

Introduction

"When the earth is shaken with a mighty shaking, and earth brings forth her burdens, and man says, 'What ails her?' Upon that day she shall tell her tidings for that her Lord has inspired her."
(99: 1-5)

It is 1971, just the beginning of the end of the Pahlavi regime and the monarchical system in Iran. The words of Ali Shariati, the great teacher, the man who redefines Islam as it has been and not as it has become, ring out at the Husayniyyeh Ershad¹ on the night which marks the anniversary of the birth of the daughter of the Prophet of Islam – Fatima (‘a).²

He cries out the question which is upon all women's lips, "Who am I?" "Am I a mother?", "A wife?", "A daughter?", "A friend?", "A biologist?", "A chemist?", "A doctor, nurse, mid-wife, laborer, writer, human being...?" "Who am I?"

It is the very first time that an Iranian woman is confronted with this question. She knows, feels, senses the question with her innermost being but she has never had it expressed for her before. Once expressed, the question, of necessity, begs for an answer which is a genuine and authentic part of that person.

This is the beginning of the Revolution which Iranian women were to undergo but it will take seven long years before it is expressed in society namely, in the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

But we have moved too quickly. We are way ahead of ourselves. We have to return to that night when so many of us were not present, the night when the question was first expressed.

On that night in 1971, he begins the journey to Fatima with this question and slowly but surely unfolds an answer. He lays the groundwork: be authentic, genuine in your search. Search for what? Search for the Truth. Do not be intimidated by external forms and eye catching colors. Be yourself, that which you really are and not that which you have become. Seek out the Truth.

With this as a base, you face the first obstacle. "How can I be authentic when I still do not know who I am?" He tells us, "You do not know who you are because you have no traditional models to turn to." That

is, you have no direction, you have no orientation. Why? Because scholars for the last fourteen centuries have been too busy describing the details of devotions and by doing so, have inadvertently left the models aside. They failed to present Islam to the people in the people's language.

Other than a few responsible and committed scholars, they failed to bring the essence of Islam to light. That is, Islam stresses inner as well as outer freedom. When presented in the form that the Prophet received it, it brings self respect. It opposes tyranny, oppression and colonialism for they foster dependence upon a man made system. These scholars failed to uncover the forgotten concepts of Islam. They ignored its revolutionary dimension.

They stepped over the family of Ali ('a), Islam as it was at the time of the Prophet and what Shi'ism really stands for. The essential principles, the columns which hold up the personality had been so intricately carved and decorated that their basic form and function had been covered over. Pillars such as *azadeh* – freedom from attachments to this world or inner liberation, being inwardly free and the seeking of justice, all lay dormant within their exterior decoration.

What should be done? One should seek out the methodology set down by the Prophet. Shariati then describes the three methods of the conservative, the reformist and the revolutionary pointing out the pros and cons of each approach. Then he turns his analysis to the method which the Prophet was inspired with. "The Prophet preserves the form," Shariati tells us, "the container of a custom which has deep roots in society, one which people have gotten used to from generation to generation, and one which is practiced in a natural manner, but he changes the contained, the contents, spirit, direction and practical application of this custom in a revolutionary, decisive and immediate manner."

Is this not the very method he puts forth for women? If your culture holds the tradition of a Fatima, seek her out. Retain your outer feminine form but change the contents, for the infiltration of your inner essence by imported contents brought by the enemy in the guise of a friend is far more harmful than the changes one's outer form may take.

The state of one's hemline is a superficial problem resolved one way this year and another way, next. It produces meaningless consumerism. However, when the disease reaches the roots, the inner essence of the form, the form falls away from its society and remains root-less, wandering, without meaning. This is what the enemy, the destroyer of the inner essence of womanhood wants, for root-less forms follow the course of events without ever again taking roots, without any concern for their society, without commitment, alienated and completely capable of being molded into whatever framework is provided.

This is what the Prophet brought when Islam, 'the real sense of submission' was revealed to him. Submit to that which gave you roots, the One God and not the multiple forms which attract one away from one's roots. Strengthen your roots and your earth so that when there is a 'mighty shaking' as the Qur'an so firmly announces, which at one level can be interpreted as an 'awakening of consciousness', your roots will hold, you will prevail, the outer winds, storms, lightening and thunder can not pull you away.

This takes us to another stage. We have a method but now we need a direction. Will it be that of a realist or that of an idealist? Shariati tells us, "Neither. Both."

