions on the authorship of the text, and from an academic perspective sacred texts are regarded as the product of the hearts and minds of a people, not a god or gods. The Muslim account of the compilation of the Qur'ān places the actual process as having occurred during the rule of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph from 634-644 and father of Muhammad's wife, Hafsa. Many of the commentators discussed here have mentioned that 'Umar was rather misogynistic based upon historical reports. Engineer couches his discussion of 'Umar's attitudes within the framework of the Qur'ān's bestowal of basic rights on women, unheard of in *jāhiliyya* times.

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[112] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:128.

> Before Islam, male-domination in Arabia was, like other societies, absolute and unquestionable. Despite this the Islamic revolution sought to empower women and recognized her as an individual legal entity and gave her various rights which were until then never given to her in her own right. It was not easy to get empowerment of women accepted by that society. Even eminent companions of the Prophet like 'Umar found it hard to accept it. 'Umar, it is reported, used to beat his wife.[113]

Fatima Mernissi reports that 'Umar was "still under the influence of pre-Islamic customs" and "had to act rapidly and severely to see that a key idea of Islam, the patriarchal family, became rooted in the minds of the believers."[114] Leila Ahmed gives similar support to such claims of 'Umar's character: "He was harsh toward women in both private and public life: he was ill-tempered with his wives and physically assaulted them, and he sought to confine women to their homes and to prevent their attending prayers at the mosques."[115] In light of this portrait of 'Umar and the fact that he most likely had a hand in the compilation of the Qur'ān, it is a possibility that the canonization of *al-Nisā'* 4:34 was the direct result of 'Umar's opinion and influence, rather than Muhammad's. If this case were to be true, it would explain the apparent discord between reports of the Prophet admonishing his community against cruelty to their wives and such an inflammatory scriptural verse. Mere speculation, however, does not explain the implications, of the verse and the rise of fundamentalist interpretations to the detriment of women leave out the possibility of an examination of authorship. It is my opinion that this verse will continue to be a "thorn" in the side of progressive Qur'ānic commentary until scholars are more willing to confront issues of authorship. Safia Amir is one such scholar who questions the Muslim account of the compilation of the text. Referring to 'Umar and 'Uthman's involvement in the formation of the Qur'ān: "In the face of this overwhelming evidence can it be claimed that

[113] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women, and Modern Society*, 61-62.
[114] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 60.
[115] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 60.

interpolations have been made in the Qur'an and that too by the pious and learned men who took upon themselves the onerous task of codifying Islamic law."[116]

[116] Safia Amir, "The Qur'an on Women." *Muslim & Arab Perspectives* 3 (1996): 404-408, 406.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTIVE VERSES

Introduction

The language used to describe someone or a group of people is one of the most valuable tools we have to provide information on the attitude towards a person or group. While descriptive verses concerning women may not necessarily inform us of modes of salvation according to Qur'ānic criteria, the use of women as peripheral characters within the text can provide important clues to the overall view of women in the Qur'ān. Verses included in this chapter are not commonly addressed by Western authors on Muslim women. There could be a multitude of reasons for this apparent omission, some of which may be pared down to simple Western unfamiliarity with the content of the text. In any case, we will narrow our focus to one particular theme of Islamic eschatology: Companions in the Garden. I have chosen not to concentrate on every peripheral female character within the Qur'ān. As an explanation, I would like to reference the discussion on Qur'ānic world-view. The description of many peripheral female characters has no bearing on the goal of salvation for humanity nor are they even described in anything other than a neutral tone. Yet I am including them because examining how women are talked *about* in the text will help us understand the overall Qur'ānic view of women. Following is a brief discussion of these characters and their role in the Qur'ān.

