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# WOMEN IN THE QUR'AN

AN EMANCIPATORY READING

A S M A L A M R A B E T

translation . myriam francois-cerrah

Women in the Qur'an:  
An Emancipatory Reading

Asma Lamrabet

*Translated by* Myriam Francois-Cerrah

Square View

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## CONTENTS

<b>Preface to the English Edition</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Introducing the author</b>	<b>ix</b>
<i>A meeting with very special Muslim women</i>	ix
<b>Thanks</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
What kind of liberation are we speaking of?	1
<b>In the very beginning ...</b>	<b>9</b>

### PART ONE



<b>When the Qur'an speaks of women</b>	<b>21</b>
A story of all women	21
<i>Balkis</i> , Queen of Sheba: A democratic queen	25
Sarah and Hagar, emblems of monotheism	36
Zulaykha or forbidden love	44
Umm Musa and Asiah, the free women	57
The daughter of Shu'ayb and the meeting with Musa	64
Maryam, the favourite	70

<i>Maryam, a link between Christians and Muslims</i>	70
<i>The birth of Maryam</i>	71
<i>Maryam's spiritual retreat</i>	76
<i>Revelation and annunciation</i>	79
<i>The birth of 'Isa and all the struggles</i>	84
<i>Maryam and her son, a 'sign' for the worlds</i>	86

## PART TWO



<b>When the Qur'an speaks to women</b>	<b>91</b>
The language of the Qur'an, a masculine language?	91
When the Qur'an responds to female demands	93
A <i>mubahalah</i> , or when the Qur'an encourages women to social participation	101
The Muhajirat or female political refugees	106
The <i>mubayy'at</i> or the political participation of women	116
<i>Al-Mujadilah</i> , when God listens to the secrets of a woman	131
And the other verses?	139
<i>Polygamy</i>	142
<i>Testimony</i>	145
<i>Inheritance</i>	147
<i>Hit them ... ?</i>	153
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>160</b>
Islam or the story of an aborted women's revolution	160
<b>Glossary of Terms</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Publishers End Notes</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>175</b>



## INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR

*A meeting with very special Muslim women*

The Parisian suburbs ... . Saint-Denis, Sartrouville, the Yvelines ... .

Neighbourhoods which I know only by name. It is grey and cold, despite it being springtime. Housing project tower blocks where generations of immigrants are expected to flourish ... . A sad setting.

Luckily, there was this meeting, those smiles ... . a glimmer of hope in this grey French sky. These Muslim women from over there ... . True members of the resistance.

They are there, welcoming me with lots of expectation, a certain shyness, a hint of curiosity ... . For them I probably represent the other part of themselves, the one from back home, from the roots, the source.

The other side of the Mediterranean from where, ultimately, everything comes, where this idealized Islam lives ... . Of course, since it is at home there. This allegedly calm Islam they call home, where they so wish they could live sometimes, especially at difficult times such as these when it is not easy living here, when one self describes and wishes to be Muslim ... . and especially a Muslim woman.

Apparently, I am like a breath of fresh air to them, as one of them tells me. But if they only knew. If they only knew that it is them who have dazzled me, with their energy, their wisdom, their lucidity ... .

Still very young for the most part, they each have a journey which betrays a profound maturity of mind ... . By force of circumstances, we emerge grown from life's struggles. And in fact, one discerns on their faces, in their smiles and in their expressions, the deep impact of so many life struggles ... .

How many life experiences, stories and journeys, where the act of living one's faith daily becomes an incessant struggle and an experience of being truly torn ... . But how much dignity also, how much realism and humility!

Their struggle? It is on all fronts. To face an environment increasingly hostile to their need for spirituality, to struggle against all forms of discrimination, to assert their right to be fully fledged citizens, to denounce the politics of marginalisation which consistently relegates them to an eternal sub-culture.

Despite the multiple challenges, they do not give up. And as one of them said to me, 'each conflict we experience enriches us and highlights our shortcomings and weaknesses. It pushes us at the same time to think, to improve and to try and surpass ourselves.'

True warriors ... .

They are continuously searching for a sense of well-being despite other people's stares, each day a little more aggressive.

Nonetheless, it is sometimes other people's stares which have led them to question themselves and to rework their spirituality in order, in fact, to better themselves ... .

They dream of living their Islam peacefully. They dream of a serene and free spirituality ... .

But every aspect of their daily life amounts to facing a growing animosity against their spiritual identity. They have learned to live with their Islam, as one learns to live with an intractable and profound chronic illness.

A recurring pain following almost daily politico-media indictments. They dream of reformism, of renewal, of remaking the world. Their world.

But the observation of a fossilized traditionalism is obvious in their surroundings and at the heart of a community which is desperately seeking itself.

The debate is passionate, frenetic. But it is also of a high intellectual calibre, because the demands are legitimate and the critiques merited, in the face of the archaic daily lives of Muslims ... . They do not want to live Islam merely with their hearts, but also with their minds.

