

FEMALE PERSONALITIES IN THE QUR'AN AND SUNNA:  
BASED ON THE MAJOR SOURCES OF IMAMI SHI'I ISLAM

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the manner in which the Qur'an and *sunna* depict female personalities in their narrative literature. It is a comprehensive study of all the female personalities mentioned in the Qur'an, and is selective in the personalities of the *sunna* to the three prominent women of *ahl al-bayt*, Khadija, Fāṭima, and Zaynab. The sources examined here are the major sources of Imāmī Shī'ī Islam, including the exegetical compilations of the eminent Shī'ī religious authorities of the classical and modern periods; as well as the authoritative books of Shī'ī traditions. The results reached here are that female personalities are portrayed as human beings, and that they display feminine qualities, which are often viewed positively and are sometimes commendable traits for men, at least as far as the spiritual domain is concerned. The hypothesis, particularly about women's humanity, will be tested against the depiction of womanhood in the *ḥadīth* literature, with special emphasis on *Nahj al-Balāgha*. The study recommends that future research on the subject of "women in Islam" widen the scope of what it considers to be its data, outside the domain of the law.

*For my mother and father*

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of the representation of female personalities in the Qur'an and *sunna* (Prophet's example) in the authoritative sources of Imāmī Shī'ī Islam. It is comprehensive in discussing all the female persons mentioned in the Qur'an, and it is selective in the personalities of the *sunna* to the three major women of *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's holy household). Therefore, what is meant by "female personalities" are those women who are presented as examples in the Qur'an, and role-models in the *sunna* of the Prophet, but not all women who accompanied him. The theme of *jihād al-nafs* (the soul's efforts/struggle) will be traced throughout, and it will be observed that under this title, two specific features of "spiritual motherhood" and earthly/political *jihād* (pursuit/struggle) will be recurrent themes in the depiction of those personalities. The study is based on the sources of Shī'ī Islam, because the second part of it deals with the women of *ahl al-bayt* in particular. Fāṭima's position, in the Shī'ī tradition, as an impeccable female and spiritual mother will confirm some observations made about the representation of Mary in the Qur'an. Moreover, the women of *ahl al-bayt*, particularly the ones discussed here, represent from the Shī'ī point of view, exemplary women's *jihād* in its various forms. Both the spiritual *jihād* epitomised by Mary and Fāṭima, and the political *jihād* expounded upon by the female personalities of *ahl al-bayt* are twin elements of the representation of female personalities in the Islamic Shī'ī tradition. The use of only the major sources which are considered authentic by the tradition itself, serves to provide an intellectual discussion of the personalities, rather than delve into the images of these women in the more popular literature, which is outside the scope of this research.

The field of “Islamic feminism” comprises scholars who might not necessarily define themselves as such, and it includes religious Muslims, secular Muslims, and non-Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The term “Islamic feminism” is sometimes seen as problematic,<sup>2</sup> although the incompatibility of feminism with an old religion, philosophy, or even language is by no means restricted to Islam. Some Muslim women propagating women’s rights in Islam are not comfortable with the term feminism,<sup>3</sup> conservative Muslims deem feminism, sometimes understandably, a tool of foreign aggression,<sup>4</sup> and secularists find that Islam is not compatible with feminism and describe “Islamic feminism” as an oxymoron.<sup>5</sup> Indeed feminism is a contested term, which begs the question whether anyone fighting for women’s rights may be called a feminist.<sup>6</sup> Among secular feminists are some who are utterly dismissive of the possibilities for liberation that Islam may offer, but these are often dogmatic in their definition of feminism.<sup>7</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini rightly contends that Islamic feminist interpretations have produced practical gains because they were purely Islamic.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the spiritual dimension as a need for many women is not always taken into account, but Islamic feminist endeavours on the whole, appear to be a genuine search to find more justice within the religion, thus strengthening women’s bond with the source of revelation. Therefore, the Islamic feminist project is not only legitimate but necessary; “For Muslims, Islam is both a religion and a culture – a source of spiritual ideas and social norms.

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<sup>1</sup> Badran (2002).

<sup>2</sup> For some useful discussions, refer to: Moghadam (2002, pp. 1135-1171). Mir-Hosseini (2006, pp. 629-645).

<sup>3</sup> Badran (2002).

<sup>4</sup> On feminism and orientalism, refer to: Ahmed (1992), Abu Lughod (2002, p. 783-790). Mirza (2002, p. 108-112). Abisaab (2009, p. 164-198). For a reproduction of orientalist discourse, refer to: Moghissi (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Moghadam (2002, p. 1150).

<sup>6</sup> Moghadam (2002, p. 1154).

<sup>7</sup> Moghadam (2002, p. 1148-1156, including fn. 27).

<sup>8</sup> Mirza (2002, p. 118). On Muslim women’s gains from an Islamic feminist discourse, outside of academia, refer to: Mir-Hosseini (2000). Doorn-Harder (2006).

To be interested in Islam is, for Muslim women, to seek an engaged understanding of beliefs that affect one's entire way of life.”<sup>9</sup>

The “quest for equality” or defining Islamic feminism as the attempt “to sever patriarchy from Islamic ideals and sacred texts”<sup>10</sup> is far-fetched. One remembers Amina Wadud's stance, after having exerted her efforts in rereading the Qur'an in a woman-friendly fashion, that the text can only take us so far.<sup>11</sup> Today, what is asked of Islam by western nations is to adhere to their understanding of human rights as unequivocal equality before the law.<sup>12</sup> These however neglect that Islamic law, while acknowledging the equality in worth and dignity among all human beings, is far more concerned with the principle of justice than it is with a superficial equality. *‘Adl* (justice) comes immediately after *tawhīd* (roughly translated as “monotheism”) in Islamic ideals.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on men's greater financial responsibilities in the Qur'an, which are often incorrectly read as male excellence, Maysam al-Faruqi accurately points out that, “it is a system in which the inequitable division of biological tasks have been straightened out.”<sup>14</sup> However, it is also clear that in patriarchal systems in general, male authority derives from male responsibility.<sup>15</sup> It might well be that in the Islamic world view, a certain degree of male responsibility/authority is considered just, and this idea is not exclusive to Muslims or to organised religions.<sup>16</sup> In the context of the “equal but different” argument, perhaps “equity feminism”<sup>17</sup> is the type that is most compatible with the Qur'anic vision of women's rights. In this regard, Qudsiya Mirza has asked some very pertinent questions about Islamic feminism's emphasis on sameness

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<sup>9</sup> Sharify-Funk (2008, p. 23).

<sup>10</sup> Mir-Hosseini (2006, p. 645).

<sup>11</sup> Wadud-Muhsin (2006, p. 190-200).

<sup>12</sup> For example: Mayer (1999, p. 83-130).

<sup>13</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 108).

<sup>14</sup> Faruqi (2000, p. 81).

<sup>15</sup> Kandiyoti (1991, p. 34-35).

<sup>16</sup> Refer to the discussion on “The Inevitability of Patriarchy” with Steven Goldberg, in: Leacock (1981, p. 264-280).

<sup>17</sup> The term coined by the American philosopher/scholar Christina Hoff Summers.

rather than difference in the scriptures. She argues that the idea of sexual difference has almost become immaterial, that equality has been used as a “levelling up” of the status of women, whereas orthodox interpretations of difference are perceived as having been the cause of women’s subjugation. She explains that questions regarding when and to what extent scriptural difference is acceptable have not yet been addressed, nor have the cases when more rights are given to women than to men, although she does not elaborate on those supposed instances that privilege women.<sup>18</sup>

The question of the status of women in Islam is primarily a legal problem, but has been discussed in two main spheres, the legal and the mystical. Feminists’ rereading of Islamic law and their debate with the clerics has shifted “the focus of *fiqh* away from women as sexual beings to women as social beings”.<sup>19</sup> This caused a major change in perspective on the question of women in Islam.<sup>20</sup> Another feminist contribution to *fiqh* has been a historical attempt at pointing out the distinction between the imagined lives of Muslim women as they are perceived by the jurists, and the reality of women’s experiences.<sup>21</sup> It has also been explained that the discourses of the jurists are based on the ideal example of the forebears, but that the ideal itself is a construct of succeeding generations, which represents the image that modern women are supposed to live by.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, Muslim feminists are successfully representing their own perspectives on the various issues, through their understanding of their past and present experiences, and thereby studying the law in new light.

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<sup>18</sup> Mirza (2002, p. 118-119).

<sup>19</sup> Mir-Hosseini (1996, p. 316).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Amira el-Azhary Sonbol (2001, p. 111-116) reclaims Muslim women’s history and convincingly shows that the rights enjoyed by some Muslim women in the pre-modern period, especially in reference to women’s labour, actually exceeded the rights given to them by the emerging patriarchal nation states.

<sup>22</sup> Sonbol (2001, p. 117).

The mystical approach to understand the spiritual status of women in Islam tends to rely on the Sufi paradigm, and is valuable in offering the spiritual perspective which provides an image of equality between men and women in Islam, where the feminine is valued and seen as complementary to the masculine, and even exceeds the masculine in being a better manifestation of divine compassion.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, many women were traditionally accepted in Sufi circles as teachers and saints.<sup>24</sup> However, this trend is not without its problems. Sufi writings tend to equate, at least symbolically, women with the lower world, and men with the higher realm. The *nafs* (human soul) is seen as woman, because it is worldly and because it is receptive to God's creativity and light.<sup>25</sup> The Qur'an says, "O human being! Thou art labouring unto thy Lord laboriously, and thou shalt encounter Him" [84: 6], thereby portraying a highly active soul, and a receptive God in this instance. Yet to the Sufis, woman is soul in so far as she seeks to divert the man from what they see is the typically male element of intellect.<sup>26</sup> When the individual soul struggles to seek God however, she is described as "manly".<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, constant Sufi emphasis on the female as loving is also not entirely warranted. For example, such Qur'anic personalities as Zulaykha, the Queen of Sheba, and Mary are all seen as a "loving soul".<sup>28</sup> However, a consideration of the Qur'anic text itself would show (in chapter 2), that there is perhaps more emphasis on the lust/love, intelligence, and spirituality of these women respectively, than there is on love as such.

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<sup>23</sup> Murata (1992, p. 191-193). Schimmel (1997, p. 21-23). Jawad (2009, pp. 194-201).

<sup>24</sup> Jawad (2009, p. 196-199).

<sup>25</sup> Schimmel (1997, p. 20, and 22-23).

<sup>26</sup> Schimmel (1997, p. 20, and 22).

<sup>27</sup> Schimmel (1997, p. 20). Murata (1992, p. 266-269). Murata indeed observes that receptivity is also a divine attribute, but does not challenge the association of woman with the world, p. 206-211. Moreover, she explains that there is a relativity in Sufi thought, whereby receptivity of the soul is right when it is towards God and wrong in the face of appetite, similarly, activity of the soul is blameworthy towards God (does this contradict the Qur'anic verse above?), but commendable when mastering the appetite, p. 316-317. In the final analysis however, the woman is always likened to the soul and the man to intellect, with a theological necessity of the former to be dominated by the latter, p. 317.

<sup>28</sup> Schimmel (1997, p. 22-23).

Furthermore, Rumi's reported words show that despite all the talk on love, it is masculine virility that is valued, and that male theologians seem to be blind to women's share of pain and struggling, he says "Since women never go out to fight the holy war, how should they engage in the Greater Holy War [against the soul that commands to evil]?"<sup>29</sup>

With the strict male-female opposition and the female always falling on the worldly side, and the tendency to attribute love to woman at the expense of her other qualities, the Sufi perspective becomes problematic. There is a need therefore, to differentiate between the Sufi and the Qur'anic points of view on women and their *jihad*.

More recently, a third trend, other than the legal and mystical, has been developing, and that is rereading the primary sources of Qur'an and *ḥadīth*, and developing new methods in order to yield new results.

Amina Wadud-Muhsin's "Qur'an and Woman"<sup>30</sup> was a groundbreaking work in women's reinterpretation of Islamic scripture. Her methodology is perhaps her most important contribution. She confirms that her method is the traditional one of interpreting the Qur'an based on itself, but she extends five particular terms to her method. These are that she understands each verse in its historical-social context, in the context of similar topics in the Qur'an, similar linguistic usages in the Qur'an, in light of overriding Qur'anic principles, and within the larger Qur'anic world-view.<sup>31</sup> Her contention is that if the Qur'an is universal then its meanings cannot be limited to any one cultural perspective, even if it were the culture of the Prophet's community.<sup>32</sup> The result is that she finds equality between men and women in the Qur'an not in the meaning of sameness but in a necessary and complementary distinction. To her, this means that the two "have the same rights and

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<sup>29</sup> Murata (1992, p. 318).

<sup>30</sup> Wadud-Muhsin (1994).

<sup>31</sup> Wadud-Muhsin (1994, p. 5).

<sup>32</sup> Wadud-Muhsin (1994, p. 6).

obligations on the ethico-religious level, and have equally significant responsibilities on the social-functional level.”<sup>33</sup> Wadud’s approach being within the Islamic tradition, even though it diverges from it in its suppositions and results, is one of her strengths because it provides her with common ground to debate with the conservatives. However, one major weakness in her work is that she condemns traditional commentaries of the Qur’an without providing any systematic analysis or comparative study of these commentaries.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, her focus on the issues which are already labelled “controversial”<sup>35</sup> is perhaps a self-defeating strategy, which is why this thesis will attempt to widen the scope of the research topic.

Asma Barlas’ “Believing Women in Islam”<sup>36</sup> takes the application of Wadud’s hermeneutical scholarship to a new level.<sup>37</sup> She furthers Wadud’s historical analysis of the patriarchal enterprise of exegesis by focusing on the interaction between text, interpreter, and context.<sup>38</sup> She finds that “the failure to consider the criteria for generating a contextually legitimate reading of the Qur’an is not just a *hermeneutic* failure, but also a *theological* one [emphasis in original]” because reading scripture is necessarily influenced by theological considerations, especially the relationship with God.<sup>39</sup> Barlas continues to “unread” patriarchy from the Qur’an by “uncovering the hermeneutic connections between seemingly disparate themes in the Qur’an”.<sup>40</sup> She argues that the Qur’an undermines the rule of the fathers, by not allowing either God or the prophets to be represented as male or as fathers. Analysing the stories of the prophets in the Qur’an, particularly Abraham and Muhammad, she finds that patriarchies historically provided the core resistance to the

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<sup>33</sup> Wadud-Muhsin (1994, p. 102).

<sup>34</sup> Jawad (2003, p. 124).

<sup>35</sup> Wadud (1994, p. 62).

<sup>36</sup> Barlas (2002).

<sup>37</sup> Sharify-Funk (2008, p.55).

<sup>38</sup> Sharify-Funk (2008, p. 56). Barlas (2002, chapters 2 and 3).

<sup>39</sup> Barlas (2002, p. 12-13).

<sup>40</sup> Barlas (2002, p. 22).

divine message.<sup>41</sup> Barlas reads the pagans' insistence on worshipping their fathers' gods as patriarchy against God; she does not however address the issue that the prophets themselves might be seen as the new patriarchs, possibly with a monotheistic brand of father/husband rule. Therefore, Barlas widens the scope of information relevant to the topic, but this is expressed negatively because she studies the position of the father rather than that of the mother.

Shuruq Naguib criticises the construction by some modernists including feminists, of the division between tradition as oppressor and Qur'an as liberator, and adds that "By embracing severing as a beginning, a feminist hermeneutic of the Qur'an is deafening itself to the earlier voices of Muslim women."<sup>42</sup> She perceptively invites a Muslim feminist hermeneutic that "liberates itself from the limitations of a counter-position".<sup>43</sup> She accepts the *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) called for by Islamic feminists, as a method that enables the modern interpreter to understand the themes of the Qur'an and its ethical content in a coherent theory.<sup>44</sup> While she concurs with Wadud and Barlas' viewpoint that the oblivion to the unity of the Qur'an's message was the result of the "atomistic" (verse by verse, as opposed to "holistic") interpretations, she then suggests that "atomism" may be "re-evaluated in terms of a conscious choice not to subdue the text to a (masculinist) quest for a totalizing order of reading; a choice that is sensitive to the Qur'an's resistance, due to its subversive textual nature, to remolding and enclosure by discourse, and that is responsive to its self-referential description of its most basic constituent, the *aya* (verse), as a divine sign—a universe of signification in itself, the horizon of which can only be the divine."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Barlas (2002, chapter 4).

<sup>42</sup> Naguib (2010, p. 45-46).

<sup>43</sup> Naguib (2010, p. 47).

<sup>44</sup> Naguib (2010, p. 45).

<sup>45</sup> Naguib (2010, p. 45, and 47-48).



While women's reading of the Qur'an has generally been viewed favourably, the feminist perspective remains problematic for some. Ni'mat Hafez Barazangi approves of women's active participation in rereading the divine text, as a mandate in the Qur'anic view of the human as vicegerent. She finds that there is a need and a duty upon Muslim women to interpret the Qur'anic text fairly and without bias,<sup>46</sup> which is why gender is not her unit of analysis but the pious person.<sup>47</sup> She says that this is in line with the Qur'anic criterion of distinguishing individuals according to *taqwa*.<sup>48</sup> That Barazangi does not seem to see that the Qur'an sometimes clearly distinguishes between people based on gender is an inconsistency in her approach, even if she wishes to understand the Qur'an on its own terms. She has a held back view of feminism, and rejects it when it emphasises group solidarity.<sup>49</sup> Considering that there are elements of women's subjugation which are repeated cross-culturally, this approach might miss the opportunity to identify patterns of male dominance when they exist within the Islamic tradition.

Such initiatives in reading the Qur'an from a feminist-informed perspective, despite some limitations in their methods as they are today, have opened the door for new, more feminine interpretations of the book.

However, as far as more practical results are concerned, extracting legal principles from the Qur'an depends heavily on the *sunna* of the Prophet as the context and interpreter of the Qur'an. Feminist research on *sunna* has been far less than that on the Qur'an. Fatima Mernissi's "*Le Harem Politique*"<sup>50</sup> deals with *sunna* and *ḥadīth*, in conjunction with the Qur'an. She discusses the relationship between texts and politics through an analysis of one tradition in particular, a supposedly authentic one which discredits women as political

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<sup>46</sup> Barazangi (2004, p. 22-25).

<sup>47</sup> Barazangi (2004, p. 48).

<sup>48</sup> Barazangi (2004, p. 120).

<sup>49</sup> Barazangi (2004, p. 117-119).

<sup>50</sup> Mernissi (1991).

leaders. Mernissi argues that this appeared after the Prophet's death, in the time of the first civil war, the Battle of the Camel, when one side was led by the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha, a woman. Mernissi traces the lives of some of the narrators in the chain of transmission and discredits the memory of one and the trustworthiness of another.<sup>51</sup>

In her work with the Qur'an, Mernissi attempts to provide a portrait of the social, political, and economic situation of the fifth year of the *hijri* Muslim calendar, which she contends, was the year most difficult on the Prophet and his community of believers, and the year the verses on "veiling" were revealed. She speaks of two opposing forces in the Prophet's city of Medina, at the time. One is supposed to have been led by the Prophet's wife Umm Salama, representing women's concerns, and the other led by the prominent companion 'Umar, representing the interests of the male establishment.<sup>52</sup> She supposes that Islam was primarily egalitarian, and reads the hierarchical verses as a tactic on the Prophet's part, to appease the men who had worked hard for the monotheistic message.<sup>53</sup>

Mernissi departs from the Islamic feminists discussed above in that she does not deal directly with the Qur'an but with the person of the Prophet.<sup>54</sup> One concern with Mernissi's work is her selective use of the sources; she depicts a tension between the Prophet and 'Umar, with the former being heavily influenced by the latter, without discussing the historical challenges involved in arriving at this,<sup>55</sup> nor indeed the theological ones. Moreover, while she is sceptical of misogynist traditions, she nonetheless is not critical of the sources that inform her of the precise dates and occasions for revelations, which are matters she depends on heavily in forming her conclusions.<sup>56</sup> She departs from other

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<sup>51</sup> Mernissi (1991, chapters 3 and 4).

<sup>52</sup> Mernissi (1991, chapters 7 and 8).

<sup>53</sup> Mernissi (1991, p. 138-139).

<sup>54</sup> Scott (2009, p. 68).

<sup>55</sup> Scott (2009, p. 68).

<sup>56</sup> Scott (2009, p. 68).

modernists in her treatment of the Qur’anic verses as being tied up to the historical events surrounding them; thus the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, “occasions of revelation” tacitly become “occasions for revelation”.<sup>57</sup> Mernissi assumes the temporality of particular verses without her argument being grounded in the Qur’an or *ḥadīth*, thus she fails to solve the dichotomy between the egalitarian verses and the hierarchical ones.<sup>58</sup> Her work however, was published before the new feminist hermeneutics of the Qur’an.