Peripheral Characters in the Text

Many of the verses allocated to the descriptive category deserve justification. The following verse regarding Mary will serve as an introductory example: "**Someone called out to**

her from below where she was: 'Don't feel so sad! Your Lord has placed a brook at your feet. Shake the trunk of the datepalm towards you so it will drop some fresh dates on you. Eat and drink, and refresh yourself…."[117] Clearly, Mary is commanded in this verse, yet it falls within the realm of the descriptive for our purposes of study. Once again, I refer to the yardstick of salvation with which verses are measured against for our purposes: does the verse, in relation to the women situated therein, have any bearing on the Qur'ānic goal of salvation? In the case of Mary, the answer is, overwhelmingly: no, particularly when her entire story is included in the surah *Maryam*. The role that Mary plays in the text is not necessarily a role intimately linked with the Qur'ānic view of women in general. The thematic content of *Maryam* is not specifically attached to the fact that she is female; her story in the text serves to illustrate the importance of her role in the event of prophecy, being the mother of Jesus. Commentators are quick to point out that Mary is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'ān.[118] "There are 70 verses that refer to her, and she is named specifically in 34 of these (24 in relation to Jesus, son of Mary)."[119] Mary's description in the Qur'ān also serves to emphasize the differentiation between the Islamic view of Mary as juxtaposed with the Christian view.

> It re-presents the "Christian" story of Jesus' mother and does so to differentiate the Qur'ān's claims from Christian ones. The Qur'ān desires primarily to reject any notion of divine paternity for 'Isā (Jesus)—as implied in the concept of trinity.[120]

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[117] Qur'ān, *Miryam* 19:23-24
[118] Ahmad Zaki Hammad, *Mary the Chosen Woman: The Mother of Jesus in the Quran* (Illinois: Quranic Literacy Institute, 2001), 3.
[119] Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary." *Muslim World* LXXIX, nos. 3-4 (July/October 1989): 161-187, 162.
[120] Loren D. Lybarger, "Gender and Prophetic Authority in the Qur'ānic Story of Maryam: A Literary Approach." *The Journal of Religion* 80, no. 1 (January 2000): 240-270, 242.

Companions in the Garden

One particular theme of importance for this section on descriptive verses is that of Companions in the Hereafter. For many Qur'ānic commentators, these Companions are often designated as female, which is why I chose to include this thematic category in this analysis. These verses, scattered throughout the Qur'ān, describe the rewards of the righteous in the afterlife. Several examples follow, with surrounding verses included for contextual purposes:

> **This is a Reminder; those who do their duty shall have a fine retreat, gardens of Eden whose gates will swing open for them! Relaxing there, they will call for much fruit and drink in them. With them there will be bashful mates equal in age to them. This is what you were promised on the Day of Reckoning; this is Our provision which will never be used up.**[121]
>
> **The heedful will be in a safe position among gardens and springs. The will wear satin and brocade as they sit facing one another, just like that; and We will wed them to dark-eyed damsels.**[122]

These verses, as noted before, are scattered throughout the Qur'ān and are only loosely connected. The term that appears to be the most favored by commentators is "Companions"—this term is used in most passages in reference to heavenly partners promised to those who do good deeds. However this same term is used even when the Arabic term varies. It is important to note that there are other verses discussing the "Companions of the Garden" but this category is separate from those of our concerns. In these passages, the term *ashābu-l-jannah* is used to designate those who will be rewarded for doing God's will.[123] The term "Companions" noted initially refers to the ones who await the righteous in heaven. Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad refer to this group as the *mu'mināt*, in gendered terms, but the *mu'min*, as the male

[121] Qur'ān, *Sād* 38:49-53.
[122] Qur'ān, *al-Dhukhān* 44:51-54.
[123] Examples, see: *al-A'rāf* 7:42, *al-Furqān* 25:24, *Yā Sīn* 36:55.

believers are referred to, are included in the *ashābu-l-jannah* as well.[124] *Ashābu-l-jannah* is an anthropological category whereas other terms such refer to an ontological (eschatological) category, one of primary concern for this section of the analysis. I would like to focus on three of the Arabic terms used in reference to the translation of "Companions": *hūri 'ayn*,[125] and *azwāj mutahharah*.[126]