Passionate, they clearly are, but beyond this impassioned Islam which they experience with their heart, their quest for spirituality is also a quest for meaning and recognition.

It is what enables them to get through often very complex social situations with a lot of realism and discernment ... .

Their work on the ground is impressive but remains insufficient in their eyes and as one reminded me: 'Beyond a new Muslim intellectual theorising, which has already begun, it is its implementation on the ground which is imperatively required right now!'

Their motto? An unwavering commitment to their faith, their identity, but also to their French citizenship which they wish to experience fully ... without caveats and particularly without political blackmail! Conscious that the debate concerning the veil, women and Islam is merely a political-media strategy which seeks above all else to instrumentalize them in order to better stigmatize them.

They have moved beyond the stage of an identity crisis which means one feels torn between two apparently irreconcilable cultures.

Through their faith, they have already reconciled the two and wish moreover to define their own culture, diverse, fertile, open to all universal values.

How many challenges to overcome and paths to cross!? How many situations of self-denial, of struggles, of humiliations, of psychological barriers to confront, to undergo, to live through ... . ?

Will they have the courage to go through with it? The courage to not succumb to this nagging temptation to renounce, to resign, to abandon everything, like so many others.

Will they be allowed to accomplish their project: to live their Islam in harmony with a rights-based citizenship? Or will they be discouraged, pushed to their wits end and made hostages of an ideological confrontation of which the central implication is a covert racism.

I wish through these lines to express my admiration to them for their work ... for their resistance, their struggle which somewhere along the lines is also my own. My sincere emotion at having known them, my desire to see them continue their activism ... . In particular, I want to tell them to hold on.

If things change in Islam today, it is also thanks to this substantive work, to this spirit of renewal, thanks to all these struggles ... . In Islamic or Western lands, it is the same breath of spirituality, of freedom and of hope, which stirs hearts and minds ... .

To these French Muslim women, I dedicate this book.

To these resistance figures in the shadows whom I met that certain spring in 2004 and who inspired me to undertake this re-reading which, I hope with much humility, will help them, however little, in their struggle ... .

To Zhor, Hanan, Malika, Nourhen, Khadija, Aloise, Naila, but also Amira, the Tunisian princess, Fatema, Aicha and all the others, whose names I do not recall but whose memories are indelibly engraved in my memory.

**May God love you all.**





## INTRODUCTION

### **What kind of liberation are we speaking of?**

For a long time, the question of the status of Muslim women has been taken hostage between two extreme interpretations: a very rigid conservative Islamic approach and a Western, Islamophobic and ethnocentric approach.

These two conceptions are of course at odds, but they share the same stumbling block: a dead-end. It is virtually impossible to conceive of even the hint of a debate to clarify certain points, given how blinded partisans from each perspective are by their respective certainties.

The Muslim woman, the victim of choice during centuries of stagnation and decadence, continues today to survive in a social system which perpetuates, of course to different degrees, oppression in the name of religion. This statement is rarely acknowledged in Muslim lands where often the *other* is incriminated for seeking to undermine, or even corrupt an entire social fabric of moral values, of which women are the main guarantor.

'Islam gave women all their rights ... It honours women ... It has protected them ...'. This is the favourite discourse of many Muslims, often very sincere, but whose arguments remain nevertheless very weak. A recurring discourse, constantly on the defensive, which is losing traction with time and which, for lack of convincing, is more revealing of a profound and manifest state of disarray.

We note in fact a patent anachronism between these two discourses and the lived reality which aims towards and claims to be respectful of Islamic values and in which the worst discriminations against women are justified ... From honour crimes to forced marriages, via retrograde laws which maintain women in the position of a minor for life, the list of injustices is long and remains unfortunately justified by a certain reading of Islam.

What is more, it is no secret that the status of women, such as it is conceived currently in traditionalist and dominant readings of Islam, remains the *obligatory* breach through which a certain Western hegemony continuously seeks to interfere in order to discredit an entire system of thought. The current meta-discourse on the *veiled, oppressed and reclusive* Muslim woman is merely a continuous reproduction of the orientalist and colonialist vision still in vogue in contemporary postcolonial representations.

