

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL STATUS IN THE QURAN AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Abstract. Women's social and human dignity was greatly addressed by holy scriptures. Significance of research into this might be brought out by appeals that have been made to holy scriptures for views on both ends of the extreme about women's human and hence social dignity. The present work adopts the descriptive method and cites numerous verses of the Old Testament and the Quran to present women's social status in the course of the society according to religious rulings and doctrines under the notions of human dignity and social dignity. Accordingly, the human dignity results from the divine spirit breathed into both women and men and their intellectual faculty that gives them the power to choose and paves the path for their transcendence or fall. In light of God-wariness and piety, humans will attain the dignity of transcendent humans and praiseworthy social dignity. Nevertheless, social roles of God-wary pious women, and above that, their effective crucial role as mothers give them an unparalleled social dignity in perpetuating piety in the society, which is why their role is particularly addressed and highlighted in holy scriptures.

Keywords: Social status, human dignity, social dignity, piety, divine spirit, free will

Introduction

Social status is the status of an individual in a group or in the social order of a group in comparison to other groups, which comes with a social role for the individual that results in particular behaviors on his or her part. There are two kinds of social status: attributive and acquired. The former is assigned to the individual since birth and is grounded in family backgrounds such as gender, religion, ethnicity, wealth, and other social criteria, while the latter is obtained through the individual's efforts to actualize his or her potentialities (Cohen 2005, 83, 2005). Although the Old Testament highlights the attributive social status by describing the Israelites as the chosen people, it also respects and honors the acquired social status. The Quran, however, assumes that women and men have a human dignity to which attributive factors are not relevant, and hence, it stresses that the social status is only acquired. Social status in the two scriptures falls under two notions: human and social dignity, where the former concerns the human dimension and the latter has to do with how a role affects and is af-

fects in the society. Consideration of gender and the picture of *women's* social status in the scriptures are relevant to the contemporary issues. Social stratification studies in the recent years neglected gender, and were written in ways that make it seem as if women did not exist or lacked any human and social dignity, and hence, any social status. Historically speaking, gender inequalities were more deeply ingrained than class systems. Even in hunter-gatherer communities where there was no social class, men's position was superior to women's (Giddens 1989, 258). An inferior view of women was not confined to a particular age or a particular social class. As witnessed by history, there were many intellectuals and philosophers who believed that women were progenies of devil and origins of the human decline (Benoat 1999, 6), as if lawmakers, priests, philosophers, writers, and scholars insisted that women's subordinate status was a heavenly demand and was useful for the earth (de Beauvoir 2001, 27). Even the emergence of great Abrahamic religions could not bring about a dramatic change in the prevalent view of women, since there were verses in the holy scriptures and remarks by religious Reference groups that implied men's superiority and women's inferiority. The story of woman's creation, the story of the human fall to the earth, the laws of marriage and divorce, inheritance, men's management or supervision of women, patriarchal remarks in the scriptures, attribution of devilish roles and behaviors to women such as geomancy, magic, and prostitution were signs of women's inferior human dignity and their tendency to sins and anti-religious acts such as magic and geomancy, and hence, their lack of a positive social dignity. As a consequence, women's social status was degraded to that of the devil's advocate and cursed negative picture of women's role in the society's progress toward divine objectives and a pious society. On the other hand, some proponents of women's rights appeal to verses of scriptures, including those of creation and given the sequence of creation and perfection, to suggest that women are meta-human beings.

An impartial unbiased reading of the scriptures and the verses about women's human and social status, including those about the characteristics of admirable competent women as prophets, rulers, wives, and mothers, yields another picture of their view of women's social status, which aims to present Reference groups for proper conduct and social influence. This is because when an individual plays a certain role, he or she chooses the conduct given by a Reference group (Cohen 2005, 85). Of course, Bach, Marx, and Durkheim believed that the ingrained values of a *society* were transformed by Reference groups into religious values. According to Feuerbach, since humans do not tend to have a full grasp of their history, they

