

Book Review

Four Works on Women in Islam

Al Mar'ah al Muslimah fi Tūnis bayna Tawjīhāt al Qur'ān wa Wāqī' al Mujtama' al Tūnisī

By Rāshid al Ghanūshī. Kuwait: Dār al Qalam, 1988.

This book is a penetrating study of several of the Qur'anic verses and hadiths used to construct and justify a "skewed" understanding of femininity: "He created you from a single soul, and then He created from it/like-nature its mate" (4:1); ". . . mighty is your snare" (12:27); "Fair in the eyes of men/people is the love of things they covet: women and sons . . ." (3:14); the concept of *shahawāt* (earthly desires); and the hadith "she was created from a rib."

The discussion is based on a close reading of several *tafāsīr*. One notices immediately that many of these sources dignify women and do not advocate the conventional view prevailing in contemporary Muslim societies. The book makes no apology to any author or source that presents a stereotypical view of women; instead, it criticizes their methodology on the ground that they followed the traditions of the Bible and the Jews.

In the second section, the discussion departs from a direct analysis of texts to elaborate on an Islamic typology of modern Muslim women. The author, now writing as an activist, no longer argues with others, but is concerned with getting his own understanding across. Therefore he is not concerned with normative understanding, but rather seeks the best Islamic judgment, within the context of present circumstances and world culture,

on this issue. The book is totally progressive, straight to the point, and does not make compromises to please traditionalists.

Al Mar'ah bayna Ta'lim al Dīn wa Taqālīd al Mujtama'

By Ḥasan al Turābī. Jeddah: al Dār al Sa'ūdīyah li al Nashr wa Tawzī', 1984.

This transcribed speech evokes a picture of a society in which men and women act corporately to build a sound Islamic environment. The author uses hadith and Islamic concepts to construct this vision. The book's methodology is not text-based, with the result that hadiths and verses are cited without any mention of previous analysis or argument on legal rulings deduced from them. Rather, it cites them within a social context and as highlights in an expansive vision of women's role. The booklet shows that women lived "normally" and without rigidity in the Prophet's society.

Al Mar'ah bayna al Taqālīd al Rākidah wa al Wāfīdah

By Muḥammad al Ghazālī. Kuwait: Dār al Shurūq, 1990.

This is one of two recent books by al Ghazālī which Arabic-speaking Islamists frequently use as a litmus test for the question: "Do you agree with his books on Sunnah and women?"

The book is divided into four parts: a) a discussion of general Islamic concepts advocating openness and a holistic vision when it comes to formulating a general understanding of Islam. He decries reductionism and literalists and criticizes severely some legal opinions on social life and women; b) the high status and achievements of Muslim women in history and how these prior accomplishments connect them with modern life. The idea that there is ample space in the Islamic heritage for women to emulate what has gone before, but that Muslims in general are now hung up on some outdated opinions, is stated indirectly; c) an analysis of family life at home and relationships, which draws a picture of a modern moral Islamic social environment; and, perhaps the most controversial, d) "Concepts to Be Corrected," in which he discusses critical concepts in the area of gender relations, such as *qawāmah* (ultimate responsibility for the family), covering the face, wife beating, divorce, attending mosques, public participation, women heads of state, women's dress, and other husband-wife relations. He presents expansive opinions in these matters and disregards those that he feels are unworthy of discussion because they run counter to the general discourse of Qur'an and hadith.

He also introduces boldly the opinion, which goes against accepted legal rulings, that a woman can rule an Islamic state. His understanding

of the hadith used to prevent this practice is that it is specific (*khāṣṣ*) to an historical event: the elevation of a young girl to the Persian throne.

As progressive the book is in discussing these subjects, it falls short in one important subject—wife beating—and provides no decisive opinion. One would expect the author to at least define *nushūz* (exceeding one's proper boundaries) and to reflect on the vague meaning of *ḍaraba*, which appears in the Qur'an in many different contexts.