This eternally accusatory discourse serves in particular as an alibi for all political attitudes of cultural domination and supports the binary analysis which pits, utterly unquestionably, the *universal* model of the *free* Western woman against that of the oppressed Muslim woman in need of *liberation* ... The opposition of these two models allows Muslim women to remain categorised as second-class citizens and in particular allows the image to be used as a *foil* in relation to modernity, civilization and freedom. It is ironic to note within a certain western discourse, which claims to be *liberating* and has *universalist* pretensions, the obvious signs of a language of paternalistic domination, which struggles to break with its colonial vocation of a *civilizing mission*. The desire is not to *free* Muslim women in order to simply free them, but rather to *showcase western freedom* and, thus, maintain the power relations which best enable domination of the other. It is not a question of demonizing the West and of accusing it of all ills. The contribution of western ideas to the long process of modernization is undeniable. But the critique is directed towards a certain strand of thinking which, in the name of its conception of the universal, claims to behold a monopoly on modernity and truth. It is not about denying the existence of a culture of oppression of women in Muslim lands but, rather, about

denouncing what a given hegemonic western vision wishes to do to this culture by hyper-essentialising it. A Western perspective which maintains Muslim women in a one-dimensional grid in which they have been carefully enclosed and through which western values and norms are promoted as the only means of *liberating* those poor Muslim women.

Between these two diametrically opposed visions, the Muslim woman ultimately remains a prisoner, despite herself, of a discourse which in both cases, ignores her person, her aspirations and her will ... Between a frozen Islamic thought which assiduously *ring-fences* women's issues and a western ideology which takes pleasure from denigrating Islam through those same issues, one struggles to think of a third way, through which Muslim women can emerge from this ideological impasse.

The problem is that women and their status in Islam is a contentious subject and it would be difficult for anyone to deny this. But what is the truth of the matter? Is it truly religion, as a system of values, which oppresses us or a collective social reality which appropriates the religious in order to reformulate it according to a hierarchical representation which suits it and which allows it to better affirm its powers?

It is undeniable that when religion comes into being in an already sexually ascribed social order, it can only be absorbed into it, despite itself. It is also obvious that one is within one's right to question, and to remain perplexed in the face of the real contradiction which exists between the spiritual message of the Qur'an and the lived reality of Muslims. On one hand, Islam carries, like other monotheistic religions, a message of peace, love and justice, coming from a God who, in creating human beings, men and women, has made them unequivocally free, equal and dignified ... on the other hand, the traditionalist understanding of that same religion seems to contribute to a certain preponderance of men at the level of social reality and seems, therefore, to be one of the main vectors of discrimination against women. In a large number of interpretative readings of the Qur'an are found classic patterns of male domination where women are marginalized, even excluded

in the name of the sacred ...<sup>A</sup> One can understand that the different religious interpretations can carry the imprint of the geopolitical contexts from which they emerge and of the socio-cultural environment which produced them. But it is harder to understand how, in the long term, these same interpretations have become themselves, immutable and entirely closed to all critical reflection. Interpretations which have removed the profound meaning of the message and which with time have become insurmountable barriers for those who wish to return to the *initial impulse* of the text and find within it answers to the needs of our time.

The confusion is such that it has become very difficult to distinguish between what is from the sacred text and what is from the domain of subjective human interpretation.

And yet, between the *humanist spirit* of the Qur'an which favours the human being *Insan*, without distinction according to gender, and certain classical interpretations demeaning towards women, there is a substantial misunderstanding which means that the lived reality of Muslims has become to this extent removed from their spiritual references.

The spiritual message is, as described by the Qur'an in several passages, a 'reminder' (*dhikr*) which consists in awakening in human beings the most noble side of their conscience in order that they remain in a continuous state of *proximity* with the Creator. And through this *remembrance*, there is an intimate conviction in Divine justice ... Nothing in the Qur'anic text can justify or support any sort of discrimination against women. It is this conviction which stems from profound faith but which truly struggles to materialize in our Muslim reality, which needs to be reformulated and put into practise on the ground, in daily life.

It is here that Islamic thought needs to evolve, in order to redefine itself, to be re-thought and to make the necessary distinction between the spiritual message and some interpretations which have fixed the text and at times, killed discussion.

This is what is happening, God willing, today in the Muslim world where the premises of a serene and well-thought through change are beginning to appear.

Despite an overall chaotic general assessment in the Muslim world, one discerns the clear though timid emergence of an innovating discourse, which seeks to *reform* religious thought that is currently dwindling and virtually entirely focused on its moralising tendency.

In fact, it is comforting to note the current emergence of an Islamic trend, albeit still marginal, which whilst still trying to find itself contributes to redrawing new spaces where the religious debate can evolve without losing its soul ....

Within these new spheres of reflection, that concerning the status of women in Islam is taking shape and affirming itself day by day. The question of women in Islam has always been at the heart of the debate, possibly even of all debates in the Islamic world. However, what is currently new is that at the heart of this intellectual effervescence, Muslim women are trying to *reclaim* their voice, in order to *re-appropriate* what has persistently remained in the hands of men, namely their own destiny!

Indeed today many intellectual Muslim women, living in Muslim societies but also in the West, through their academic research, social and theological, and particularly in the name of their faith, are questioning a significant amount of prejudice on this topic. They contest in particular a classical analysis which stipulates that the inequality between men and women and its corollary of discriminatory measures are an inherent part of the sacred text by demonstrating that, in fact, it is certain biased readings, bolstered by patriarchal customs, which have rather legitimated these same inequalities.