often attribute socially constructed norms and values to the deeds of gods. Accordingly, he gives an account of religion in terms of self-alienation (Giddens 1989, 502). On this account, it will not be a matter of surprise that religions offer masculine pictures (Giddens 1989, 512). Inspired by Bach, Marx believed that religion was the opium of the people, since it teaches a submissive acceptance of the present conditions of life, and so it will be an instrument in the hands of the powerful and the wealthy to justify the inequalities (Giddens 1989, 503). Durkheim believed that religion was a sacred entity called totem, which represented the values that were crucial to a group or a society. In his view, the object of worship in religion was the society itself (Giddens 1989, 504). For him, the relation with the sacred can justify social discriminations, monopolies of social dignities and roles; in a word, monopolies of the social status (Turner 2006, 585). One might therefore say that, for Bach, Durkheim, and Max, it is the *society* that constructs the *religion*, and people consult and interpret the holy scriptures with their cultural presuppositions. A case in point is the problem of women's social status. Weber offers a different account, however. From a more profound perspective, he believes that *religion* is what causes social transformations, and hence, the "revolutionary" dimension is the main characteristic of salvific religions (Turner 2006, 506). That is, in his view, religion is a crucial factor that determines the prevalent view of the society, which is why acceptable cultural-religious beliefs play a role in the determination of one's social status (Turner 2006, 585-85). What is commonly stressed by the three classical sociologists of religion—Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—is that the fundamental notion in the religion is an illusion, as the *Hereafter* or the other world created by religion is *our* world as distorted by the lens of religious symbolism (Giddens 2006, 525). The upshot is that, however, religion and society have a mutual relationship, in determining the position of holy scriptures in women's social status, free from presuppositions and the prevalent beliefs of societies, we should appeal to textual evidence to find the determining meaning-conferring criterion of women's social status in religious texts. To do so, in what follows, let us scrutinize women's social status in the Old Testament and the Quran under the notions of human and social dignity.

1. A Study of Women's Human and Social Dignity in the Hebrew Bible

The Biblical story of human's creation, the original sin, and his fall has been like a nightmare for the human mind for millennia—a nightmare from which humans are not free yet (Ashtiani 1989, 362).

The Hebrew Bible offers two different accounts of the creation of the first man and woman. Although the second account is often deemed in continuity with the first, each involves points that lead to various interpretations which underlying assumption is that the timing and character of woman's creation indicate not only her status in the hierarchy of creation, but also her essential nature (Mishra and Pandey 2011, 67). The major point in the first account is that the humankind resembles God, or is created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and as the ruler of all creatures on the earth, which confirms the supreme dignity and the shared human nature of women and men.

For Maimonides (or Moses ben Maimon), the human similarity to God lies in the "divine reason" owned by God, with which He created humans out of grace and kindness. This is what distinguishes humans from animals. However, Rabbi Moses ben Nachman believes that the ground of human similarity with God is the "divine spirit" breathed into humans (Blech 1999, 24). The Jewish tradition combines the two views to yield the view that human similarity with God lies in human reason and spirit. Shared reason and spirit imply shared free will and responsibility, since if everything was predetermined and predestined, then divine reward and punishment would make no sense (Blech 1999, 28). Women and men are equally free and responsible in complying with divine rulings and abstaining from divine prohibitions, just as the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, and the punishment for its violation, made no gender difference. In the divine command for marriage and having children (Genesis 1:28), both women and men are equally addressed, and in the end, the human species, including women and men, are blessed (Genesis 1:28).

The second account offers a different narrative of the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7), and Eve from Adam's rib for Adam (Genesis 2:22). The latter led some people such as Rabbi Judah to the belief that men enjoy a superior human dignity. Others, however, refer to Eve being named by Adam as evidence of the shared nature and essence of women and men. There are exegeses to the effect that the first human, Adam, had the attributes of both genders (Mishra and Pandey 2011, 67), which is why there are Biblical verses in which Adam is addressed with a plural pronoun (Genesis 1:27; 5: 2).