The term *hūri 'ayn* is difficult to translate. The verb *hāra*, from which *hūri* is derived, means to decrease or reduce. *'Ayn* simply means "eye." Smith and Haddad claim that the term "literally means having eyes with marked contrast of black and white."[127] However, many commentators and dictionaries alike render the word *hūri* as "virgin of Paradise" or a very similar wording of the phrase. Al-Hilālī gives an example of the angle in his *tafsir*: "**So (it will be), and We shall marry them to *Houris* (female fair ones) with wide, lovely eyes**."[128] Behbūdī presents a similar translation: "**Reclining on couches, facing each other, a round table of delights before them. And We will provide for them doe-eyed companions of lustrous form and impeccable character.**"[129] These passages are curious within the Qur'ān in their translation; the implications of portraying an eschatology with preference towards men's desires only creates an uneven heavenly reward system between men and women: "In general, the depictions of Paradise are meant to entice the readers towards the afterlife."[130] These verses have also caused concern for Western feminists, who posit such verses as an example of the Qur'ānic tendency to appeal to men over women in terms of reward in the afterlife. Juliette Minces declares:

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[124] Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, "Women in the Afterlife: The Islamic View as Seen from Qur'ān and Traditions." *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XLIII, no. 1 (March 1975): 39-50, 41.
[125] Examples, see: *al-Dukhān* 44:54, *al-Tūr* 56:20, a*l-Wāqi'ah* 56:22.
[126] Examples, see: *al-'Imrān* 3:15, *al-Nisā'* 4:57.
[127] Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad. "Women in the Afterlife," 40.
[128] Qur'ān, *al-Dukhān* 44:54, al-Hilālī.
[129] Qur'ān, *al-Dukhān* 44:54, Turner.
[130] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 52.

> The descriptions of Paradise in the Koran are in themselves indicative of what the ideal society should be. Women are present there only for the pleasure and enjoyment—especially the sexual pleasure and enjoyment—of the pious and virtuous men who have succeeded in entering this marvelous garden.[131]

Such claims as to the position of the text on the matter of the afterlife are contrary to the Qur'ān's message of salvation for all. This analysis has already explored the Qur'ānic world-view in terms of salvation. In terms specific to the Islamic concept of reward in the afterlife, we can find a number of passages that address men and women on equal ground, such as "**Anyone who performs honorable deeds, whether it is a man or a woman, provided he is a believer, those will enter the Garden and not be harmed a speck**."[132] Context provides important clues for the reasoning behind a female-exclusive interpretation of the Gardens of Paradise.

The descriptions of heaven and hell are an integral part of this view as foreknowledge of one's potential fate can be a powerful motivational factor. In this case, the descriptions of the Companions in the Garden can be seen as an image used by the text to speak to the pre-Islamic Arabs in terms that they would understand. Wadud points to *jāhiliyya* connotations of the word and claims that the description of the *hūri* is used to communicate with pre-Islamic Arab society in terms that they could understand. The image of the chaste, large-eyed virgin was put forth in order to inspire those of the *jāhiliyya* towards righteousness. In order to understand this explanation, it is important to note that the verses containing the term *hūri al-'ayn* are from the Meccan period: "After the Makkan period, the Qur'an *never* uses this term again to depict the companions in Paradise. After Madinah, it describes the companions of Paradise in generic terms...," by use of the words *zawj* and *azwāj*.[133] Smith and Haddad are in agreement with Wadud's position and maintain that in later *surahs* (including some later Meccan verses) the

[131] Juliette Minces, *Veiled*, 25.
[132] Qur'ān, *al-Nisā'* 4:124. See also *al-Tawbah* 9:68, 71, 72; *al-Ahzāb* 30:35, 73; *al-Hadīd* 57:12, etc.
[133] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 55.