It is important to underline that these new positive forms of resistance are the prerogative of Muslim women who, whilst having a critical approach to certain religious readings, are practising believers and it is in the name of their faith that they assert their right to assess the text.

It is an effort to demarcate oneself from a women's movement coming from Muslims which seeks changes outside of the religious framework. Whilst one must respect this desire to define oneself outside of the religious framework, it is sad to note that these

Muslim women who are rebelling against the alleged *diktats* of the religion are those most heard and given the greatest amount of airtime ... This is not surprising in and of itself, since the only acceptable or even expected critique in Western circles today is that which challenges the Islamic tradition.<sup>1</sup>

What is original about this new form of female contestation in Islam which, it should be noted, is met with notable indifference in the West, is that it takes shape within and in the name of the Islamic tradition ... Muslim women who undertake, in the name of their convictions, a process of questioning of certain misogynistic readings in Islam and contest readings which legitimize the subordinate status of women in Islamic societies ... It is what some have referred to as *the questioners from within*. In fact, it is a project which is intrinsic to Qur'anic teachings and which advocates, in the very name of those teachings, the promotion of an egalitarian ethic both in theory and in practise.

It is thus at the heart of these debates and evolutions that the stake of a new reading of the sacred text lies ... A reading adapted to our context and to a human reality which never ceases to evolve. A reading which seeks to remain faithful to basic principles in Islam and which contends that the Qur'an is valid in all times and in all places.

How can we remain content with exegeses compiled centuries ago and which, concerning women, more often than not reflect a distressing literalism? Why do we continue to restrict ourselves to traditional readings when the text itself presents in its guiding principles extremely important latitudes so that each social reality can adapt to it and recognize itself within it. How can we remain with our arms crossed, regurgitating outmoded interpretations and hence ignoring the objectives of the text which, in every context,

- 
1. One need look no further than the success of French editors publishing testimonies by Muslim women and the proposed titles which speak volumes on this obsession with representing the Muslim woman as an inevitable victim of Islam: *Burnt Alive* by Souad; *Forced to Marry* by Leila; *Mutilated* by Khady; *The Woman's Stoning* by Freidoune Sahebjam; *Disfigured* by Rania el Baz; *I Was Born in a Harem* by Choga Regina ... almost all of which were published in the year 2005 alone!

provides *meaning* to our life on earth? It is sad to note that instead of remaining faithful to the objectives of the Divine message, we have rather remained faithful to human interpretations and readings which, voluntarily or not, have contributed to the rise of this culture of demeaning women which continues to plague our Muslim societies.

It is in this sense that a re-reading of the Qur'an from a feminine perspective draws all its importance. It will enable us to create a true dynamic of liberation from within the Islamic sphere, in the sense of *raising the status* of Muslim women.

This *liberation reading* will also allow the development of a true autonomy and an authentic Islamic feminine identity with the totality of its rights and responsibilities. Finally, it will allow women to define themselves as active partners in the process of reform and religious reinterpretation which is underway in the Muslim world. Because one can, as a believer, question the assertion according to which only men have the authority to interpret what God has outlined in His Book.

This is not an attempt to promote a women-only hermeneutics which would exclude fourteen centuries of classical exegetical tradition. Classical exegesis constitutes a very rich patrimony for Islamic memory, its contribution is indeed critical for a profound study of the text and it is not about excluding the considerable contribution of this science for the understanding of the sacred text. Rather, it is about addressing historical prejudice and inequalities, driven by a human and hence imperfect understanding of the Qur'anic message. It is about *deconstructing* an entire patriarchal model of reading which relegates women to a corner of Islamic history, in order to return to women a part of their amputated memory.

It is certainly not about forging a movement which, coming from a female perspective, would seek to oppose women to men through a conflictual understanding ... this new feminine perspective questions the alleged male superiority but not on the basis of rivalry between the sexes. It is a new perspective which can only be enriching and which takes into account the spiritual experience of

women, so often absent from the Islamic references. Spirituality has no gender, but there is a given lived relationship to God which is perceived differently by women and men ... It is here that the inclusion of the female perspective can be an *essential* addition to the human spiritual experience ... In addition, the Prophet of Islam (May Allah bless him and grant him peace) guided us from the beginning to conceiving of this female/male difference as a type of *equality at the heart of the fraternity in God* ... It is for this reason that at the heart of the Islamic reformist project, a number of Muslim men have for a long time been engaged in a process of re-reading and of liberation of women, according to the principles of Islam. This emanates precisely from a profound conviction in Divine justice and the absolute requirement of impartiality towards all human beings. Such conviction leads to a critical awakening in the believer, be it male or female, towards all the various forms of enslavement.

And refusing to endorse the subservience of which Muslim women are victims is itself an act of devotion, of piety and of faithfulness in front of the Creator.