Mernissi may be credited with highlighting the roles of early Muslim women in their “feminist” streak and their debate with revelation, which is an era that is of utmost importance to Muslims in general. Also, hers remains one of very scarce works which attempt to revisit an authenticated tradition on women and subject it to the standards of the tradition itself. However, unlike Mernissi’s, the approach to the *sunna* in this thesis does not claim to be historical, but is a study of the representation of certain women in the religious texts. Similarly, while Mernissi scrutinised the chain of transmission of her *ḥadīth* and therefore its historicity, this thesis will be concerned only with the content of traditions as texts.

Another study which has found relevance in the female personalities of yore is Barbara Stowasser’s “Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation” which is a systematic study of women in Muslim sacred history.<sup>59</sup> Unlike Mernissi, Stowasser’s approach is not strictly historical but comparative of the major Sunni exegeses, classical and modern, and includes *ḥadīth* material, as well as some popular collections of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (tales of the prophets). In fact, Stowasser pays attention to the role of *isrā’īliyyāt* (Bible-related traditions) in the medieval Muslim scholars’ subversion of the Qur’anic message of

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<sup>57</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 133-134).

<sup>58</sup> Scott (2009, p. 68-69).

<sup>59</sup> Stowasser (1994).

woman's "spiritual freedom" and "moral responsibility", and their decision on themes of woman's inherent weakness, and as man's follower.<sup>60</sup> She explains why eventually, a certain kind of *isrā'iliyyāt* which was incompatible with "Islamic sensibilities" fell out of favour.<sup>61</sup> Then she describes how in the modern age, the idea of female inferiority was substituted with female nurturing strength for the sake of cultural survival.<sup>62</sup> Stowasser emphasises the historicity of changing interpretations, and explains the link between "religious ideas" and "social reality".<sup>63</sup> In treating her subject matter of women in Islam, she does not settle the argument but presents different sides of it for discussion.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike Mernissi, Stowasser includes a great variety of personalities in her study, rather than focusing on the veiling of the Prophet's wives as indicative of Islam's stance on women. Therefore, the historical context of the Prophet's life is not relevant to her study of the Qur'anic women, except in those verses that deal with this explicitly, but it is the interpreters' contexts that shape her argument.

While the title and chapter headings of this thesis might seem similar to Stowasser's, the present study differs from hers in three ways. First, only the major/authoritative religious sources will be consulted here, which is unlike Stowasser who used *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, and even hagiography, a factor which added significantly to her thesis regarding the historical context of meaning. This is an ahistorical study, neither the female personalities of the Qur'an and *sunna* nor the primary texts that represent them are meant to be analysed from a historical perspective. The similarities and especially the differences between the various commentaries used here will be pointed out clearly, however, this is done in order to provide the various understandings of a Qur'anic verse, in hope of reaching a normative

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<sup>60</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 21).

<sup>61</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 22-23).

<sup>62</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 24).

<sup>63</sup> Mir (1998, p. 63).

<sup>64</sup> Mir (1998, p. 64).

meaning, which is different from Stowasser's aims. Second, while Stowasser does not attempt to formulate any conclusions about the personalities of the women, this study does follow the theme of *jihād al-nafs* in the women of the Qur'an and *sunna*, and further emphasises two dimensions within that broad title, which are the themes of "spiritual motherhood", and of the lesser *jihād*, or earthly and political pursuit. Third, while Stowasser divides her book into two main parts, the first being on the women in the Qur'an, and the second on the wives of the Prophet, this thesis places the wives of the Prophet among the women in the Qur'an, and contains a second part which is on the women of the *sunna* as a separate category which focuses on *ahl al-bayt*. Again, the aim of this division is to attempt to reach a normative understanding by finding whether the depiction of women in the *sunna* conforms with the Qur'anic picture, and how it might differ from it.

The women of *ahl al-bayt* have been largely neglected in western research, despite their influence. One modern work however, has reinterpreted the personality of the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima. Muḥammad Husayn Faḍlallāh's (d. 2010 A.D.) "*al-Zahrā' al-Qudwa*"<sup>65</sup> is a book based on his lectures and sermons, in which he discusses Fāṭima as "a role model for men and women".<sup>66</sup> He begins with a brief historical account of her life, and then moves to describe her status and piety in the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*. As a role model, he discusses thoroughly Fāṭima's knowledge and spirituality, in addition to her life sufferings and political struggles. By focusing on the more authentic sources of Islam, Faḍlallāh departs from the prevalent, almost mythological views on Fāṭima, and depicts a personality that is accessible to modern Muslim men and women. He justifies his choice of Fāṭima by saying that she taught Muslims how to be culturally responsible and to defy injustice.<sup>67</sup> He further affirms that Fāṭima's example instructs women to be full persons, rather than

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<sup>65</sup> Faḍlallāh (1421h).

<sup>66</sup> Parts of the book have been translated into an English booklet: Faḍlallāh (2002).

<sup>67</sup> Husseini (2008, p. 276).

females only.<sup>68</sup> Faḍlallāh is an eminent religious authority among the Shī‘a, but his conclusions are radically different from the Shī‘ī religious establishment. He is widely popular for modernising religion, a task he does well in this book. His reliance on the more authentic sources of Islam, the same method used in this thesis, will lead to much convergence between his depiction of Fāṭima and her image in this study. Faḍlallāh however is a male cleric, and therefore does not analyse Fāṭima’s personality from a feminist perspective, but this will be a main concern here.

Modernists tend to view the *ḥadīth* literature as problematic but continue to neglect it. Yet, it is precisely due to the problems being concentrated in that area of Islamic scripture, that it needs to be acknowledged. Two works have treated the *ḥadīths*’ relation to women very fruitfully.

Khaled Abou El Fadl’s “Speaking in God’s Name”<sup>69</sup> is one work which deals with traditions on women extensively. He describes his approach as one that accepts the juristic tradition as part of the relevant community of meaning, if not the relevant one in restricting meaning, due to his belief “in the value of tradition and precedent in forming both communities of meaning and cultures of authority.”<sup>70</sup> In reference to the *ḥadīth*, he finds that this body of literature poses “the intriguing problem of the possibility of multiple authorship”. He adds that the authenticity of traditions cannot be determined solely by *isnād* (the chain of transmission), but that methods of authentication need to be more historically grounded.<sup>71</sup> He advocates what he terms “a conscientious-pause” in face of a conflict between a conviction, which is based on faith in conjunction with texts, and a textual determinant, and he maintains that after all efforts are exerted towards a resolution, if

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<sup>68</sup> Hussein (2008, p. 276).

<sup>69</sup> Abou El Fadl (2003).

<sup>70</sup> Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 31).

<sup>71</sup> Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 87).

conflict continues then Islamic theology allows “a faith-based objection”.<sup>72</sup> Abou El Fadl finds that most if not all traditions on women rank below *ṣaḥīḥ* (correct/authentic) in the grade of authenticity, then asks that since these traditions are *āḥādī* (traditions narrated through singular chains of transmission as opposed to cumulative ones, and are therefore less reliable) and have a suspect theology and profound social implications, must they be allowed to conflict with the Qur’an?<sup>73</sup>

Abou El Fadl’s work is highly informative on how *ḥadīth* may be understood as texts and as a phenomenon. However, he does not take into consideration the few, but nonetheless existent, misogynist traditions with a strong chain of transmission, or the Qur’anic verses that, at least on the surface, might seem to corroborate some of the traditions he rejects.<sup>74</sup>

Another work on *ḥadīth* has focused not so much on criticising the authoritarian methods of producing meaning, but on gaining practical results by overcoming those old meanings derived from the *ḥadīth*. Muḥammad Mahdī Shams al-Dīn (d. 2001 A.D.) wrote four volumes on legal issues pertaining to women, which he named “*Masā’il Ḥarija fī Fiqh al-Mar’a*”. In the introduction to his first volume, Shams al-Dīn begins by establishing the unity of human kind in the Qur’an, and includes in his discussion a very brief analysis of the female personalities in the Qur’an, and confirms that they were strong women, and that they are examples for men and women alike. Crucial for the wider relevance of the topic of this thesis, he writes that this Qur’anic vision about its female personalities may enlighten

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<sup>72</sup> Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 93-94).

<sup>73</sup> Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 212, and 220-221).

<sup>74</sup> For example, he claims that the word *ta’a* (obedience) does not exist in the Qur’an in reference to the marital relationship (p. 211), but the word in fact exists in [4: 34], and irrespective of the different interpretations, it remains a subject of controversy.

juristic arguments by revealing dimensions and particularities not previously taken into account.<sup>75</sup>

He continues to explain a major problem in Islamic law by discussing the oft repeated Qur'anic term of '*urf*' (reputable custom). He says that jurists agree that '*urf*' is an authority to be considered in the law making process; however, he distinguishes between two kinds of '*urf*', one juristic and another interpretive. On the first one, he says referral to '*urf*' is only needed when the scripture is silent on an issue. When consulted, this '*urf*' ought not to be limited to the customs of the prophetic era but of the jurists' era as well, as long as it accommodates the religious principles, and unless these new customs are "unislamic". On the second one, he explains that the '*urf*' of the times when any given religious text was produced must be known in order to interpret the text adequately; otherwise the text cannot be binding. He says when the jurists mix the two kinds of '*urf*', so that customs of the Prophet or Imams' eras are made binding at all times, the law making process becomes deadened.<sup>76</sup>

Shams al-Dīn's methods in reading *ḥadīth* allow him to reach radically different conclusions from the mainstream.<sup>77</sup> His work would be liberating for women in many ways, if it were implemented. However, he does not criticise the image of woman as it is depicted in the *ḥadīth*, and how that may be harmful in itself.

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<sup>75</sup> Shams al-Din (1994, p. 26-40).

<sup>76</sup> Shams al-Din (1994, p. 40-44). That the Islamic juristic process is dead and only its tenets have survived is also the opinion of Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 171).

<sup>77</sup> For example, while he reiterates the traditional clerics' view that women's modesty entails covering everything except her face and hands, his extensive analysis in delineating the borders of modesty seems to imply that he is less stringent than them (Shams al-Din, 1994, p. 96-115). On women's governorship, he distinguishes between two types of government, totalitarian and institutional. He says that his discussion is regarding women's leadership of the second type, because the first is illegal anyway, unless headed by a Prophet or an impeccable Imam (Shams al-Din, 1995, p. 47-48). He finds that there is no text that proves women's lack of capacity or right to be governor or even judge (Shams al-Din, 1995, p. 128).



Shams al-Dīn and Abou El Fadl both start their premises from within the juristic tradition, and both agree that Islamic law as a process is dead. However, Abou El Fadl inclines towards an outright rejection of the weak traditions, whereas Shams al-Dīn, while pointing out their often unreliable grade of authenticity, works with all of them in order to show that even if they were to be accepted as authoritative, an adept understanding of these traditions does not necessarily deny women the public roles which Shams al-Dīn finds permissible. Perhaps the difference between the two is that Abou El Fadl is an expatriate academic who wishes to deconstruct and discredit the sources of female subjugation among Muslims. On the other hand, in his position as cleric and head of the Supreme Islamic Shī'ī Council in Lebanon, Shams al-Dīn might not wish to dismiss a whole group of traditions, but is rather concerned with the more short-term practical aspects of overcoming those traditions in order to improve Muslim women's opportunities. Here, Abou El Fadl's approach and Shams al-Dīn's conclusions will prove very useful in deconstructing traditions (in chapter 4).

Shams al-Dīn differs from Faḍlallāh in that his work is written for lay intellectuals and the clerical class, whereas Faḍlallāh addresses lay believers to guide them in their daily lives.<sup>78</sup> Both of them however, speak from a position of authority.<sup>79</sup> Both of their attempts at rereading the primary sources of Islam aim at restoring woman to what they view is her rightful place as a member of human society, and even though they both find that woman's primary responsibility is towards her family and home, they are strongly opposed to the production of a domesticated female.

So far, Islamic feminism has begun to direct its efforts on reading the scriptures first-hand. Bringing women's experiences into the debate have already instigated changes in *fiqh*

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<sup>78</sup> Hussein (2008, p. 274).

<sup>79</sup> Hussein (2008, p. 274).

and in the different understandings of the Qur'anic text. Not engaging with the tradition has been a weakness in Islamic feminist discourse however. It has been shown above that the women from the Islamic past occupy a primary space in various aspects of the tradition. In fact,

“the past is axial for both Islamist and feminist perspectives, in that both recognise that it is this moment that has determined the Muslim ethico-moral code that must be reconstituted in the present... it is also from this decisive moment of genesis that all future interpretations of Islam must commence. What divides them is the contrasting vision each possesses of the substantive content of that ethically correct past, resulting in the feminist quest for an authentic genealogy of women's legal and cultural rights in Islam.”<sup>80</sup>

There are two reasons why the study is occupied with the Shī'ī tradition in particular. First, Fāṭima is a prominent figure in early Islam, and yet she has not been given much attention. Therefore, there is a need to go to the sources that discuss Fāṭima and actually revere her. It may be argued that 'Ā'isha is also an important role model from the women of the Islamic era. However, despite 'Ā'isha's knowledge and outspokenness, her political experience and role in the first civil war has been shown to be cause for further restrictions on women's public roles.<sup>81</sup> Surely, one may lament how a woman's mistake became the cause for stigmatising her entire sex, whereas men who may have made more mistakes were not collectively repudiated in traditions. It remains the case however, that her public role is not seen as exemplary from the Sunni point of view, and certainly not from the Shī'ī one.<sup>82</sup> Even modern reinterpretations of 'Ā'isha's public role have shown the War of

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<sup>80</sup> Mirza (2000, p. 191).

<sup>81</sup> Spellberg (1991).

<sup>82</sup> Spellberg (1994, chapter 4).

the Camel which she led, to be an unfortunate misunderstanding at best, and the war remains a regrettable event in any case.<sup>83</sup> The Shī'ī view of the women of *ahl al-bayt* on the other hand, is one that legitimises women's public action, when it is done in the manner of the women of *ahl al-bayt*. This favourable view of women's political struggles certainly warrants closer examination, especially from a feminist perspective, because the very images of Fāṭima and Zaynab have been used much in modern political discourse on women's place. The second reason for focusing on the Shī'ī tradition, is that the women of *ahl al-bayt* may be seen to confirm some of the conclusions made on the female personalities in the Qur'an. Fāṭima's example as spiritual mother confirms some of the observations made about Mary, and therefore helps create a hypothesis about the tradition's views on spirituality and motherhood. Moreover, while the religio-political *jihād* is viewed favourably in the Qur'an, in the example set by Pharaoh's wife, the favourable view towards the women of *ahl al-bayt*'s religio-political *jihād* will also create a pattern. Of course, the confirmation of this theme in the *sunna* is important because it would encourage women's public action and possible leadership, outside of the prescribed domestic sphere.

One of the leading questions here is based on what Sachiko Murata proposes regarding the law projecting an image of a masculine God, while the mystics project a more feminine God.<sup>84</sup> If that is so, then continuing to look at Islamic law for the study of the status of women in Islam will inevitably be limited because the very subject matter favours and depends on a patriarchal world view. The conclusions on male supremacy then would hardly be surprising. Therefore, perhaps the narrative literature in the Qur'an and *sunna* would yield different results. Then, if there is spiritual equality between men and women in Islam, as it is widely held, then should there not be female prophets and Imams? This point

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<sup>83</sup> Ziyada (2001, p. 328-444).

<sup>84</sup> Murata (2002, p. 8-10).

is often brought up by the male establishment as a sign of male excellence but has not yet been answered by feminists. Moreover, if the female personalities in the Qur'an and *sunna* are portrayed as human and as examples for men and women, what is the scope of their equality, and is there nothing about them that is particularly female? If so, then this might shed light on the issue of difference, but from outside the legal framework. Furthermore, assuming there is a female particularity, does this belittle women or may it be said that those feminine characteristics are suggested as recommendable traits to be found in men as well? Finally, in view of Shams al-Dīn's assertion that an understanding of the Qur'anic depiction of these women as strong and fully human would change the premises of *fiqh*, the findings of this work on the female personalities will need to be applied to sample traditions in order to find how, if at all, these may help in the analysis of *ḥadīth*, which is a primary contributor and decisive factor in making *fiqh*.

The approach of this study is thematic because it asks one question: How are female personalities represented in Islam? Or, put differently, what do the female personalities contribute to the Qur'an and *sunna* narratives? While the thematic approach might not be traditional, it is not foreign to the tradition either. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣaḍr (d. 1980 A.D.) encourages the thematic approach based on the saying of Imam 'Alī, "This is the Qur'an, then make it speak (*dhālika al-Qur'anū fa-stanṭiqūh*)."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, modern questions and concerns must be asked, and the Qur'an given an opportunity to answer.

The research will rely on four main hermeneutical principles, which belong to traditional Islamic methodology anyway. First, the Qur'an interprets itself, and since the Qur'an is in Arabic, this will include some semantic analysis. Second, the *sunna* is the

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<sup>85</sup> Sadr (1991, lecture 3). Radi (n.d.c, vol. 2, p. 54)

context of the Qur'an. Third, *ḥadīth* explains the Qur'an. Fourth, suspect *ḥadīths* are applied to the Qur'an and *sunna* for verification.

In reading the Qur'an, the approach adopted here is comparative, analytical, and semantic. It is a systematic study based on five major exegetical compilations. Those are chosen because they represent various time periods, as well as different exegetical methods. Moreover, their authors have come to be viewed as authorities of Shī'ī scholarship and exegesis. First, is the exegesis of Qummī (d. 329 h.),<sup>86</sup> which is one of the earliest that have reached us. It is mainly analytical, and uses some traditions but is not based on them. Ṭusi's (d. 460 h.)<sup>87</sup> exegesis, *al-Tibyān* is analytical, and includes the opinions of the people of his day, in addition to some traditions and semantic analysis, with Tusi giving his opinion in the end. Ṭabarsī's (d. 560 h.) exegesis, *Majma' al-Bayān* is primarily linguistic, even though it includes traditions and the opinions of the scholars of his day. Ḥuwayzī's (d. 1112 h.) exegesis, *Nūr al-Thaqalayn* is widely respected for attempting to include all the traditions available to the author in his day; however, this also means that he includes traditions without much regard for their degree of authenticity.<sup>88</sup> Finally, Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1402 h.), one of the most prominent thinkers in contemporary Shī'ī Islam, is the author of an exegesis that is considered by many Shī'ī scholars to be the best commentary on the Qur'an yet. *Al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* is a twenty volume analytical commentary. In it Ṭabāṭabā'ī debates with classical opinions as well as modern ones. He uses traditions only as a

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<sup>86</sup> A scholar in the period of occultation of the 12th Imam, al-Mahdi, who disappeared at the age of five. That started his minor occultation period (260 - 329 h), during which he had four representatives. The period after that when the Imam had no representatives is referred to as the major occultation which extends until now, and he is still awaited.

<sup>87</sup> Also known as "Shaykha al-Taifa" for being the leading Shi'i spokesperson of the fourth century of the *hijri* calendar. He is the founder of the religious seminary in the city of Najaf, and the compiler of two of the "four books" of authentic Shi'i *ḥadīth*. Upon the Seljuk invasion of Baghdad, Tusi's house and library were burned down as several others. He fled to the city of Najaf which is the burial site of Imam 'Ali. His arrival at the religious city gave impetus to the religious learning there, thus he founded the seminary that still functions today.

<sup>88</sup> Lawson (1993, p. 178- 180).

secondary source, and is almost indifferent to them when they seem to be irrelevant or contradictory to the Qur’anic text. His analysis often includes extensive reflections on philosophy, history, tradition, and even comparative religion.

After an overview of these commentaries, they will be compared with each other especially where there are apparent differences, and will be analysed in light of contemporary writings on any given topic, including feminist ones. When needed, some semantic analysis will be elaborated here to stress certain elements in the Qur’anic language and message. Moreover, where their “atomistic” interpretation might be lacking, their comments on other relevant verses will be brought into the analysis. Since *ḥadīth* explains the Qur’an, the relevant authentic ones will have to enter the discussion at times. *Sunna* as the context of the Qur’an will not always be relevant. The female personalities in the stories of the past prophets for example, will not be grounded in any historical context. The section on the Prophet’s wives in the Qur’an however, needs some knowledge of context because the Qur’an itself refers to this.

In discussing the female personalities of the *sunna* of *ahl al-bayt*, the main reference will be the authoritative traditions. While these personalities are not discussed for their historical relevance as such, some of the history books which are generally agreed upon by Muslims as reliable will be needed to set the context and relevance of the actions and contributions of these women. The aim however, will be to discover the depiction of these women in Shī‘ī piety, as well as to read the women’s own reported words.

Throughout the thesis, what is known as the “Four Books” of *ḥadīth* which are considered authoritative to the Shī‘a will be the main sources on traditions.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> These are: Kulayni (1388h), Saduq (1404ha), Tusi (1390ha) and (1390hb).

