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WOMEN AND THE ADVENT OF ISLAM

LEILA AHMED

Probably 'Aisha rather than Khadija should be counted the first woman of Islam. Khadija, the wealthy widow who employed Mohamad to oversee her caravan (trading between Mecca and Syria) and proposed to and married him when she was forty and he twenty-five, was already in her fifties when Mohamad received his first revelation and began to preach Islam. 'Aisha, on the other hand, was born to Muslim parents and betrothed to Mohamad when she was a child and he in his fifties and already launched on his prophetic career. Khadija rightly occupies a place of first importance in the story of Islam itself because of her importance to Mohamad's life: it was her wealth that freed him from the need to earn a living and enabled him to lead the life of contemplation that was the prelude to his prophethood; and her support and confidence were crucial in his venturing to preach Islam.

To place Khadija at the beginning of the story of women in Islam—where she is regularly placed—is, however, misleading. She was after all for most of her life a Jahilia (pre-Islamic) woman, shaped by Jahilia ways, and her life and outlook exemplified Jahilia—not Islamic—attitudes and

Wherever possible I have used editions that give an English translation as well as the Arabic text.

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practices: her economic independence, her initiating of her own marriage, and not even needing, apparently, a male guardian to act as intermediary (as was to be required by Islam), her marriage to a man many years younger than herself, and her remaining with him in a monogamous marriage (Mohamad had no other wife till after her death), all must reflect *Jahilia*, not Islamic, practice. Conspicuously, too, such features are distinctly not typical either of Mohamad's marriages after he became the established prophet and leader of Islam, nor of Muslim men's since. It is 'Aisha, surely—betrothed to the prophet when she was six, married at about ten, and, soon after, when the Koranic verses on veiling and seclusion were revealed, to become along with her co-wives the first Arab woman to observe the new Islamic customs of veiling and seclusion—it is she who, properly, should hold the place of first woman of Islam. Destined to become an authority whose pronouncements remain valid to this day on the proper conduct of Muslims, consulted even in matters of Muslim law, it is her life and not Khadija's which in outline at least bears the unmistakable imprint of the new Islamic outlook. The difference between their lives and, in particular, the differences in the degree of control and autonomy they exercised with respect to marriage encapsulate and foreshadow the changes that Islam would effect for women in Arabia.

It is axiomatic that the establishment of Islam was momentous in its consequences for women, and yet though the general subject of women in Islam has generated a vast literature, it is still exceedingly difficult to discover what in fact Islam's impact was for women, despite the fact that the issue is ideologically central to any discussion of the subject of women in Islam, contemporary as well as historical. Partly, the subject being so ideologically charged, it has tended to generate a literature of assertion rather than evidence. Muslim apologists and New Muslim circles declare that Islam accords women a status unsurpassed in other cultures and religions, and that unquestionably in its own day it improved the condition of women. They declare that it banned the *Jahilia* practice of female infanticide, gave women the unprecedented right to inherit property, and, in permitting men up to four wives, curbed a previously rampant polygamy. Such claims are often reiterated in well-meaning Western works on women in Islam, a recent one, for instance, declaring that "in the pre-Islamic era there was no question of a woman being an heir"—self-evidently a claim meriting fuller investigation in light of Khadija's financial independence.¹ Women's inheritance, indeed, may have been a custom in Mecca, and there are other instances of Meccan women trading, like Khadija, in their own right.²

¹ Wiebke Walther, *Woman in Islam* (London: George Prior, 1981), 33.

² Asma' bint Mukharibah, for instance, Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat*, ed. E. Sachau, in *Biographien*, 9 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1904), 8:220. See also W. Montgomery Watt, *Mohamad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 290.

The genuine difficulty of construing, at this distance, what exactly occurred in that society, particularly given the perplexing and controversial nature of the available evidence, is also perhaps a reason for the subject's neglect despite its obvious importance. On the basis of that evidence, for example (to give some idea of both how complex and how controversial its potential implications), one early scholar concluded that pre-Islamic society had been matriarchal and that Islam therefore had displaced a matriarchy to institute a patriarchal order.³ In more recent times a leading Western Islamicist has put forward a modified version of this theory: gathering together the evidence for the pre-Islamic practice of uxorilocal marriage, and of the practice, in some parts of Arabia, of polyandry, he suggests not that pre-Islamic Arabia was matriarchal but that it was a predominantly matrilineal society, in which paternity was of little or no importance, and that the society was in the process of changing, around the time of Mohamad's birth (ca. 570. C.E.), from a matrilineal to a patrilineal society—a change that Islam was to consolidate. The change from matriliney to patriliney was occurring, it is speculated, because of Mecca's commercial growth over the fifth/sixth centuries and the progressive sedenterization of its previously nomadic dominant tribe, the Quraysh. This led to the breakdown of tribal values and, in particular, of the tribal notion of property as communal, now displaced, as dominant traders accumulated wealth, by the rise of individual property. Men now wished to pass on property to their offspring, which gave new importance to paternity and led eventually to the complete displacement of matriliney by patriliney.⁴

Today the evidence cannot be regarded as lending support to the theory of a matrilineal system once having prevailed throughout Arabia. However, the fact that the sexual/marital arrangements of pre-Islamic Arabia were very different from those of Islam cannot be disputed: indeed, it is well known that the area in which Islam introduced the greatest reform was that of marriage and sexual relations, a large proportion—perhaps 80 percent—of Koranic rulings being devoted to regulating marital relations and the conduct of women. That is, the establishment of Islam was marked by the institution of new sociosexual norms to at least the same extent as by the institution of a new religion and polity.

The changes in male/female relations instituted by Islam thus appear to have occurred against a background of an Arabia in which both matrilineal and patrilineal systems, and the diverse sociosexual arrangements they

³ W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885).

⁴ Watt, 272–73. More recently Chelhod has suggested that the change represented, in part, the spread of the matrilineal practices of a sedentary South Arabia to the nomadic, patrilineal tribes of the north. Joseph Chelhod, "Du nouveau a propos du 'Matriarcat' Arabe," *Arabica* 28, fac. 1 (1981): 76–106.

entailed, were in practice. In the changes it instituted in this area, as indeed in other areas, Islam appears to have consolidated a trend of change already under way in Arabia, particularly in Mecca: a Mecca in which, as a result of its commercial expansion, the entire fabric and institutions of living of the old nomadic order were undergoing change. This in no way preempts, however, Islam's radical innovativeness in its specificity.

External sociocultural influences following from Mecca's new openness, as a result of its expanding trade, to the wider ancient world, as well as the internal pressures of economic and social change would have played a part now in shaping the outcome of this transformative moment. Meccan trade linked Syria and the Byzantine empire to the north with Yemen and Ethiopia to the south. This meant increasing Meccan contact with and exposure to the culturally and materially more advanced, powerful world to the north, growing exposure to its predominating religions, Christianity and Judaism, and to its sociosexual arrangements (as well as with those of Persia): all at this point distinctly patriarchal. Thus, well before Mohamad began to preach Islam, an Arabian form of monotheism (its practitioners called *hanifs*) had appeared. External cultural influences perhaps had a part in the growing shift away from uxorilocal practices such as Mohamad's own background exemplified: Mohamad's mother, Amna bint Wahb, having remained with her clan after her marriage to 'Abdullah, who would visit her there; Mohamad, whose father 'Abdullah died before his birth, passed to the care of his paternal kin only after Amna's death, which occurred on her way back from a trip to Medina in the company of a female slave, Umm Ayman, and her six-year-old son.⁵ Mohamad's own grandfather had been extracted from his mother's clan and appropriated by his father's only with difficulty.⁶

Conceivably in uxorilocal, matrilineal marriages such as those that existed in Arabia at about the time of Mohamad's birth or a little earlier, women as well as men might have more than one spouse. A woman "marrying" and remaining with her clan might also marry and receive visits from other men (paternity not being important since the children belonged in any case to the maternal kin), just as men might "marry" and visit a number of women.⁷ It is known at any rate that there was no single, fixed institution of marriage at the time of the advent of Islam and that a variety of types of union were practiced by both women and men. Al-Bukhari reported on the authority of 'Aisha that marriage in the Jahilia was of four types, one of these being, according to 'Aisha, "the marriage of people as it is today," while two of the other types she describes were polyandrous.⁸

⁵ Ibn Sa'd, 1, 1, 73.