Nevertheless, some people cite the above story as well as the human fall to the earth (Genesis 3:1-19), which occurred as a consequence of

Eve's conscious free act⁷ of defiance in the face of the divine ruling and her encouragement of Adam to do the same, which caused the human entanglement in the material life and evils as well as the human essential tendency to sins (Genesis 8:21; Ecclesiastes 7:29), as well as instances of women magicians and prostitutes. They conclude that these are evidence that the major distinction between women and men is the latter's stronger tendency to sins as well as superstitions, which imply an inferior evil dignity of women. In some other verses, women are deemed exemplary evils, agents of corruption, and devil's advocates. In those verses, people or their acts are likened to negative female attributes such as prostitution, unfaithfulness, witchcraft, deception, and ignorance (Ezekiel 23, 16; Hosea 1:2; Ecclesiastes 7:26-27; Proverbs 9:3; Deuteronomy 17:17; Jeremiah 2:32-33; Zechariah 5:5-11; Numbers 25:18; Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Moreover, Kabbalah considers the woman nature as devilish and as arising from the female part of the world and the demonic is an off-spring of the feminine sphere (Scholem 1995, 37). These views seem at odd with the above Biblical assertion concerning human reason, spirit, and free will. Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible mentions instances of high-ranking women problems, such as Sarah, Hagar, Deborah, Huldah, and Mary, who were addressed by Yahweh just like great men, and had the power to foretell the future. Also, Kabbalistic conception of the Shekhinah has room for the highly paradoxical idea of a feminine element in God Himself (Scholem 1995, 38). So in spite of various and contradictory commentaries, according to the Bible instances women through their human dignity are able to reach the highest mystical degrees.

Another factor that might reinforce an inferior view of women's human dignity is the parlance and style of the Hebrew text; that is, the use of metaphors, male pronouns to refer to God (Jeremiah 9:31, 3:4, 19; Genesis 18), emphasis on male children and primogeniture (Genesis 21:6, Genesis 22, 29, 30; Ruth 4:13-16; 1 Samuel 1:8, Leviticus 3:40; Joshua 6:26; Psalms 127: 4), certain sexist rulings and laws (Leviticus 12; Numbers 27; Deuteronomy 25:5-10), not counting women in censuses (Judges 12:8-14), and even certain worships that seem to be written by a man for men. The discrepancies and contradictions of various parts of the Hebrew Bible, as well as its deployment of diverse linguistic and literary styles, has led to a varied picture of women and their dignity throughout the changing Israelite history. Considering the efficacy of the cultural and linguistic elements of

⁷ Maimonides endorses the existence of evils, holding that moral evils arise from human's own acts, which implies human free will.

the society addressed by the Old Testament affirms that the masculine nature of the Hebrew Book springs from the cultural element of the era.

What is emphasized in the Old Testament, which indicates its criterion of the supreme human dignity of women, is honesty and righteousness as a result of compliance with the divine commands: “A gracious woman retain honor” (Proverbs 11:16). According to this text, women who respect their inner essence and human dignity and do not take an instrumental view of their femininity, can achieve the highest human position—that is, prophecy—through compliance with the divine commands. These are honorable and admirable women. However, women who intentionally deviate from the path of humanity turn into examples of evil, corruption, idiocy, and weakness, such that even companionship with promiscuous women (as described in the *Book of Proverbs*) is equated with death and destruction (Proverbs 7:27). Accordingly, in the Hebrew holy text, what removes women from their human nature is deviation from human dignity, in which case their lives and companionship with them would be tantamount to death, as put by the Old Testament (Proverbs 21:16). However, with human dignity and divine spirit, women count as best companions of men, or in the words of the Bible, a fitting partner (Genesis 2:18) who is For him (Genesis 2:20) which means opposite him. Man and women are meant to be complementary and their differences are intentionally mandated by God (Blech 1999, 26). Hereupon, the command of marriage and formation of family be proved (Ruth 3:9; Isaiah 4:1; Judges 11). The marriage covenant is called “sanctified” (*Kadosh*) since through marriage man and woman union to form the greater family of the Israelite community so it is asserted on the criteria of selection in marriage (Deuteronomy 7:3-4; Ezra 10:1-17; Nehemiah 13; 1 Kings 21; Exodus 34, 2; Deuteronomy 22). Notwithstanding the many examples of prominent, socially influential women in the Bible, including rulers such as the Queen of Sheba (2 Chronicles 9), Queen Athaliah (2 Kings 11), Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 21), Hannah the mother of Samuel, Abigail the wife of David, Huldah the wife of Shallum (2 Chronicles 34:22), and Ester the queen of the Persian king Xerxes and prophet like Sarah, the wife of Abraham (Genesis 18:15), Mary the daughter of Moses (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), the supreme human and social dignity of woman in the Hebrew text is epitomized in her role as a mother and a wife. In particular, motherhood has pride of place in the Bible, since a mother counts as the carrier of the traditions and rituals and a transmitter of the Jewish genealogy to the offspring. Motherhood and maternal characteristics are so significant that God sometimes refers to Himself as people’s mother, using maternal characteristics to describe the rela-