Therefore, this is a close analysis of the authoritative religious texts. Considering the differences between the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* in the Islamic tradition and in line with the four hermeneutical principles above, the reading of the Qur'an will be "interpretation-oriented", whereas the reading of *ḥadīth* will be "text-oriented".<sup>90</sup> Reading the Qur'an will rely on a comparative and analytical approach towards *tafsīr*, along with some semantic analysis. Reading the *ḥadīth* will go behind the text and pose questions on context. The historical context of *ḥadīth* will not be investigated as such, but it will be shown how questions on context might alter the meanings of traditions. The context in all cases however, will be primarily textual.

The first chapter is on Eve, and therefore more broadly, on woman in creation; with emphasis on woman and man as having derived from a single soul and the woman like man as potential vicegerent. These two issues have been discussed already by Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, but they did not include the available *tafsīr* nor *ḥadīth* on the subject. The chapter will highlight Amina Wadud's three key words in the primary verse on the subject [4: 1], and add to them the vital feminine term, *al-arḥām*. This important feminine symbol was left out by Wadud but always stressed by traditional exegetes.

The second chapter is on the rest of the female personalities in the Qur'an. The theme of *jihād al-naḥs* will be traced throughout, in addition to the theme of earthly *jihād*. Verses [66: 10-12] will be the guiding group of verses here, as they emphasise women as negative as well as positive examples, thereby portraying them as simply human. Moreover, the positive examples of Mary and the wife of Pharaoh will be analysed in specific reference to Mary's capacity as spiritual mother, and Āsiyā's worldly *jihād* which followed her spiritual one. The models of the Prophet's wives and of the women of Paradise serve as

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<sup>90</sup> The two terms here are borrowed from: Roald (1998, p. 40-41).

examples for modesty and seclusion, but it will be argued that both of these are presented as exceptional.

The third chapter is on the female personalities of the *sunna*. It focuses in particular on the most prominent women of *ahl al-bayt*, Khadīja, Fāṭima, and Zaynab. It will be shown that these women are portrayed as having performed the religio-political *jihād* in three different ways. The theme of “spiritual motherhood” will be revisited with Fāṭima. A feminist analysis of these personalities will attempt to highlight the empowering roles that these women represent, in addition to the restrictions and limitations imposed on them by the Shī‘ī tradition.

The fourth and final chapter is on female personality in the *ḥadīth* literature. The singular form “personality” denotes the portrayal of a monolithic female personality according to the *ḥadīth*, which is opposed to the varieties in the representation of the personalities in the Qur’an and *sunna*. Here, the hypothesis of the previous chapters regarding women’s full personhood, intelligence and faith, will be tested against the *ḥadīth*. This chapter in no way finalises the feminist debate with *ḥadīth* but aims to put it within the larger perspective of the themes discussed in the narrative literature.

A note on translations, technical terms, and transliterations: Arberry’s translation of the Qur’an is adopted here as the standard translation, although in a few instances some modifications have been made, such as where he translates *al-insān* as “man”, it has been corrected as the “human being”, or where he translates *azwāj* as “wives”, it has been more adequately rendered “spouses”. In paraphrasing the Qur’an Pickthall’s translation has been consulted, and on very few occasions when a phrase from Arberry’s was substituted by Pickthall’s, this has been noted in a footnote. Translations of traditions are all mine unless otherwise noted. Technical Arabic terms have been translated between brackets upon their



first use. Biblical names have been retained in English, but Arabic proper names have been transliterated according to the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. The Arabic definitive particle “*al*” has been omitted for convenience, except when it is a part of a larger name. In the footnotes, a date after an ancient name indicates nothing more than the edition of the text that has been used.

## WOMAN IN CREATION

### 1.1 Introduction

The opening verse of the Qur'anic chapter of *al-Nisā'* (The Women) is the key in the story of the creation of woman, because it speaks of the creation of the single soul, the creation of its mate, and then the rest of humanity's existence on earth. The second part of this opening verse stresses that human beings should show piety towards God, and towards "the wombs". Therefore, it is an adequate starting point to define certain fundamental concepts, such as the Qur'anic view of what it means to be human, as well as the origin of the first woman and her humanity, because the full personhood of women may be described as the ultimate feminist quest. Reverence for the wombs, as described here may be seen as a powerful feminine symbol, which balances the masculine symbol of Adam who is the prototype human being.

Most feminists of the three monotheistic traditions find the creation of woman from man to be highly problematic and indicative of a primordial sexism, which is at the core of views that degrade woman.<sup>1</sup> Some of the earliest feminists wrote, "all political parties and religious denominations have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man. Creeds, codes, scriptures and statutes, are all based on that idea".<sup>2</sup> A contemporary radical feminist wrote describing the story of Eve's creation from Adam as "not only a hoax, but a typical instance of what I call 'reversal' of biological and historical fact... the female is *more* active (in the production of the child) - a fact which patriarchal ideology simply reversed [emphasis in original]".<sup>3</sup> Of course, there is also

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<sup>1</sup> For example, refer to: Bronner (1994, p. 22-36); Lloyd (1990, p. 90-97); Cantor (1983, p. 40-50).

<sup>2</sup> Stanton and the Revising Committee (1974, p. 7).

<sup>3</sup> Daly (1975, p. 22-23).

the point of view that, read with the proper understanding of language, and within the broader context, the scriptures' narration of the story of creation reveals strong egalitarian principles.<sup>4</sup> A contemporary Muslim feminist says,

“I regard the issue of woman's creation as more important, philosophically and theologically, than any other. If man and woman have been created equal by God, who is believed to be the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot become unequal, essentially, at a subsequent time. Hence their obvious inequality in the patriarchal world is in contravention of God's plan. On the other hand, if man and woman have been created unequal by God, then they cannot become equal, essentially, at a subsequent time. Hence any attempt to equalize them is contrary to God's intent.”<sup>5</sup>

For these reasons, the story of Eve is unique among all the female personalities in the Qur'an. Eve herself is not a dominant character in the story, but the wider implications of her creation need to be examined in order to find some clues regarding the Qur'anic views on the sameness and difference between men and women. Amina Wadud has examined the verse [4: 1] and identified three key words in this regard: *min*, *nafs*, and *zawj*.<sup>6</sup> Her interpretation however, is not grounded in the *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth*. This chapter seeks to engage with those traditional sources, and it will be observed that some Shī'ī traditions actually support the feminist point of view on the manner of Eve's creation, but the attempts to reconcile the opposing traditions sometimes result in diminishing the potential for liberation from the idea of Eve as lesser than a whole human being. Moreover, it will be argued here that

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<sup>4</sup> For example, refer to: Bird (1974, p. 41-77); Wadud (1994, p. 15-28); Barazangi (2004, p. 37-51).

<sup>5</sup> Hassan (n.d, p. 6-7).

<sup>6</sup> Wadud (1994, p. 16-26), where she also considers the word *aya* a key term in the verse, even though the word *aya* does not actually occur in this verse.

there is another key word in the verse, namely, *al-arḥām*, which was not identified as such by Wadud and which would have serious implications for the story of creation and the concept of vicegereny. In fact, it is quite ironic that a feminist interpretation has neglected this vital feminine symbol of *al-arḥām* as a key term in the verse, whereas traditional exegeses all expressed surprise and even found the high reverence for ‘the wombs’ here as potentially theologically problematic. Therefore, a reiteration of some of Wadud’s findings and expounding on them in light of *tafsīr* will be needed in order to set the scene for the debate, particularly in reference to the contradictory traditions, the relevance of *al-arḥām* as a fourth key word, and gaining a better understanding of the *nafs* in the Qur’an, which is essential for the theme of *jihād al-nafs* that is central to the overall thesis.

The verse governing this chapter will therefore be the primary one in addressing the creation of man and woman, that is, the opening of *Sūrat al-Nisā’*. First, Eve’s creation in the Qur’an and exegeses will be discussed, with emphasis on whether she was created from Adam, for Adam, and after Adam. This will be followed by an analysis of the three key terms; *nafs*, *minhā*, and *zawjahā*. Second, the *ḥadīth* perspective will be put forth. While major Shī‘ī traditions reject the story that Eve was created from a part of Adam, traces of the story of the rib exist in some allegorical traditions and in exegeses. The challenge here is to analyse some exegetes’ attempts to reconcile the contradictions, as well as to deconstruct the traditions themselves from feminist and theological perspectives. In particular, two traditions which utilise the story of the rib to make claims about woman’s nature, as well as the differing social and economic roles of men and women will be discussed. Third, the more universal meanings of the story of creation will be useful in determining how the Qur’an and *ḥadīth* view the status of the human being, and

subsequently whether woman is fully human according to those standards. Finally, the latter part of this governing verse, which speaks of reverence to God and to the wombs, will be read along with complementary traditions, to discover a powerful feminine symbol in this vital verse.

## 1.2 The Creation of the Human Duality in the Qur'an and Exegesis

The opening verse of *Sūrat al-Nisā'* states:

“Humankind, fear/reverence your Lord (*yā ayyuha al-nās ittaqū rabbakum*), who created you of a single soul (*al-ladhī khalaqakum min nafsin wāḥida*), and from it created its mate (*wa khalaqa minhā zawjahā*), and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women (*wa baththa minhumā rijālan kathīran wa nisā'an*); and fear God by whom you demand one of another (*wa-ttaqu-llāha-lladhī tasā'aluna bihi*), and the wombs (*wa-l-arḥām*); surely God ever watches over you (*inna-llāha kāna 'alaykum raqībā*)” [4: 1]

### 1.2.1 Creation in Exegesis

An overview of the main themes discussed by the exegetes regarding this verse would be a good point to start. The more relevant parts of their exegeses will be quoted and engaged with more thoroughly in the sections that will follow.

‘Ayyāshī (d. 320 h.), author of one of the earliest books of Shī'ī exegesis, relies entirely on the narration of *ḥadīth* for his interpretation. For this verse, he narrates three groups of traditions. The first is about the origin of Adam and Eve, the second is concerning their children and how they procreated, and the third is about the wombs referred to here. He reports two traditions that Eve was created from Adam's lower rib, and then one in which the Imam criticises the rib story for theological reasons, and explains that Eve was created from the same material as Adam. ‘Ayyāshī does not comment on these contradictions. Then he narrates

different traditions about the procreation of Adam and Eve's children, that some of them married angels and some married those other worldly beings created from fire, the *jinn*. Finally, he reports a number of traditions regarding the mention of the wombs in this verse; these are, that God ordained maintaining the ties of kinship, literally "connecting the wombs" (*ṣilat al-arḥam*), that God has given the wombs a grand status by placing them next to him in this verse, and even a tradition that the primordial womb is connected to God's "throne".<sup>7</sup>

Qummī explains that the first soul in the verse is a reference to Adam, and its mate is a reference to Eve who was created from his bottom rib, albeit without any justification for his claims. He understands the second part of the verse to mean that the fear/reverence for God (*taqwa*), is what humankind will be asked about on judgement day, as they will be asked about the wombs (*al-arḥām*), whether they had maintained the bonds of kinship. Finally, he adds that God the watcher also means here that he is the patron and protector.<sup>8</sup>

Ṭusī explains that the single soul is a reference to Adam according to the exegetes, and its mate is Eve. He continues that exegetes claim that she was created from one of Adam's ribs, whereas Imam al-Bāqir had said that she was created from the same clay as Adam. Then however, he narrates one prophetic *ḥadīth* which states that "Woman is a similitude of a crooked rib; if you keep it as it is you will benefit, and if you straighten it you will break it", before repeating the tradition that claims she was created from the same clay.<sup>9</sup> Ṭusī seems particularly concerned with the latter part of the verse and how it fits into the general aim. He reads that phrase to mean, fear God by whom you demand your rights, and fear the wombs meaning fear

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<sup>7</sup> 'Ayyashi (n.d, vol. 1, p. 215-217).

<sup>8</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 1, p. 130).

<sup>9</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 3, p. 99-101).

untying the bonds of kinship. Ṭūsī observes here that that the verse is admonishing people to care particularly for children, women, and the weak in society by reminding them that they are all from a single soul.<sup>10</sup>

Ḥuwayzī's traditions concerning this verse are of the same three subjects as those treated by 'Ayyāshī, the origin of Eve, the children of Adam and Eve and their marriages, and the status of the wombs, and they are in the same vein as well. There are a few extra traditions here however, particularly about the origin of the name of Eve or Ḥawwā', a name which does not occur in the Qur'an, and even the Arabic words for "woman" and "women", all implying that the woman was derived from man.<sup>11</sup> Next to these narrations in the exegesis of Ḥuwayzī however, are three other traditions from Imam 'Alī, al-Bāqir, and al-Ṣādiq, which severely criticise the story of woman's creation from the rib and maintain that Eve was created from the same clay that Adam was made from.<sup>12</sup> There is also one tradition which attributes most legal issues that are particular to women, to woman's origin in creation. It states that Eve was made from Adam and that is why divorce is in the hands of men, that she was made from a part of him which is why she is worth half the man in blood money, that she was made from inside him, in reference to the rib, which explains why women need to be hidden under their veils, that she was created from his left rib rather than his right explains why she inherits less than him and why her testimony is

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<sup>10</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 3, p. 98-99).

<sup>11</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 429- 430). Here he contends that *Hawwa'* comes from *hayy* (a living being), that *mar'a* comes from *mar'*, and that *nisa'* comes from *anas* because Adam found no amiability except in her. The root of the word *ḥ-y-ā* mean life, and could also indicate rain and fertility. *Hayy* may also mean a clan, or even a woman's genitalia and reproductive system. *Hawwa'* however, is composed from another root, *ḥ-w-ā* in this case also there is a variety of meanings, among them is a black green color which in Arab culture indicates extreme lushness, or an empty space that gathers or embraces things, such as the woman's uterus, or it could mean a man who has snakes. In: Ibn Manzur, (1405h, vol. 14, pp. 206-208, 211, 214-215, 220, and vol. 12, p. 209.)

<sup>12</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 429- 431, 434).

worth less than his.<sup>13</sup> This narration is peculiar because its inner reasoning is not at all clear, but it does not occur in other exegeses or in the major *ḥadīth* collections.

Ṭabāṭabā'ī begins by observing that the original single soul is meant as a reminder that humanity is one, and therefore one ought to show reverence to God and to the wombs by abiding by God's just laws, "The verse invites people to show reverence to God in their affairs, because they are all united in their humanity, without any difference between the man and the woman, the young and the old, the weak and the strong, so that the man does not oppress the woman, and the old among them the young... this makes evident the wittiness of the verse being addressed to human beings and not to the believers in particular, as well as attaching reverence to their Lord without mentioning the name of Allah".<sup>14</sup> He then explains that in language the word *nafs*, here translated as "soul", also denotes sameness or identity. Thus the human *nafs* is the human identity which includes the soul and the body in this material world, and the soul alone in the beyond. In this particular verse, he continues, it appears that the single soul is a reference to Adam, and its mate is his wife, and both are the parents of humanity. He refuses the interpretation of some exegetes whom he tells us, consider that the single soul and its mate are the human male and female in general. He says that such a reading would imply that the meaning of the verse is that human beings are similar in that they all descend from a human male and female, which is the idea expressed in another Qur'anic verse, "O humankind, We have created you from a male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing of you..." [49: 13]. Ṭabāṭabā'ī says that while the latter verse unifies human beings in their belonging to the human kind, as they

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<sup>13</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 434).

<sup>14</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 134-135).



all originate from a human male and a human female, the verse from *al-Nisā'* unifies human beings in their essential truth, and that “in spite of their multiplicity, men and women have been derived from a common origin.”<sup>15</sup>

As for the creation of the mate (*zawj*), Ṭabāṭabā'ī finds it to mean that its mate, or consort, was created of its same nature. His understanding is based on the meaning of the term *zawj* in several Qur'anic verses which he quotes, among them, “And of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy” [30: 21], and “God has appointed for you of yourselves spouses, and He has appointed for you of your spouses sons and grandsons” [16: 72].

Ṭabāṭabā'ī further states that what is mentioned in some exegeses regarding the mate originating from that soul and being created from a part of it, based on some narrations that say Eve was created from Adam's rib, has no proof in this verse.<sup>16</sup>

As for the phrase, “and from the pair of them (God) scattered abroad many men and women”, it means that all human beings have descended from this original pair, and from no one else. In fact, this important idea inclines Ṭabāṭabā'ī to the interpretation that Adam and Eve's children married one another because there was no one else available at the time, and he maintains that this is not problematic because the law prohibiting incest would have come to pass afterwards.<sup>17</sup>

Concerning the phrase, “and fear God by whom you demand one of another, and the wombs; surely God ever watches over you”, Ṭabāṭabā'ī like Ṭuṣī, takes on a thorough grammatical study to understand the place of the wombs in this sentence.

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<sup>15</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 135-136).

<sup>16</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 136).

<sup>17</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 136-137).

He concludes that the meaning therein, is an admonishment to fear/revere God and the wombs.<sup>18</sup> He makes a point that his interpretation, unlike others which equate the status of God with the wombs, is more appropriate both grammatically as well as theologically, for his understanding is akin to another Qur'anic verse which admonishes fear and reverence to something other than God, "And fear/revere a day wherein you shall be returned to God..." [2: 281]. He understands the second statement of reverence to the wombs, as a particularity of reverence to God.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, he says that God as watcher, in the final phrase, is not the same as God the protector. Rather, he is a watcher and a guide of people's actions. There is an implicit warning in the command to fear God the watcher and revere him. Thus, this verse is a fit beginning for a chapter that will deal mostly with legal issues and inter-human relationships.<sup>20</sup>

The verse addresses humanity and admonishes reverence to God and to the wombs or kindred because all people are created from a single soul. As the Qur'an does not go into detail regarding the material from which the mate was created, contradictory traditions tell us either that she was made from a part of him, namely his left rib, or from the same material as him. The exegetes generally do not address the contradiction, and the ones whose interpretation does not rely solely on the *hadith* seem to be inclined to the latter explanation. There is also a debate about the procreation of Adam and Eve's children, but this is not very relevant to the present discussion on the Qur'anic view of womanhood. Finally, there is a linguistic and theological discussion regarding the status of the wombs, because reverence for them is placed next to God himself.

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<sup>18</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 137-138).

<sup>19</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 138-139).

<sup>20</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 139, 134).

One important feature of this verse is the gradualness in creation; first the one, then the two, and finally the many. The second step of duality is neglected in interpretation. The exegetes seem to focus more on the single soul and its universal implications, rather than the duality and its gender implications.

To further clarify the Qur’anic view of the human *nafs*, as it pertains to the themes of common humanity and of *jihād al-nafs*, in addition to the words that explain the derivation of the dual from the one, expounding on the three key words *nafs wāhida*, *minhā*, and *zawjahā* would be in order. The emphasis on *al-arham* will come later (in section 1.5).

### 1.2.2 *Nafs Wāhida*

In language, the *nafs* is the reality of someone or something (as in our saying “itself”); it is also defined as the spirit (*rūh*),<sup>21</sup> but some linguists have maintained that it is the seat of the mind, but not the spirit.<sup>22</sup> *Nafs* is also the generator of breath (*nafās*);<sup>23</sup> the term may mean blood,<sup>24</sup> and it might occur in reference to the body.<sup>25</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā’ī explains that the *nafs* is the combination of flesh and spirit together, which forms the reality of the individual in the physical world, and it is the spirit alone in the *barzakh*,<sup>26</sup> which is the place where the soul resides between death and resurrection.<sup>27</sup> He finds that some Qur’anic verses imply that the *nafs* is the whole of the individual in the physical world,<sup>28</sup> while others imply that it is the human being separate from his or her body.<sup>29</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī deduces that the *nafs* is

<sup>21</sup> Fairuz Abadi (n.d. vol. 2, p. 255). Isfahani (1404h, p. 501).

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 6, p. 233-234), where he explains that those who reject that *nafs* is *ruh*, do so partly based on [39: 42].

<sup>23</sup> Isfahani (1404h, p. 501). Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 6, p. 234-235).

<sup>24</sup> Fairuz Abadi (n.d. vol. 2, p. 255). Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 6, p. 234-235).

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 6, p. 234-235).

<sup>26</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 135).

<sup>27</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 1, p. 349).

<sup>28</sup> Such as [2: 233] and [31: 34].

<sup>29</sup> Such as [21: 47] and [2: 48].

essentially the spirit, just like the human is essentially his spirit. However, in the beginning of its existence the *nafs* is the body, the spirit then springs from it like a fruit from a tree, and upon death it becomes an entity separate from the body. He further contends that verses [23: 12-14] give a visible image of the creation of flesh as a starting point, followed by the introduction of the spirit which renders the human complete.<sup>30</sup>

The Qur'an avoids giving a sexual identity to the *nafs wāḥida*,<sup>31</sup> it rather uses this theme of the creation of humankind from a single soul as a sign of God's power.<sup>32</sup>

Crucial for the concept of *jihād al-nafs*, the human *nafs* according to the Qur'an naturally combines a pious element and a lewd element, and therefore each *nafs* has to make a choice about which of the two roads it will take, "By the soul (*nafs*), and That which shaped it and inspired it to lewdness and god-fearing! Prosperous is he who purifies it, and failed has he who seduces it" [91: 7-10]. Ultimately, the *nafs* is related to God, and those who forget God subsequently forget themselves, "Be not as those who forgot God, and so He caused them to forget their souls (*anfusahum*); those -- they are the ungodly" [59: 19].