⁶ Watt, 375.

⁷ Ibid., 275.

⁸ Al-Bukhari, *The Translation of the Meaning of Sahih*, Arabic and English, trans. Muhammad M. Khan, 9 vols. (Medina: Dar al Fikr, 1981), 7:44. Here and below I have translated the Arabic rather than followed the precise wording of Khan's rendering.

Evidence for Medina indicates that many men had two and sometimes three wives and also that as many women had two and sometimes three or even four husbands. While we do not know if the multiple marriages in these cases were consecutive or concurrent, examples of distinctly polyandrous marriages are known for both Mecca and Medina.⁹ Also, although polygyny as well as polyandry was a custom, the type of polygyny endorsed by Islam (wherein a man marries and maintains a number of women in one or more establishments) seems to have been an innovation of Mohamad's: there is no evidence of its having been a practice in Medina, and if there were instances of it before Mohamad's initiative, it was clearly not widespread.¹⁰ Divorce and remarriage appear to have been common for both men and women, with women as well as men able to initiate divorce. *Kitab al Aghani* reports: "The women in the Jahilia, or some of them, divorced men, and their [manner of] divorce was that if they lived in a tent they turned it round, so that if the door had faced east it now faced west . . . and when the man saw this he knew that she had divorced him and did not go to her."¹¹ Divorce was not generally followed by the 'idda or "waiting period" for women before remarriage—an observance Islam was to insist on—and although it appears to have been a custom for a woman to go into retirement for a period after her husband's death, it seems to have been laxly observed.¹²

It was against this background of varied marriage customs that the specific lineaments of Islamic marriage were gradually defined. The Koran was revealed piecemeal in the course of Mohamad's life, and the majority of the laws on marriage and divorce and those directly affecting women's status were revealed after the Muslims had become an established community in Medina with Mohamad as the acknowledged religious/secular leader. Even at the early stages, however, the institution of a type of marriage insisting on the recognition of paternity as the Islamic type of marriage was evidently part of the Islamic message. The pledge of allegiance to Islam, later formalized in the Koran, sura 60:13 (known as the Pledge of the Women: the men's pledge differing only in that it included the duty of defense) seems from its earliest stages to have included a pledge to refrain from *zina*, a term usually rendered as "adultery." What *zina* meant before Islam—in a society in which a number of different types of union were legitimate—is not clear. The men of Taif, for example, complained when conquered by Mohamad and taking the oath to Islam, that *zina* was necessary to them since they were merchants (for them, in other words, it was a practice to which no stigma was attached), and one woman's

⁹ Ibn Sa'd, vol. 8: "Hind," 231; and "Buraida" 251. See also Watt, 277–79, 376–77; Gertrude Stern, *Marriage in Early Islam* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1939), 61–62, 172–73.

¹⁰ Watt, 277–79; Stern, 62.

¹¹ Abu'l Faraj al-Isfahani, *Kitab al Aghani*, 20 vols. (Bulak, 1285 A.H./1868), 16:106.

¹² Stern, 139–43.

indignant response when taking the oath, “Does a free woman commit *zina*?” has been understood to mean that she felt that any union a free woman entered into could not be termed *zina*.¹³ At the time of its first use in Islam, then, the term may have referred to other types of marriage, including the polyandrous, and to forms of “temporary” marriage also practiced in the Jahilia and which Islam would outlaw. ‘Aisha, in her remarks about the different types of Jahilia marriages, concludes: “When Moḥamad (God bless and preserve him) was sent with the Truth, he abolished all the types of marriage [*nikah*] of the pre-Islamic period . . . except the type of marriage [*nikah*] which people recognize today.”¹⁴ The fact that in prohibiting adultery and sexual misconduct generally Islam was outlawing previously accepted practices is presumably among the reasons for the otherwise surely extraordinary Koranic ruling (4:16) that four witnesses should be produced to convict anyone of these crimes. The ruling suggests both that those engaging in practices being designated by Islam as sexual misconduct were engaging in them with some openness (the openness appropriate to relatively accepted rather than “immoral” or prohibited practices) and that Moḥamad realized that such practices could not be instantly eradicated.

Islam’s institution of one form of marriage as the sole legitimate form and its outlawing of all others would precipitate, the material surveyed in the following pages suggests, dramatic social change. The particular type and specific lineaments of the form of marriage it rendered the exclusively normative form was of decisive importance: a type of marriage based unambiguously and categorically on the privileging of male right, father right, and the abolition not only of customs clearly incompatible with this, such as polyandry, but also of customs—such as women’s right to initiate divorce—which in any way encroached on the unqualified endorsement of male precedence with respect comprehensively to all matters of divorce, plurality of wives, and right to offspring. That this became the normative form of Islamic marriage would be crucial, would be the pivotal point precipitating transformation in the relations between the sexes. It would also lead to the foreclosing of freedoms, activities, and roles that had been open to Jahilia women.

In tracing out the impact of Islam on women, I have tried to include material that might convey a sense of women’s lives at the time, tangibly and practically—what tasks they performed and how they participated in the community’s life: facts ultimately also relevant to the larger investigation. The source material—accounts of the Prophet’s life, of early Muslims, and the Hadith (Traditions), for example—is replete with such information: early Muslim historians, eager to record all they could about the Prophet

¹³ Watt, 384; Ibn Sa‘d, 8:4.

¹⁴ Al-Bukhari, 7:45–46.

inevitably also recorded material involving women. Even texts incorporating commentary on Koranic verses include such material, in that they give accounts of situations that "occasioned" the revelation of particular verses, situations, such as those bearing on the verses on veiling and seclusion, often involving women and in particular Mohamad's wives.

It is noteworthy that in its account of pre-Islamic customs, this early material is material that has already been ideologically edited from an Islamic standpoint. All the material we have on the Jahilia dates from at least a century after Mohamad's death and thus was written down by Muslims (the term "Jahilia," usually translated as the "Age of Ignorance," was the name Muslims gave to that period). For example, when Ibn Sa'd asserts that none of Mohamad's foremothers through five hundred generations, was a "fornicator" in the manner "of the Jahilia," he refers presumably to forms of union, including polyandry, that were accepted practice and not "fornication" in the Jahilia but that were outlawed by Islam.¹⁵ Conversely, practices endorsed by Islam—for example, polygyny—are mentioned without parallel censor. The texts, that is, themselves discreetly and continuously reaffirmed the new Islamic practices and branded the old "immoral."

Further, although these early records were written down by men, a significant portion of the accounts of the Prophet and his times (a literature forming the core of the Islamic corpus revered as the authentic annals of early Islam and looked to as a model for Muslim conduct and a source for Muslim law) was recounted on the authority of women, that is, traced itself back to a woman of the Prophet's generation as the first teller, and usually to a woman who was a Companion of the Prophet, generally a wife or daughter. Women therefore (and 'Aisha most particularly) have had an important part in the authoring of the official history of Islam, and in creating that literature that established the normative practices of Islamic society. This in itself is an indication that the first generation of Muslims (the generation that stood closest to the Jahilia days and Jahilia attitudes toward women), and their immediate heirs, had no difficulty in accepting women as authorities. It also means that the early literature incorporates material that fairly directly expressed the views of women; 'Aisha's indignant response, for instance, to the notion that women might be religiously "unclean" like dogs or donkeys. "You equate us [women] with dogs and donkeys!" she exclaims in one *hadith*, "The Prophet would pray while I lay before him on the bed [between him and the qibla]."¹⁶ There is also, though, evidence strongly suggesting, as will be seen below, some perhaps rather critical censorship.

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¹⁵ Ibn Sa'd 1, 1:32.

¹⁶ Al-Bukhari, 1:289; Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, 6 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al Islami lil Tib'a wa'l nashr, 1969), 6:42.