It is of this *liberation* of which we speak ....

A *women's liberation* which advocates a spiritual rejuvenation through the Qur'an, Divine words, eternal, and an endless source of strength, of freedom and of hope ....

A *liberation* which favours above all else authenticity, the inner self and integrity.

A *liberation* which conceives of the relationship to transcendence as profoundly liberating since it frees us from all other forms of servitude ....

A *women's liberation* which does not have to conform to any other model in vogue, which is neither necessarily western, nor typically eastern, but autonomous and independent ....

A *women's liberation* which should be free to make its own choices, to re-write *its* history and to redefine *its* own spaces of freedom ....

A *liberation* well-grounded in its spiritual identity but which is open on all forms of human richness and is prepared to share with *others*, all *others*, the true universal values of ethics and justice ....



## IN THE VERY BEGINNING ...

We must go back, way back, to the story of human creation ... The universal story and popular imagination are indelibly marked by a same and unique belief which transcends time, cultural space, religious dogma and the history of civilizations ... This belief stipulates that Adam – as a man – was God’s first creation and that Eve, the woman, was created from one of Adam’s ribs.

Henceforth, this legendary truth has become the founding myth of the inferiority of women and we know the disastrous effect this type of concept has had throughout the history of humanity.

It remains undeniable that the affirmation of the inferiority of women as compared to men finds its origins in theological assumptions widely anchored in ways of thinking, both in Judaeo-Christian cultures and in Muslim lands. Without going into the metaphysical details, these main assumptions are found, with much continuity, in the interpretative texts of the religious traditions of the three monotheistic religions and one can summarize the main points through three observations which continuously return in universal religious history.

Firstly, there is this idea that woman was created from Adam’s rib, which equates to saying that her creation was necessarily secondary, Adam – man – being considered as the norm or representative of the human ideal.

The second observation is that which suggests that Eve is the

primary cause of Adam's eviction from Paradise, since it is she, according to this very widespread understanding, who incited Adam to transgress God's command and to taste from the forbidden tree. She has become the undeniable muse of the legendary 'original sin'.

And the final assumption, that woman was not only created from Adam, but she was created *for* him! An important nuance! It is from here that the entire culture of the oppression of women that we are familiar with has emerged and which has found its legitimacy in a particular religious discourse. Today, the majority of Christian exegetes consider the story of Adam and Eve to be symbolic and many theologians interpret it differently from traditional readings. They recognize the existence of many contradictions in the Bible and reject classical interpretations which they consider to be too literalistic.

As for Islam, or, rather the Qur'anic text itself, nowhere does one find this conception of Eve coming from Adam's rib. Nonetheless, it is stupefying to see the extent to which the different commentaries and religious works, and moreover the Muslim imagination, have remained profoundly tainted by the traditionalist Judaeo-Christian understanding!

In the Qur'an, several verses illustrate a very different conception to that widely circulated nowadays. First we find a central verse in Surah *al Nisā'* (Women):

*O MANKIND! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women [...]*  
(*al Nisā'* 4: 1)<sup>1</sup>

It is very important to *redefine* the terminology used in the Qur'anic text concerning creation, because key words in this verse will be interpreted in the vast majority of cases according to a classical schema of the hierarchization of human creation. In fact, in classical commentaries the term '*nafs wahida*' refers to Adam as a masculine being and *zawj* to his wife.

---

1. Translation by Muhammed Asad.

However, a more structured approach indicates that the term ‘*nafs*’, which is feminine in Arabic, refers to a range of notions which one can translate according to the meaning of the text, as: person, individual, soul, essence, matter, spirit, or even breath of life.

As for the term ‘*zawj*’, it refers to both spouses, the pair or, the partner. It is often used to speak indistinguishably of the husband or wife and despite the fact it is grammatically masculine, it can be used both for the man or the woman.<sup>2</sup> In the Qur’an, it is often used to speak of a couple, and this, as much when discussing humans as plants or animals. It is what the Qur’an describes in this verse, for example:

*And in everything have We created pairs,<sup>3</sup> so that you might bear in mind [that God alone is One]. (al-Dhāriyāt 51: 49)<sup>4</sup>*

Nevertheless, a great majority of scholars interpret the term ‘*nafs*’ as ‘Adam’ as a man or male and the term *zawj* as ‘wife’, which, according to this logic, reinforces the classical anthropomorphic representation of the origin of human creation. Since Adam is a man, the term ‘*zawj*’, as referred to by the Qur’an in this verse, refers to the female counterpart, namely Eve or Hawwa. Since the first exegetes drew widely from the pre-Islamic religious heritage in order to support their interpretations, the legend of the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib was widely reported and subsequently endorsed by Muslim scholars.

Starting from this assumption and certain supporting hadiths, the classical commentators concluded that Eve was created from one of Adam’s ribs.