"Companions" refer more and more to the *mu'mināt*, the female believers and not the *hūri*.[134] Indeed the Arabic words used in the verses from different periods of revelation supports such a claim, as Wadud illustrates: there is a shift from the use of the term *hūri al-'yin* to *azwāj mutahhara*.

I have already discussed the meaning of the word *azwāj*: spouses, with no specific gender reference. The word *mutahhara* is derived from the verb *tahara*—to be clean or pure. The addition of *mu-* at the beginning of the root renders an agent who is maintained in such a state of existence—one who has been purified. The translation for this phrase is straight-forward: "purified spouses." Once again, the gender of the spouses is unclear and can be taken to be inclusive of both husbands and wives. From this translation, we can see that in the afterlife, the believers will be joined to their spouses in heaven. Wadud notes: "It is important to clarify that most authors assume every use of the word *zawj* is equal to, or the same as, the *hūri*…."[135] We have already determined that both men and women are commanded similarly in terms of salvation in the text. In fact, there are many more verses addressing both genders equally in terms of the afterlife than there are verses focusing on these "Companions" of the afterlife.

> **So their Lord responded to them: "I shall never waste the work of any worker among you, whether it is a man or a woman. Some of you [have sprung] from others. I shall remove their evil deeds for those who have migrated and were driven out of their homes and mistreated for My sake, and have fought and were killed; and I shall admit them to a Garden through which rivers flow, as a prize from God Himself. God holds the finest prize![136]**

[134] Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad. *Women in the Afterlife*, 41.
[135] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 57.
[136] Qur'ān, *al-'Imrān* 3:95.

My servants, you have no need to fear today nor should you feel saddened;
[tell] those who believe in Our signs and are committed to [live in] peace:
"Enter the Garden rejoicing, both you and your spouses!"[137]

We can see that the term *azwāj* refers to the term spouses, in this case purified in the afterlife and offered as a reward for the righteous, be they male or female. Some commentators, including Wadud, introduce the possibility of the Believer being reunited with his or her earthly spouse in heaven.[138]

One of the reasons Qur'ānic commentators have traditionally appropriated the female gender to the companions as a result of one particular passage in *al-Wāqi'ah*: "**We have produced special women and made them (ever) virgins, easy to get along with of and of their same age**."[139] The term translate as "ever virgins" is *abkārān*, derived from the verb *bakara*, meaning to be early, or to start off early. The term here translates into "virgins," but can also mean new or unprecedented—it does not exclusively refer to sexual purity. This is one of merely two passages in the Qur'ān which refers to the companions in such gendered terms.[140] The phrase "we have produced special women" in verse 35 is a particular grammatical construct called the cognate accusative in which the verbal noun is repeated after the corresponding verb for emphasis. The verb *ansha'a* means "to create;" it is the plural pronoun suffix to this verb (*hunna*) that renders the female gender assigned to the *abkāran* in verse 36. As a result of this gender assignment, the literal translation of theses *ayāt* point to a view of the hereafter which

[137] Qur'ān, *al-Zukhruf* 43:68-70.
[138] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 55.
[139] Qur'ān, *al-Wāqi'ah* 56:35-37.
[140] However we can find one example in which *female* virginity specifically is portrayed as a virtue in the afterlife: *al-Rahmān* 55:74. The verse specifically relates to the companions referred to in verse 70. Irving translates the verse "Whom no human being has tainted previously, nor any sprites?"[140] The word "tainted" corresponds to the Arabic verb *yatmithhunna* which is the third person masculine jussive form (with a plural feminine pronoun suffix) of the verb *tamatha*, to menstruate or to deflower. The affix of *–hunna* at the end of the word designates the virginal companions as female.

seems to appeal to men rather than women. In defense of this assertion, ʻAbdullah Yūsuf ʻAlī references his translation with the following explanation:

> **The pronoun in Arabic is in the feminine gender, but lest grosser ideas of sex should intrude, it is made clear that these Companions for heavenly society will be of special creation—of virginal purity, grace, and beauty inspiring and inspired by love, with the question of time and age eliminated. Thus every person among the Righteous will have the Bliss of Heaven and the Peace of Allah.**[141]