In a cave in Hira, a hill near Mecca, to which he had taken to retiring for solitary contemplation, Mohamad, now forty years old, received his first revelation: a vision of the angel Gabriel, commanding him to read. Shivering from the experience, he hurried to Khadija, who comforted him physically and mentally, wrapping him in a blanket and assuring him that he was indeed sane. Later she took Mohamad to her cousin Waraka who was Christian, and versed in the Hebrew scriptures, and he confirmed what had evidently occurred to her, saying that the angel Gabriel had indeed also been sent by Allah to Moses. Thereafter, the Judeo-Christian framework was to be the framework within which Mohamad would present his prophethood.¹⁷

Khadija, who hired Mohamad to trade on her behalf reportedly because of his reputation for honesty and who proposed to and married him when he was in her employ now became his first convert. Her faith now—the faith of a mature, wealthy woman of standing in the community—must have been of some weight in influencing others, particularly members of her own important clan, the Quraysh, to accept Islam.¹⁸ From the earliest years women were among the converts, including women whose clans were fiercely opposed to Mohamad, such as Umm Habiba, daughter of Abu Safyan, Mohamad's formidable enemy. They were also among the Muslims who, under the pressure of a growing Meccan opposition and persecution of Mohamad and his followers, emigrated (ca. 615 C.E.) to Abyssinia.¹⁹

It was during the period of persecution in Mecca (to lead eventually to the Muslims' and Mohamad's migration to Medina) that Mohamad spoke verses sanctioning the worship, along with Allah, of the three Meccan goddesses, the "daughters of Allah," Allat, Manat, and Al-'Uzza, a development which briefly appeased the Meccans. The verses however were shortly abrogated, having been "thrown" upon Mohamad's tongue by Satan at a time when Meccan persecution was growing intense and the Meccans were offering Mohamad position and wealth if he ceased reviling their goddesses. As they stand in the Koran now, the verses in their amended form (Koran, 53:19–22) point out (as they are traditionally explained) **the absurdity of Allah's having daughters while mortals could have (the preferred) sons.** As they stand, the verses therefore confirm what the practice of female infanticide anyway indicated, that the existence of goddesses in the late Jahilia period (or their survival into it) did not mean a concomitant valuation of females above or as much as males.²⁰

¹⁷ Al-Bukhari, 1:1–4.

¹⁸ Ibn Sa'd, 8:9. Khadija is described in the same text as a woman "of honor and power and a hirer of men" (8:9).

¹⁹ Gertrude Stern, "The First Women Converts in Early Islam" *Islamic Culture* 13, no. 3 (July 1939), 291–305, 293.

²⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 102–5.

In 619 C.E. Abu Talib, Mohamad's uncle and protector, and head of their clan, and Khadija, both died, within days of each other. Mohamad himself "went down into the pit," to place Khadija in her tomb in the Hujun, a hill near Mecca that was the burial place of her people. Neither Mohamad nor Khadija's daughters appear to have inherited anything from Khadija, and it is possible that she lost her wealth as a result of the Meccan persecution.²¹

Abu Talib had not converted to Islam though he had granted Mohamad the full protection of a clan member, and thereby made it possible for him to survive the Meccan persecution. His successor as head of the clan was Abu Lahab, another uncle of Mohamad's, who was married to Umm Jamil, sister of Abu Sufyan, Mohamad's great enemy. Soon after Abu Talib died, Abu Lahab sided with his wife's clan and refused Mohamad clan protection. When a Koranic revelation then cursed Abu Lahab and Umm Jamil, the latter, carrying a stone pestle, went searching for Mohamad and came to where he sat with Abu Bakr, by the Ka'aba. God, however, made Mohamad invisible to her so that she saw only Abu Bakr. Asking him where Mohamad was, she said, "I have been told that he is satirising me, and by God, if I had found him I would have smashed his mouth with this stone." She was a poet, she then declared, and recited:

We reject the reprobate.
His Words we repudiate.
His religion we loathe and hate.²²

Bereft of the clan's protection, Mohamad actively began to seek converts and protectors beyond Mecca. He began a series of negotiations with people from Medina who, while on pilgrimage to Mecca in 620 C.E. had converted to Islam, (the Ka'aba, now the sacred shrine of Islam, was also a holy shrine before Islam). The following year they returned with more converts, and in June of 622 C.E. seventy-five Medinians, including two women whose husbands were also present, came to a secret meeting with Mohamad at 'Aqaba, where they pledged to protect and obey him: he was to be received in Medina not as reviled leader of a sect seeking protection but as honored prophet and as designated arbiter of the internal tribal dissensions of Medina.²³

Meanwhile, Mohamad had also set about his own remarriage—to two

²¹ Omar Ridda Kāḥhalah, *A'lam al-Nisa fi A'lami al-Arab w'al Islam*, 5 vols. in 3 (Damascus: Al-Matba'a al-Hashimiyya, 1959), 1:280; Stern, "The First Women Converts . . .," 291.

²² Ibn Hisham, *Al-Sira Al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Mustapha Al-Saqqa, Ibrahim Al-Ibyari, and 'Abdel Haftah Shibli, 2 vols. (Cairo: Mustapha al-Babi wa-Awladuh, 1375H/1955), 1:356. I quote in this instance the translation of Alfred Guillaume, *Sirat Rasul Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 161.

²³ Ibn Hisham, 2:441.

females, Sawda and 'Aisha. The idea for those marriages came, according to Ibn Ḥanbal, from Khawla, an aunt of Mohamad's (his mother's sister) who was a convert to Islam. After Khadija's death she "served" Mohamad, presumably seeing to the housework along with his daughters. Mohamad had in the past interfered on her behalf in her marriage, rebuking her husband for his celibate outlook and his neglect, consequently, of his duties toward his wife; Ibn Ḥanbal further reports of Khawla (who seems thus to have been rather preoccupied with sexual matters) that she asked Mohamad if, when "a woman sees in her sleep what a man sees," purification was necessary: only, was the reply, as with a man, "if water is emitted."²⁴ When Khawla suggested Mohamad's remarriage he had responded by asking whom she would suggest: 'Aisha if he wanted a virgin, she said, and Sawda if a nonvirgin. "Go," he is said to have replied, "bespeak them both for me."²⁵ Having two wives concurrently was not in itself a new practice, but the fact that it was distinctly so for Mohamad has led some scholars to speculate that he may have had a marriage contract with Khadija which specified that during her lifetime she would be his only wife.²⁶

Sawda, a Muslim widow and former emigrant to Abyssinia, described as "no longer young," sent back with Khawla the message "my affair is in your hands," indicating her consent: a point which confirms that, as Khadija's case had suggested, widows in the Jahilia were free to dispose of their persons without consulting guardians.²⁷ Their marriage probably took place shortly after Khadija's death.

'Aisha's case was different. She was the six-year-old daughter of Mohamad's closest and most important supporter, Abu Bakr. Khawla took the proposal to Umm Ruman, 'Aisha's mother, who deferred the matter to her husband. His response was that, as 'Aisha was already betrothed, he would have first to release her from that betrothal. There is no suggestion that anyone thought the marriage inappropriate because of the discrepancy in age, though 'Aisha's prior betrothal was evidently to a boy near her age, for Abu Bakr went to seek her release from the boy's parents and found the mother in particular, who was not a Muslim, anxious to release her son from that betrothal because she was afraid it might lead to his converting to Islam. 'Aisha later recalled that the realization that she was married came to her when her mother called her in from her games with her friends and told her that she was not to go out but must stay indoors, and so "it fell into my heart," 'Aisha said, "that I was married." She did not, she recalled, ask

²⁴ Ibn Ḥanbal, 6:409.

²⁵ Nabia Abbott, *Aishah, the Beloved of Mohamad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 3.

²⁶ Maxime Rodinson, *Mohamad*, trans. Ann Carter (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 55.

²⁷ Ibn Sa'd (n. 2 above), 8:36; Stern, *Marriage* (n. 9 above), 34.

to whom.²⁸ Mohamad thereafter continued his regular daily visits to Abu Bakr's house, but the marriage was not consummated until after the Muslims had migrated to Medina.