However, one notes firstly that in the Qur’an, Eve (or Hawwa) is not mentioned by her name. The significance of the term ‘*zawj*’ or ‘partner’ depends on the meaning of the verse or ‘*siyaq al-ayah*’. Based on the consistency and the orientation of the verse, the term

2. The term ‘*zawj*’ is used in the Qur’an to refer to both the masculine (*al-Baqarah* 2: 230, *al-Mujadilah* 58: 1) and the feminine (*al-Nisā*’ 4: 20, *al-Baqarah* 2: 102)

3. Lamrabet prefers ‘pairs’ here to Asad’s ‘opposites’ for *zawj* (Editor).

4. Translation by Muhammed Asad.

'partner' can be translated as either the man or the woman and sometimes, as is the case in this central verse, it remains totally abstract, apparently in order to better underline the Divine will to transcend gender when it comes to the first human design.

What's more, there is no Qur'anic affirmation which specifies that the Adam of this initial creation was male and even less that Eve was drawn from one of his ribs! Some Muslim scholars, both classical and contemporary, question and even refute this type of interpretation which seems to be, according to them, largely influenced by the previous scriptural texts.

These thinkers consider that the term 'Adam' is used primarily in the Qur'an in its broadest meaning of 'human being' or 'human kind'. In his various writings, the imam Muḥammad 'Abdu suggests that Adam also refers to individual, human being, '*al-insan*' or '*bashar*'. Adam, as he is mentioned in this verse, specifically seems to refer to 'humanity' in its entirety, which amounts to saying that in creating Adam, God created the human race, male and female at once, in its initial form.

This reading, which is dubbed *reformist* to distinguish it from *classical* approaches, advocates a single unique provenance for humanity, in other words a humanity which emerged from a single matter and same origin. Still within this reformist perspective, the objective of the verse describing creation would be to unequivocally affirm the original equality of all human beings. Unlike the classical reading which translates the term '*nafs*' by 'man' or 'Adam' and *zawj* by 'Eve' or 'the first woman', the term refers here and according to the perspective of these reformists, to 'the original essence', whereas '*zawj*' refers to 'partner', which supports the idea of a full human equality, beyond any considerations based on gender or race. Humanity was thus created from this 'first entity' or 'initial truth', and through his unique interpretation the definition by Imam Muhammad 'Abdu who, differs markedly from the classical commentators.

In fact imam 'Abdu has retained two quite similar versions of the term '*nafs wahida*'. One suggests that this initial entity refers to both sexes, male and female, which will subsequently evolve to produce

the two partners and from there, all men and women. The other version considers that nothing in the Qur'an refutes the idea that this initial 'nafs' is feminine, a view which is supported by the fact the term 'nafs' itself is feminine and that the term 'zawj' – masculine – implies husband since, in another verse, it is said:

*[...] so that man (zawjaha: 'her husband') might incline [with love] towards woman (nafs).<sup>5</sup> (al-A'rāf 7: 189)*

Imam 'Abdu sees a justification of this reading in the titling of the surah, introduced by this verse, 'surah al-Nisā' or 'The women'. This is a beautiful example of a feminine reading ...

It is clear that based on what some modern commentators have retained and without omitting the part of the occult or 'ghayb' which characterizes any sacred text, one can suggest without taking too many risks that, in the Qur'anic version, human creation is not expressed through gender and that 'the Qur'an indiscriminately uses masculine and feminine words and images, in order to describe creation according to a single origin and substance. It is implicit in a great number of passages of the Qur'an that Allah's original creation was an undifferentiated humanity, neither man, nor woman'.

It seems, therefore, that God created man and woman simultaneously from a single substance and that these two human beings constitute the gender-based elements of a single, same reality. This corresponds precisely to this notion of *dualism* of creation, which is referred to several times in the Qur'an:<sup>B</sup>

*And in everything have We created opposites, so that you might bear in mind [that God alone is One]. (al-Dhāriyāt 51: 49)*

In fact, man and woman as a 'pair' or 'couple' will confirm the central principle of the Qur'an: the creator is **One** whereas all of creation is in 'pairs'. And the term 'pairs' itself speaks to the notion of equality at all levels. This reformist reading of human creation seems to be the closest to the Qur'anic message which promotes

5. Translation by Muhammed Asad; parenthesis notes by Asma Lamrabet.

equality and human equity. One also notes that the entire story of the creation of humanity revolves around the central concept of Unicity or '*tawhīd*', which is the very essence of Muslim spirituality.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that a number of classical exegetes refer to certain hadiths, which refer to women in general, in order to *constrain* more or less the meaning of the text, in particular that concerning creation, and to extract a particular conception, namely that of a *subordinate* creation of women! This sadly leads to a religious justification of the structural inferiority of women.