tion (Isaiah 49:14-15, 66:12-13). In the Book of Exodus (23: 26) and Genesis (29: 14) motherhood is described as one of the greatest endowments to women and the human community. Mother is so respected and venerated that the Ten Commands include the following: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16).

In this and other verses (Proverbs 19:26; Exodus 21:15), respect for mother is mentioned along with respect for father, and disrespect for the parents is described as a shame for the child. There are verses indicating the particular role of mother in rearing righteous, influential children (2 Kings 8, 12, 15; Judges 13:3-13; Proverbs 1:8). Moreover, mothers have the responsibility to name their children, where most names selected by mothers were derived from divine attributes or relevant to Yahweh in one way or another (Genesis 29:32-35, 16, 19, 25, 38; Exodus 2:10; Judges 13; Ruth 4; 1 Samuel 4). As a wife and mother, a woman enforces religious rulings (Leviticus 24:5-8) in the family, motivating her husband and children to learn the Torah. By fulfilling the material and emotional needs of the family and creating a sense of safety and peace, the woman is admired by her husband and respected by her children: all the blessings of a family arise from the woman, which is why the husband should respect the woman (Durant 1997, 4:462). In their acquired social status as mothers and wives, women play a fundamental crucial role in determining the religious path of the family as part and parcel of the society at large, and hence, “excellent women” are particularly venerated as having a privileged human dignity (Proverbs 31:10), because “The fear of the Lord leads to life; then one rests content, untouched by trouble” (Proverbs 19:23). “The world rest on one pillar, and its name is righteous, for it is said (Proverb10: 25) that the righteous is the foundation of the world” (Scholem 1987,152). Although God describes the creation of the human species as blessed, a woman becomes “excellent” only when she reaches the position of fear of God by utilizing her faculty of intellection or reasoning as well as her free will, persuading her family and then the society to follow the same route. According to verses of the Hebrew text, virtuous, righteous women who exemplify the fear of God in their social roles and help the society to move toward religious and spiritual transcendence, pave the ground of developing and extending the YHW commends among the People so have a social status worthy of respect. Accordingly, the inferiority view of women in the Old Testament refers to an acquired inferiority as a result of having played certain social roles and conducts, and it is by no means attributive.

2. Human and Social Dignity of Woman in the Quran

Contrary to the Hebrew text, the Quran makes an implicit reference to the story of creation of Adam and Eve (al-Nisa: 1; al-Zumar 6; al-A'raf: 189), which yields the following interpretations:

Creation of Eve from Adam's rib (Majlisī 1983, 11:15, hadith no. 43, 116, hadith no. 45, 189, hadith no. 47, and 15:34; Ṭabarsī 1994, 3:5).

Eve's independent creation (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, n.d., 4:1233).

Eve's creation from the remaining dust of Adam's left rib ('Ayyāshī 1984, 1:242).