Once the agreement with the Medinians at 'Aqaba had been concluded, the Muslims began to migrate in small groups over the following three months to Medina. Mohamad and Abu Bakr, of the men, left last, and secretly, to escape a Meccan plot to murder Mohamad, as the Meccans now feared that at Medina he would grow too strong for them. The two remained in hiding first in the hills near Mecca, waiting for the search to be given up, 'Asma, 'Aisha's half-sister, taking them provisions at night and helping to load their camels when they were ready to depart. When they were gone and she returned home, a group of hostile Meccans came searching for them and, when she denied knowledge of their whereabouts, slapped her face so hard, she related, that her earring flew off.²⁹

A far different figure from the reviled and persecuted leader of a persecuted sect, Mohamad arrived in Medina a prophet with a large religious following and a position of some political importance. The year of the migration, or hegira (*hidjra*), 622 C.E., is reckoned by Muslims as the first year of the Islamic era, and the migration did indeed inaugurate a new type of community which was in time to live by the new values and the new laws—many of them to be elaborated over the following few years—of Islam.

Work was immediately begun on the building that was to be Mohamad's dwelling, the courtyard of which was to be both mosque and where he would conduct secular affairs. He meanwhile lodged on the ground floor of the two-room home of the couple whose home was nearest to the construction. Some sense of the material roughness of their lives, and the Prophet's, is suggested by their alarm once when, breaking a jar of water and fearing that it would fall through onto the Prophet, they mopped it up with their garments, having no cloth to mop it up with.³⁰

Mohamad then had his family, Sawda and his daughters, fetched from Mecca. Sawda's "house" (as it is generally termed) was the first to be built along the eastern wall of the mosque, though "house" is rather a grand name for it: like those later to be built for Mohamad's other wives, it consisted of one room of some twelve by fourteen feet, with possibly some veranda-like enclosure giving onto the mosque courtyard that had pillars of palm trunks and a roof of palm branches. **Mohamad had no separate room, sharing in turn those of his wives.³¹**

²⁸ Ibn Sa'd, 8:40.

²⁹ Ibn Hisham, 1:487. 'Asma's mother, unlike 'Aisha's mother (both wives of Abu Bakr), did not convert to Islam and did not migrate with the Muslims to Medina. Ibn Sa'd, 8:184.

³⁰ Ibn Hisham, 1:498–99.

³¹ W. Muir, *The Life of Mohamad* (Edinburgh: J. Grant, 1923), 175–76, 201; Abbott, 50, 68, and *passim*.

Abu Bakr also had his family fetched from Mecca, and they joined him in a house in the suburb of Sunh. When 'Aisha was no more than nine or ten, Abu Bakr, anxious no doubt to create between himself and Mohamad the further bond of kinship, asked Mohamad why he was delaying in consummating the marriage, and when Mohamad replied that he was as yet unable to provide the marriage portion, Abu Bakr forthwith provided it himself.³² Then, in their house in Sunh, the marriage was consummated. 'Aisha recalled the occasion as follows: the Prophet came to their house, and there gathered about him men and women of Medina, "and my mother came to me and I was swinging on a swing"

and she brought me down from the swing, and I had some friends there and she sent them away, and she wiped my face with a little water, and led me till we stopped by the door, and I was breathless [from being on the swing] and we waited till I regained my breath. Then she took me in, and the Prophet was sitting on a bed in our house with men and women of the Ansar [Medinians] and she set me on his lap, and said, "these are your people, God bless you in them and they in you." And the men and women rose immediately and went out, and the Prophet consummated the marriage in our house.³³

Even to dwell in this much detail on an event that after all was unimportant in the life of a man whose life was packed with momentous events will seem to some Muslims to be in bad taste. But in the nature of our subject it is precisely these privacies and "unimportant" details in the lives of men that nevertheless have traditionally been allowed to entirely govern and circumscribe the lives of women, that inevitably must be at the forefront of our concern, as it must finally be our concern to examine, by, in part, looking into such details, Islam's potentiality for respecting the personness of women.

The relationship between Mohamad and 'Aisha—who throughout was to remain Mohamad's undisputed favorite, even when he had added beautiful, sought-after women to his harem—bears looking into a little further. Abbott, 'Aisha's biographer, stresses Mohamad's tender care of and patience with her, and his joining in even in her games with her dolls. However, that the attention of a man in his fifties to a girl of nine or ten can be sexual and yet caring is scarcely comprehensible to modern sensibilities, as are other aspects of that relationship: the emotional equality for example and, on his part (as well, of course, as on hers) dependence, that seem to have pertained between them. This is suggested, for instance, in

³² Ibn Sa'd, 8:43.

³³ Ibn Hanbal (n. 16 above), 6:211.

his response of sullen, wounded withdrawal following the famous necklace incident when 'Aisha, left behind at the campsite and arriving the following morning escorted by a young man, is suspected by the community, and finally also by Mohamad, of infidelity. Mohamad's distress over the matter became so intense that his revelations ceased for the duration of their estrangement, and his first revelation at the end of that period was the verses declaring her innocence.³⁴ Complementarily, 'Aisha must have felt reasonably "equal" and unawed by this prophet of God, for his announcement, for example, that he had received a revelation permitting him to enter into marriages not permitted other men drew from her the retort, "It seems to me your Lord hastens to satisfy your desire!"³⁵

In other words, not merely in one but in most of its aspects that relationship is essentially inaccessible to modern sensibilities, a fact that emphasizes how completely it was defined by its particular social context, not only in the sense of the mores of the society but in the sense too of that society's specific structuring of its individuals. Nevertheless, as the bare form in which it sometimes figures in the Hadith may remind us ("Of the consummation of marriage with a nine year old [female]: the Prophet, the peace and blessings of God be on him, married 'Aisha when she was six and consummated it when she was nine"),³⁶ its essential significance for the Muslim community was and continues to be its function as practical and legal precedent, the specificity of the original context being then completely discounted and, for this purpose, quite irrelevant. Together these facts highlight what is the fundamental question in Islam in that major domain, the treatment of women (as indeed in others) and that is: whether the religion is to be allowed to remain permanently locked into replicating the outer forms of the specific society into which it was revealed, or whether the true pursuit and fulfillment of the Islamic message entails, on the contrary, the gradual abandonment of laws necessary in its first age. Islamic philosophers such as Ibn 'Arabi, and certain strands of Sufi and Qarmati thought, have from earliest times leaned toward the latter view. Islam was above all, it may thus be maintained, a revolution that transformed its society in its every aspect, ethically, religiously, and socially, and that initiated a new society centered on ideas of moral and social responsibility and justice. Therefore, the undertaking of reforms, even of revolution, in the furtherance of those ideals—rather than merely adherence to the letter of the law—would constitute the truer continuation of the process Islam initiated, and would more accurately realize its message.

'Aisha's removal to Mohamad's dwelling where Sawda already lived and where they would soon be joined by more wives (rooms being added

³⁴ Abbott, 2, 7-8, 31-35.

³⁵ Ibn Sa'd, 8:112.

³⁶ Al-Bukhari (n. 8 above), 7:65.

for them along the mosque's eastern wall) initiated into Islam the type of Islamic polygyny—virilocal polygyny—which, as noted above, some scholars believe was an innovation of Mohamad's. Whether new or not, it was deeply consonant in its attendant consequences and implications (such as the husband's right and ability practically now to oversee and control a wife's movements and relations) with the type of marriage that Islam was instituting as normative. The insistence on the *'idda* (waiting period) and the banning of types of union that made difficult the recognition of paternity reflected, it could be argued, the concern that men should be able to share in and take responsibility for their children. The granting to males, further, unconditional rights to offspring (as soon as the period in which they may be considered to need female nurturance was over) and the retaining for males only the right enjoyed by *Jahilia* women and men of divorcing apparently at will, seem distinctly to connote that in addition the absolute privileging of male right, father right, was also one of Mohamad's distinct objectives. When one adds to these the licensing of polygyny and of unrestricted male sexual access to women (four wives, and as many concubines as a man desires and can afford), it becomes difficult not to conclude that the absolute empowerment of men in relation to women in all matters relating to sexuality and offspring and the disempowerment of women (and thus the complete transformation of his society's mores in the area of the relation between the sexes) was also itself one of Mohamad's prime objectives. In import, and indeed explicitly, Koranic verses do recognize women's rights to equality in marriage (for example, "they [wives] have rights corresponding to those which husbands have, in equitable reciprocity" [2:229]), and the Koran's directive to this effect is sufficiently distinct for most schools of Islamic law to grant women the right to be empowered, by marriage contract, to initiate divorce or stipulate their marriage conditions, including monogamy. Nevertheless, the type of marriage Islam was setting up as the norm for that early society evidently was one in which women were disempowered. Fatima Mernissi has implied in her discussion of the subject that the rulings giving the right to divorce exclusively to men, like all Islamic rulings on women, stemmed from and reflected, not some larger concern, but only Mohamad's purely subjective response to his personal experiences, in this case his being irked because a number of women, daughters of tribal leaders, divorced him (before their marriages' consummation).³⁷ It is indeed difficult to reconcile the Koran's pronouncements on male/female relations with its otherwise consistent emphasis on the centrality of justice and the equal worth of all human beings. It is only in the matter of the rights and responsibilities of males and females that the notion of equal human worth, otherwise so intrinsic to the Koran, seems momentarily suspended: when it declares men to be "guard-

³⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), 31–41.

ians over" women and "a degree above" them in the context, in the first case, of economic/inheritance rights, and in the second, that of divorce rights (4:35, 2:229).³⁸ However, to come to these conclusions is apparently also to agree with Islamic clerics and ideologues that the subjection of women is intrinsically and inseparably part of Islam, which would then also be to concede that believing Muslim women must renounce religious belief or accept their subjection as divinely ordained—a view that is most gratifying to the clerics. Clerical Islam, however, the historically dominant form of Islam, though formidably successful in the process of consolidating its dominance in eradicating or suppressing rival interpretations of Islam, has nevertheless never been the only possible reading of Islam. Among the interpretations it has been particularly and implacably hostile to, have been those tendencies within early Sufi and Qarmati thought which inclined toward regarding the Koran's spiritual message and its passion for justice as the kernel of Islam and its laws as the husk to be discarded in the fulfillment of Islam's own vision of the ideal society—namely, a society based on equity and justice for all members without distinction. Significantly, it is within just such readings that, potentially at least, the yoking of religious beliefs with the subjection of women would not be (as it is in clerical Islam) an inevitable and indissoluble yoking, and potentially, within those readings, Muslim women would not be compelled to make the intolerable choice between religious belief and their own autonomy and self-affirmation.

Not any one but rather the sum of all its features makes up the distinctive lineaments of Islamic marriage: its institution, which obviously placed the relations between the sexes on dramatically new footing, was to lead logically, predictably, to the emergence of customs such as veiling and seclusion (or some device by which a man could insure that "his" women were exclusively his and thus his offspring indeed his own) to the circumscribing of women's lives and to great changes in their roles in society.

Soon after Mohamad's marriage to 'Aisha, and his marriage three months later to Hafsa, daughter of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (who was, along with Abu Bakr, Mohamad's most powerful supporter), the verses encouraging polygyny—"marry such of the women as seem good to you, two or three or four" (4:4)—were revealed. Islamic apologists, responding to Western criticism, once argued that the verses constituted a curb on a previously rampant polygyny; traditional Islam and modern scholarship, however, agree that, on the contrary, they were intended to encourage it. The verses were revealed after the battle of Uhud (625 C.E.), in which large numbers of the Muslim men were killed and many women therefore widowed. Islam's disruption of the clan system (many of the widows would

³⁸ The Koranic citations and references are to *The Quran*, Arabic text with a new translation by Muhammad Z. Khan, 3d rev. ed. (London: Curzon Press, 1981).

have been Meccan immigrants and so could not return to the support of their clan) meant that the Muslim community found itself with the responsibility of providing for them. Encouraging men to marry more than one woman both settled the matter of the widows' support and confirmed the young society in its new direction by absorbing the women into the new type of family life and so forestalling their reverting to Jahilia types of unions.

Polygyny seems to have been alien to the Medinians in particular. There was little intermarriage in Medina between Medinians and Meccans. Their different attitudes to marriage, and in particular to the Islamic polygyny, may have been a chief reason.³⁹ Medinian women apparently were noticeably more assertive than Meccan women: 'Umar ibn al-Khattab complainingly stated that before coming to Medina "we the people of Quraysh [Mecca] used to have the upper hand over our wives, but when we came among the Ansar [Medinians], we found that their women had the upper hand over their men, so our women also started learning the ways of the Ansari women."⁴⁰ One Medinian woman is said to have offered herself in marriage to Mohamad—who accepted—then to have withdrawn her offer when her family, who disapproved, pointed out that she could never put up with co-wives.⁴¹

However, women's right to inherit property, also decreed by Islam (generally speaking, a woman is entitled to about half a man's share), was also a novel and apparently uncongenial decree to Medinians. Medina's being an agricultural community presumably made the law, involving for them the division of land, more complex in its consequences than for the commercial Meccans whose property was in herds and material goods and where (as earlier indicated) women's inheritance in some cases appears to have been a custom before Islam. Mitigating to some extent the stark male control decreed in the marital situation, the law decreeing women's right to inherit—and thus by implication retain control in important ways over their lives—appears surprising and even in conflict with the laws dictating marital relations. For, to rule guaranteeing women's right to own and independently manage property is tacitly to recognize and indeed promote women's right to economic autonomy, and consequently to autonomy in all those domains of life that economic autonomy commands. In consonance with that tacit recognition are those elements in the Koran (already noted) that appear to recognize women's right to equality in marriage and that also run distinctly, even startlingly, counter to its general, insistent thrust toward the privileging of male right, and of the male's absolute and unequal authority. It would be possible to regard both these as fortuitous survivals merely—aspects or features of the old order anomalously retained in the

³⁹ Watt, *Medina* (n. 2 above), 381.

⁴⁰ Al-Bukhari, 7:88.

⁴¹ Ibn Sa'd (n. 2 above), 8:107–8.

new: but in that they are *consonant* anomalies that together recognize and imply women's right to economic autonomy and to equality in marriage—the two domains that between them define and circumscribe an individual's life—it would also be possible to understand their incorporation into the Koran as having profoundly radical implications. For in incorporating these two "anomalous" rulings into a system otherwise giving males exclusive control and economic responsibility, the Koran in effect incorporates into the system it was then initiating the seeds of that system's own future potential destruction.⁴²

From about the time of the battle of Uhud, as women's freedoms to form and dissolve unions were all but abolished, and as men were given authority over them, so their freedom to participate in the activities of their society began to be circumscribed. Their roles on the battlefield of Uhud itself give one a glimpse of the tradition of active female participation in Jahilia society, even in so apparently specifically male a domain as warfare. One man for instance reported seeing 'Aisha and another wife of Mohamad's, their garments tucked up, and their anklets showing, carrying water to those on the battlefield; and other women on the Muslim side are mentioned as tending to the wounded and removing dead and wounded from the field.⁴³ On the opposing, Meccan side Hind bint 'Utbah, wife of the Meccan leader Abu Sufyan, led some fourteen or fifteen women of the Meccan aristocracy onto the battlefield, playing out women's traditional Jahilia role in war of singing war songs and playing on their tambourines.⁴⁴ The Meccans won, and Hind, who had lost father and brothers to the Muslims in previous wars, cut out the liver of the man who had killed her father and cut off his nose and ears and those of other dead on the field.⁴⁵ However, this extreme ferociousness attributed to her, reported in works compiled in the 'Abbasid age, probably owes much of its bloodiness to 'Abbasid hatred of the Umayyad dynasty, founded by Hind's son.

Such free participation in the community's life would soon begin to be drastically diminished, not because directly banned but as a result of the process of change Islam had set under way and as the implications of its new basis for male/female relations worked themselves out. Mohamad's wives were the first whose lives would begin to be circumscribed. Early texts record the "occasions" of the revelation of the verses instituting veiling and seclusion for Mohamad's wives, and these in fact offer vignettes of women's

⁴² For further analyses of the possibilities of developing interpretations on this issue, see Fazlur Rahman, "Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Methods and Alternatives," and "A Survey of Modernisation of Muslim Family Law," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 4 (1970): 317–33; 11, no. 4 (1980): 451–65.

⁴³ Al-Bukhari, 4:85–86.