Concerning the hadith taken as reference for the interpretation of the verse on creation, it seems there exists at least three versions, more or less similar, according to which the Prophet describes woman as '*created from a crooked rib which must not be forced at the risk of breaking it.*'<sup>6</sup>

The study of the Prophetic tradition suggests this hadith was formulated within the context of a set of recommendations relative to male-female relations and according to which the Prophet encouraged men to display kindness and softness towards women. The resemblance of these hadiths to the story of Adam and Eve in the biblical tradition encouraged scholars to draw parallels and conclude that Eve was brought forth from one of Adam's ribs. One notes in passing that the hadith in question nowhere refers to Adam. This interpretation is found traditionally in the majority of works of *tafāsīr* despite the fact that, as we noted, nothing in the Qur'an affirms this concept.

One should not be surprised of this comparison undertaken between the tradition of the Prophet and the Judaeo-Christian myth because the hadith in question was elaborated in the context of a series of exhortations undertaken by the Prophet to his companions during the departing pilgrimage, where the topic itself was the recommendation to men to treat women well. The end of this hadith is the famous warning directed at believers: 'Be good towards your women.' The use of the imagery of the rib – and it is worth restating that the Prophet is not referring to Adam's rib – is in fact a metaphor, used according to an allegorical linguistic style

6. Hadith reported by Abu Hurayra in Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim.

much appreciated by the Arabs of the time, in order to advise men to show sensitivity and kindness towards women. It is important to specify here that the said hadiths were not evoked by the Prophet in order to explain the biological aspect of human creation, as some contemporary<sup>7</sup> Muslim thinkers rightly point out, rather the objective was to challenge certain sexist traditions according to a very pedagogical strategy.

The Prophet, as was his habit, sought to inculcate in his companions the rules of propriety and consideration towards women and, thus, to soften the harsh norms of the era.

It is, therefore, obvious that any interpretation which draws from the hadiths in order to advance arguments in favour of the secondary creation of women and which attempts to diminish the status of women is necessarily erroneous and must be considered as being in opposition to the fundamental principles of the Qur'an and of the teachings of the Prophet.

This type of allegation, which is at the root of an entire universal heritage of the depreciation (discrediting?) of women, has long justified – and continues to do so in many cultures – a logic of oppression and humiliation of women.

A scholar as famous as Imam al-Razi believes that, in the following verse, can be found the evidence that women were created only in order to satisfy men's needs:

*And among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are signs indeed for people who think! (al-Rūm 30: 21)*

'There is proof in this verse that the creation of women is similar to that of animals, of plants and all other types of blessings[...] The creation of women is therefore a true blessing for us (men) and they have, therefore, essentially been created for us[...] This is explained through the fact that women are weak by their physical

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7. Rachid al-Ghannoushi, *Al-Mar'a Bayna al-Qur'an wa Waqi' al-Muslimin*, (London, Maghreb Center for Research and Translations, 2000), 15.

constitution, that they are foolish and puerile like children ...<sup>8</sup>

If women were created by and for men, this confirms their structural inferiority and the requirement of their submissiveness. This type of assertion constitutes a recurring theme in all classical religious discourse and ends up outlining an ideological framework within which the subordination of women is incorporated into the language of the Sacred.

It is saddening to see the extent to which these scholars, who were negatively influenced by their socio-cultural environment and certain previous religious traditions, backed through their respective interpretations by an entire body of literature demeaning women and justifying the concept of male domination over women, in the name of Islam. From this, one understands how the vast majority of the religious arguments which legitimize the subordination of women draw their inspiration from this type of interpretation of Qur'anic verses, interpretations which with time are considered as somehow part of dogma, even confining the Qur'an itself to a secondary position.

It is well known that within other religious traditions, the indictment of the first woman, as being the one who led Adam – man – to be thrown out of Paradise, is obvious and this image of a temptress is undeniable. An entire legend full of imagery, with the forbidden tree, the snake and Eve, symbols of temptation and the fall from Eden, have been transmitted from generation to generation as being part of immutable religious concepts. None of these previous suppositions can be found in the Qur'an, not even in the form of a veiled reference.

Nonetheless, famous Muslim exegetes refer to these types of commentaries in their different works of *tafsīr*.<sup>9</sup> In fact, an exegete as famous as al-Qurṭubī states in his commentary that it was Eve who succumbed first to Satan and that it was she who led to the downfall of Adam, thus becoming the first source of temptation

8. Fakhr ar-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Kabīr, Mafatīh al-Ghayb*, pp. 11–13.

9. Ibn Kathīr says in his *Tafsīr* that a number of scholars which he refers to draw on ancient monotheistic sources [*ʿIsrāʿīliyyaat*] the story of the snake and of Satan, see p. 80.

for men!<sup>10</sup>

Yet, nowhere in the Qur'an does it incriminate the first woman in humanity. The Qur'anic verses couldn't be clearer: It was the first human couple which was responsible and it has never been a question, according to revelation, of blaming one or the other.