### 1.2.3 Minhā

The meaning of "*min*" as a particle is a major issue in Arabic grammar. There is a lengthy discussion on this, indicating that "*min*" could be used for negation, similar to the word "any", or for denoting a part of a whole, for denoting a kind, for a

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<sup>30</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 1, p. 351-352).

<sup>31</sup> Wadud (1994, p. 20).

<sup>32</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 3 p. 8, and vol. 8, p. 92). Also refer to [6: 98], [31: 28], and [39: 6].

beginning of something in space or time, as in “from” here or “from” now. It could also be an added particle, and it could be used in the sense of “instead of”.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of the phrase in the main verse, “and from it (*minhā*) created its mate”, the meanings of “*min*” may be narrowed down to either, a part of a whole (*tab‘īd*) or to kind (*jins*).

Ṭabarsī supports the view that this term could imply either meanings, either that Eve was created from Adam or that she was created of his kind. He supports the latter view however, with a Qur’anic verse which has almost identical words, “God has appointed for you of yourselves spouses (*wa ja‘ala lakum min anfusikum azwājan*), and He has appointed for you of your spouses sons and grandsons” [16: 72]. Telling spouses that they were created from each other means from the same kind not from a part.<sup>34</sup> This is the same as Ṭabāṭabā‘ī’s view discussed above in his interpretation of the verse.

In fact, several classical and renowned Shī‘ī Muslim scholars supported the view that God created the mate of the same kind as the original *nafs*, based on a comparison with other Qur’anic verses.<sup>35</sup> These say that the Prophet is from the people, obviously meaning from their kind, “Now there has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves (*min anfusikum*)” [9: 128], and “Truly God was gracious to the believers when He raised up among them a Messenger from themselves (*min anfusihim*)” [3: 164]. In this classical debate, the opposite point of view argued that if Eve were an equally original creation, then humankind would have been created from two souls not one, which is contrary to the Qur’an. However, the answer to that

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<sup>33</sup> Ibn ‘Aqil (n.d., vol. 2, p. 15-19).

<sup>34</sup> Tabarsi (1418h, vol. 1, p. 729).

<sup>35</sup> One such opinion is expressed by: Radi (n.d.b, p.308-309), and that is the same opinion as Abu Muslim al-Isfahani, in: Majlisi (1403h, vol. 11, p. 222).

was that Adam was the beginning of creation in time.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, they argued that since God created Adam from clay, he was equally capable of creating Eve from clay as well, and the story of her creation from his rib becomes aimless.<sup>37</sup>

Since the traditions on this matter are contradictory, a deconstruction of those traditions in the *ḥadīth* section (1.3) will shed more light on the debate.

#### 1.2.4 *Zawjahā*

In language, *zawj* is the opposite of single; it is whatever has a mate, in which case, each of the two would be referred to as a *zawj*.<sup>38</sup> The origin of the word *zawj* means “sort”<sup>39</sup> and it is a term given to any two things that are related to each other whether similarly or oppositely.<sup>40</sup> Imam al-Ḥasan had said that “the sky is a *zawj* and the earth is a *zawj*, winter is a *zawj* and summer is a *zawj*, night is a *zawj* and day is a *zawj*”.<sup>41</sup> As a verb, it means to join and generate.<sup>42</sup>

The Qur’an tells that everything has a *zawj*, “And of everything created We two kinds; haply you will remember” [51: 49]. The theme that duality is one of the signs of divinity is told often, including in reference to the human couple, and each member of the pair is described as splendid.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, dualities are described as derivatives of a common origin, “God created you of dust then of a little fluid, then He made you pairs” [35: 11], and “Have not the unbelievers then beheld that the heavens and the earth were a mass all sewn up, and then We unstitched them” [21: 30]. They are also continuously related to each other, “That is because God makes the night enter into day and makes the day to enter into the night” [22: 61].

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<sup>36</sup> In which case the first use of *min* in the verse (created you from a single soul) would take the meaning of “from” in the sense of beginning in time.

<sup>37</sup> Majlisi (1403h, vol. 11, p. 222).

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 2, p. 291). Isfahani (1404h, p. 215-216).

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 2, p. 292).

<sup>40</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 2, p. 292). Isfahani (1404h, p. 215-216).

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 2, p. 291-292).

<sup>42</sup> Fairuz Abadi (n.d. vol. 1, p. 192-193).

<sup>43</sup> For example: [10: 6], [22: 5], [30: 21-25], [36: 36], [43: 12], [50: 7], [53: 45].

One may then observe how differently God describes himself. The original human soul is described as *nafs wāḥida*. *Wāḥida* by definition implies a second (*thāniya*), whether the second is in material existence or in the realm of the intellect.<sup>44</sup> This is unlike the term *aḥad* which also means “one”, and is one of the names of God [112: 1]. *Aḥad* is a singular which is always alone. Other than its use in numbers, such as “*aḥad ‘ashar*”, it is perhaps never used on its own except in the negative sense, such as “you are not as other (*lastunna ka-aḥad*) women” [33: 32]. *Aḥad* in this negative sense may be used for one and many, feminine and masculine.<sup>45</sup> *Aḥad* in the Qur’an is a name of God because *Aḥad* cannot be divided and cannot be multiplied, unlike *wāḥid*.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps this meaning is also the reason why the term is generally used in the negative; in one word it negates all possibilities.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, the original *nafs wāḥida* needed a second existentially. The use of *zawjahā*, that is ‘its mate’ instead of ‘a mate’ (*zawj*), could be taken to confirm Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s point, that the mate already existed intellectually before it was materialised. Indeed, the gradual mode of creation, of the one, then the mate, and finally the multiplicity is repeated in the Qur’an [42: 11], and reveals that duality is fundamental and is the source of multiplicity, for “all the other numerical relationships grow out of duality”, thus God’s command to Noah, “Embark therein, of each kind two, male and female.”<sup>48</sup> After the two were created (*khalaqa*), multiplicity ensued from both (*baththa minhumā*), therefore “procreation repeats creation.”<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 20, p. 387).

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 3, p. 70).

<sup>46</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 10, p. 485-486).

<sup>47</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 10, p. 486).

<sup>48</sup> Murata (1992, p. 58).

<sup>49</sup> Bouhdiba (1998, p. 8).

To shed some more light on the human *zawj* in particular, there is one instance in the Qur'an which seems to describe the wife as *sakan* (lodging, tranquillity, security, mercy, blessing, and humility),<sup>50</sup> "It is He who created you out of one living soul, and made of it its spouse that he might rest in her (*wa ja'ala minhā zawjahā li-yaskuna ilayhā*)" [7: 189]. Some understood this to be a reference to Adam and Eve,<sup>51</sup> but others saw that this is the human couple in general due to the following verses, which speak of humans who associate others with God.<sup>52</sup> Here the wife is a source of tranquillity for the husband; he trusts her or relies upon her so as to become quiet in mind.<sup>53</sup> It is also the case that the merciful relationship between spouses is described as mutual in another verse, "And of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy. Surely in that are signs for a people who consider" [30: 21].

The exegetes all insist that the creation of humanity from a single soul nullifies the apparent differences among people because the essence of all humans is one. Moreover, this soul which may be seen as body/spirit, has inspired both piety and wickedness, which means that all human beings face a similar test. Numerous Shī'ī scholars categorically refused to understand the particle "*min*" in this case as a part of Adam, in order to maintain consistency with other Qur'anic usages of the term in similar contexts. While these saw Adam's creation to be prior in time only, their opponents understood creation from a single soul to necessarily mean that the second was a part of the first. The Qur'anic repeated references to the

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<sup>50</sup> Lane (n.d.): *s-k-n*.

<sup>51</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 5, p. 52-55), where he says that the rest of the verse and the following one refer to the human couple in general.

<sup>52</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 8, p. 375).

<sup>53</sup> Lane (n.d.): *s-k-n*.



fundamentality of duality and the interdependence of its members show that the couple, at least in theory, are non-hierarchical.<sup>54</sup> The wife may be seen as a source of tranquillity for her husband, but this may be regarded as mutual. The man and woman are each simultaneously a *nafs* and a *zawj*.<sup>55</sup>

### 1.3 The Creation of Eve in the *Ḥadīth*

It has been mentioned above that there are some contradictions among the traditions regarding the creation of Eve. The following is an analysis of those traditions, and the existing attempts to reconcile them. In fact, Shī'ī *ḥadīth* predominantly describes Eve's creation as from the same material as Adam. The difficulty as far as a feminist interpretation is concerned, is in two allegorical traditions that utilise the story of woman's creation from man to make claims about woman's inferiority and her limited social and economic space. As mentioned above, traditions which counter the Qur'an or empirical evidence may be challenged.

#### 1.3.1 The Imams' Denial of the Rib Story

It was mentioned above that when exegetes explain that the single soul is Adam and its mate is Eve, they do so on the authority of previous exegetes. Moreover, most of them mention the Prophet's *ḥadīth* which compares woman to a crooked rib, and they narrate the Imams' denial of the story of her creation from his rib next to the Prophet's *ḥadīth* but without comment on the contradiction. Even though Ḥuwayzī reports traditions on the rib story, in another place in his *tafsīr* he mentions that they are weak.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Murata (1992, p. 58) points out, "There can be no absolutes when the two sides depend on each other."

<sup>55</sup> Barlas (2002, p. 103) argues, in line with Murata, that man and woman "each manifest the whole". Also refer to: Wadud (1994, p. 22-23).

<sup>56</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 476).

In *al-Kāfī*, the standard book of traditions for the Shī‘a and one of the most authoritative “four books”, there are eight traditions on Eve. Five of those are on issues that have to do with her and Adam and their descent to earth, including topics such as the pilgrimage, the Ka‘ba, the prohibition of alcohol, the use of perfume, and the extraordinary physical length of those first humans.<sup>57</sup> The other three traditions include one on Eve’s creation from Adam, one on the metaphor that likens woman to a crooked rib, and one on an allegory inspired by the story of woman’s creation from man, and its socio-economic consequences. The two allegorical traditions will be discussed shortly, after a discussion of creation itself.

The story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib is told in *al-Kāfī* as part of the explanation of the verse, “And it is He who created of water a mortal, and made him kindred of blood and marriage; thy Lord is All-powerful” [25: 54]. It claims that kindred by blood (*nasab*) is Eve’s creation from Adam and by marriage (*ṣihr*) is her marriage to him.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, it is precisely on these grounds, the alleged marriage of Adam to a part of himself, that the Imams’ harshly criticised such claims. In another one of the four reliable books, *Man La Yaḥḍuruḥu al-Faḳīh* which is equally authoritative, there is a different account on the creation of Eve.

“Someone asked Abū ‘Abdallāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq) peace be upon him about the creation of Eve, and told him that ‘some of our people are saying that God the Exalted and Magnificent created Eve from the lowest left rib of Adam’. So he (the Imam) said, ‘Praise be to God who is high above what they say. Is, whoever is saying that, saying that God does not have the power to create for Adam a wife from other than his rib?! And he gives way to the speaker of calumny to say that Adam was mating with a part of himself, if she were

<sup>57</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 190- 192, 196, vol. 6, p. 393- 394, 514, vol. 8, p. 233).

<sup>58</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 442).

from his rib. These people have no judgement, and God is the judge between us! Then he, peace be upon him, said, ‘when God the blessed and exalted created Adam from clay and ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before him, he made him rest, then he innovated for him Eve and placed her on the alveolus between his hips, so that the woman may be a follower to the man... This is the story of Eve, prayers be upon her’.<sup>59</sup>

Another tradition following this one in the same book simply says that “God created from the clay of the original *nafs* its mate”.<sup>60</sup> A slightly more elaborate version of the latter is found in the exegesis of ‘Ayyāshī, this time from Imam al-Bāqir, saying that they lie about the story of the rib, and that God held a piece of clay with his right hand- and both his hands are right- and created Adam from it, and with the remainder of the clay he created Eve.<sup>61</sup>

A couple of points should be noted. The first is that these traditions agree that Eve was created from the same clay, that is, the same substance as Adam. The second point is that in the first tradition cited, Eve was made to follow Adam nonetheless.

In the tradition from al-Ṣādiq, only partially cited above, there is a lot about Eve’s marriage. When Adam asks her about her identity, she describes herself as “God’s creature”. Then Adam addresses God asking, “My Lord, what is this beautiful creature that is pleasant for me to be near to and look at?” God answers, “This is my worshipper Eve. Would you like her to be with you, to be amiable to you, converse with you, and obey your command?” Adam, of course, answers affirmatively. God then instructs him to ask him to betroth them, “For she is my worshipper and might

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<sup>59</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 379-380).

<sup>60</sup> Saduq, (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 380).

<sup>61</sup> ‘Ayyashi (n.d., vol. 1, p. 216- 217).

also be a wife for your pleasure...” The tradition continues, “God then cast lust into Adam and he had taught him before that knowledge of all things”. When Adam asks God’s permission to be betrothed, God accepts and asks him to teach her his religion, and then he marries them.<sup>62</sup> Twice Eve is described by God as his worshipper, and after God proposes the idea of marriage he explicitly states that one of her roles would be to obey Adam’s command. It is as though after the marriage, pleasant company and obedience would be Eve’s roles, whereas before it she was simply “God’s creature” and “God’s worshipper”. Then, for what seems to be her *mahr* (loosely translated as ‘bride-price’), God tells Adam to teach his bride the religion. The story is very much like a normal Muslim marriage whereby Adam is the suitor and God is the father. In this marriage however, nobody asks Eve for her opinion. This tradition simultaneously idolises both the father and the husband, one as a god and the other as an ultimate being. They are in charge of her affairs and she obeys them both. There are however, two clues which may be seen to shed light on some weaknesses in this tradition, or at least parts of it.

This tradition claims that God created Eve while Adam was resting, after the angels had prostrated to him. This gives the impression that he was resting in the Garden. If that were so, it would be contrary to the Qur’an where God tells them both to enter the Garden together, “And We said, Adam, dwell thou, and thy wife, in the Garden, and eat thereof easefully where you desire” [2: 35]. If this tradition suggests that Eve was introduced into the Garden after Adam, then it threatens the ancientness of Eve. As one author puts it, “the very concept of the female existence

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<sup>62</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 380).

is being compromised and, perhaps, divorced from its Qur'anic roots as being equally primordial to that of the male existence".<sup>63</sup>

Then, the idea that lust was cast into Adam shortly after the creation of Eve and after the angels prostrated to him may be challenged not only on feminist grounds, but also on theological ones. It seems that the tradition tries to link the creation of woman with the creation of lust, as it links Adam to the possession of knowledge. This late introduction of lust into Adam however, may threaten a fundamental element in the story of the angels' prostration to Adam, and that is that they did so knowing full well that his *nafs* has a baser side to it; indeed, they inquired about why they should prostrate to one who will do corruption in the earth [2: 30]. This tradition however implies that they had prostrated to him when he was given the knowledge, and only after their prostration was lust cast into him. Moreover, the Qur'an itself illustrates that awareness of man and woman's sexuality was introduced simultaneously, "and when they tasted the tree, their shameful parts revealed to them, so they took to stitching upon themselves leaves of the Garden" [7: 22, 20: 121].

This tradition begins with the promise of primordial equality, that both are of the same material. However, it continues to describe an Eve which is not at all equal to Adam. In the latter part of this tradition, Eve is not the same *nafs* as her husband, because she lacks knowledge, while he lacked lust before her. This tradition thus implies that Adam is the higher soul and Eve the lower. This is contrary to the Qur'anic description of each individual *nafs* as inspired to lewdness and piety [91: 7-10]. Moreover, here Eve is not a *zawj* but a follower. The tradition tells how she was created for him, to provide pleasant company and obey his orders, but it does not tell

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<sup>63</sup> Barazangi (2004, p. 47).

us how they completed each other as a *zawj* would. This is contrary to the Qur'anic idea of partnership between woman and man where the couple are meant to find love and mercy mutually [30: 21], and “when each of you has been privily with the other” [4: 21].

Some feminists have considered the chronology of creation, that Eve was created after Adam in time, to be problematic. To be sure, the Islamic account of creation does imply a chronology in the creation of the first pair, at least through the word *thumma* (“then” created its mate) in [39: 6]. The Qur'an itself does not explicitly reveal the identity of the first soul or its mate, however the traditions unanimously portray Adam as the first soul and Eve as the mate who was created after him in time.

One author writes, “Time is one of the foundations of power; it is the first, and space comes afterward. The relationship of beings to power is closely wed to their relationship to time. Chronology determines the degree of power”.<sup>64</sup> She continues, “The schema of pyramidal relationships not only embodies a hierarchization of duties characterized by an increasing distance from the divine being and a multiplication of intermediaries. It also reflects the time sequence of creation”.<sup>65</sup> However another contemporary feminist correctly points out that in Islam the creator does not act in the beginning of time only, therefore time itself does not reflect any distance from the divine.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, it may be of relevance here that Adam was created after the angels, but it was they who prostrated themselves to him.

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<sup>64</sup> Sabbah (1984, p. 73).

<sup>65</sup> Sabbah (1984, p. 74).

<sup>66</sup> Barlas (2002, p. 50-53).

Note that the traditions seem to imply that Eve was created shortly after Adam, when they say that she was made with God's both hands and with the remainder of the clay. This is unlike the objection voiced above regarding Eve's creation while Adam was in the Garden. That objection was not strictly about chronology but about her exclusion from the beginning of the human journey marked by the entry into the Garden.

### 1.3.2 Attempts to Reconcile or Analogise the Traditions

Ṣadūq (d. 381 h.) in an attempt to reconcile the contradictory traditions, regarding whether Eve was created from the rib of Adam, or from the same clay as Adam, suggests that perhaps Eve was created from the clay of Adam's rib.<sup>67</sup> Majlisī (d. 1111 h.),<sup>68</sup> suggests two possibilities. One is that the narrations about Eve's origin from the rib were pronounced out of 'pious dissimulation' (*taqiyya*), and the second possibility he borrows from Ṣadūq, that she was created from the clay of his rib.<sup>69</sup>

It is unclear how the clay of the rib is perceived by the respected scholars to be any different from the rib itself. This compromise also does not explain why the Imams<sup>70</sup> were so harsh in their criticism of the rib story. This reconciliation actually continues to say that Eve was made from Adam's rib, the clay of his rib, and it does not really answer the criticisms of the Imams who argued that God does not need the rib to make Eve, and that if Adam's wife was made from his rib, or any part of him for that matter, then that leads to the grave consequence of saying that Adam mated with a part of himself.

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<sup>67</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 381).

<sup>68</sup> On the life and contribution of this religious authority, refer to: Momen (1985, p. 114- 115).

<sup>69</sup> Majlisi, (1403h, vol. 11, p. 116).

<sup>70</sup> I refer to the Imams in the plural because the first variation of this *hadith* has been attributed to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (Saduq, 1404ha), and the second variation has been attributed to Imam Muhammad al-Baqir ( 'Ayyashi, n.d.).

Kāshānī (d.1091 h.), whose exegesis is inclined to philosophy and Sufism, takes the allegorical route saying that the story that Eve was created from Adam's left rib hints that the woman's sensuality is stronger than that of the man's, while the man is more inclined to the spiritual realm. Kāshānī explains that the right represents the spiritual world and the left the physical world, and adds that the Imams' denial of the rib story is a denial of its literal meaning but not of its allegorical one.<sup>71</sup>

There are two problems with this however. The first is that there is no proof that women are more sensual and men more spiritual. In the story of Adam and Eve in the Qur'an, the couple's awareness of their own sexuality was introduced simultaneously after they ate of the forbidden tree.

There are some traditions that speak of the greatness of female desire and pleasure. For example, a tradition from Imam 'Alī states, "God created desire/pleasure (*shahwa*) of ten parts, and made nine parts in women and only one part in men. Had God not put in them (the women) as much bashfulness (*ḥayā'*) as he did desire/pleasure, each man would have had nine wives (the compiler notes that last phrase must have been changed because the meaning demands that what was meant was that 'each woman would have had nine husbands')." <sup>72</sup> That an equal amount of modesty is naturally placed in women to create a balance contradicts Kāshānī's point that women are highly sensual, at the expense of their spirituality.

Moreover, one may further consider the Qur'anic verses that admonish women to dress modestly as a measure of protection from "those in whose hearts there is sickness" [33: 59-60] in reference to the hypocrites, thereby giving a rather

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<sup>71</sup> Kashani (1416h, vol. 1, p. 415).