ʻAlī's interpretation of the virgins is largely symbolic; perhaps this language can be explained once again by assertions such as Wadud's in which the text portrayed certain situations in light of the audience that the Qur'ān was initially addressing: *jāhiliyya* Arabs. From both perspectives the specific gender in this verse is regarded as relatively meaningless and simply a gesture towards cultural relativism for the sake of the Islam's promise of salvation. Cases in which gender distinction plays the role of excluding the wishes and desires of one particular gender can be read as largely symbolic and applied to the population in general, male and female. Other commentators appear to echo this sentiment in their translations of these verses. Behbūdī renders these *ayāt* as follows: "**And there are heavenly companions, ever created anew in perpetual virginity, loving and faithful to their (earthly) spouses…**"[142] Majid Fakhry delivers a similarly non-gendered reading: "**We have formed them originally; and made them pure virgins, tender and unageing**."[143] A reading of verses regarding the companions in the afterlife is to be done symbolically according to many commentators, while keeping in mind the historical framework within which the Qur'ān was revealed.

[141] Qur'ān, *al-Wāqi'ah* 56:35, ʻAlī.
[142] Qur'ān, *al-Wāqi'ah* 56:35, Behbūdī.
[143] Qur'ān, *al-Wāqi'ah* 56:35, Fakhry.

The Believing Women

Outside of peripheral characters and nameless individuals (with the exception of Mary), we find in the text numerous *ayāt* referring to women in general that are generally descriptive, often in reference to "believing women." It is important to note that many of theses passages are also descriptive of men in much the same way. We have already encountered the verses on modesty in *al-Nūr* 4:30-31 in which men *and* women are commanded to act in the same manner. On a broader theological scale we have the example of *al-Ahzāb* 30:35 in which the righteous, both male and female will attain their reward in the afterlife. The majority of verses within the Qur'ān referring to women do so in a general sense, portraying them as examples. Wadud notes: "For the most part, the Qur'anic consideration of woman on earth centres on her relationship to the group, i.e. as a member of a social system."[144] As stated earlier, many verses will use the feminine and masculine version of a noun in the same verse, offering equal guidance while creating a gender distinction.

> **Believers, whether men or women, must [act as] friends to one another; they should command decency and forbid wickedness, keep up prayer, and pay the welfare tax as well as obey God and His messenger. Those God will grant mercy to; God is Powerful, Wise![145]**
>
> **Flog the adulterous woman and the adulterous man with a hundred lashes, and do not let any pity for either party distract you from [complying with God's religion if you believe in God and the Last Day. Have a group of believers witness their punishment.[146]**

This particular occurrence can be seen to offer clarity by thoroughly defining the applicable groups to which the command or promise refers to. Ahmad Aziz Khalil uses *al-Nūr* 24:2, above,

[144] Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 34.
[145] Qur'ān, *al-Tawbah* 9:71.
[146] Qur'ān, *al-Nūr* 24:2.

as a specific example of how the Qur'ān uses both genders in order to make it clear that it no one is exempt from the laws of God.[147]

However, the verses which refer specifically to women are not the only verses that concern the women. Again, as I noted at the beginning of this work, the masculine plural can be and is used to refer to a group of mixed gender. Ahmad Khalil Aziz refers to this form (for both verbs and nouns) as the "generic masculine."[148] Most instances of the use of the masculine in the Qur'ān are considered to be examples of the generic masculine. If this were not the case, half of the population (the women) would be exempt from most important religious obligations, as many of the text's large-scale directives employ the use of this form. "This is the Book which contains no doubt; it means guidance for those who do their duty."[149] The masculine plural form is used for "those who do their duty." If one takes this verse to refer solely to men they have committed themselves to a Qur'ānic ideology which is exclusively masculine, which contradicts the Qur'ānic world-view of a message of guidance for all of humanity. "You need not ask them for any payment for it; it [serves] only as a Reminder to [everybody in] the Universe."[150]

The descriptions of women in the Qur'ān generally depict women in a positive light. In the specific case of companions in the afterlife, we can see that, as with many of the examples in chapter three, situating the verses in historical context reveals the purpose behind portraying women in such a fashion. In the grander Qur'ānic world-view, women are addressed equally with men.