Nevertheless, according to the majority of contemporary prominent Shiite exegetes of the Quran, such as Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Javadi Amoli, God create Eve as newly emerged creature after Adam's creation. In addition to the above Quranic verses, Javadi Amoli cites other verses (al-A'raf: 89; al-Zumar: 6) to argue that all humans, women or men, are created from the same essence, the receiver of the creation in all humans was the same, and God created the first woman with the same essence with which He created all men and women. In his view, the human essence lies in the soul, rather than the body, which implies that women and men are equal in humanity (Javadi Amoli 2007, 243-48). He therefore rejects the inferior human dignity of woman influenced by her role in the story of the fall to the earth, the Arabic styles of Quran, and certain legal rulings in the Quran. According to Quranic verses concerning the human fall from the heaven (al-A'raf: 18-22) to the earth, the man and the woman were both culprits and punished by God. Moreover, as for the verse 28 of Sura Yusuf in which women's guile is said to be great, which is interpreted as denoting the evil essence of women, contemporary Shiite exegetes believe that it refers to a particular group of women; that is, some ancient Egyptian women (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, n.d., 11:159). On the other hand, as noted about the Hebrew text, some people cite man-centered remarks in the Quran, male names of God (al-Tawhid: 1), significance of male offspring (Al 'Imran: 61; al-Tawba: 24), and heavenly blessings for men (al-Dukhan: 54) to argue that the Quran adopts a patriarchal approach in which women do not count. In reply, some scholars say that the Quran was revealed in accordance with the rules of the Arabic language and the predominant culture of the pre-Islamic culture of the Arabian Peninsula (Mesbah Yazdi 2003, 5:30). Furthermore, the Quran aims to improve the soul, which is neither masculine, nor feminine (Javadi Amoli 2007, 100). Some people appeal to certain legal differences between women and men as well as different religious rulings (al-Nisa: 11) to argue that the Quran takes men to be superior to women. Verse 35 of Sura al-Ahzab rejects such an attitude and highlights the

essence of humanity, saying that women and men are equally capable of acquiring virtues such as faith, truthfulness, patience, humbleness, and chastity. In fact, the reason why there are legal inequalities in certain verses of the Quran lies in innate features (al-Rum: 30) and the respective duties of women and men in the social life. Therefore some prominent Shiite exegetes in justifying the discriminative verses of Quran claim that the Quran does not see femininity as essentially evil or as tending toward sins, and thus, it does not see it as an inferior dignity. For the Quran, “a bad woman (al-Tahrim: 10) is not an example of bad women. To the contrary, she is an example bad human, just as a virtuous woman is an example of virtuous people” (Javadi Amoli 2007, 132). For instance, Mary as the chosen woman for the position of prophethood⁸ is describe as truthful (al-Ma’ida: 75), one of the chosen people (Al ‘Imran: 33, 42), and a paradigm example of a perfect human. “Wherever God talks about the human beings or whenever, he talks about human soul in Quran, Muslims theologians and scholars have never considered that humanness or the soul as “male” or “female” (Mishra and Ara 2011, 7). In the Quran, a person’s human and social dignity is never determined by gender and other material criteria, just as verse 13 of Sura al-Hujurat refers to the independent creation of women and men and then explicitly introduces God-wariness (or piety) as the only criterion for the transcendence of the human dignity. Islam believes that women and men can achieve their well-deserved dignity in light of Islam and faith, in which respect there is no difference between women and men (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, n.d., 16:313). “Since both are same in their humanness, both have been created for the same purpose: to serve God” (Mishra and Ara 2011, 7). The Quran says that those misguided women and men who misuse their faculty of reasoning and their free will and stubbornly disbelieve and lead not only themselves but also the society astray are tantamount, or even inferior, to cattle (al-A’raf: 179). From the Quranic perspective, humans deserve a human dignity only in light of God-wariness, without which they would just be animals.