⁴⁴ Nabia Abbott, "Women and the State on the Eve of Islam," *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 58 (1941): 259–84, 273. See also Ilse Lichtenstadter, *Women in Aiyam al-Arab* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1935).

⁴⁵ Ibn Sa'd, 3:1, 5–6.

life-styles in the society Islam was displacing, as well as record the steps by which it was to foreclose women's spheres of action. These texts, as will be apparent in the following passages, do not distinguish in their language between veiling and seclusion but use the term "*hidjab*" interchangeably to mean "veil," as in *darabat al hidjab*, meaning "she took the veil" (which in turn meant "she became a wife of Mohamad's—Mohamad's wives but not his concubines donning the veil); and to mean "curtain" (its literal meaning) in the sense (of separation/partition) in which it is used in the Koranic verse quoted below; and they also used it to refer generally to the practice of the seclusion or separation and the decrees of veiling/covering for Mohamad's wives/women, instituted by this and other verses also quoted below.⁴⁶

The wedding feast at Mohamad's marriage to Zeinab bint Djahsh, according to one account, was the occasion for the revelation of a number of these verses. Some of the wedding guests stayed a long while in Zeinab's room chatting, which annoyed Mohamad. It was in this context that the verses instituting seclusion for Mohamad's wives were revealed. At this or some other meal, according to another account, the hands of some of the men guests touched the hands of Mohamad's wives, and in particular 'Aisha's hand touched 'Umar's.⁴⁷ The Koranic verses instituting seclusion do indeed read as if they might have followed from such a situation: "O ye who believe," they read, "enter not the house of the Prophet unless you are invited to a meal, and then not in anticipation of its getting ready. But enter when you are called, and when you have eaten, disperse; linger not in eagerness for talk. This was a cause of embarrassment for the Prophet. . . . When you ask any of the wives of the Prophet for something, ask from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts" (33:54).

An account going back to 'Aisha connects these and the further verses enjoining Mohamad's wives and the believing women to draw their cloaks around them so that they may be recognized for who they were and thus not molested (33:60) with another occasion. 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, according to 'Aisha, had been urging Mohamad to seclude his wives; Mohamad did not, and one night 'Aisha and Sawda went out (there was no indoor sanitation and the women went out at night) and Sawda being a tall woman, she was recognized by 'Umar from a distance, and he called out to her saying so. Again he urged Mohamad to seclude his wives. 'Umar's concern that Mohamad should seclude his wives was in order to guard, according to one account, against the insults of the "hypocrites" (a group of Medinians whose faith was lukewarm) who would abuse Mohamad's wives and then claim that they had taken them for slaves.⁴⁸ In another account (that several

⁴⁶ Stern, *Marriage* (n. 9 above), 111 ff.

⁴⁷ Ibn Sa'd, 8:126; see also Abbott, *Aishah* (n. 25 above), 20–24.

⁴⁸ Ibn Sa'd, 8:125–27; Ibn Hanbal (n. 16 above), 6:271.

different occasions and reasons are given for those verses does not mean that they are all untrue but, rather, that these were all part of the background to the new edicts and represent the kinds of situations that were coming to seem, to new Muslim eyes, unacceptable) ‘Umar urged Mohamad to seclude his wives because Mohamad’s success was now bringing all kinds of visitors to the mosque.⁴⁹ The mosque, serving also as the place where Mohamad conducted secular affairs, was indeed a place of lively activity. Mohamad once received there, for instance, the leaders of a tribe not yet converted to Islam. He put up three tents for them in the courtyard while they stayed to conduct negotiations. Envoys from other tribes wanting to deal with Mohamad would come there looking for him; and Medinian chiefs spent the night there after a battle. One time a warrior brought the head of an enemy to the mosque. People without means slept in the arbor of the north wall.⁵⁰ People also simply sat about or lay there and put up tents. A black woman, an emancipated slave, according to ‘Aisha, at one time “put up a tent or hut in the mosque” and would visit and talk with Mohamad’s wives.⁵¹ Many who came hoping for some favor from the Prophet would approach first one or another of his wives to enlist her assistance.⁵²

By instituting seclusion, Mohamad created a distance between his wives and this thronging community on their doorstep—the distance appropriate to the wives of a now powerful and successful patriarchal leader in a newly unambiguously patriarchal society. In introducing seclusion Mohamad was in effect summarily creating in nonarchitectural terms the forms (the gynaeceum, the harem quarters) already firmly established in the more anciently patriarchal cultures of Byzantium and Persia—and perhaps indeed he was borrowing from those architectural/social practices of which no doubt he was to some degree aware. As a successful leader he presumably had the wealth now to give his wives the servants necessary if they were to observe seclusion, releasing them from those tasks that women of Mohamad’s family and kin are described as having engaged in: Asma, for instance, Abu Bakr’s daughter, fetched water, carried garden produce, ground corn, and kneaded bread, and Fatima, Mohamad’s daughter, also ground corn and fetched water.⁵³

The practice of veiling, unlike seclusion, was not apparently introduced into Arabia by Mohamad but was to be found there among some classes, particularly in the towns, though it was probably more prevalent in the countries that the Arabs had contact with, such as Syria and Palestine. In

⁴⁹ Abbott, *Aishah*, 25.

⁵⁰ “Masjid,” *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1913–).

⁵¹ Al-Bukhari (n. 8 above), 1:257.

⁵² Watt, *Medina* (n. 2 above), 285.

⁵³ Ibn Sa‘d (n. 2 above), 8:182–83; Henri Lammens, *Fatima et les filles de Mahomet* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1912), 53–54.

those areas, as in Arabia, it was connected with social status, as was its use among Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Assyrians, all of whom to some degree practiced or had practiced it.⁵⁴ It is nowhere explicitly prescribed in the Koran; the only verses bearing on the matter of women's clothing, aside from those already quoted, instruct women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms (24:32). **Throughout Mohamad's life both veiling and seclusion were observed only by his wives.** Moreover, that the formula "[she] took on the veil" is used in the Hadith to mean she became a wife of the Prophet suggests that for some time after Mohamad's death and at the time of the circulation of the material incorporated into the Hadith, veiling and seclusion were still thought of as customs peculiar to Mohamad's wives. **It is not known how they spread to the rest of the community.** The Muslim conquests, the influx of wealth, the resultant raised status of Arabs, and the Prophet's wives being taken as example probably combined to bring about their general adoption.

There is no record of the reactions of Mohamad's wives to these institutions, a remarkable silence given their articulateness (particularly 'Aisha's, as the Traditions well attest) on all manner of topics, a silence that draws attention to the fact that those who did the recording had also the power of suppression. One scholar suggested that it was probably the wives' reaction to the imposition of seclusion which precipitated Mohamad's threat of mass divorce and the tense situation which culminated in the **Verse of the Choice.**⁵⁵ This is the Koranic verse in which Mohamad's wives were presented with the choice of divorce or of continuing as wives and accepting the special conduct expected of them as his wives in this life, as well as, eventually, special rewards in heaven.

The threatened divorce was no mere domestic affair. In the month during which Mohamad withdrew from his wives, the threat of divorce hanging over them, the community at large became gravely concerned over the issue because of its potentially serious consequences since Mohamad's marriages cemented crucial ties with important members of the Muslim community in Medina and with tribal leaders beyond it. The rumor of a possible divorce reportedly caused greater concern to the community than an anticipated Ghassanid invasion: Abu Bakr and 'Umar, fathers of 'Aisha and Hafsa, (who would become first and second caliph after Mohamad's death) became deeply perturbed and called on and reprimanded their daughters. Given the seriousness of the situation, the traditional accounts as to the cause of the breach are, as several scholars have noted, astonishingly trivial. Thus the "occasion" for the breach was,

⁵⁴ "Hidjab," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-); Stern, *Marriage*, 108-10; E. Abrahams, *Ancient Greek Dress* (Chicago: Argonaut Press, 1964), 34; "Veil," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1901).