Islam admits to all realities – hunger, ignorance, drug addiction, the need for divorce, the weakening of the weak by the strong, oppression and suppression (realities according to realists, must be translated into real forms so they have no problem with imagination, ideology and ideas which they ignore). "But as opposed to realism, Islam does not accept the status quo but changes the realities." Shariati continues, "It changes their essence in a revolutionary way. It carries realities along with its ideals. It uses realities as a means to reach its idealistic goals, its real desires, which are nonexistent by themselves. Unlike realists, Islam does not submit to realities, but rather, it causes the realities to submit to it. Islam does not turn away from realities as idealists do. It seeks them out. It tames them. Through this means, Islam uses that which hinders the idealists as a composite for its own ideals."

With this approach, an independence of thinking develops which, in order to succeed as an answer and not to cause deviation, must branch out from that society's historical roots. Face up to your realities. Tame them. Work through them to reach your ideals.

Which mould does the Iranian woman of 1971 fill? Traditional or absurd? Women of the tradition or women of the new imported mould? The question, "Who am I?" does not concern them. It is directed towards those who "can neither automatically accept their hereditary, traditional form nor surrender to the imposed new forms."

The question is relevant to the woman who wants to decide for herself and who desires a decision that relates to her own culture; for if she is authentically and genuinely searching, she cannot neglect her culture nor can she ignore it. Is she one who serves herself or others? Is she an individual or a social being? Is she aware of the fact that, individualism, that is, 'individual independence,' in the present century, "in one's relationship to one's society (family, tribe or country) or the serving of oneself, replaces the spirit and unity of society and the serving of others"?

As Shariati points out, there are many women whom we cannot see – women who are independent and who rely on their own accomplishments and relate these to their own cultural background. It is for a woman to awaken so that she will not live her life unconsciously imitating borrowed forms and ideas – forms and ideas which neither she nor her ancestors participated in the creation of, thereby being essentially irrelevant to her.

It is here that Shariati develops the concept of Islamic social justice. In Islam it is not sufficient to tell one's self, "Thou shalt not ... this or that." For there is a commitment by which each individual is bound by and that is to be an active participant in society opposing social ills. That is, one should say to one's self, "Thou shalt not be an oppressor," but one is equally obliged to say to one's self, "Thou shalt help the oppressed."

Ali Shariati was a firm believer in the traditions of, his culture. He realized that you cannot inject ideas

from other cultures which have no organic or rational roots. He realized that concepts must be tested according to the cultural and social criteria of that environment. He was able to redefine the basis of the beliefs of his people, his society and his society's perception of itself. He awoke latent ideas. His goal was the development of a dynamic social environment which would be embedded in the historical background and conscience of that society.

To this end, he takes us to the heart of Shi'ism: Fatima, the beloved daughter of the Prophet of Islam. He describes the woman we could not see, the one we thought we knew but only after his guidance did we become aware of the fact that although we related each day directly to her spirit, she had been lost as a model for our daily lives. That is, we had an emotional attachment to her inner essence but we had removed her form.

Shariati takes us to Fatima. He begins with the social customs of the Arabian Peninsula before her birth where according to custom, female children were buried alive at birth in order to save the family from the disgrace of having an unsuitable son-in-law. It was the revolutionary message of Islam which did away with this custom.

God reveals through the Qur'an that the Prophet Muhammad (s) had been given 'the abundant river of Paradise', *kawthar*, and through that river, he shall have abundant progeny although according to Arab beliefs at that time, a man without a son is called 'cut-off'. How could it be? The father of a daughter will have abundant progeny? His wife, over 50 years old, gives birth to a fourth daughter, Fatima. God has kept his promise to the Prophet for through her, the progeny of the Prophet multiplies – through a woman.

Shariati then goes on to further enumerate the honors that Islam has bestowed upon women. There is only one person buried in the Ka'ba, the 'House of God' and that is a woman, a slave, Hajar, the second wife of Abraham and mother of Ismail.

The Prophet always treated Fatima with a love and respect which caused great amazement to the people of the times. Their relationship was such that Fatima became known as 'the mother of her father' for she accompanied him everywhere and she was always protecting and, caring for him.

Although polygamy is allowed in Islam in certain circumstances, the Prophet, because of his love and respect for Khadijah, the mother of Fatima, never married another during her lifetime nor did his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, marry another wife as long as Fatima was alive.