<sup>72</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 338-339, including footnote 3). The term *shahwa* seems to denote not only desire but physical pleasure as well, as in its other uses in: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 3, p. 47-48). Therefore, it might be that the tradition is not only talking about women's desire psychologically, but their capacity for intense pleasure anatomically.



pessimistic view of a potentially destructive element in male sexuality. This may be taken to contradict Kāshānī's contention that men are more spiritual.

Furthermore, Kāshānī understands the tradition's claim that Eve was created from the lowest left rib, to align women with the left and men with the right. This gendered alignment is unsubstantiated considering the general use of the symbols of right and left in the Qur'an,

“Have We not appointed to him (the human) two eyes, and a tongue, and two lips, and guided him on the two highways? Yet he has not assaulted the obstacle; and what shall teach thee what is the obstacle? The freeing of a slave, or giving food upon a day of hunger to an orphan, near of kin, or a needy man in misery; then that he become of those who believe and counsel each other to be steadfast, and counsel each other to be merciful. Those are the Companions of the Right Hand. And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the Companions of the Left Hand; over them is a Fire covered down” [90: 8-20].

Here again, in its description of the human *nafs*, the Qur'an refers to the two available paths for every human being, the right and the left, and it explains in detail that these are choices that are based on deeds, faith, and mutual counsel, never on gender.

Finally, Kāshānī's understanding assumes that the Imams' denial of the tradition is of its literal and historical meanings only, but he continues to use it as a valid metaphor. However, when the Imams objected they did not allude to any valid metaphor in the story they were rejecting, instead, they gave an alternative story altogether.

On the creation of Eve, there are two opinions in the traditions. One tradition claims that she was created from a part of him, and he is therefore related to her by blood (*nasab*) and by marriage (*sihr*), but these are the very theological grounds that made several of the Imams deny the story outright. Several traditions then describe how she was created from the same material as Adam. One of those however, continues to describe the marriage of the first couple. In doing so, it appears to threaten some religious foundations, when it claims that the angels prostrated to Adam before lust was introduced into him, that lust was actually introduced after he was faced with Eve, and that Eve was not given knowledge by God upon her creation, the knowledge to which the angels prostrated as will be seen (in section 1.4), but that some knowledge was given to her by her husband as a *mahr*. There are three opinions among those who try to reconcile the differences regarding her creation. One opinion is that concurring with the rib story is not real but may have been spoken out of ‘pious dissimulation’. The other opinion is that she was not created from his rib, but from the clay of his rib, which seems to be a mere play with words because the difference between the two is not at all clear. Finally, some accept that the rib story is not true literally or historically, but maintain that it has metaphorical connotations particularly about women’s sensuality and inferiority. In addition to the unsubstantiated claims about her sensuality and his spirituality, it seems absurd to maintain that the same story the Imams repeatedly denied and criticised, may be understood as a purposeful story nonetheless, for it is the thought that is much more powerful and with everlasting effects than the historical authenticity. Indeed, the rib story has been rejected by the modern editors of the *ḥadīth* compilations.<sup>73</sup> However, two more traditions continue to utilise the story in

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<sup>73</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 381, and vol. 4, p. 326, and 328 footnotes ).

an allegorical manner in order to imply an alleged natural immorality in women, and inform the restriction of women's social and economic activities. It may be said that having shown that the rib story is most probably inauthentic, it logically follows that traditions derived from it must be inauthentic as well. However, in defence of those traditions it may also be said that they are valued metaphors, even if they do not bespeak woman's creation from man as such.

### 1.3.3 The Rib Metaphor

The exegeses discussed above all attributed the story of the rib either to earlier exegetes, or to the Prophet's tradition, "Woman is a similitude of a crooked rib; if you keep it as it is you will benefit (and in another version "you will take pleasure in it"), and if you straighten it you will break it."<sup>74</sup> The woman's "crookedness" here seems to refer to her alleged bent morality; as the variant of this tradition says that when Abraham complained to God about Sarah's morality/ill manners, God inspired in him that idiom, and added that he should be patient with her.<sup>75</sup>

A feminist perspective has found this tradition to be misogynistic because it portrays woman as "irremediably crooked", whereas the Qur'an describes humans as having been created *fī aḥsani taqwīm* (in the best form).<sup>76</sup> The Qur'anic verse quoted here continues, "We indeed created the human being in the fairest stature, then We restored him the lowest of the low, save those who believe, and do righteous deeds"

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<sup>74</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 513).

<sup>75</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 513). In Saduq (1404ha., vol. 3, pp. 440-441), there is a curious incident here when the disciple asks the Imam about the source of this tradition, and the Imam gets angry and swears it is from the Prophet. It is curious that no issue of *taqiyya* was raised due to the disciple, who is a reliable narrator, questioning the source rather than the content of the tradition. It is also worthy to note that the Umayyad poet Hajib bin Dhibyan uses in one of his verses the admonishment not to attempt to straighten the *dil* (the word for 'rib' and anything with a bent shape) so as not to break it, although he does not extend the analogy to woman, in: Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 8, p. 226).

<sup>76</sup> Hassan (n.d., p. 6).

[95: 4-6].<sup>77</sup> Again, the perfection of the human being and his collapse are not described in gendered terms.

Some modern authors have given this problematic tradition due thought. One finds that this tradition does not describe woman's creation but is a metaphor;<sup>78</sup> however, she does not address the value of the metaphor. Another one reads this tradition as God explaining to men that women are different from them and that woman's "crookedness" is a reference to her compassion, which is needed in raising children whereas intelligence is not needed, he finds. Then he continues that this crookedness is actually her straightest quality,<sup>79</sup> thus implicitly affirming that the description of woman as crooked is indeed derogatory. A third point of view finds that since ribs surround the heart to protect it, and therefore needs to be bent, woman's role is to protect the man's heart, thus if he leaves her as she is he will take pleasure in her, but if she were straightened and lost her love, she would not be able to do the job she was born to do.<sup>80</sup> While this point of view of woman as protector of man's heart may concur with her portrayal as *sakan* in the Qur'an, there are two problems with this interpretation. First, it neglects the variant of this tradition which explains crookedness as ill manners and advises the man to be patient. Second, it associates love with crookedness and as in the interpretation before, it pretends that there is nothing derogatory about the term. This however neglects that in the Qur'an, the image of the righteous path is repeatedly described as a straight path, "Guide us in the straight path" [1: 6], and "Surely my Lord is on a straight path" [11:

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<sup>77</sup> Also refer to [32: 7], "(God) who has created all things well..."

<sup>78</sup> 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman, as quoted in Smith and Haddad (1982, p. 141).

<sup>79</sup> Sha'rawi, as quoted in Stowasser (1994, p. 37).

<sup>80</sup> A reference to a spoken lecture by 'Amr Khaled, in: bint Muhammad bin Fahd al-Rashid (1427h, p. 154).

56]. In fact, all these interpretations seem to imply that the tradition does not really mean to say “crooked”.

When read together with its variants, this tradition, even though metaphorical, does not change the nature of its message, that woman is hopelessly immoral. Because this may be seen to contradict the Qur’anic claims that God created everyone perfectly, and that the human being in general was also made low, some interpretations have attempted to give the tradition another meaning. These, however, seem to agree that woman’s love is what is crooked about her. They neglect that crookedness in the Qur’anic context would denote a negative image, and they fail to explain why they understood this to be in reference to love (more on intellect versus compassion in section 4.3.1). In fact, these interpretations perpetuate the negative implications of the tradition, instead of solving them.

#### 1.3.4 Women’s Zeal is towards Men

Another tradition that is inspired by the Qur’anic phrase “from it created its mate” is expressed in Imam al-Ṣādiq’s reported words, “God created Adam from water and clay, and the son of Adam’s zeal is for water and clay. He created Eve from Adam and women’s zeal is for men, so safeguard them (the women) in the houses.”<sup>81</sup> The first contention here is that the son of Adam’s zeal is for water and earth, presumably meaning work in the land, and the second is that women’s zeal is for men, and that they need to be safeguarded because of it.

The first part suggests not only a division of labour, but that women are not interested in work because they were not made from the earth. This situation in which men are the bread winners and women stay at home has been a major part of human history, but it has not always been so. In fact, women’s connection to

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<sup>81</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 337).

agriculture in particular is remarkable. There is a widely held theory that women invented gardening and agriculture to begin with, as an extension of their gathering activities.<sup>82</sup> Today, women play the primary role in agriculture and feel ethically committed to the land.<sup>83</sup>

Concerning the second part of the tradition, the compiler's footnote explains that what is meant with houses here, is the husband. Therefore, it is not incarceration as such that is recommended, but to make women safe through marriage, so that their endeavours towards men would not lead them astray.

Interestingly, the tradition preceding this one in the compilation admonishes girls to marry as soon as they reach puberty "otherwise they might not be protected against corruption, because they are human (*li'anna-hunna bashar*)."<sup>84</sup> This tradition is similar to the one from Imam al-Ṣādiq in that it is saying that women should marry to be safeguarded. However, it is different in that it does not imply that this advice is exclusive to women, rather that women are human, so that if we know this to be true about men, then it is also true about women. One may further argue that there are ample verses and traditions which would indicate men's zeal towards women such as in those that deal with polygyny.

It might be said therefore, that there is empirical evidence to disprove both claims of this tradition. Women's connection with the land is documented, and the fervour the couple have for each other is mutual, and by virtue of their being a pair (*zawj*), not because one was made from the other.

To conclude the discussion on the traditions, one might say that even though the rib story has no real weight as far as the creation of woman is concerned, it

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<sup>82</sup> For example, refer to: Stanley (1995, p. 1-86).

<sup>83</sup> For example, refer to the U.N. report "Women feed the world", and: Jensen (1991).

<sup>84</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 337).

nonetheless has metaphorical bearing on theories of woman's inferior nature and her socio-economic role. One may continue to question the inconsistency between authentic traditions rejecting the historical and theological truth of woman's creation from the rib, while accepting the story as a valid metaphor with many moral and socio-economic implications. One author suggests that, "while borrowing from Jewish and Christian sources may have been officially rejected, assumptions about these materials continued to influence early Islamic written interpretations."<sup>85</sup> Gender distinction on such issues as pre-destined immorality, or even that women's zeal is solely for men may be seen as contrary to the Qur'an and other traditions or to empirical evidence. By alluding to her lack of knowledge, her bent morality, and her social role being restricted to follow man of whom she is a part, such traditions systematically try to give woman a place that is less than her full humanity, a matter that needs to be contested further through the lens of the concept of vicegerency.

#### **1.4 The Universal Meanings of the Story of Creation**

Many important themes may be derived from the Qur'anic account of the story of creation, but of particular relevance here is what it means to be human, and how it pertains to the question of woman's full personhood, often denied her by the traditions.

In the Qur'anic accounts of the events in the Garden, Adam and Eve are mentioned together, in the Arabic dual form, throughout their journey from being introduced into the Garden, and warned by God not to eat of the forbidden tree [2: 35, 7: 19], to being warned of Satan and then tempted by him [2: 36, 7: 20-22], and both eating of the tree and becoming conscious of their genitals [7: 22, 20: 121], until finally they are both sent to the earth with Satan who will continue to be the

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<sup>85</sup> Spellberg (1996, p. 305).

enemy of both [2: 36, 7: 24, and 20: 123]. Moreover, both Adam and Eve say to God that they have wronged themselves and they seek God's mercy and forgiveness [7: 23], and both are parents of humanity and are made as examples for their children [7: 27]. This implies "female ethical responsibility and freedom."<sup>86</sup>

In one passage however, these events are spoken interchangeably between the singular grammatical form addressed to Adam, and the double addressed to the couple [20: 115-123].<sup>87</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī's analysis of this passage points out that Adam was singled out here because of the prophetic covenant.<sup>88</sup>

However, the more crucial events in which Adam appears to be singled out are in the description of his creation, the purpose of which seems to be being taught 'the names' [2: 31-33], and therefore leading to the angels' prostration to him [2: 34, 7: 11-12, 15: 28-33, and 38: 71-76]. However, these passages and the commentaries around them reveal that Adam in the prostration episode is meant as a symbol for humanity. When the angels were informed of God's plan to put a vicegerent on earth, they instantly knew that what is meant is a human community/society, which will necessarily produce corruption and blood shed [2: 30].<sup>89</sup> So when they question why that creature who will do corruption there and shed blood, will be God's vicegerent on earth, even while they, the angels, praise and worship God all the time, God answers that He knows what they do not know [2: 30]. Then right after that in verse [2: 31], the Qur'an says that God taught Adam "the names, all of them", and it goes

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<sup>86</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 21).

<sup>87</sup> Wadud (1994, p. 25) points out that Adam is singled out in these verses due to a particular point being made in this passage, which is a comparison between, what she calls, Adam's forgetfulness as a prophet, and Muhammad's forgetfulness as a prophet.

<sup>88</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 14, p. 220-221) argues against what has been suggested, that the singularity of Adam in the phrase "so that thou art unprosperous" [20:117] means that work in the world is the domain of man. Tabataba'i refuses this understanding of gender roles in this verse because Adam is singled out in most verses of that passage, even in places where Eve would have been included, such as, "It is assuredly given to thee neither to hunger therein, nor to go naked..." [20:118].

<sup>89</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 1, p. 115).



on to describe how God showed the angels that Adam has been given more knowledge than they were, thus answering their question [2: 31-33].<sup>90</sup>

That this vicegerency is the domain of all human beings is shown in several Qur'anic verses, "Then We appointed you viceroys (*khalā'if*) in the earth after them, that We might behold how you would do" [10: 14], "and appoints you to be successors (*khulafā'*) in the earth" [27: 62]. Thus, according to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the meaning of teaching the names is that knowledge has been deposited in all human beings without exclusivity. If a human being were guided to tread the righteous path, then knowledge, and with it vicegerency, would be transformed from a potentiality to an actuality.<sup>91</sup>

Thus to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the prostration of the angels was to the status of vicegerency represented by Adam, as he sees is evident in the Qur'anic verse, "We created you (plural), then We shaped you (plural), then We said to the angels: 'Bow yourselves to Adam'" [7: 11], which moves from the creation of the plurality of human beings to the prostration to Adam alone. That, to him, is also evident in the verses [38: 77-83] in which Satan threatens to tempt all human beings right after he refuses to prostrate to Adam. The prostration was for the status of vicegerency; otherwise Satan need not have sworn to lead all humans astray, if his objection was to the prostration to Adam alone.<sup>92</sup> This however, does not imply as some have suggested, that Adam is not a person but a kind, because the Qur'an calls humans "the children of Adam", hence Adam is certainly a person.<sup>93</sup> The angels however, did not prostrate to the person of Adam but to what he represents, much in the same

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<sup>90</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 1, p. 115-116).

<sup>91</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 1, p. 116).

<sup>92</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 8, p. 20-21).

<sup>93</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 142-143).

manner that the Ka'ba is made the direction in which worship is held, due to its representation of divinity.<sup>94</sup>

#### 1.4.1 Vicegerency

One understands from the story of creation, that the human condition is unique, “There are two fundamental differences between human beings and all other creatures... The second fundamental difference is that other creatures have fixed courses from which they never swerve, courses defined by the limited qualities that they manifest. In contrast, human beings have no fixed nature since they manifest the whole... They must undergo a process whereby they become what they are to be.”<sup>95</sup>

As Ṭabāṭabā'ī pointed out, the actuality of becoming God's vicegerent is the outcome of human beings' guidance and their walking towards righteousness. The human being was created to be the vicegerent of God on earth, but due to the arduousness of this task and the nature of the human soul, vicegerency comes at a price as the Qur'an explains, “We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and the human carried it. Surely he is sinful, very foolish. That God may chastise the hypocrites, men and women alike, and the idolaters, men and women alike; and that God may turn again unto the believers, men and women alike. God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate” [33: 72-73].

Therefore, vicegerency is particular to humans, and it is the domain of all human beings, men and women. Moreover, in the story of the angels' prostration, it was Adam's knowledge of the names that convinced the angels to prostrate

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<sup>94</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 8, p. 20).

<sup>95</sup> Murata (1992, p. 43). For a brief analysis of vicegerency as anti-patriarchal and the domain of all humans, refer to: Barlas (2002, p. 106-108).

themselves. Thus, it may be said that the knowledge is a pre-requisite for vicegerency.

#### 1.4.2 Knowledge

The possibilities for knowledge are always available in the world, and Adam's vicegerency was intended for all human beings, for as a tradition teaches, "The knowledge that was brought down to earth with Adam was not taken back, for knowledge does not disappear with its bearer, and it is inherited".<sup>96</sup>

The number of traditions that stress the necessity of learning and knowledge is vast. The view that all Muslims should gain knowledge goes far beyond being a mere right, and is in fact a religious duty, as the Prophet said, "The quest for knowledge is a duty incumbent upon every Muslim, indeed God loves the passionate seekers of knowledge".<sup>97</sup>

The traditions explain what kind of knowledge one needs to pursue and how. Even though no knowledge is bad, some is irrelevant, for not any kind of education qualifies as being the knowledge these traditions refer to. It is reported that when the Prophet came across a man respected for his knowledge of Arab genealogy, history and poetry, the Prophet said, "That is knowledge that does not harm who does not know it, and does not benefit the one who knows it... for knowledge is of three kinds, a sign of clear meaning (*āya muḥkama*), a just religious duty (*farīḍa 'ādila*), or a living (prophetic) tradition (*sunna qā'ima*), and anything other than those is a blessing".<sup>98</sup> Qur'anic verses are called *ayas*, and 'signs/portents' are also found "in the earth", "in the horizons" and "in your souls/selves" [41: 53, and 51: 20-21]. That is why Murata observes, "When the Koran commands people to see all things as

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<sup>96</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 222).

<sup>97</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 30-31).

<sup>98</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 32).

God's signs, it is encouraging them to make use of a particular type of mental process that is not oriented towards objects, things, or data. On the contrary, the Koran tells us that we must perceive things not so much for what they are in themselves but for what they tell us about something beyond themselves".<sup>99</sup>

A tradition from Imam 'Alī further explains the value of the intellect and its relationship with prophecy and Imamate, which are vicegerency exemplified, "God has given human beings two proofs, one is external and the other internal, the external proofs are the messengers, prophets, and Imams peace be upon them, and the internal proofs are the intellects."<sup>100</sup>

Acquiring knowledge and living accordingly are always coupled in the traditions, but knowledge is not simply following the rituals of religious law. One disciple told the Imam that he had a neighbour who prays, fasts, gives alms, goes to the pilgrimage extensively, and is good to people, but he has no intellect (*'aql*), the Imam said, "that would not elevate him".<sup>101</sup> Acquiring knowledge is also an active process that involves living in the world. The Imam was asked about a man who knew this commandment for knowledge, but stayed at home and did not interact with his brethren, the Imam questioned rhetorically, "How does such a person acquire religious knowledge?"<sup>102</sup> Repeatedly, traditions tell that the final judgement is based primarily on one's intellect, in the sense that the judgement of actions is coupled with the judgement of intellect, with the reward for the intellect being greater.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Murata (1992, p. 24).

<sup>100</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 16).

<sup>101</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 24).

<sup>102</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 31).

<sup>103</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 12).

Women are also capable of high knowledge in the view of Imam al-Ṣādiq who said, “A woman may be more knowledgeable than a man.”<sup>104</sup>

These traditions and others show that acquiring knowledge and improving the intellect are matters of urgency for they are related to the hereafter. The idea that gaining knowledge is not merely allowed for women but considered their religious duty, is important because this is the means for them to be vicegerents for God on earth and therefore manifest their full personhood. Adam and Eve are both shown to have been accountable for their mistakes and carried the burden of responsibility. The story of Adam teaches that vicegerency is fulfilled through knowledge, and both vicegerency and knowledge are shared between males and females and there is no gender based distinction in this regard. Adam was only a symbol for that status, yet he is a male symbol.

### 1.5 Reassessing the Symbols: Adam and *al-Arḥām*

It has been shown that the idea of woman’s creation from a rib inevitably has negative repercussions for women. The Qur’anic concepts of the single soul as prototype human *nafs* and of vicegerency however, are grounds for confirming the full personhood of women. It has been argued that the status of vicegerency needs to be actualised through a particular process, particularly knowledge and guidance. It is this idea that now brings the argument into an assessment of the symbols. Thus far, only the first part of the governing verse from *Sūrat al-Nisā’* has been thoroughly discussed. The second part of the verse is also important because it clarifies that compassion is linked to vicegerency, and in expressing this particular quality, the Qur’an utilises the uniquely feminine symbol of the womb.

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<sup>104</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 306).