⁵⁵ Stern, *Marriage*, 114-15.

according to one account, that Mohamad's wives were clamoring for more worldly goods than he had means to provide. Another account blames the bickering that developed between 'Aisha and Zeinab over the equitable distribution between them of shares of a slaughtered animal. Yet another claims that Hafsa had caught Mohamad with Miriam, his Egyptian concubine, in her (Hafsa's) apartment, but on 'Aisha's day. After promising Mohamad that she would not tell 'Aisha, Hafsa broke her promise and told her. 'Aisha confronted him, and shortly the entire harem was up in arms over the matter.⁵⁶

Such scenes and troubles, however, are not particularly distinguishable from the lively activities and rivalries that seem to have been part of their ordinary manner of living and therefore do not seem to be grounds for precipitating a serious political crisis. The verses themselves, moreover, which specifically enjoin obedient submissiveness, support the notion of some general protest amongst Mohamad's wives:

Say O Prophet, to thy wives: if you desire the life of this world and its adornment, come then, I shall make provision for you and send you away in handsome manner. But if you desire Allah and His Messenger and the Home of the Hereafter, then Allah has prepared for those of you who carry out your obligations fully, a great reward. Wives of the Prophet, if any of you act in a manner incompatible with the highest standards of piety, her punishment will be doubled. That is easy for Allah. And whoever of you is completely obedient to Allah and his Messenger, and acts righteously We shall double her reward and We have prepared an honorable provision for her. Wives of the Prophet, if you safeguard your dignity, you are not like any other women. So speak in a simple, straightforward manner lest he whose mind is diseased should form an ill design, and always say the good word. Stay at home and do not show off in the manner of the women of the days of ignorance. [33:29–34]

The choice was put first to 'Aisha, Mohamad advising her to consult her parents before making a decision. Replying that she had no need to consult her parents ("you know they would never advise me to leave you"), she chose to stay. The other wives followed suit. Verses conferring on Mohamad's wives (in compensation perhaps) the title of Mothers of the Believers and forbidding them to remarry after his death also probably belong to this period.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ Ibn Sa'd, 8:131–39. See also Abbott, *Aishah* (n. 25 above), 45, 49–54; Stern, *Marriage* (n. 9 above), 114.

⁵⁷ Abbott, *Aishah*, 56–58.

The trend toward the subjugation of women and the closure of the roles and independence available to them in the old order continued inexorably on its course, leaving an almost smothered trail of defiance, an almost erased memory of the ways of independence.

In 630 C.E. the Muslims took Mecca in an almost bloodless conquest. Abu Sufyan came to the Muslim encampment to make his submission and returned and called on the Meccans to convert to Islam. His wife Hind bint 'Utbah, enraged by his surrender, denounced him publicly, then realizing the cause was lost, she turned on and shattered her gods. Some sources have it that Hind was among the three or four women condemned to death and that she only saved herself by hastily converting to Islam: but this may well be no more than an anti-Ummayad embellishment of her story.⁵⁸ In any event she spiritedly led the Meccan women as they took the oath of allegiance to Islam. Having received the pledge from the men, Mohamad turned to receive it from the women. He leads, and Hind responds: "You shall have but one God." / "We grant you that." / "You shall not steal." / "Abu Sufyan is a stingy man, I only stole provisions from him." / "That is not theft. You will not commit adultery." / "Does a free woman commit adultery?" / "You will not kill your children" [a reference to the practice of infanticide]. / "Have you left us any children that you did not kill at the battle of Badr?"⁵⁹

With the Muslim conquest the key of the holy shrine of the Ka'aba was handed over to the Muslims. At the time of the conquest the key was in the hands of Sulafah, a woman. Muslim sources represent her, as they do Hubba, another woman known to have held the key at one point, as having been only for safekeeping: Sulafah by her son and Hubba by her father, last priest-king of Mecca. However, though indeed no other woman is mentioned as keeper of the key, their minimal role in Islamic records probably reflects Muslim assumptions projected onto the earlier society. In a society and period in which there were *kahinahs* (female soothsayers) and priestesses, Hubba at least may well have been in some sense a successor or transmitter of her father's powers.⁶⁰

Two years after the conquest, after a brief illness, Mohamad died. Lying sick in Maimuna's (one of his wives') room and visited there by his other wives, he began asking where he was due the following day, and the following, trying, they realized, to figure out when he was due at 'Aisha's. Finally he asked to be allowed to retire there and a few days later, on June 11, 632 C.E., he died and was buried in her room: so that 'Aisha's room is now, after the Ka'aba, the most sacred spot in Islam.⁶¹ His death was unexpected and, in the crisis it caused, Abu Bakr settled the question of

⁵⁸ Abbott, "Women . . . on the Eve of Islam" (n. 44 above), 275–76.

⁵⁹ Ibn Sa'd, 8:4. Hind's reply to the phrase about adultery was referred to above.

⁶⁰ Abbott, "Women . . . on the Eve of Islam," 264–66.

⁶¹ Abbott, *Aishah*, 68–69.

where he should be buried by recalling that Mohamad had said that a prophet should be buried where he expires.⁶² Abu Bakr also, at his request, was buried there, as was 'Umar, who also requested it, although 'Aisha had hoped to keep that last space for herself. Once 'Umar was buried there, she had a partition built between her and the tombs: she had felt at home, she said, sharing her room with her husband and father, but with 'Umar there she felt in the presence of a stranger.⁶³

Following Mohamad's death there were a series of rebellions in various parts of Arabia, which, by the time of Mohamad's death, had largely converted to Islam. "False prophets" appeared as leaders of revolt against the Islamic state. At least one armed rebellion was led by a woman, and one of the "false prophets" was a woman. Salma bint Malik was the woman who led the armed rebellion. She had been captured by the Muslims in a battle led by her mother in 628 C.E. and given by Mohamad to 'Aisha. She served her for a time, and later married a relative of Mohamad's. At Mohamad's death she withdrew from the Muslims and returned to her people, who were among those rebelling against Islam. The Muslims had put her mother to death by tying her feet to two beasts which then tore her in two. Salma, determined to avenge her death or die herself, led her men into battle, riding on her mother's camel. She was killed only after "a hundred others" had fallen around her.⁶⁴

The prophetess was Sajah bint 'Aws, of the Tamim, whose mother was of the Banu Taglib, a largely Christianized tribe. The Tamim were divided about rebelling from Islam: those wanting to reject Islam supporting Sajah. In a civil war her faction lost, and she, with her army, had to leave Tamimi territory. She headed for Yamama, the capital of another "false prophet," Musaylamah, and appears to have made a treaty with him; but nothing is known of her after that. Her teachings have not been preserved: her deity was referred to as Rabb al-Sirab, "The Lord of the Clouds."⁶⁵

Salma and Sajah, though, were apparently a rebel and a prophet who happened to be women. Another rebellion in Hadramaut may have been a rebellion of women as women: a rejoicing by them at Mohamad's death because of the limitations Islam had brought them as women. "When the Prophet of God died," reads a third-century (Islamic) account of this rebellion, "the news of it was carried to Hadramaut":

There were in Hadramaut six women of Kindah and Hadramaut, who were desirous for the death of the Prophet of God; they therefore (on hearing the news) dyed their hands with henna and

⁶² Ibn Sa'd, 2,2:71.

⁶³ Ibid., 3,1:245, 264.