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[147] Ahmad Khalil Aziz, "Gender Patterns in the Quran: A Sociolinguistic Approach." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 12, no. 3 (1995), 309-319, 316.
[148] Ibid, 315.
[149] Qur'ān, *al-Baqara* 2:2.
[150] Qur'ān, *Yūsuf* 12:104.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This manner of analysis was rather unorthodox in its approach in that it relied upon commentary from a wide range of groups, each with their own agenda, defined at the beginning by my categories of commentators. My purpose in doing this was to place commentaries on individual Qur'ānic verses side-by-side in order to compare these agendas and make a critique of them. This perspective was placed within the framework of the Qur'ānic world-view, using salvation as the yardstick by which to measure the gravity of verses relating to women in the text. By presenting a socio-historical framework for the event of revelation for particular verses, I demonstrated that the role of Muslim women in Islamic scripture is on equal footing with the men's role. It is true that there are troublesome passages that become quite difficult to explain from the stance that the Qur'ān is the uncontested, inimitable word of God. Providing an historical context for such passages can certainly explain how gender reform was relatively progressive in many instances, such as in the case of Wadud's explanation of *daraba* and *nushūz*. However, from this perspective the Qur'ān is supposed to be universal not only diachronically, but synchronically as well: the text is a manual of directives for the rest of human history as it was considered to be God's final revelation to humanity. No other scripture is to follow; it can never be updated. Such problematic verses may be understood from the outsider's perspective if we examine the authorship of the Qur'ān and the personalities involved in its compilation. Yet the position of Western scholars and that of Muslim scholars such as Wadud's (and even Mernissi's) are irreconcilable due to the issue of the authenticity of the divinity of the Qur'ān.

This fundamental difference in viewpoint is where much of the tension

between the confessional and academic/Western approaches to the topic of women in the Qur'ān lies. The synchronic view of the attitude towards women in the text is progressive for its time: by outlawing practices such as female infanticide and granting women rights previously denied to them such as inheritance and marital rights, the Qur'ān becomes a paradigm of gender equality. Safia Amir points out "that the Qur'an assured equal rights for woman more than fourteen centuries back…"[151] Diachronically, however, a few of the verses regarding women appear outdated with modern progressive views of gender roles. While the Qur'ān imposed justice for women (and children) where before there was none (as in the *jāhiliyya*), the historical picture shows that women's space has been confined or restricted in the public sphere, as John L. Esposito notes.[152] There appears to be a discrepancy in some cases between the Qur'ān's message of equality and the actual treatment of women. An analysis of such a dissonance is beyond the scope of this project, but is certainly a consideration for future research. The goal of this thesis was to examine the role of gender within the text itself, not its concurrent application. This was done in response to the many writers who point to the Qur'ān as being inherently misogynistic and claiming that practices detrimental to women are based solely upon scripture, and are not the result of socio-cultural factors or specific historical situations. Still more revealing on the Islamic view of women is the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad, unfortunately also beyond the scope of this work yet still central in determining the status of women in Islam outside of the Qur'ān. A careful analysis of Muhammad's *hadīth* is certainly a consideration for future research. However, the overall message of the Qur'ān is one of salvation and guidance for the righteous—male or female. If this is the case, why does the vast majority of literature on the topic highlight the subordination and mistreatment of Muslim women by the hands of men in the

[151] Safia Amir, "The Qur'an on Women," 404.
[152] John L. Esposito, "Introduction." *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiii.

name of Islam? To answer this question, we must turn our attention to the views of Western scholars and writers from an historical perspective.