It was argued above that in the Qur'an and a section of the traditions, Eve was made from the same clay as Adam. It has also been argued that the chronology of creation does not necessarily indicate a hierarchy. However, what remains problematic, particularly for a feminist reading, is that a man would represent humanity as the prototype being, as the one who was given knowledge and before whom the angels prostrated. A contemporary reformist Christian feminist articulates the problem (although she talks about the representation of Christ, but the similarities in this context are obvious), she says, "The male alone is the normative or generic sex of the human species; only the male represents the fullness of human nature, whereas woman is defective physically, morally, and mentally. It follows that the incarnation of the *Logos* of God into a male is not a historical accident but an ontological necessity. Just as Christ [read: Adam] has to be incarnated in a male, so only can the male represent Christ [read: Adam]".<sup>105</sup>

This vicegerency however is a burden, and the vicegerent may abuse his status, as the angels were sure that the human vicegerent will fill the earth with corruption and bloodshed [2: 30]. The Qur'an once asks, "If you were given the command,<sup>106</sup> would you then haply work corruption in the land, and break your bonds of kin (*wa tuqattī'ū arḥāmakum*)?" [47: 22], thereby linking corruption and the exploitation of status, with breaking the bonds of kinship, or *al-arḥām*.

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<sup>105</sup> Ruether (1989, p.126). Here, it would be useful to insist that the male form is not specially related to the divine. The Shi'i traditions refute the idea that 'God created man in his image'. Al-Baqir answers this saying, "The image is new, it is created, God chose it over the other images and added it to himself, just like he added the Ka'ba to himself and the Spirit to himself..." in: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 134). Another tradition explains the origin of this misunderstanding about the correlation between the two; that the Prophet once came across two men fighting, and he heard one curse the other's face, therefore the Prophet asked him not to say that to his 'brother' because "God created Adam in his image" (Saduq, 1404hb, vol. 2, p. 110).

<sup>106</sup> This particular segment of the phrase is from Pickthall, because it seems more accurate than Arberry's "if you were turned away" in the context of the passage.

The second segment of the governing verse [4: 1] reads, “And fear God by whom you demand one of another, and the wombs; surely God ever watches over you.” The exegetes discussed above did in fact pay close attention to this *taqwa* (fear/reverence) for ‘the wombs’. Literally, the *rahm* (womb) is the uterus of the female, and among the Arabs it is a metaphor for close kinship<sup>107</sup> because kin come out of the same womb.<sup>108</sup> and when pronounced *ruḥm*, it means compassion.<sup>109</sup> The verse according to most exegetes has two possible meanings depending on how it is read. One meaning is a command to reverence God, and reverence the wombs, meaning to maintain the bonds of kinship. The other meaning is that the word ‘wombs’ is not an extension of the command for reverence, but an extension of that by what people demand their rights, which renders the verse, ‘Fear God, by whom you demand of one another, and the wombs which you also demand by’. The first meaning of ‘fear/reverence God and the wombs’ is grammatically stronger, and it is also the meaning available in the traditions.<sup>110</sup> For instance, Imam al-Ṣādiq interprets this part of the verse exclaiming, “It is (a reference to) the wombs of people which he ordained connection with and gave it a high status; can you not see that he has made it of him (*ja‘alahā minhu*).”<sup>111</sup>

The “connection” referred to in this tradition comes from the Arabic phrase *ṣilat al-rahm*, which literally means “connection of the wombs”, but the actual meaning of which may be translated as maintaining the bonds of kinship, or as “regard/consideration for kinship”.<sup>112</sup> The various traditions that utilise the terms *ṣilat al-rahm* or simply *al-arḥām* (the wombs) give three meanings for the term. One

<sup>107</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 12, p. 230).

<sup>108</sup> Isfahani (1404h, p. 191).

<sup>109</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 12, p. 232-233).

<sup>110</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 3, p. 97-100); Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 3, p. 6); Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 137-138, and 147).

<sup>111</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol.2, p.150).

<sup>112</sup> Translation from: Radi (1996, p. 591, 620, 621, etc).

meaning refers to connection with and consideration for kin, the other refers to the wombs as flesh, the last refers to ‘the wombs’ as a single entity that is connected to God, and also named after one of his most prominent names, *al-Raḥmān*.

One tradition gives the meaning of consideration for kin, “Connect with your kin even with a greeting”.<sup>113</sup> Another tradition says that “Consideration for kin is the fastest way to gain rewards for good deeds”.<sup>114</sup>

The second meaning may be seen in traditions that value touch as a way to calm an angry person. A part of a larger tradition, which will be fully discussed in the third meaning below suggests, “Any man of you who feels anger towards his kin, let him come closer to him, for if the ‘womb’ was touched by a ‘womb’ it settles/rests”.<sup>115</sup> This gives the term ‘womb’ the meaning of flesh. Indeed, Ṭabāṭabā’ī says that the womb is the material unity between individuals of the family, and he says that this has physical and spiritual effects that are undeniable.<sup>116</sup>

As for the third meaning of the wombs as an entity with a divinely ordained status, a couple of traditions are of special significance. Imam ‘Alī explains in an authenticated tradition, “The one of you gets angry and would not become calm until he is entered into hell. Any man of you who feels anger towards his kin let him come closer to him, for if the ‘womb’ was touched by a ‘womb’ it settles/rests. It (the womb) is connected to the Throne, it strikes it like metal that reverberates, and it calls, ‘Oh God! Connect whoever connects me and disconnect whoever disconnects me’... and any man who gets angry while standing, should stay sitting on the earth in his gush, for that gets rid of Satan’s abomination.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 2, p. 155).

<sup>114</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 2, p. 152).

<sup>115</sup> ‘Ayyashi (n.d., vol. 1, p. 217).

<sup>116</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 148).

<sup>117</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 2, p. 151). ‘Ayyashi (n.d., vol. 1, p. 217).



The Throne of God in the traditions could mean the whole creation, and it could mean knowledge.<sup>118</sup> It has been established in several exegeses, that many traditions explain or imply that the Throne represents knowledge that was given to the prophets.<sup>119</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī explains that the Throne in the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* is the place of comprehensive knowledge of events. It is the stage in existence where different events, causes and effects gather. The womb puts the chain of events in action in the sense that it is connected to the spirit motivator of the chains. This is similar to the position of the king where all the different problems of the kingdom gather, and who with one command, orders a chain of active powers in the kingdom to act. Therefore, the womb which is like the spirit that connects kin, is connected to the Throne, when it is abused and oppressed, it takes refuge in and seeks justice from that which she is connected to. This causes the whole Throne to reverberate. The image of the womb complaining to the Throne is the image of a metallic body being struck, upon one strike the whole body would make a sound and reverberate.<sup>120</sup> This, Ṭabāṭabā'ī says, explains the tradition in which the womb calls on to God to connect with himself whoever connects her,<sup>121</sup> and this is also the meaning of other traditions that confirm that consideration for kin prolongs one's life, and disconnection from kin disconnects life.<sup>122</sup>

According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the Islamic vision is that the human soul is naturally inclined towards compassion and away from anger. This, he says, is evident in several traditions that discuss anger.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, Ṭabāṭabā'ī says that the Islamic

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<sup>118</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 127-128).

<sup>119</sup> For example, refer to: Kashani (1416h, vol. 1, p. 283), and Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 1, p. 124, and vol. 2, p. 341, and vol. 8, p. 163-167).

<sup>120</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 149-150).

<sup>121</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 2, p. 151-156).

<sup>122</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 2, p. 152).

<sup>123</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 149).

view is that God is constantly driving the universe towards good goals,<sup>124</sup> and therefore whoever disconnect themselves from their kin are actually fighting God's essence, and this is why God would fix the problem either by rehabilitating them or by eliminating them with death.<sup>125</sup>

Murata writes, "The Throne marks the demarcation line between the unseen and the visible worlds, or the World of Command and the World of Creation."<sup>126</sup> Ibn 'Arabi explains this more clearly in his interpretation of the verse in question, he says that the wombs are disconnected with the lack of love, and he says that this leads to isolation, detachment, and disconnection from God. He explains that the womb to the visible world is similar to the connection with God in the invisible world. Therefore maintaining unity in the physical connection is similar to unifying God, and one who cannot maintain physical unity, would not be able to attain spiritual unity.<sup>127</sup>

Another tradition on the third meaning of 'the womb' as an entity, is a widely reported *ḥadīth qudsī* where God addresses the womb saying, "I am *al-Raḥmān* and you are *al-rahm*, I derived your name from my name, so whoever connects you I will connect and whoever disconnects you I will disconnect."<sup>128</sup> In this tradition, the creator links one of his most prominent names, which means the all-compassionate, to this entity that is the womb. Moreover, it has been shown that the divine name *al-Raḥmān* is unlike the other names of God. While the other names signify one aspect of the divine, and may be used as an attribute of someone other than the divine, *al-*

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<sup>124</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 2) discusses this extensively.

<sup>125</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 150). He continues here that this reality is not felt by humans today because of the advancement of medication and its mixing and addiction in the human body, which therefore no longer perceives that subtle pains.

<sup>126</sup> Murata (1992, p. 219).

<sup>127</sup> Ibn 'Arabi (n.d.).

<sup>128</sup> Saduq (1379h, p. 302). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 3, p. 9).

*Raḥmān* designates “God himself”, and cannot designate anyone or anything other than him.<sup>129</sup> Thus, the honour bestowed upon the womb is not only by being placed next to God in reverence, but also through his choice of that particular one of his names to give to her.

It has been observed that one of the main themes of the story of creation is its suggestion regarding human beings’ “affinity with the earth, and our responsibility towards it and dependence on it.”<sup>130</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī remarked that the womb is the material unity between individuals of the family. However, since the story of Adam and Eve aims to teach that humanity is literally one family, then consideration for kin, as well as the material unity between individuals may extend to the whole race, or even to the earth itself which is the source of the human race.

The three meanings of *al-arḥām* may thus come together. The consideration for kin may extend to all of the earth and its children because of the material bond among them. Moreover this connection with and consideration for kin is placed right next to reverence towards God in importance. One may further argue, that this theme which may be summarised as showing compassion to living things in order to gain the God’s mercy and be connected with him, is tightly knit with the theme of vicegerency. It was shown above that vicegerency is only a test that might cause either the elevation of people or their depression. Causing corruption and bloodshed does not represent the true status of vicegerency; rather, it is the abuse of that status. Thus, the mention of the wombs next to God in this very verse that speaks of the creation of the first couple and the rest of humanity is very befitting.

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<sup>129</sup> Jomier (2001, p. 198-199).

<sup>130</sup> Abdel Haleem (1999, p. 134). Symbolic links between the earth and the mother are ample in the Qur’an, such as in: Sells (1999, p. 213-216) and in traditions, such as the Prophet’s saying, “Wipe yourselves with the earth for it is compassionate towards you as a woman to her children”, in: Radi (n.d.a., p. 269).

This analysis then gives a place for the feminine in the divine plan. If Adam represents the original being, woman represents the unity of humans and the very material of compassion.

In any case, it has to be remembered that this is an analysis of symbols, not a contention that men are Adam and women their wombs. The symbols do not pertain to individual men and women in the world, nor should people be constrained to these symbols but, “the woman and the man must be demythologized.”<sup>131</sup> Yet this investigation into the symbols is important, not only to demonstrate that the feminine is equally essential and equally linked to the divine in the Qur’an, but also to restore a balance between the feminine and the masculine symbols in this key verse on the story of creation.<sup>132</sup>

## 1.6 Conclusions

This chapter discussed the opening verse of *Sūrat al-Nisā’*, which has two main parts. The first part speaks of the creation of the single soul, followed by its mate, and then the scattering of a multitude of men and women. The second part speaks of reverence for God and for “the wombs”.

Regarding the first segment, it was argued that men and women are each *nafs* and *zawj*. There is an emphasis in verse [4: 1] and its exegesis that the verse is a reminder that people come from one soul and therefore that they should be merciful towards each other. The Qur’anic description of Eve’s creation *min* Adam accepts both possibilities, that she was created from a part of him or from the same material as him. Her creation has contradictory stories in the traditions, some specifying Eve’s origin from Adam, and most others criticising that story on theological

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<sup>131</sup> McLaughlin (1974, p. 257).

<sup>132</sup> Murata sees a different but equally interesting balance in the symbols of creation when she says, “Being is yang, and the divine knowledge is yin”, in: Murata (1992, p. 67).

grounds and promoting the idea that she was created from the same material as he. The allegorical traditions that make use of the rib story or that she is part of a whole undermine her humanity. On the contrary, the theme of human vicegerency portrays woman as an equally full person. She is capable of knowledge and invited to pursue it in order to achieve her potential. In the story of the angels' prostration, Adam is a symbol for the totality of the human race and their carrying the knowledge. Yet, this status will necessarily bring corruption with it, and a part of the vicegerent's guidance is that he reveres 'the wombs', *al-arḥām*. With this feminine symbol and its connection to the Throne, the status of vicegerency may be seen in both its masculine and feminine dimensions.

The *nafs* is the human identity and it is at once perfected and abased, perhaps as part of the vicegerency status which is a burden of knowledge, choice, and accountability. Eve is certainly a *nafs*, and the following chapters will attempt to discover how her daughters are portrayed as having lived their vicegerency, or in other words, which of the two available paths of the human *nafs* did Eve's daughters take. Moreover, the question whether the other terms of *zawj* and *rahīm* play a role in the portrayal of the female *nafs* will be pursued.

## FEMALE PERSONALITIES IN THE QUR'ANIC QASAS

### 2.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter was devoted to the story of Eve, this chapter will continue the discussion on female personalities of the Qur'anic narratives, which include the stories of the past prophets, the time of Muhammad, and a small section in the end will be on the women of paradise.

The stories of the prophets (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) comprise a major part of the Qur'anic message, about one seventh of the book.<sup>1</sup> Most of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an are Biblical prophets, but some are old Arabian prophets. The Islamic versions of their stories diverge from the Biblical ones in minor or major details. One of the main themes of the Qur'anic narratives is that prophets have had the same basic message, which is the oneness of the Creator, even though their experiences differed as well as a part of their message such as the religious law. The Qur'an instructs people to accept all the prophets and messengers and not distinguish between them [2: 136, 2: 285, 3: 84], even though it also states that God did cause some of them to excel over others and granted varying degrees to his messengers [2: 253]. The term *Islam* and being *Muslim*, is employed everywhere in the Qur'an, including in the narratives of the past, as the original and natural religion of all creation. Therefore, the "Islam" of previous prophets is not to be confused with Islam as the religious doctrine brought by Muhammad.

While each story has its own morals, there are some general aims for the *Qasas*. The Qur'an itself explains that the narratives are told to make firm the prophet Muhammad's heart [11: 120], whereby remembering the experiences of his predecessors would make him stand firm in his own prophetic career. The stories are also a reminder for believers [11: 120], and a lesson for people of understanding [12: 111].

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<sup>1</sup> Lawson (1993, p. 184).

It should be noted that the tales of the prophets or *Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* as a popular genre of "Islamic mythological literature" was a product of medieval storytellers, and the demands of their societies, which was frowned upon by Islamic theologians.<sup>2</sup> These started with the Qur'an and its exegeses, but in their form and content went beyond the narrow Qur'anic framework.<sup>3</sup>

This study however, is removed from that popular genre and concerned only with the Qur'an and its exegeses, and with authentic traditions where they are available. The following is a study of each one of the female characters in the Qur'anic narratives of the prophets. Due to the wide variety in their personalities and circumstances, each character in this chapter will be discussed individually and analysed according to her own contribution to the larger story and to the Qur'an. Special emphasis will be laid on aspects of these women's humanity, particularly regarding their faith, intellects, and fortunes, which are characteristics normally portrayed in the traditions to be lacking in women.

In the previous chapter, it was shown that the Qur'an sees humanity as having emanated from a single soul, the nature of which encompasses both misconduct and piety. It was argued that Eve is a *nafs* in her own right, rather than being a part of a whole. It was also argued that although knowledge is represented through Adam, it is the possession of both men and women as vicegerents of God on earth, as the feminine symbol of *al-arḥām* revered the quality of mercy which is also a necessary character trait of the human vicegerent. In this chapter, the notion of woman as an independent human *nafs* will be elaborated. The women of the *qışaş* will be examined to see whether the Qur'an portrays them as particularly feminine, or whether they provide examples of a universal human *nafs*, or whether they combine feminine with universal qualities.

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<sup>2</sup> Pauliny (1998, p. 321-323).

<sup>3</sup> Pauliny (1998, p. 326).

In his article “Qur’anic Concepts of Human Psyche”, Absar Ahmad argues that the human soul in the Qur’anic view point is not merely a psychological entity but one that has God-consciousness in its depth, and that is because humanity emerged in creation primarily in the transcendental dimension of existence. God-consciousness and self-consciousness are therefore intertwined. He explains that the three kinds of *nafs* that are referred to in the Qur’an, are to the majority of scholars three dimensions or stages of the human soul. He further elaborates that *al-nafs al-ammāra bi-s-sū’* [12: 53], the commanding soul is the appetitive soul. He understands *al-nafs al-lawwāma* [75: 2], the blaming soul to be the seat of reason, because it is through thoughts that people issue moral judgements. Finally, he explains that *al-nafs al-muṭma’inna* [89: 27], is the pacified soul where both emotions and thoughts have calmed, and this is the seat of the heart which is the spiritual core of the human being.<sup>4</sup>

The women examined here may be seen to fall into one or other of these categories. For example, the wives of Noah and Lot are commanding souls which did not progress and were doomed to punishment in the hereafter. The soul of Potiphar’s wife was also a commanding soul, but this one finally progressed and issued moral judgements blaming herself and commending Joseph. The mother of Moses seems to have had an inner struggle but finally God pacified her heart so that she had complete trust in what he inspired her. The queen of Sheba is a blaming soul which, due to her intelligence, was able to see the harm that she had been doing to herself. Mary is seen by some Sufis as the prototype pacified soul,<sup>5</sup> for from before her birth, through her early childhood and into her later experiences, she remained disconnected from people and concerned only with God and worship. Other female personalities also fall within these categories and thus portray a spiritual struggle, or

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmad (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Sands (2006, p. 100).



what the Prophet called *jihād al-nafs*,<sup>6</sup> which is however mixed with active earthly struggle. This will be most clearly seen in Hagar and Pharaoh's wife. That is in the form of worldly pursuit that was divinely acknowledged in the case of Hagar, and a spiritual *jihād* followed by a political one in the story of Āsiyā and Pharaoh. The wives of the prophet Muhammad are described as exceptional women, and pertaining to their status is the theme that a human in a place of responsibility has a heavier burden of struggle.

It should be mentioned that with the exception of Mary, women are not referred to in the Qur'an using their proper names. It has often been suggested that this follows Arabic mannerisms which demonstrate respect.<sup>7</sup> It has also been suggested that as a rule, only prophets are mentioned by name in the Qur'an.<sup>8</sup> The latter however is not true, since Abraham's father Azar, a disbeliever is mentioned by name [6: 74]. Pharaoh's minister is identified as Hāmān [28: 38, 40: 24, 36], and a wealthy Israelite on Pharaoh's side as Qārūn [40: 24]. Zayd, the adopted son of the Prophet is also named [33: 37]. On the other hand, one Qur'anic character which tradition identifies as the prophet al-Khiḍr is never mentioned by name, rather as "one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge proceeding from Us" [18: 65]. The reasoning therefore, behind naming an individual or not, is not clear and that is why this issue will be left at that.

## **2.2 The Wives of the Prophets Noah and Lot**

"God has struck a similitude for the unbelievers -- the wife of Noah, and the wife of Lot; for they were under two of Our righteous servants, but they betrayed them, so they availed them nothing whatsoever against God; so it was said, 'Enter, you two, the Fire with those who enter'" [66: 10].

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<sup>6</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 12).

<sup>7</sup> For example: Wadud (1994, p. 32).

<sup>8</sup> Abdel Haleem (1999, p. 132).

This verse is from *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm*, which deals with “female rebellion in a prophet’s household and its punishment”.<sup>9</sup> It is followed by two other verses that give as examples to the believers, the wife of Pharaoh, and Mary [66: 11-12] (discussed in 2.5.2 and 2.7.4.3). Exegetes find that these verses are given as admonishments to two of the prophet Muhammad’s wives who were discussed in the beginning of *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm*, and were the occasion of revelation.<sup>10</sup> However, Ṭūsī adds to this that the aim of this group of verses is to show that every person shall be judged according to their own actions. The wives of the two prophets were not saved despite their husbands’ righteousness, but the wife of Pharaoh was saved despite her husband’s wickedness.<sup>11</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī finds that even though the verses are addressing the Prophet’s wives, the aim is universal whereby the verses give two examples for the disbelievers and believers respectively, saying that death comes as a result of infidelity and happiness as a result of faith. He adds that these examples are represented by women.<sup>12</sup>

The major reason that makes the wives of Noah and Lot examples for the disbelievers is their betrayal (*khānatāhumā*). The root of this word *khawn* indicates that a person is unfaithful to a trust that he was given,<sup>13</sup> and that a person did not abide by admonishments.<sup>14</sup> One lexicon adds that betrayal is a “betrayal of admonishment and betrayal of enduring love”.<sup>15</sup> That seems very appropriate in this context, where Noah and

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<sup>9</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 39). For the *Sura* starts with its occasion of revelation being that one of the prophet Muhammad’s wives betrayed a secret and conspired against him with another wife.

