

Chapter Four

"We have previously stated that Islam is a complete religion. Islam links an individual with his Creator through various means, whether social, economic, political, or emotional. Hence all of the actions of an individual, however large or small, are in harmony with Divine Law.

Performing prayer, paying zakat (religious tax), refraining from injustice and abandoning all vices are aspects of this religion. Spiritual rituals, such as fasting, create good morals, and giving charity and religious alms can direct the behaviour of a Muslim and regulate family affairs", the alim ended his lecture.

"Does worship include an these aspects?" I asked.

"Yes my son. Islam is a religion broad enough to cover all that I mentioned. Each aspect is clearly stated. Now we should determine what Islam has achieved in showing the norms that can mould a righteous person."

I asked, "What do you mean by norms?"

"I mean religious instructions", he replied. "Islamic laws are constructive in regard to an individual's character, which is shaped with the knowledge that he is an important part of an humanity. Islamic laws take such a fact into consideration, in the interest of the individual as well as the community. Islam forms a comprehensive, unified whole; all the parts of which are in harmony with and support each other."

Here Sarah asked him to illustrate his point and our teacher said, "For example, gambling and intoxication destroy the human personality, therefore they are forbidden in order to protect both the individual and the society and to prevent the various crimes that result from these two evils. Another example is the religious order to observe decent dress and covering with regard to women."

Sarah asked eagerly, "I have been anxious to know the reasons for the imposition of hijab on women."

The alim smiled and replied, "I'll explain why Islam insists that women observe modest dress when in the company of men to whom they are not forbidden in marriage. Islam does not state that woman should be kept hidden from society, it simply calls for covering her beauty.

The word 'hijab' is mentioned in one particular Qur'anic verse addressing Muslim believers with regard to dealing with the Prophet's wives:

...And when you ask of them any goods, ask of them from behind a curtain;... (Al-Ahzab, 33: 53)

"This concerns the respect which was due to the wives with such a status."

"Then Islam does not require that women be confined behind the walls of their homes," Sarah commented.

"Of course not. A clear indication is in the Qur'anic verse about modest dressing as mentioned in Chapter Al-Nur, which states:

Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them, surely Allah is aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and not display their ornaments except what appears thereof; and let them wear their head covering over their bosoms and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers.. (Al-Nur, 24: 30-31)

"You can see that Islam orders both men and women to cast down their eyes and guard their private parts. This fact proves that woman is present in the arena; otherwise, there would not have been any need for this Qur'anic order. Men would not have found it necessary to cast down their looks as well.

Sarah nodded approvingly and the alim added, "In the early days of Islam, woman's role in life proved this fact. Women participated in all activities for the sake of religion –the first Muslim martyr was a woman: Summayah, the mother of Ammar Bin Yassir– and women were present in all the battles and wars for the sake of Islam. They nursed the wounded, supplied water for the soldiers and gave them courage. In fact, the call for Islamic modest dressing is intended as a protective measure to keep the society, of which woman is a part, safe."

I asked, "How?"

He answered, "It is a well known fact that a woman possesses attraction and can excite a man's innate feelings, to such a degree that he may come to a crucial crossroad; either he responds or restrains these feelings. In both cases, a man may seriously suffer. A free release of his emotions, without regard to religion or social conduct means sexual chaos and the destruction of families and social tragedies. Statistics in countries that encourage sexual freedom prove this fact. Such statistics show a high incidence of rape and other forms of sexual abuse.

"In Sweden, some researchers discovered that 15% of the Swedish population is unwell psychologically and that a large percentage of that country's income is spent trying to cure them. This is the result of sexual freedom in one of the Western countries. A report issued by the American Association of Family Services stated that the breakdown of the family in the U.S. has reached epidemic proportions and is a major social problem. Every

year, divorce separates one million people. The U.S. divorce rate has increased rapidly, as has the number of illegitimate children. Such facts are the result of sexual freedom.”

"On the other hand, if man restrains his feelings, then he may suffer physical and psychological disorders. Restraint in the presence of exciting beauty is difficult for many men. We can relate that to exposing a hungry man to a sumptuous banquet. The delicious aroma of food arises his appetite, and yet he is forced to stay away from the food. He may obey, but we cannot remove or change his desire to eat. The display of feminine beauty in front of a male will certainly awaken his innate desires. The best way to protect society and avoid a harmful reaction is for women to cover their beauty. Thus woman, as well as man, can avoid harmful consequences."

Sarah said, "Then observation of decent dress is a precautionary step to the interest of society." The alim said, "Yes, it is like that. Moreover it is to the interest of a female to keep herself from turning into a cheap commodity devoured by the hungry looks of men."

Sarah commented, "But I have heard that the covering of a woman is a Persian tradition that mingled with Muslim tradition."

The alim said, "Covering and decent dress are legislated by Islam years prior to Islamic conquest in Persia. Moreover, the decent dress mentioned in Islam is different from the Persian tradition."