Modern Western presentations of Muslim women are in many ways, I think, rooted in the historical cultural relationship between the West and the Middle East. I have already briefly introduced the concept of Orientalism as a localized form of cultural hegemony. From a long history of Western colonialism and imperialism (perpetrated first by the French and British, and now the United States), a metanarrative emerges concerning Muslim women. Mohja Kahf states in her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*:

> The core narrative itself, whittled to one sentence for working purposes, is this: the Muslim woman is being victimized. There are variations on the narrative: the woman may be a willing accomplice, or she may be escaping her victimization. But "the Muslim woman is being victimized" is the common axis undergirding a wide variety of Western representations. The narrative about the Muslim woman is so diffuse as to be a part of conventional wisdom in the Western world.[153]

This metanarrative is so widespread that it has garnered the force of fact for much of the Western world. The "plight" of Muslim women appeared on the radar of mainstream Western feminist politics just after the emergence of Second Wave feminism in America in the 1960's and 1970's reacting to the idea of the victimization of Muslim women. As the situation of women in Islam is rooted in religion for much of the West, discourse on the subject in couched within the context of divine command and preference. It is for this reason that I chose to look at Islamic scripture exclusively for my analysis. One of the most obvious oversights in mainstream discussions on Muslim women is the lack of examining parallels in religious views of women outside of Islam. Dr. W.A. Criswell, a well-known conservative Christian maintains that women are not allowed to be preachers or take any active role in church leadership or politics.[154] The Christian

[153] Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman¨ From Termagant to Odalisque* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 1.
[154] *Battle for the Bible*, prod. and dir. Gail Pellett, 60 min., Pacific Arts Video, 1992, videocassette.

conservatives are criticized by many Western feminists for attempting to limit the personal rights of American women in the name of religion, yet no one discusses the "plight" of Christian women. Fringe groups (such as abortion clinic bombers, whose actions are decried by many conservative Christian organizations) even resort to violence to preserve the ideal of the American family, yet no one mentions the extremism of Christianity in terms of the treatment of women except in a few cases.[155] This apparent discrepancy is, I think, a result of the ideological disconnect between current modes of presenting Muslim women and the long history of regarding the "East" from within an exclusively Western framework.

Many of the stereotypical characteristics of Muslim women portrayed by the Orientalists (subservience, for instance) form the basis for the Western feminist stance on the topic. These images have been further promulgated by the media, including the books written by journalists used in this analysis. The most interesting feature about this reaction is that it is a result of images that the West propagated. In other words, Westerners are reacting to an image of women in Islam that they themselves have created at an earlier point in history. In many ways, it is Western women who are reacting to a model posited by Western men. Modern Western perspectives on Muslim women seem largely ignorant of the connection between the historical phenomenon of Orientalism and current mainstream portrayals of women in Islam. In modern times, this image has even been used to justify political actions by the West, namely the United States, as Moja Kahf states: "…during Operation Desert Storm…the narrative of the Muslim woman was activated to round out the story of the need for a civilizing American presence in the Gulf."[156] The same narrative was invoked during the American invasion of Afghanistan as well. In these instances, the representation of Muslim women, which is the product of Western minds,

[155] For several articles on Christianity and violence towards women, see *Transforming a Rape Culture* edited by Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth.
[156] Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, 2.

are used to justify further acts of political, military, and/or cultural domination, under the guise of friendly assistance or intervention. Western scholars and writers have created an image of Muslim women that maintains a certain flexibility in that it can be used to continually define the culture of the Middle East as relatively uncivilized. The most recent modes of this perspective center on women in Islam, used to bolster support for the notion that the West is far more civilized than the East. The reasons for the specifically Western images of Muslim women may be rooted in a subconscious need for cultural domination rather than genuine concern for the situation of women in Islam. Further exploration into this argument is a consideration for future studies on the representations of Muslim women.

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