<sup>10</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 10, p. 52-53). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 10, p. 64).

<sup>11</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 10, p. 53).

<sup>12</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 342-343).

<sup>13</sup> Isfahani (1404h, p. 163).

<sup>14</sup> Fairuz Abadi (n.d., vol. 4, p. 220).

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 13, p. 144).

Lot were prophets as well as husbands to their wives, therefore both their advice and their love were betrayed.<sup>16</sup>

Some have claimed that the betrayal was of an adulterous nature, based on the scene in which Noah pleads for the life of his son, but God reminds him that the son is not of his family, but that he is an unrighteous deed, after which Noah seeks forgiveness and mercy [11: 45-47]. This has been interpreted by some to mean that the boy was not his son but his wife's son.<sup>17</sup> However, this claim has been rejected categorically for its incompatibility with the Qur'anic account. The main reason given is that the Qur'anic story is teaching that when it comes to standing by truth, one ought not to give any preference to one's own blood relations, thus God's reminder to Noah that it is not his son but evil conduct.<sup>18</sup> Exegetes often add that no wife of a prophet has ever committed adultery.<sup>19</sup>

Traditions also confirm that the betrayal was in religion and in trust.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Noah's wife, her betrayal was accusing him of insanity, and in the case of Lot's wife, it was her alerting the Sodomites of his male guests.<sup>21</sup>

The Qur'an narrates that when the Lot's people came to his house for the guests, he offered them his own daughters in marriage as a purer alternative if they were insistent on their deed, and to relieve the shame they caused him, but none was upright among them [11: 78, 15: 71]. Lot's wife however, was on the side of the Sodomites, and therefore, as Noah's wife was left to drown, so also Lot was instructed to flee at night with his family, except for his wife who was made to lag behind [11: 81, 15: 60, 27: 57, 37: 135].

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<sup>16</sup> Also note that the status of vicegerency is referred to in the Qur'an as "the Trust" [33: 72], and therefore, perhaps there is a hint at the women betraying "the Trust" although their betrayal of their husbands the prophets is the more explicit indication here.

<sup>17</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 41) quotes Ibn Kathir and al-Kisa'i.

<sup>18</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 10, p. 235- 236).

<sup>19</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 10, p. 52). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 10, p. 64).

<sup>20</sup> 'Ayyashi, (n.d., vol. 2, p. 151).

<sup>21</sup> Tabrasi (1415h, vol. 5, p. 285; and vol. 10, p. 64).

Lot's behaviour towards his daughters is problematic; they were offered in marriage by their father to the Sodomites, presumably without being consulted, and to people whom Lot himself strongly condemned. Those daughters were among those who fled with Lot, and therefore one may assume that they were believing women. This makes Lot's behaviour uncharacteristic of a prophet unless there is a hidden reason behind his offer.<sup>22</sup>

The wives of Noah and Lot are described here to have been “under” the two righteous men, which indicates that they were their wives.<sup>23</sup> This seems to be the apparent meaning of the expression, but it has also been argued that the element of their husbands' prophethood is another reason that the women were “under” their husbands.<sup>24</sup> Notice, that in the very next verse that speaks of the wife of Pharaoh as an example for the believers, she is not described as having been “under” Pharaoh, even though she was indeed his wife and subject to his tyranny.

Even though the verse speaks of two specific women, it gives them as examples to disbelievers/infidels in general. The sex of individuals is less important than their conduct. Perhaps the verse addresses in particular the people who think they might have an advantage by being close to a prophet in one way or another. It says that if people betray the prophets and their message, then no intercession can avail them against God's judgement.

### **2.3 The Wives of the Prophet Abraham**

The two wives of Abraham are barely mentioned in the Qur'an, most of what we know about Sarah and Hagar comes from the traditions. Sarah is mostly remembered for the miraculous birth of her son Isaac in her old age. Hagar is remembered for her contribution to

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<sup>22</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 2, p. 219 ) considers this among the proofs for the permissibility, though hatefulness (*makruh*), of anal sex with women. The objection however is not only feminist based but an Islamic one against believing men and especially women being offered in marriage to disbelievers. It might be however, that Lot knew already the Sodomites would not accept because they were not interested in women, but made the offer anyway for some reason such as to save face in front of his guests, or to give proof to the Sodomites before themselves and God that they acted out of greed not out of need, which is why he described them as “*musrifun*” [7: 81], and that they deserved the punishment that was soon to come.

<sup>23</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 343).

<sup>24</sup> Fadlallah (1998, p. 270).

the story of bringing life to Mecca, through her *sa'y* and the springing of the well of *zamzam*, a contribution that would ultimately lead to the birth of Islam. Some tensions are noted between the two women considering that the former was a wife and the latter a concubine of the same man. However, these tensions are not addressed in the Qur'an, and they are minimised in the traditions where both women are portrayed as pious individuals.

### 2.3.1 Sarah and Hagar

Sarah, the wife and cousin of Abraham was wealthy and gave him her land and cattle from which he made a vast wealth.<sup>25</sup> Upon persecution and the people's rejection of his preaching, Abraham decided to leave his homeland with his believing wife Sarah, whereupon he made a prayer for God to grant him a good son, and God gave him the good tidings of a meek boy [37: 83- 101]. When they were later in Egypt, the king offered Sarah his "beautiful and sensible" slave girl, whom Abraham later bought from his wife and conjugated with, in hope that she might bring the barren couple a child, and she indeed brought Ishmael.<sup>26</sup> The Qur'anic passage [37: 102-113] is an account of the sacrifice that was about to be done on Abraham's son, followed by the good tidings of Isaac. Medieval scholars had debated whether the sacrificial boy was Ishmael or Isaac,<sup>27</sup> however, the Shī'ī traditions and exegeses maintain that it was Ishmael, and that Isaac had not been born at the time.<sup>28</sup> This is relevant here because it means that Hagar will be considered the mother of the willing sacrificial boy.

Sarah is mentioned twice in the Qur'an. In the first instance, when she and Abraham were worried of their visitors' identity and intentions, then the guests informed them that they were angels sent to Lot's people. Upon that news the Qur'an describes Sarah as "*qā'ima fa-ḍāḥikat*" [11: 70-71]. She was standing (*qā'ima*) and listening to the

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<sup>25</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 8, p.370).

<sup>26</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 8, p. 372- 373).

<sup>27</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 1, p. 189- 190).

<sup>28</sup> Kulayni (1388h vol. 4, p. 203- 204), and Qummi (1404h, vol. 1, p. 351- 352).

conversation, or perhaps standing and serving the guests.<sup>29</sup> Then *ḍahikat* primarily means that she laughed, another possible meaning for the word is that she menstruated.<sup>30</sup> This however, has been understood primarily to mean “menstruated” as a prerequisite for the tidings of Isaac that followed, and “laughed” as a sign of relief concerning the identity of the guests was considered a secondary possibility.<sup>31</sup> The primary meaning of laughter is considered secondary here because the reason for her laughter is claimed to be not very clear.<sup>32</sup> However, *ḍahik* may simply be an expression of happiness which reveals the front teeth, as in Solomon’s laugh in [27: 19],<sup>33</sup> which makes Sarah’s *ḍahik* upon realising that her guests were angels very plausible.

Then, Sarah was given the good tidings of Isaac and after him, his son Jacob. She expressed her surprise at the news because both she and her husband were in their old age, to which the angels replied, “What, dost thou marvel at God's command? The mercy of God and His blessings be upon you, O people of the House! Surely He is All-laudable, All-glorious.” [11: 71-73]. Note, that Sarah is addressed here as among the “people of the house” (*ahl al-bayt*), which is important for future discussions on Mary and Fāṭima who are also described as among *ahl al-bayt*. In the other occasion, upon hearing the tidings of a knowledgeable son, “came forward his wife, clamouring, and she smote her face, and said, ‘An old woman, barren!’” [51: 29]. Some have said describing her behaviour that this is what women typically do when they are astonished.<sup>34</sup> This might well be the case, especially with eastern women, but perhaps another reason for the Qur’an vividly recounting her acts

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<sup>29</sup> Tusi, *al-Tibyan* (1409h, vol. 6, p. 29). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 10, p. 323).

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 10, p. 459-460).

<sup>31</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 10, p. 323).

<sup>32</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 10, p. 323).

<sup>33</sup> Isfahani (1404h, p. 292). He adds that “*ḍahik*” may also mean surprise, and finds that this best fits the context because Sarah expressed surprise at two other instances in the Qur’an.

<sup>34</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 46) quoting Ibn Kathir.

of astonishment, is to bring the reader's attention to the inconceivability of the event that was being foretold.<sup>35</sup>

Hagar is mentioned only once and very indirectly in the Qur'an. Apparently due to Sarah's jealousy from the slave girl after Ishmael's birth,<sup>36</sup> Abraham took Hagar and his son to the desert until they reached Mecca, and he called God, "Our Lord, I have made some of my seed (*min dhurriyyatī*) to dwell in a valley where is no sown land by Thy Holy House; Our Lord, let them perform the prayer, and make hearts of men yearn towards them, and provide them with fruits; haply they will be thankful" [14: 37]. While, the terms seed and posterity are confined to descendants, the Arabic *dhurriyyah*, primarily means offspring but includes fathers and women.<sup>37</sup>

The reason for this migration being Sarah's jealousy has been mentioned scantily in the traditions. The Qur'an does not give a direct explicit reason for the relocation, it does however describe their prayers to make this a region of security and bestow fruits upon it. It also describes the building of the foundations of the Ka'ba by Abraham and Ishmael at the holy site, and recounts their prayers to God, to make of themselves and their seed a submissive/Muslim nation, to show them their rites and relent towards them, and to raise up in their nation's midst a Messenger from among themselves who would recite God's revelation, teach the scripture and wisdom, and make them pure [2: 125-129]. These words will prove to be relevant to Hagar's contribution.

The theme of "female rivalry in a patriarchal household"<sup>38</sup> is evident in the traditions though not in the Qur'an, but it is not given due thought because of the emphasis on the

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<sup>35</sup> The idea that Sarah's reactions stress the inconceivability of the event has been noted by: Reynolds (2007, p. 196).

<sup>36</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 6, p.35- 36).

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 14, p. 286).

<sup>38</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 44).

outcome rather than the cause of the tension between the women and the subsequent relocation of Hagar and her son.

### 2.3.2 *Sa'y and Zamzam*

According to authentic traditions, when Abraham left Hagar and her son in the valley, she went to the hill of *al-Ṣafā* looking for help, and then she went to the hill of *al-Marwa* for the same reason. She kept going back and forth seven times and God made that a ritual. When she finally came back to her son, she found that water had gushed forth from beneath his feet.<sup>39</sup> The ritual that God prescribed is the *sa'y*, walking or running seven times between *al-Ṣafā* and *al-Marwa*, which is a requirement for any Muslim pilgrimage at Mecca [2: 158]. As for the water that came to them in the desert, it is the well of *zamzam*, so named because as soon as the water gushed out, Hagar gathered soil round it in order to contain it (*zammathu*). The traditions add, had she not done so it would have spilled.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps, at first glance this might seem to be a simple story of a mother looking for water in the desert to give her child. However, one is forced to dig deeper, because these very actions of Hagar, particularly the *sa'y* seven times but also drinking from *zamzam*, remain a token of the pilgrimage, one of the five pillars of Islam.

*Sa'y* means walking, running, working, or seeking.<sup>41</sup> It has been said that striving is the cause of sustenance.<sup>42</sup> This is one clear theme from Hagar's pursuit, and her finding water in the desert.

The Qur'an uses the term *sa'y* in reference to spiritual pursuit, "hasten to God's remembrance (*fā-s'aw ilā dhikr-i-llāh*)" [62: 9]. However, it describes people's efforts as being dispersed, "surely your striving is to diverse ends" [92: 4]. Therefore, it reminds each human soul of its judgement based on what it had pursued, "and that the human shall have

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<sup>39</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 201- 205).

<sup>40</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 202).

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 14, p. 385).

<sup>42</sup> Mazandarani (n.d., vol. 5, p. 50).



to his account only as he has laboured, and that his labouring shall surely be seen” [53: 39-40], and “upon the day when the human shall remember what he has striven” [79: 35].

Traditions mostly use the term *sa’y* in reference to the pilgrimage rite. The importance of *sa’y* is heightened in the traditions that describe it as God’s favourite ritual because it is the humiliation of tyrants.<sup>43</sup>

Notice that from the traditions mentioned earlier, which state that Hagar kept going back and forth seven times and God made that a ritual, one understands that Hagar’s actual *sa’y* preceded God’s making the *sa’y* into ritual. This means that Hagar herself, running between the two hilltops, was unaware of any divine ritual that she was performing. She was simply a mother searching for water in the desert to quench her child’s thirst. However, something in her actions made God look at her and make the *sa’y* his own.

The relevance of *sa’y* is pinned to another potent symbol in the story which is water, the product of *sa’y* and an element of utmost relevance for life. As the Qur’an puts it “and of water (We) fashioned every living thing” [21: 30]. Water is seen in the Qur’an as a sign of God’s existence, unity and power. By bringing forth water, God provides food and drink for all his creatures, as well as physical, psychological and spiritual purification, [77: 27, 80: 24-30, 8: 11, etc].<sup>44</sup> The authentic traditions that describe the blessings of the water of *zamzam* specifically are numerous.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, when God sent water to Hagar and Ishmael, he sent life to the barren valley of Mecca and in it was a promise of spiritual purification as well. One can see that from the point when Hagar started her pursuit, the prayers of Abraham with Ishmael discussed earlier, that God bestow security upon that region, give its people fruits, that God “show us our rites (*arinā manāsikanā*)”, and raise a Messenger who would purify the people

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<sup>43</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4 p. 434).

<sup>44</sup> Abdel Haleem (1999, p. 33, 38- 39).

<sup>45</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 430- 431) etc.

[2: 126- 129], all started to be answered. Her *sa'y* became a major part of Muslims' rites, and the water of *zamzam*, which she sought and contained, was the answer for all their other prayers of life, and purification.

The conceptualisation of Hagar as, a potent symbol for "a woman seeking reform in a patriarchal society"<sup>46</sup> seems to be an overstatement. The fact that her somewhat ordinary actions were seen by God to be fit for a ritual undertaking by all Muslims, men and women, means that her actions and significance are beyond gender.

Some have seen in Hagar a "female figure of sufferance", and have understood the message of her story as a message for women to be "persevering, hard working, simple, obedient, and with few expectations".<sup>47</sup> In the analysis above it has been shown that suffering in itself is not the legacy of Hagar, as it is not the legacy of her son. Rather, their suffering created a situation for them to leave a more glorious legacy, that patience, perseverance, and prayer are soon rewarded. When Abraham informed his son of his dream to kill him, and asked his opinion, Ishmael did not see himself a victim but submitted to the will of God and showed courage; he advised his father to do it and stated that he will, with God's permission, be patient [37: 102- 103]. Similarly, Hagar accepted what was given to her and directed her energies at useful pursuits. If the gift of water is understood in modern times to be a little expectation, it may be seen from the Qur'anic point of view as a symbol for all that can be given. Both her *sa'y*, and the product of her *sa'y* which is *zamzam*, became not only for her family but for generations a divine gift bestowed upon that land.

In the story of Hagar and the ritual that followed, there is an exemplification of the Islamic motif that work is worship. The role Hagar plays in the story of Abraham's planting a seed in the barren but holy place, is a very vigorous and influential role, both in its worldly and spiritual dimensions. Abraham planted his and Hagar's seed, he and his son prayed but

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<sup>46</sup> Abugideiri (2000, p. 83).

<sup>47</sup> Najmabadi (1998, p. 62).

through her actions was the answer to much of their prayers. This makes her a partner in the making of this story/history. Thus, it may ring true that her “near absence from scriptural commentary is not necessarily a signal of her insignificance; it may be quite the opposite”.<sup>48</sup>

Sarah and Hagar are both mentioned rarely in the Qur’an. Sarah saw and conversed with the angels that visited her house, and she was addressed by them as a member of *ahl al-bayt*. She was also miraculously given a son and a grandson who were in a line of prophets from her descendants. Hagar’s story connects the monotheism of Abraham with Muhammad’s Islam. Through her actions the prayers of Abraham came true, and her legacy continues to form and renew Muslims’ identity, through their imitation of her *sa’y* in that sacred space.<sup>49</sup>

## 2.4 Zulaykha

The story of Joseph, unlike the stories of other prophets, is narrated from beginning to end in a chronological order of his life. The beginning of *Sūrat Yūsuf*, describes the story that will follow as “the best of narratives” (*aḥsan al-qasas*) [12: 3].<sup>50</sup>

Some feminists were suspicious of this description especially due to the notion of the wiles of women expressed in the chapter, and asked whose best story is this story.<sup>51</sup> Some Sufis however, suggest that it is so because this is a story about love.<sup>52</sup>

In this section on Zulaykha, the problem of the infamous statement on the wiles of women will be addressed in its context. The Sufi idea that this Qur’anic chapter, in which Zulaykha is one major character, is about love will be examined in the light of the Qur’an

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<sup>48</sup> Abugideiri (2001, p. 83- 84).

<sup>49</sup> The theme of scared space is strong in the story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. The two hilltops where Hagar walked have been shown to be a sacred space referred to in the Qur’an as “*al-Sa’y*” (Calder, 1986, p.17-26). Hagar is also buried in *Hijr Isma’il*, a semi-circular wall at the north-western side of the Ka’ba, where Ishmael placed the first stones there in order to disallow stepping on her grave, and the space is a burial site for many prophets (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 4, p. 210).

<sup>50</sup> Nisaburi (1388h, p. 182) says that the Arabs demanded to hear stories (presumably for entertainment), so the Qur’an decided to give them “*aḥsan al-qasas*”.

<sup>51</sup> Merguerian and Najmabadi (1997, p. 485-508).

<sup>52</sup> Keeler (2006, p. 285).

and traditions. Finally, the redemption of Zulaykha or the lack of it, which is a textual problem among exegetes, will be analysed. This problem is particularly relevant because it expresses whether or not Zulaykha identified herself as the soul that bids evil and outgrew it.

#### 2.4.1 The Wiles of Women

The story begins with Joseph's dream in which he saw eleven planets and the sun and moon prostrating unto him. His father advised him not to tell his brothers of his vision. His brothers had always been envious of Joseph so they threw him into a pit. Through a sequence of events he was sold into slavery to an Egyptian governor. When Joseph became mature and was given knowledge and wisdom, the wife of the governor, whom traditions name Zulaykha, seduced him but he refused her. As he ran towards the door she chased him and caught him by the shirt so that his shirt got torn. At the door they found her husband, so she immediately accused Joseph of seducing her and encouraged her husband to imprison him or torture him. A witness from her family suggested that if his shirt was torn from the back then she is a liar and vice versa. At that point her husband said, "This is of your guile (feminine plural); surely your guile (feminine plural) is great" [12: 28]. He then asked Joseph not to mention the incident, and told his wife to seek forgiveness for her sin. Later however, in spite of the signs of Joseph's innocence, the men of the town decide to imprison Joseph for a while because of the havoc he unintentionally created among the women of the town. Later, due to his unique ability to correctly interpret dreams, Joseph is freed and made governor, but not before clearing his name regarding the reasons of his imprisonment. In the end, he is reunited with his family who prostrate themselves before him. Thus the vision Joseph had as a child became realised, whereby the parents were represented by the sun and moon, and the eleven planets were his brothers.

While many exegetes focus on Zulaykha's and the women's guile as the main problem in the story, Sayyid Qutb finds that the enemy of Joseph was Egyptian *jāhili* society ("the time of ignorance", before the prophetic message reaches a people), partly because of the spoiled women, but also the weak governor who put an innocent man in jail merely to avoid scandal.<sup>53</sup>

It may be added to Qutb's view, however, that the problem was not only of Egyptian society because Joseph's brothers were not *jāhili* but sons of a monotheistic prophet, and yet they envied the love of their father to Joseph and their younger brother over the rest of them, "When they said, 'Surely Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, though we are a band. Surely our father is in manifest error'" [12: 8]. Their logic is twisted, "they see their father's affection as a commodity, as merchandise to be shared out, and calculate that ten should receive more than two".<sup>54</sup> The Qur'an narrates the brothers' dialogue when they discuss what to do with the prophet, "Kill you Joseph, or cast him forth into some land, that your father's face may be free for you, and thereafter you may be a righteous people" [12: 9]. Notice the irony in their planning to be righteous right after killing their brother.<sup>55</sup> The brothers pressured and deceived their father into allowing Joseph to go out with them [12: 11-14], and then they threw him into a pit. The Qur'an narrates how after they had done their deed, they returned to their father "crying" about the loss of their brother [12: 16]. Had the Qur'an attributed those actions to a female character, most exegetes surely would not have spared the chance to point out that women really do have crocodile tears. Throughout the story, Joseph's brothers are portrayed to be mocking their father [12: 8, 85, 95]<sup>56</sup> and towards the end falsely accusing Joseph of being a thief [12: 77].