God-wariness helps people to play their effective social roles, and in this way, form a virtuous, religious society. According to Quranic doctrines, women play an influential role in reinforcing and developing a reli-

⁸ Unlike the Hebrew Bible, the Quran does not explicitly mention women’s prophethood, which goes back to various notions of prophethood in the Quran. Here, “prophethood” refers to the position in which a person receives the divine message and is made aware of one’s own and other people’s future, without being responsible for the leadership of the society. This sort of prophethood is not gender-specific, and thus, women can also have such a position.

gious society in various social roles (Al ‘Imran: 61; al-Mumtahina: 12; Taha: 39; al-Qisas: 7-13), just as the Queen of Sheba finds an exemplary place in the Quran (as well as the Hebrew Bible) in virtue of her wisdom, humbleness, and truth-seeking. Asiya, the queen of Egypt, saved Moses’s life and raised him, and in this way, she played an influential role in the fate of the Children of Israel (al-Tahrim: 11). Based on Quran’s teachings the most constructive women’s function reveals in family. In the Quranic view, family contributes to the thriving of a religious society, and central to family is the woman as a wife and mother, which is why the Quran commands people to start families (al-Nur: 32). The Quran considers marriage as a sign of divine power (al-Rum: 21), referring to it as a sacred covenant, or in Quranic phrases, a “solemn covenant” (al-Nisa: 21). The fact that Quranic verses forbid marriage with disbelievers (al-Baqara: 221) indicates the impact of women, particularly as wives and mothers, on the fate of the society and the ideas prevalent therein. According to Prophet Muhammad, “the felicitous is felicitous in his mother’s womb, and the wretched is wretched in his mother’s womb” (Majlisī 1983, 5:175). The Arabic term for mother is “al-umm,” which basically means the origin of a thing, what trains and improves something, or the start of something. The use of the term in the Quran sometimes refers to maternal affection and maternal attachment to children (al-Qisas: 10, Taha: 40), and sometimes to hardships mothers go through during pregnancy, birth-giving, and breastfeeding (Luqman; 14), and there are Quranic verses about the central role of mothers in families as well as the issue of mahrams (al-Nisa: 23). People are particularly obligated to be kind to their mothers (al-Ahqaf: 15). Veneration of parents, particularly mother, is deemed on a par with the principle of monotheism in the Quran, as it commands kindness to parents immediately after commanding commitment to monotheism (al-Isra: 23), asserting that the only case in which one should disobey one’s parents is when they call to polytheism (Luqman: 15). A monotheistic community is a product of raising children in a religious family, central to which is a mother as the first and most effective teacher of children and as a transmitter of religious ideas and principles. The upshot is that, in the Quranic tradition, women’s social dignity springs from their unique role as mothers, wives, or other social roles in perpetuating a religious society. In this way, the Quran rejects any attributive social status based on physiological material factors, asserting that social status is the consequence of one’s function in various social roles, and is therefore acquired.

Conclusion

According to the Old Testament and the Quran, what makes humans, both women and men, similar to God as the best of creators is their shared spirit and reasoning power. Moreover, the power of free will enables humans to adopt God-wariness and enhance their human dignity. In the words of the Old Testament, humans are in this way venerated, and in the words of the Quran, with disbelief they become like cattle. Accordingly, what is most stressed in the scriptures in question is the acquisition of a social status, which directly bears on the human faculties of reasoning and free will. While the Hebrew Bible assigns an attributive social status based on ethnic-racial factors, it believes that women's status is in particular an acquired feature. The Quran, however, believes that social status results only from human practice in various social roles, and in this respect, women and men are equal. However, according to verses of the Old Testament and the Quran, women have a particular role in creating a religious structure in the society, and thus, their social status comes from the extent of their effectiveness in maintaining a family and a religious generation, which is why the acquired aspect of their social status is more prominent. For, given the individual and social roles of women in forming the religious attitude of their families and the society at large, preservation of God-wariness, and compliance with divine commands, women have a particular social impact, which is why they play a fundamental part in creating and preserving a religious society. Accordingly, the holy scriptures underscore the human dignity of women and their ability to acquire virtues as well as higher spiritual degrees, and the effect of their social roles on the religious atmosphere and the prevalent attitude of the society, and in this way, they present the social status of women as a determining factor in perpetuating religious teachings and principles in the society.

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