Sarah added, "I have also heard that it was imposed for economic reasons."

The alim asked, "What do you mean?" She answered, "That man wanted to enslave woman and exploit her, hence he imprisoned her in the house for his own advantage."

The alim said, "This is not the case in Islam. Islamic legislations guarantee the woman's rights in full. She keeps as her own what she gets by work. The Qur'anic verse states:

...men shall have the benefit of what they earn; and women shall have the benefit of what they earn... (Al-Baqara, 2: 32)

Man cannot benefit from her work since she is the owner of her property. By the way, such a right has only recently been granted to the European woman, who used to get half wages a man received for the same work."

Then Sarah raised another question. She said, "In regard to hijab, has it anything to do with self-denial?" The alim answered, "In Islam, there is no such thing!"

Here for the first time, I exposed my being a Muslim, so I said, "The Prophet of Islam says: There is no monkey in Islam."

The alim smiled and said, "Here is a Muslim who knows such a fact, there is also a Qur'anic verse in this regard:

...and (as for) monkey they innovated it, We did not prescribe it to them... (Al-Hadid, 57: 19-25)

In Islamic history it is related that one of the Companions wanted to spend all his time for the worship of Allah, so he gave up all earthly pleasures, including his wife. The wife complained to the Prophet (SAW), who was annoyed at the husband's behaviour. He went to the mosque, got on the pulpit and warned his Companions, saying: "Three matters have been made enjoyable to me in this life: all that is good, women and my beloved prayer."

Sarah asked another question, "What is the status of woman in Islam? Has she the same rights as man?"

The alim told us, "She has equal rights, but they are not identical to man's. Similarity is impossible, while equality is justice. Women's rights in Islam are no less than man's rights with due consideration of the differences between men and women. Imagine that a wealthy man who owns many properties wants to divide his wealth among his sons.

He will surely consider their qualifications and give the fertile land to the one interested in farming; business management to the one interested in business, and so on. The man is aware that his sons will get equal shares, though not similar. In regard to woman, she has the right to work and keep her earnings for herself."

"She will be rewarded for her good deeds and punished for bad deeds in the hereafter, the same as man. Man and woman follow the same life course towards Allah, the Almighty. They have equal rights in the Divine Legislations. I will list some books about this subject which should help you understand more about Islam and women's rights."

"I'll read them," Sarah said. "Another question I have is this: Does Islam consider woman (Eve) as the source of all evil, and that she tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit?"

He replied, "Absolutely not. Islam does not blame woman for this disobedience. When the Holy Qur'an narrates the story of disobedience it refers to them both suffering from the trick of Satan. The Qur'anic verses state:

And We said: Oh, Adam dwell you and your wife in the garden; so eat from where you desire, but do not go near this tree, for then you will be of the unjust. But Satan made an evil suggestion to them that he might make manifest to them what had been hidden from them of their evil inclinations and he said: Your Lord has not forbidden you this tree except that you may not both become two angels or that you may not become immortals.

And he swore to them both; Most surely I am a sincere advisor to you. Then he caused them to fall by deceit, so when they tasted of the tree, their evil inclinations became manifest to them and they both began to cover themselves with the leaves of the garden and their Lord called out to them: "Did I not forbid you both from that tree and say, to you that Satan is your open enemy?"
(Al-Araf, 7: 19-22)

"You see, they were both exposed to temptation and they both succumbed. Eve alone is not accused of the first disobedience."

Then Sarah said, "They say woman was created from man and for the sake of man. What does Islam say in this regard?"

The alim said, "This is not correct either. Almighty Allah could have created man without any innate desire for woman. Yet Allah created woman as an independent creature whose existence is related to man, just as his is related to her. The Qur'an says:

...they (women) are an apparel for you and you are an apparel for them... (Al-Baqara, 2: 187)

Another verse states:

He has created you from a single being then made its mate of the same (kind). (Al-Zumar, 39: 6)

Sarah's final question concerned children, and if Islam considered woman just as means for producing children.

The alim said, "Islam gives the mother a supreme status and grants her full rights to her children in addition to recognizing the important role a mother has with regard to bearing and raising her children. Islam has confirmed through the Prophet (SAW) that Paradise is reached through a mother's satisfaction. Hence, Allah's pleasure stems from a mother's pleasure."

Then it was time for the evening prayer, so we asked the alim to schedule the next meeting. We left the house and stood outside for a few moments. I saw a couple of men who were walking by admire Sarah and I felt quite annoyed for the first time. She was also bothered by their looks and bid me farewell, although I pleaded with her to stay and talk with me. She stopped a taxi, got in, and left me at the roadside broken-hearted.

I was excited and did not know what to do. I walked along the streets, bought the books recommended by the alim and returned home exhausted, both spiritually and physically. I started reading and gradually I felt better. I never ceased thinking of Sarah, who was not only a dear friend, but my whole life.

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