⁶⁴ Abbott, "Women . . . on the Eve of Islam," 279-80.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 281-84.

played on the tambourine. To them came the harlots of Hadramaut and did likewise, so that some twenty-odd women joined the six. . . [The text then lists the names of some women, including two it describes as grandmothers.] Oh horseman, if thou dost pass by, convey this message from me to Abu Bakr the successor of Ahmad [Mohamad]: leave not in peace the harlots, black as chaff, who assert that Mohamad need not be mourned; satisfy that longing for them to be cut off, which burns in my breast like an unquenchable fire.⁶⁶

Abu Bakr sent al-Muhagir with men and horses against the women, and though the men of Kindah and Hadramaut came to the women's defense, al-Muhagir cut off the women's hands. This account is intriguing. Why should the opposition of "harlots" have been threatening enough to Islam to merit a force being sent against them? Moreover, three of the women listed were of the nobility, and four belonged to the royal clan of Kindah. **Their status and the support of their men suggest that they were possibly priestesses, not prostitutes, and that in singing and dancing they were attempting to incite their tribesmen to throw off the new religion.** They were evidently successful enough in gathering support to constitute a threat worthy of having a force sent against them.⁶⁷

Moreover some women, and not only priestesses, doubtless understood and disliked the new religion's restrictions on women and its curtailment of their independence. Mohamad's death would have been for them a matter of rejoicing, and the demise of his religion a much desired result. That the religion was understood by some women at the time as being at least rather depressing for women is suggested by a remark of one of Mohamad's own great-granddaughters, **Sukaina**, who, **asked why she was so merry and her sister, Fatima, always so solemn**, replied that it was because she had been named after her pre-Islamic great-grandmother while her sister had been named after her Islamic grandmother.⁶⁸

The Prophet's wives continued to live in their mosque apartments, revered by the community as the Mothers of the Believers. Financially they seemed at first to have depended on private means, on their families, or on incomes they earned through their skills. Sawda, for instance, earned an income from her leather work. They apparently inherited nothing from Mohamad, Abu Bakr maintaining that Mohamad had said that such modest property as he had was to go to charity. Later, with the immense revenues from the Arab conquests, 'Umar, as caliph, initiated (in 641 C.E.) state pensions, placed the Mothers of the Believers at the head of the list, and awarded them generous pensions. This confirmed their already prominent

⁶⁶ F. Beeston, "The So-called Harlots of Hadramaut," *Oriens* 5 (1952): 16–22, 16.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 16 ff.

⁶⁸ Walther (n. 1 above), 78.

status. 'Aisha, as Mohamad's favorite wife, received the state's highest pension: acknowledged as having special knowledge of his ways, sayings and character, she was consulted on the Prophet's *sunnah*, or practice, and gave decisions on sacred law or custom.⁶⁹ Other wives also were consulted and authored Traditions, though none were as prominent and prolific as 'Aisha.

'Umar's reign (634–44 C.E.) is regarded as the period in which many of the major institutions of Islam had their origin, for 'Umar was responsible for initiating a series of religious, civil, and penal ordinances, including the punishment of stoning for adultery.⁷⁰ He was harsh toward women in both private and public life: he was ill-tempered with and physically assaulted his wives, and he sought to confine women to their homes and to prevent their continuing to attend mosques.⁷¹ He was unsuccessful in this and instituted segregated prayers instead, appointing a separate imam for each sex. He appointed a male imam for the women, in this also departing from the Prophet's precedent, for it is known that Mohamad himself appointed a woman, Umm Waraka, to act as imam for her entire household, which included, so far as can be ascertained, men as well as women.⁷² Moreover, after Mohamad's death 'Aisha and Umm Salama acted as imams for other women.⁷³ 'Umar also prohibited Mohamad's wives from going on pilgrimage, also a departure from Mohamad's practice. The prohibition, which was lifted in the last year of 'Umar's reign, must have provoked the discontent of the Mothers of the Believers. "History," however, seemingly has not recorded such discontent, as it has not recorded any opposition on the part of Mohamad's widows to 'Umar's attempt to prevent women from attending mosques.⁷⁴ These silences, consistently surrounding those kinds of issues, are beginning now to be speaking silences. With the instance of the harsh, swift punishment of the rebellious women of Hadramaut before us, we have no ground to imagine that the guardians of Islam would have hesitated, rather they would doubtless have considered it simply their duty to erase rebellion in women from the written page of history as ruthlessly as they eradicated it from the world in which they lived.

'Uthman, the next caliph, continued to allow Mohamad's wives to go on pilgrimage and revoked 'Umar's arrangement of separate imams. Men and women once again were together in the mosques, the women however, forming a separate group, would now be held back while men left.⁷⁵ However, 'Uthman's restoration of some liberties to women was but the

⁶⁹ Abbott, *Aishah* (n. 25 above), 11, 84, 95–97.

⁷⁰ "Omar ibn al-Khattab," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (1913–).

⁷¹ Abbott, *Aishah*, 88.

⁷² Ibn Sa'd (n. 2 above), 8:335; Stern, "The First Women Converts . . ." (n. 19 above), 299.

⁷³ Ibn Sa'd, 8:355–56, "Rayta," "Na'ilah," "Hujaira."

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8:150; see also Abbott, *Aishah*, 94.

⁷⁵ Ibn Sa'd, 5:17.

brief staying of a tide that was moving inexorably in the contrary direction. ‘Aisha was still to take an active and eventually public part in politics, acting out, though, a part that belonged in reality to a dying order. When ‘Uthman was murdered, she delivered, veiled, a public address at the mosque in Mecca, proclaiming that his death would be avenged, and thereby gathered around her one of the two factions opposing the succession of Ali. Their opposition was to lead to confrontation at the Battle of the Camel—named after the camel on which ‘Aisha sat, in the thick of the battle, inciting and directing her men, as had done her Jahilia forebears. Ali, realizing the importance of her role, had her camel cut down, thus causing her men to fall into disarray and the battle to end. The defeated ‘Aisha was magnanimously treated by the victorious Ali. Nevertheless, the important role she played in this battle that has remained controversial in Islamic history (it was the first in which Muslim blood was shed by Muslims) earned her the reproach of many. The charges that the opposition had made from the start, that by going into battle, ‘Aisha had violated the seclusion imposed by Mohamad, who had ordered his wives to stay at home (women’s proper place in this new order), seemed the more fully vindicated by her defeat.⁷⁶ ‘Aisha then did retire from public life and thus became, as befits the woman who has contributed so richly and importantly to the founding of the Traditions that were to govern Muslim life, the exemplary New Woman.

Women scholars and authorities were still to be met with in the following generation and in the following, though in far fewer number. Gradually it became extremely rare for any of the teachers of Hadith to have learned from a woman.⁷⁷ This is the period typically blamed for the restrictions on women’s lives that followed from Islam. Nabia Abbott aptly summarizes this view when she states that it was now that women’s position in Islam was crystallized “into one of passivity and submissiveness comparable to that already imposed on the women of her Jewish and Christian neighbours” and that by the second and third centuries of Islam, “the seclusion and degradation of women had progressed beyond anything known in the first decades of Islam.”⁷⁸ The implication is that the seclusion and degradation of women typical of most of Islamic history is the result not of Islam but of its misinterpretation by later generations. This is also the view of New Muslims: in that first Islamic society, they argue, women participated in the life of the community and performed functions—attended the mosque, led prayers—which they were later to be barred

⁷⁶ Abbott, *Aishah*, 131, 160–69.

⁷⁷ See Ignaz Goldziher, “Women in Hadith Literature,” in *Muslim Studies*, ed. S. M. Stern, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern, 2 vols. (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1966–68), 2:366–68; Stern, “The First Women Converts . . . ,” 22.

⁷⁸ Abbott, “Women and the State in Early Islam,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1 (April 1942): 106–26, 115, 123.

from, and therefore Islam in reality encouraged women to participate in the community's social and professional life. However, the women and men of that first Islamic society, Mohamad's contemporaries, were not themselves molded by the ordinances and practices of Islam, though adhering to them consciously no doubt; those that had molded them were the attitudes and practices of the Jahilia society that Islam was transforming, a society in which women had been remarkably active and independent. We have encountered in the preceding pages, even if often fleetingly, Jahilia women in the roles of priestesses, soothsayers, prophetesses, warrior-leaders heading armies, nurses looking after the wounded on the battlefield and venturing into the thick of battle, poets, authors of satirical verse taking for its object formidable male opponents, keepers, in some unclear capacity, of the keys of the holiest shrine of Mecca, encountered them as rebellious women, and as leaders of rebellions that included men, indeed as commanding armies, and, of course, as women initiating and terminating marriages at will, and mingling freely, even the Prophet's wives, until banned by Islam, with the men of their society. It is that heritage, women's roles in the society being superseded and transformed by Islam that, it is here suggested, accounts for those elements of activeness and independence to be found in the women of the first Muslim society. In this reading then, the closure and increasingly more pronounced subjugation that came to women's lives in the next generation were not the result of misinterpretation but represent rather the workings out in history of the implications of the order Islam had introduced (albeit an order intended from the first, as one vein within Islamic thought has always argued, to be itself transitional). That closure therefore bears that relation to its initial, founding institutions and specifically to the lineaments of Islamic marriage, of plant to seed.

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