Fatima spent her life in struggle, resisting poverty and difficulties. Her father was forced to spend three years in a valley with his family when his tribe imposed economic and social sanctions against his message of Islam. After the migration to Medina, her new life as a married woman begins but she continues to face the same hardships and difficulties that she has encountered since childhood.

She is inspired by the spirit and compassion of her father. She grows up in his shadow as her husband,

Hazrat Ali, had. They came to know the spirit of struggle and resistance and the turns of fate.

Ali Shariati describes these events and many others based upon Sunni and Shiite sources of the Traditions. At the beginning, in Part One, he has told us, "The only thing our beloved people know about Fatima is the following:

'Fatima was the beloved daughter of the Prophet and detested by Aiesha [the wife of the Prophet after Khadijah's death and the daughter of Abu Bakr, the first of the Orthodox Caliphs]. After the death of the Prophet, Abu Bakr took her grazing land in Fadak. Omar attacked her home with a group of his men. They struck her .in her side and she, six months pregnant, aborted her son, Mohsin.

From then on, her days passed with the taking of her children's hands and walking outside of the city to a place called 'House of Sorrows'. There she would sit and cry. She would speak ill of the usurpers of Ali's rights. She would cry and lament for hours. She spent her short life crying and cursing her fate until she died. She requested in her will that she be buried at night so that those who thought ill of her would not follow her funeral and they would not know where she was buried.'

What we learn in Part two is a far cry from what we had known. Is that a Moslem female child who defends her father against the elders of her tribe? Is that a Moslem female child who, holding her father's hand, accompanies him into the bazaar, listens to his debates and walks with him to her home?

Is that a Moslem woman who stands at the door and defends her husband and her home when usurpers try to burn it down? Is that a Moslem woman who tells the newly elected Caliph that he has displeased God and God's Prophet by not listening to the Prophet's advice and taking only his own interests to heart? Is that a Moslem woman who when she finds injustice and oppression speaks out with the totality of her being, not fearing the outcome of her words for—she knows she speaks with the tongue of Truth?

Let us turn to her last sermon and have her own words tell us what she really believed and practiced. When Fatima was ill with the final sickness which caused her death, the wives of the Emigrants and Companions of the Prophet went to visit her to ask how she was feeling. Abu Bakr had been elected Caliph and Ali was put aside. In reply to them, after asking for the blessings of God for her father, Muhammad, she said:

"By God I am alive while I have nothing but contempt for this world. I detest your men. After I tried to show them who their real enemy was and they did not listen, I put them aside.

"How ugly are the sharp edges of swords when they are broken and then play with people's efforts and struggles which so many have undertaken, destroying the fortifications, breaking spears, making devious decisions and standing on the precipice of material and personal self desires. What a terrible future they are preparing for by causing the wrath of God and thereby bringing about permanent torment for themselves.

"I tried to awaken them to their acts and show them the burden they had placed upon their own shoulders. They deserve to be slaughtered, to be wounded by swords. Those who act oppressively are far from –the blessings and mercy of God. Woe be to those people. They brought down a leader (Ali) who was at the peak of the mission. Mountains form upon the unconquerable pillars of prophecy, the place of inspiration, the wise and expert dominated by both routine and spiritual affairs. Beware! This is an obvious loss.

"By God, why did they dislike Ali? Were they afraid of the sharpness of his sword in supporting right and truth, his braveness in fighting and martyrdom, his killing of oppressors, his effective blows in words and his anger for the sake of God?

"By God, if they had followed the selection of the Prophet, Hazrat Ali, he would have guided anyone who had gone astray and if one rejected the right reasoning Ali would have shown the error in a way that neither would the rider be hurt nor the horse he is riding upon, wounded.

"If Ali had been leader, he would guide them to a clear, sweet spring of water. The watering spring would be full, its shores clean and sound and he would return them safely to the edge after they had drank from the water.

"He would advise them in things both manifest and hidden without any benefit to himself from their needs and without taking more than a small share for himself – just enough so that he would not go thirsty or hungry. In such a case, worshippers of this world (materialists) would be distinguished from the ascetics and the right ones from the antagonists.

"God says, 'if citizens are faithful and avoid wrong deeds, We will give blessings from heaven and earth to them. But they deny the truths so we captivated them for their deeds. From those who oppressed, the results of their actions will be returned to themselves: They cannot change the traditions of history.'

"Arise! Arise! If you stay a while you will see the wonders of nature, but more wonderful than these is speech. What is their argument? What pillars do they support? What rope do they hold onto? What family do they admire and dominate over?