It is the book's style, however, that makes it so controversial. As with most of his other works, al Ghazālī uses an accessible literary language that is in itself delightful. The book does not tire the reader with detailed legalistic arguments or systematic analyses. Rather, it provides mature Islamic opinions based on many sources, among them the Qur'an and hadith, Muslim history, world history, *fiqh*, and the sayings of great people. At some points the style becomes sarcastic, as in this paragraph:

Our Prophet advises women to go mosques 'simple' and without perfume or asking for attention (*tabarruj*), but al Qastilānī, one of al Bukhārī's commentators, opines that women should go to mosques in their kitchen attire and smelly from cooking! (p. 6)

Tahrīr al Mar'ah fī 'Asr al Risālah

By 'Abd al Ḥalīm Abū Shaqah. Kuwait: *Dār al Qalam*, 1990.

This ground-breaking work consists of four volumes (two subsequent volumes yet to be released) that discuss women and their social roles based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. The author restricted himself to the hadith collections of imams al Bukhārī and Muslim so as to minimize the number of citations (in a few places he used hadiths reported by others).

Three properties make this an outstanding work: the author a) rarely states his own opinion directly in the form of discussion or in presenting a prototype of women's place in Islam. Instead, he lets the Islamic texts speak for themselves; b) offers a new categorization of Islamic texts, mainly hadith. In this way, argument over meanings is reduced to a minimum; and c) rebuts restrictive legal opinions citing opposing legal opinions. The emphasis is placed not on the author's opinion, but rather on previous *fuqahā'* whose rulings might still hold some relevance for us today. By so doing, he decimates the acclaimed hegemony of the restrictive opinions and establishes the fact that the more authentic and more widely supported legal opinions are those that are the more expansive.

The four volumes are arranged by theme: "The Muslim Woman in the Qur'an and Sunnah"; "The Participation of Muslim Women in Social and Political Life at the Time of the Prophet"; a debate with opponents; and

"Women's Clothing and Adornments." Although these topics are subjects for scholars and students of Islamic law, the author tries to put them in a social context.

The book is introduced by two contemporary giants in Islamic studies: al Ghazālī and al Qaraḍāwī, as the author is not so well known. Both of them highly recommend this book, and al Qaraḍāwī spends a good portion of his introduction stressing the author's integrity and reputation as an Islamic worker, fully qualified to deal with these topics.

The book is easy to read, despite the fact that some redundancy seems to have been unavoidable due to the chosen methodology. There is a possibility of a great deal being lost in translation, for most of the cited hadiths cannot be understood properly without the accompanying commentary that appears in the Arabic original. A translation of its intended abridgement could be very useful.

It should also be noted that, in the few places where the author makes some analysis on femininity, there was an occasional lack of sophistication as well as stereotyping (see vol. 1:276-7, 284-5, 288, 314-5; vol. 2:16, 69, 350, 391-3). While discussing one issue, he fell into the trap of analytical reaction to restrictive opinions, for he stated "it is considered for Muslim women that wearing external adornment, in most of her circumstances, is a *shar'i* requirement (*wajib*)" (vol. 4:253).

The book also shows the difficulty encountered by those specializing in the Islamic heritage when it comes to integrating scientific concepts into their analysis. It features a long citation from a psychology book (reference is missing) dealing with gender differences (vol. 1:281-4). It comments on the cited studies and experiments, giving them a measure of absoluteness. The work does not introduce a new methodology for the reading of Islamic texts.

These four books will have great impact because of their contents and the status of their authors. Regarding their contents and the logic of discussion, it should be noted that all are Islamic and authentic. With all of their openness, they do not attempt to meet the western model in the middle, but rather look upon it with disdain. As for the authors' status, al Turābī is known internationally as an Islamic leader, and al Ghanūshī is on his way to achieving the same stature. Muḥammad al Ghazālī enjoys the highest respect of his peers in the area of Islamic heritage and is an authority in his own right. Abū Shaqah has laid down the supports for what these three leading personalities have presented and proposed.

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