Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands

Debra Majeed
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Polygyny is titled precisely to reflect the form of plural marriage practiced by Muslims: one husband with up to four wives, as described in Q. 4:3. Debra Majeed employs the term *living polygyny* to describe the experiences of those involved in such marriages: men with multiple wives, the first or subsequent wives, those married both civilly and religiously, those only religiously married in a *nikāḥ* (Islamic marriage contract) ceremony, publically recognized marriages, closeted polygynous marriages not publically recognized, and "back door" marriages in which at least one wife is unknown to the other(s). The participants discussed in this book presently live in or have been part of a polygynous marriage.

Polygyny is a qualitative ethnography that utilizes womanist theoretical approaches through dialogical performance, an approach in which interview data are dialogues performed through "imaginary interplay" (p. 31) across participant responses. It also constructs a rich and comprehensive presentation of her findings in the form of the participants' voices as well as triangulates data by using focus groups, surveys, and interviews. However, the methods require greater detail to specify how the surveys were used. Majeed's paradigm is rooted in gender justice, which acknowledges the intersectionality of all social statuses held by women in these cases: religion, race, gender, marital status, motherhood, age, class, and ability. She asserts that Muslim womanism is not only a lens for seeing the world, but also a "way of knowing (episte-

mology) that positions the experience and wisdom of women at the forefront of any consideration of Muslim family life" (pp. 20-21).

The concept of community is qualified by Majeed's examination of how the late Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (d. 2008), leader of the Muslim American Society/Mosque Cares, the largest community of African American Muslims with its historical trajectory of indigenous American Islam, viewed polygyny. Imam Mohammed asserted that while polygyny is not the norm, it can be practiced for the wellbeing of the community with a provision for justice in place, such as informing all parties involved and making the marriage public to the Muslim community. While the Qur'an legitimizes polygyny, monogamy is the norm for Muslims historically and globally. Majeed presents evidence that estimates 0.07% of African American Muslims live polygyny, a marginalized norm that warrants the attention of scholarly research, which is largely absent.

Polygyny explores the varied and dynamic experiences of African American Muslim women living polygyny. In a culture that fervently asserts monogamy as the norm, social stigma and legal sanction (i.e., bigamy laws) bar the legal practice of polygyny. Additionally, this work confronts the stereotypes and dispels the myths of Muslim women as victimized, without agency, and circumscribed by male authority. These assumptions are taken to task throughout this research. Majeed explains: "Two basic assumptions many Americans appear to hold of women living polygyny are that they have no authority over their lives and no agency in their homes" (p. 53).

Women share stories of both limitations of choice and coercion; however, they also share successes and the joys of healthy plural families that meet the material, emotional, and spiritual needs of all members. This book does not present a "pro or con" argument, but shares women's experiences through storytelling. Majeed's honesty regarding her personal reservations about polygyny as a personal choice, characteristic of standpoint theory, does not infringe upon her ability to give voice and legitimacy to it as a healthy family form in need of discussion and reform.

This work challenges patriarchy by presenting alternative interpretations to the Qur'an that privilege male authority and interpretations of Islam that subordinate women to men, as well as the patriarchal structure of American, Muslim, and African American communities. Various issues are explored, such as how to deal with men who do not meet the requirements of material maintenance and emotional equity across spouses. *Polygyny* cites the inability to protect the rights of women in *nikāḥ*-only second marriages as the primary reason for imams' refusal to perform polygynous or *nikāḥ*-only marriages.

Importantly, this work examines the Qur'an and the various interpretations held by Muslims on plural marriage and the place of women, schools of thought within Islamic jurisprudence (e.g., the Hanbalis allow polygyny exclusions within the *nikāḥ*), and American imams' relationships with these texts. Islam did not invent polygyny; in fact, it defined and restricted this practice for a new Muslim community that was steeped in pre-Islamic traditions. Contemporary Muslims have no unanimous view on its acceptance or even how it should be regulated.

Polygyny describes Muslim interpretations of Allah's injunction on plural marriage to include "Yes," "No," "Maybe," and Majeed demonstrates that there is "fluidity" across these categories. "Yes" or Traditional Literalism (TL) interprets *Sūrat al-Nisā'*s description of polygyny and Prophet Muhammad's life as proof in support of the practice. While TL acknowledges provisions to improve fairness among those living polygyny, prohibiting it should be avoided as that would be a human imposition upon Allah's law. The "No" Reformers for Justice (RFJ) oppose polygyny on the grounds that even by the Qur'an's own standard – men should have only one wife because being just to multiple wives is impossible. RFJ interprets texts through a gender justice lens that challenges patriarchal interpretations of gender roles and statuses. "Maybe" Ambiguous Pragmatism (AP) interprets the polygyny verses as situational and conditional. For instance, imams who subscribe to AP interpretations may support polygyny in Muslim-majority countries where the laws legitimate it and protect the union and its parties, but may not perform such marriages in America because the woman has no legal protection in either the Muslim community or civil law.

At the crux of this work is an exploration of the unique challenges and opportunities that polygyny presents for American Muslim women. Many African American Muslim leaders have interpreted polygyny as a way to address the "marriage squeeze" in Black communities, the phenomena whereby the number of marriageable women outnumbers the availability of marriageable men. The oppression and marginalization of African Americans has resulted in situating Black folks toward the bottom of the socio-economic class and power structure, poor health, and victimization by violence. Historical and contemporary barriers from enslavement and legal segregation to underemployment, income and wealth disparities, and mass incarceration have also minimized the number of marriage partners.

As a result, the majority of African American households today are female-headed and lack Black men as partners, supporters, and leaders in their communities. This has also resulted in disproportionate poverty and disorgan-

ized communities. Alternately, these same social phenomena have engendered varied social statuses and structures among African Americans, such as comparably more egalitarian relationships between Black men and women and Black women's increased visibility, activism, and leadership roles in their religious and ethnic communities.

These contrasting realities present different points at where women enter polygyny. Majeed's research identifies three categories: polygyny as coercion, choice, or liberation. Women enter into or remain in polygynous marriages for a variety of reasons. Some participants felt inclined to remain in relationships even when hurt by husbands' choices to take another wife either against their will or knowledge, or for these reasons may have left the marriage (coercion). Reasons for remaining in polygyny include religious devotion (marriage is half of faith), love for the husband, financial dependence, and keeping the family unit intact. In marriages of liberation, women are content with living polygyny; some were even initiators of and actively involved in identifying another wife for their husband. While these marriages are not free of problems, polygyny is their choice. A small group of participants (choice) intentionally seek out polygyny marriages and accept the Qur'anic injunction of plural marriage without conditions. Many of them prefer the independence of shared marital responsibility or see polygyny as an opportunity to provide emotional and material support for unmarried women and children in the community – a chance to "want for her sister what she wants for herself."

Polygyny is a priceless contribution to the body of scholarship that lacks a voice from the subjects of this study. There is much to be gained in marriage and family studies, standpoint and feminist theories, African American family studies, and research on American Muslims. Importantly, such research challenges a widely held assumption regarding Muslim women's lack of agency within their families and lives. This work is fundamental to informing social service program design and intervention within Muslim communities, as well as to imparting cultural competency from mainstream agencies working with Muslim families. The methods and data collection are invaluable in social science research on Muslim populations. This study, which offers valuable data and knowledge of research methods to use with Muslim populations, represents an important contribution in the age of Islamophobia, a time when the community is cautious about exposure to public scrutiny.

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