*(And We said: 'O Adam, dwell thou and thy wife in this garden, and eat freely thereof, both of you, whatever you may wish; but do not approach this one tree, lest you become wrongdoers.')*  
*al-Baqarah 2: 35*

And it was both of them who succumbed to the temptation of Satan:

*(But Satan caused them both to stumble therein, and thus brought about the loss of their erstwhile state. And so We said: 'Down with you, [and be henceforth] enemies unto one another; and on earth you shall have your abode and your livelihood for a while!')*  
*al-Baqarah 2: 36*

Then the Qur'an describes how both of them, regretting their disobedience and dismayed at their fall from grace, implored God in order that He might forgive them.

That error, a symbol of the first act of human disobedience, was absolutely absolved by the Creator. It is one of the core concepts of Islam according to which the rehabilitation of human beings is total and entirely assumed by the Creator. There is no trace of the concept of the infamous original sin, weighing heavily on the whole of humanity, an irreparable error as it is described in the Christian tradition. According to the Islamic understanding, the forbidden tree is a symbol heavy with significance, designed to test this first couple of human beings, Adam and Eve. In the face of their clear-sightedness, their lucidity and their repentance, Allah forgives them ...

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10. Al-Qurṭubi, *Al-Jami' li-Ahkam al-Qur'an*, Vol. I, p.408.

And from there, a sort of alliance between God and human beings was sealed via the intermediary of humanity's first couple ... No original sin but rather a sort of original pact between God and His creatures.<sup>11</sup>

That first erring has, therefore, not been written eternally into humanity's destiny as it has been transmitted in other religious traditions. God Says:

*And whatever [wrong] any human being commits rests upon himself alone [...] (al-An'ām 6: 164)*

There is no notion of sin in the Christian sense of the term, nor eternal Divine punishment with its concepts of guilt, suffering or redemption.

The story of Adam and Eve, as it was interpreted in the biblical tradition and by extension in other religious traditions, is far removed from that advocated by the Qur'anic text.

In fact, in tracing the creation of these first human beings, the Qur'an depicts what could be referred to as the *first communal human experience* symbolized by these two first creatures. Firstly, God honoured the human being by referring to him as - '*khalifa*'<sup>12</sup> - on Earth or the 'legatee' of His knowledge. Then, Adam and Eve were raised to the ranks of 'learned beings', among those who 'know', in front of whom the angels - perfect beings - prostrated.

The angels prostrated in front of this human creature because God inculcated *knowledge* in him! Knowledge is at the root of creation ... Humans are above angels, despite the perfection of the latter, due to knowledge, reason and intelligence, qualities inherent to human beings.

The prostration of angels in front of human beings is the revelation of *humanism* in all its splendour as stated by the great Iranian thinker Ali Shariati!<sup>13</sup>

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11. Tariq Ramadan, *Les musulmans D'Occident et l'avenir de l'Islam*, (Paris: Sinbad-Actes Sud, 2003), p. 36.

12. The term *khalifa* is often translated as vicegerent or curator

13. Ali Shariati, 'Man's creation from the Islamic viewpoint'.

See, <http://www.shariati.com/english/human.html>

These two beings created by God lived their first human trial in Paradise, when they infringed the Divine recommendation due to their weakness, their imperfection, in other words due to their humanity.

It was the first human experience of freedom ....

The first human uncertainty, the very first doubt, the first lesson in humility also ... despite their superiority in relation to the angels who prostrate before their knowledge, they are not infallible.

The Qur'an thus offers us a beautiful depiction of the human experience within the couple. Humanity's first couple will experience this first test in perfect communion. First man and first woman together, intimately connected, taken up the challenge of life ....

The Qur'an retraces in a harmonious fashion their fears and their joys, then their disobedience and their hopes, without ever distinguishing one from the other, and certainly not by denigrating one in relation to the other. Together they transgress and it is together that they repented. It is also together that they began a new destiny ....

A beautiful example of tribulations, patience, repentance and hope, whereby the return to God is always liberating.

A story of human experience which is both eternal and continuously renewed.





Today, the issue of Muslim women is held hostage between two perceptions: a conservative Islamic approach and a liberal Western approach. At the heart of this debate Muslim women are seeking to reclaim their right to speak in order to re-appropriate their own destinies, calling for the equality and liberation that is at the heart of the Qur'an.

However, with few female commentators on the meaning of the Qur'an and an overreliance on the readings of the Qur'an compiled centuries ago this message is often lost. In this book Asma Lamrabet demands a rereading of the Qur'an by women that focuses on its spiritual and humanistic messages in order to alter the lived reality on the ground.

By acknowledging the oppression of Muslim women, to different degrees, in social systems organized in the name of religion and also rejecting a perspective that seeks to promote Western values as the only means of liberating them, the author is able to define a new way. One in which their refusal to remain silent is an act of devotion and their demand for reform, within the guidelines laid out by God, will lead to liberation.

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VIEW

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