"What a terrible leader they have elected (Abu Bakr). What a terrible helper they have appointed (Omar). What a wrong and oppressive exchange they have made! By God, they gave superiority to those who deferred their decision to become Moslems rather than to those who were the pioneers. They elected weak ones instead of strong ones. They destroyed those who believe they are performing good affairs. They are corrupters who do not understand.

"Woe be to them! Is it not more worthy to follow the one who guides rather than the one who cannot find his way if he is not guided? What has happened to you? What kind of a judgment is this? You have impregnated the earth with your act. Just wait until the time when it gives birth. I swear to you, instead of milk, you will have buckets full of blood and poison will flow from the breasts of the newborn.

"It is then that the destroyers of rights will lose and those who will come in the future will find and realize the terrible results of what the ancestors have done. So you should be satisfied with your daily affairs and live in peace prior to the storm and terrible revolts.

"For then, the sharp swords of the dominations of the oppressors, anarchy and the rule of tyrants will overcome you. The oppressors will enslave you. No public assets except a small quantity will remain. They will cultivate with force what you have planted with love. At that time you will only sigh for there will be nothing that you can do because you were blind and could not see the truth. They will oblige you because you have turned your faces from the right way and you did not accept it."

Why has Fatima been misunderstood? Why have our women been lost to either outdated forms or new imports? Why has she been exploited? Shariati tells us in the words of Hazrat Ali, "two parties are required in order to bring about oppression. One is the oppressor and the other is the one who accepts oppression. Oppression cannot be one sided. An oppressor cannot perform oppression in the air. Oppression is like a piece of iron which is formed by the striking of the hammer of the oppressor upon the anvil of the oppressed." Thus, women themselves participated in the attack upon their values by allowing themselves to be oppressed and by not searching out their roots.

With the awareness which Shariati brings to us, our coming to know Fatima brings about a responsibility and a commitment to those who first ask, "Who am I" and then search out the answer in the authenticity and genuineness of their own culture. The responsibility and commitment grows through love and faith. Our knowledge becomes illuminated because Shariati has awakened this responsibility within us. With Fatima as our model, we learn to fight injustice and oppression. We turn from ourselves to others. We become actively involved in society's ills because she as she really was, is our symbol, our model, our heroine.

This is not to deny the spiritual presence and essence of Fatima who has inspired thousands of artists, poets, writers and artisans. At one point we learn that the Prophet gave her a prayer instead of the domestic help that she had asked for. She grew from this for this nourished her spirit and strengthened her commitment to God and His people. But it is rather to complement it for as Jalal al-din Rumi tells us, "The physical form is of great importance; nothing can be done without the consociation of the form and the essence. However often you may sow a seed stripped of its pod, it will not grow; sow it with the pod, it will become a great tree."⁴ And as every artisan knows, it is the clay itself which determines the forms that can be created.

Having awoken and become aware to the real Fatima presented by Shariati, Iranian women were able to arise and play a major role in the Islamic Revolution of Iran. They fought against oppression and injustice side by side with the men. Clothed in the modest dress of what Fatima might have worn, they found no impediments to their freedom to act, to fight, to resist.

After the Revolution, Iranian women who had asked themselves Shariati's question, "Who am I?," are

trying to come to know themselves as being 'like Fatima' for one must remember that only Fatima is Fatima.

Laleh Bakhtiar

June, 1980.

-
1. A Husayniyyeh is a traditional religious center where the people gather to see passion plays, in particular, those related to the third Shi'ite Imam, Imam Husayn, and his martyrdom at Karbala. The Husayniyyeh Ershad, referred to here, is located in Tehran. It is a center built in the late 60's and has extended the meaning to include a center for lectures about Islam. Ali Shariati was one of the first people to lecture here and drew crowds in the thousands; and people gathered in the streets and surrounding areas to hear him. But as the former regime began to fear his effect, they closed down the center for several years. It was re-opened after the Revolution.
 2. The letter ('a) which follows the name of Hazrat Ali or Hazrat Fatima or the other Imams is the abbreviation of 'alayhi salam, (peace be upon them).
 3. The letter ('s) which follows the name of the Prophet Muhammad ('s) is a customary abbreviation for the benediction salli 'aLah 'alih wa alihi, ('may the blessings of God be upon him and his family').
 4. Fihi ma fi, p. 19-21

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/fatima-is-fatima-dr-ali-shariati/introduction>