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<sup>53</sup> Stowasser. (1994, p. 55) quoting Sayyid Qutb.

<sup>54</sup> Johns (1981, p. 37).

<sup>55</sup> Other ironic aspects of the brothers' guile have been noted in: Johns (1981, p. 35).

<sup>56</sup> Also pointed out in: Johns (1981, p. 35).

Guile (*kayd*) is a common and repeated theme in this story. The term occurs in the beginning of the story when Jacob hears of Joseph's dream and advises his son not to mention the dream to his brothers lest they scheme against him (*fā yakīdū laka kaydan*) [12: 5]. The same term is also used later in the chapter when Joseph devises a plot, a contrivance taught to him by God, to plant the king's cup in his brother's sack in order to accuse his beloved brother of theft so that he may keep him with him (*kadhālika kidnā li Yūsuf*) [12: 76].

As for the wiles of women, "This is of your guile (feminine plural); surely your guile (feminine plural) is great" [12: 28], Ṭūsi only points out that the governor attributed guile to his wife and excluded Joseph from it, and while he acknowledges that it is in the grammatically plural feminine, he does not comment on it.<sup>57</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'i however considers women's guile to be in their ability to attract men and their hearts, thereby ridding them of their sound minds and controlling them.<sup>58</sup> It has sometimes been correctly pointed out that the verse is spoken neither by a prophet as in the first use of the term *kayd* mentioned above, nor by the narrator of the Qur'an as in the last use of the term, but by the character of the governor of Egypt.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, this attribution of guile to women by the governor may not necessarily carry in it the Qur'anic approval. Soon afterwards in the story, the governor himself plots against Joseph by putting him in jail despite the signs of Joseph's innocence, merely to avoid scandal [12: 35]. This renders his statement on the wiles of women hypocritical. Zulaykha attempted to seduce Joseph, but as far as scheming against him by putting him in prison for their own personal grudges, Zulaykha and her husband were the same.

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<sup>57</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 6, p. 123, 127).

<sup>58</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 143).

<sup>59</sup> Merguerian and Najmabadi (1997, p. 485-508).

In addition to Zulaykha's wives, there are those of her female friends. After the incident when the governor walked in on his wife chasing Joseph, the women in society started talking about Zulaykha seducing her slave boy against his will. They concluded that he had impassioned her and they deemed her to be in plain aberration. Ṭabāṭabā'ī claims that gossip is in the nature of women, so is their love of themselves and their envy towards others. His understanding is that those women were judgemental in order to console themselves, and their envy was because they had not seen Joseph's beauty.<sup>60</sup> This seems very far-fetched because a simpler explanation would be that they really did consider what they heard of Zulaykha's actions as inappropriate for her status. Moreover, it is not at all clear why it would be assumed that the women were envious for not having seen Joseph. The story continues that Zulaykha heard of their slyness, so she invited them to her house and presented them with knives, presumably to cut fruits with. She then asked Joseph to enter their place of gathering. Upon seeing him the women started cutting their hands, presumably smitten with his beauty, they exalted him and declared that this was no man but a noble angel [12: 31]. Zulaykha thus proved her point, telling them this is the one you blamed me about, and she continued to threaten Joseph with prison if he did not submit to her will. The women then joined in the seduction, as is understood from Joseph's words afterwards asking God to shield him from their plots to seduce him. Some have seen the bleeding of the women to be a symbol for the display of female sexuality, albeit implicit, because it is the words of Joseph that "transform the scene from one of collective empathy by the women of the town for Zulaykha into a scene of collective seduction".<sup>61</sup>

One question put forth by some feminists asks, whose best story is this story? That point of view expresses scepticism about the possibility of appropriating the story as an "emancipatory narrative for female sexual liberation", because the story is male-centred and

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<sup>60</sup> Tabataba'ī (1402h, vol. 11, p. 144- 145).

<sup>61</sup> Merguerian and Najmabadi (1997, p. 485- 508).

because female sexuality is described as an “uncontrollable threatening force that men have to be wary of, not seduced by”.<sup>62</sup> Later however, this idea was revisited, and it was seen that the theme of such tales of guile, in which women seduce men, actually reverses the traditional image of women as passive and subservient, and puts women “in control of the sexual scene”.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed this chapter of the Qur’an has been problematic in Islamic culture, particularly because of its depiction of a powerful female sexuality. One tradition claims that the Imam declared that *Sūrat Yūsuf* should not be taught to women because it causes discord, whereas teaching women *Sūrat al-Nūr* is commendable because it contains admonishments.<sup>64</sup> It is very strange that some parts of the Qur’an should not be taught because the Qur’an, all of it, is supposed to be guidance to humankind, and to censor parts of “the Book of God” is difficult to understand. However, what this tradition shows is that indeed Islamic culture found it hard to come to terms with the image of Zulaikha as it is portrayed in the Qur’an. The advice to teach *Sūrat al-Nūr* instead seems to say that Zulaikha’s open sexuality is precisely the problem, because *Sūrat al-Nūr* begins with prescribing the punishments for the adulteress and adulterer.

It has been shown above that guile is one of the major themes in this story, and that it is not exclusive to the female characters. Towards the middle of the story it will be said that God does not guide the guile of betrayers [12: 52], thereby completing the theme of guile. The scenes of Zulaikha’s passion and later the women’s passion do exhibit the power of sexual energy. This energy is portrayed through female characters, although there seems to be an understanding of these women too. Zulaikha inviting the women to her house in a way gives her space to tell her side of the story, that it was not only due to a folly in herself

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<sup>62</sup> Merguerian and Najmabadi (1997, p. 485- 508).

<sup>63</sup> Najmabadi (1999, p. 203- 222).

<sup>64</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p.516, and vol. 6, p. 49).



but it was Joseph's sublime beauty that crazed her. The women of the town, who blamed Zulaykha when they first heard the news, seem to have lost their minds upon seeing Joseph. The women's reaction reveal that Zulaykha was not the only one to react as such, which is exactly what Zulaykha sought to prove in that gathering, and she even pointed out to the women, that this is what you blamed me for. Therefore, perhaps another important element in the scene is not to condemn female sexuality, but to hint that having attracted all those women, Joseph's abstinence itself seems all the more majestic.

Islamic tradition often speaks of Joseph's beauty as exemplary, but Sufi exegesis observes that "this radiance emanated not from Joseph's external beauty, but from his inner qualities."<sup>65</sup> This issue of external beauty and internal beauty is perhaps linked to the story's differentiation between illusory love and true love.

#### 2.4.2 Lover and Beloved

A repeatedly narrated tradition says that when Joseph was in jail, one of the prison guards told him, "I love you", Joseph answered him, "do not love me; my aunt loved me and accused me of theft, and my father loved me so my brothers envied me and threw me in the pit, and the wife of the governor loved me so they jailed me."<sup>66</sup> This tradition should be kept in mind, because it seems to agree with the point of view that this story is about love, whether it is Joseph's perfect love for God or the unperfected and misdirected love of others.

When the women blamed Zulaykha they said that Joseph had inflamed her with love. The Qur'anic expression is (*qad shaghafahā ḥubban*) [12: 30]. In Arabic, *al-shaghaf* is literally the layer of fat that veils the heart, and normally when an illness reaches that layer the heart is inflicted beyond cure. This is precisely what the Arabs mean when they employ

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<sup>65</sup> Keeler (2006, p. 282).

<sup>66</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 240).

the term in reference to love.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, Zulaykha's love was in reality a sickness in her heart.

Ṭabāṭabā'ī contrasts Zulaykha's love for Joseph with Joseph's love for God. Her love to him was like a fire that consumed her heart. He was beautiful so her love to him was lustful, and she attempted to use her social status to subdue him. His heart on the other hand, was filled with the love of God, due to what he saw of God's beautiful work and His support of every soul. Joseph was almost like a ghost, the only reality behind him was divine love that made him forget everything else including himself. This is the meaning of the Qur'an describing him saying, "He was one of Our sincere/devoted servants (*mukhlāsīn*)" [12: 24]. His soul was purified and chosen by God for himself alone. She wanted to turn him away from himself to herself, but he did not want to turn to anyone other than God. Animal love and divine love, represented by these two characters in the story, were fighting the will of one another. That fight was also an inner fight inside Joseph's soul. God's word and divine love soon protected Joseph however, and he abstained from entertaining the woman because he would not show disloyalty to his real owner and protector.<sup>68</sup>

Maybūdī's mystical interpretation on the other hand, compares Zulaykha's love to Joseph with Jacob's love for his son. Zulaykha's love had no truth in it, and only later when she admitted her fault, did real love for Joseph dominate her heart. Maybūdī sees that this is in the nature of love, that in the beginning the lover shows bewilderment, and after habituation the lover shows stability. That, in his view, explains why Zulaykha did not cut her hands when the women who saw Joseph for the first time did.<sup>69</sup> In one of Maybūdī's several interpretations, Jacob's love is shown to have begun where Zulaykha's love ended,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 9, p. 179). Imam al-Sadiq has been quoted in this context as saying, "Shaghaf is like a cloud; it obscures the lover's heart from contemplating other than Him and from preoccupation with other than him" (Keeler, 2006, p. 290).

<sup>68</sup> Tabataba'ī (1402h, vol. 11, p. 122- 125).

<sup>69</sup> Keeler (2006, p. 289- 292).

which is the point where love has complete control over the lover.<sup>70</sup> Remember that in the Qur’anic narrative, Jacob’s crying and longing for Joseph caused his eyes to become blind, and in the end only Joseph’s garment was able to restore his eyesight [12: 96].

Towards the end of the story, Joseph’s dream is finally realised. When the family is reunited in Egypt, Joseph asked that his parents be brought onto the throne, and they prostrated before Joseph. Ṭabāṭabā’ī says, based on the Qur’anic description of them falling into prostration (*wa kharrū lahu sujjadan*), that when he entered into their gathering they were overcast with divine light that was shining through his beauty, and they just fell into prostration.<sup>71</sup>

While Ṭabāṭabā’ī sees Zulaykha as an outer representative of an inner animalistic reality within the soul, Maybūdī sees her as a lover in progress. Zulaykha represents the appetitive soul, but it is difficult to concede to Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s claims that she represents the lower soul even within Joseph himself. That is because the repeated Qur’anic expression that is being translated here as “she seduced him” is actually *rāwadthu ‘an nafsih*, which literally means that she fought with him a battle of wills.<sup>72</sup> Even though Joseph sought God’s support in those times, his will was evidently opposed to hers. As for Maybūdī’s interpretation, it seems to be an exaggeration to compare Zulaykha’s love to Jacob’s. She was completely absorbed with her desires, and when she did not meet them she took revenge at the perceived cause of her misery. That is unlike Jacob who understood the real value of Joseph, and who suffered because of love but continued to show great forbearance. Yet, there is an element in the observation that both Jacob’s and Zulaykha’s love were directed towards Joseph, although they were each at a different stage of love. That becomes clearest

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<sup>70</sup> Keeler (2006, p. 300).

<sup>71</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 246). He adds that this is not in defiance to the Islamic command that people prostrate to none other than God, because Joseph here was a sign (*aya*), just like Adam was to the angels and the Ka’ba is to Muslims. Prostration before the sign does not imply worshipping it, and worship remains for God (Tabataba’i, 1402h, vol. 11, p. 247).

<sup>72</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 119).

when even Jacob the prophet prostrated before his son in the end, whereas Joseph's love was always directed towards God alone.

The tradition in which Joseph complains of people's "love" for him emphasises the theme of illusory love as opposed to divine love. The use of the word *shaghaf* in the Qur'an describes Zulaykha's love as a sickness. She did not see beyond Joseph's physical beauty, and she punished him because he did not satisfy her. She failed to see the paradox of her situation, that it was precisely the source of his beauty that made him refuse her. The prostration scene however, again reveals that Joseph's beauty was magnificent, and that the women were not amiss when they compared him to a noble angel. It also points out that Zulaykha's love was not entirely unjustified, although it was untrue. Seeing Zulaykha as a symbol of the inner appetitive soul is problematic because it fixes her in that position, whereas seeing her as a lover in progress emphasises the possibility for growth even though she was misguided; but either identification is more closely related to her as an individual than as a woman. The difference between these two view points however, unfolds in the debate regarding the identity of the speaker of verses [12: 52-53], concerning the soul that bids evil.

#### 2.4.3 The Soul that Incites to Evil

During his time in prison, Joseph met two cell mates who eventually discovered Joseph's unique ability to interpret dreams correctly. Later, the king of Egypt had a complex dream which no one was able to explain, until one of the cell mates that had been freed suggested consulting Joseph. The Qur'anic passage reads, "The king said, 'Bring him to me!' And when the messenger came to him, he said, 'Return unto thy lord, and ask of him, 'What of the women who cut their hands?' Surely my Lord has knowledge of their guile.'" [12: 50]. 'What was your business, women,' he said, 'when you solicited Joseph?' 'God save us!' they said. 'We know no evil against him.' The Governor's wife said, 'Now the truth is at

last discovered; I solicited him; he is a truthful man [12: 51]. ‘That, so that he may know I betrayed him not secretly, and that God guides not the guile of the treacherous [12: 52]. Yet I claim not that my soul was innocent -- surely the (human) soul incites to evil -- except inasmuch as my Lord had mercy; truly my Lord is All-forgiving, All-compassionate’ [12: 53]. The king said, ‘Bring him to me! I would attach him to my person’...” [12: 54].

These verses are particularly important for the purposes of this discussion because in them the women confess their faults, and this brings closure to the problem, as the king’s statement ends Joseph’s life of hardship. The statement on “the soul that incites to evil (*al-nafs al-ammara bi-s-sou*)” is particularly meaningful not only because of its relevance to Islamic theology in general, but also because it seems to be the crux of the entire story of Zulaykha and Joseph.

There is a debate on the identity of the speaker of the two verses [12: 52-53]. Qummī, one of the earliest commentators understands this to be a continuation of Zulaykha’s speech, and does not give the matter further attention.<sup>73</sup> Classical exegetes understand the text to be possibly the speech of either one of them, that is, either Zulaykha or Joseph. If Joseph were the speaker, then the lack of betrayal mentioned is that he did not betray the governor with his wife. As for his saying that he does not exculpate himself, that is because he abstained from succumbing to temptation because of God’s mercy, and therefore did not take credit for himself. The reference to the soul that incites to evil “except inasmuch as my Lord had mercy (*illā mā raḥima rabbi*)” is in this case understood to imply that this is the nature of the soul except until God bestows his mercy on the soul. In this case the exception is an exception not of certain souls as such, but an exception that occurs in time. In which case, he would have been saying that his soul incited to evil until God saved him. However, if the speech belongs to Zulaykha, then her claim that she did not

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<sup>73</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 1, p.346).

betray Joseph secretly is a reference to the fact that she testified to Joseph's honesty in his absence, and she did not exculpate herself because in fact she did previously betray him by putting him in jail. In that case, the reference to the soul that incites to evil is simply a reference to the nature of the human soul in general, with the exception of some souls, such as Joseph himself.<sup>74</sup> Most classical exegetes give priority to the speech belonging to Joseph, with the exception of Ṭūsī who considers, although without elaboration, that attributing the words to Joseph is problematic and that it is more likely to be a continuation of Zulaykha's speech.<sup>75</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā'ī considers the point of view that the two verses in question could be Zulaykha's speech a very inferior possibility. He gives three reasons for this. First, that attributing the words, "That (testimony), so that he may know I betrayed him not secretly" to her is not sensible, partly because if it were her speech she would have continued it with "and", not with "that". Also because if she were the speaker, it means that she testified just to take credit for her new found honesty, not because of a desire on her part to reveal the truth. Moreover, she had betrayed him and her confession does not negate her betrayal. Second, the continuation, "so that he may know... and that God guides not the guile of the treacherous", has no meaning because Joseph already knows that. Third, there is a contradiction between her alleged claim that she did not betray him in secret, and the next statement that she does not exculpate herself. Moreover, Ṭabāṭabā'ī continues, the statement that, "surely the (human) soul incites to evil -- except inasmuch as my Lord had mercy; truly my Lord is All-forgiving, All-compassionate", with all the monotheistic knowledge that is contained within it, is not fit to emanate from an idolatress who had been governed by whim.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 5, p. 414-415). Kashani (1416h, vol. 3, p. 26).

<sup>75</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 6, p. 154-156).

<sup>76</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 199-200).

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's objections are not entirely convincing. To answer his first question, the use of "that (testimony)" rather than "and" need not signify a discontinuation in the speech and a shift in the speaker, but could be because she testified to the king to Joseph's personality, but then wished to add something that is other than her testimony. It is understandable that Zulaykha would sincerely testify to the truth, and wish that Joseph would know about it, and that is not necessarily incompatible. While the confession does not negate the betrayal, it is nonetheless a step in the right direction. This leads to the third question, that her claim that she did not betray him in secret is a contradiction to her saying that she does not exculpate herself. Rather, her testimony in Joseph's absence was truthful, even though she does not claim she had been innocent in the past. There is a good point however, in Ṭabāṭabā'ī's second objection, which is that there is no point in her reporting to Joseph, "that God guides not the guile of the treacherous" because he already knows that. It could be however, that through this testimony is her affirmation to the listeners, based on experience, that God indeed does not guide the evildoers, which is what Joseph had counselled her in the beginning [12: 23].

The point of view that the speech belongs to Joseph has its own problems and inconsistencies. There are two problems pertaining to [12: 52] and [12: 53] respectively. Joseph could have taken the first opportunity to leave the prison but he wished to clear his name first. Notice that he asked the king to inquire about the women who cut their hands, but did not mention Zulaykha perhaps to refrain from scandalising the house of the governor,<sup>77</sup> who had previously asked Joseph to keep the issue to himself, which means that he knew of Joseph's innocence. Also, Joseph asked the king to inquire about the women who cut their hands, but the king asked the women why they seduced Joseph against his will. This might imply that people knew what the problem was really about. This is confirmed by

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<sup>77</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 194).

the Qur'an, "Then it seemed good to them, after they had seen the signs, that they should imprison him for a while" [12: 35]. This verse is explained by a tradition which states that the signs were signs of his innocence through the witness, the shirt torn from the back, and her husband at the door having already heard some of what was happening.<sup>78</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī himself, who claims that Joseph wished to prove to the governor that he did not betray him, actually adopts the explanation that the governor and others knew of Joseph's innocence when they jailed him.<sup>79</sup> In fact Ṭabāṭabā'ī commends earlier exegetes who gave nine verses which show that Joseph, Zulaykha, her husband, the women, the witness, God and the devil all knew of Joseph's innocence.<sup>80</sup> However, he adds that Joseph's statement that he did not betray the governor is further proof.<sup>81</sup> The Qur'an, traditions, and exegeses clearly inform us that the governor was already aware of Joseph's innocence in the matter. It therefore seems unlikely, that Joseph would request the women's testimony to the governor who put him in jail in spite of his knowledge of his innocence.

Another problematic point is Joseph affirming that he does not exculpate himself. The exegetes go to great lengths to show that Joseph neither encouraged the women to seduce him, nor did he contemplate the idea of engaging them. For example, on Joseph's feelings towards Zulaykha the Qur'an says, "For she desired him; and he would have desired her, but that he saw the proof of his Lord. So was it, that We might turn away from him evil and abomination; he was one of Our devoted servants" [12: 24]. Imam al-Riḍā clarifies that the statement is conditional, that had he not seen the proof of his lord, he would have inclined to her; however he was impeccable and did not incline towards sin.<sup>82</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī notices that the latter part of the verse says that God averted evil and abomination from

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<sup>78</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 1, p. 344).

<sup>79</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 169-170).

<sup>80</sup> Perhaps in reference to 'Ayyashi, (n.d., vol. 2, p. 173-174) among other exegetes.

<sup>81</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 133).

<sup>82</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 2, p. 419).



Joseph, not that he averted Joseph from them, which means that Joseph was not inclined to them in the first place.<sup>83</sup> As for the other incident when Joseph was seduced by the women collectively, “He said, ‘My Lord, prison is dearer to me than that they call me to; yet if Thou turnest not from me their guile, then I shall yearn towards them, and so become one of the ignorant’” [12: 33]. He preferred prison, which shows that he did not like what they asked of him, except for what his human nature dictated upon him.<sup>84</sup>

The question of Joseph as speaker of the words on the soul that incites to evil inevitably takes the discussion to the topic of the impeccability of the prophets, which is too vast a topic to discuss here. Suffice to say that Imam ‘Alī considered this inclination of Joseph as well as other lapses told of the prophets in the Qur’an, to show God’s wisdom, because He knows that the testimonials for the prophets are grand in the hearts of their people, and because He knows that some people worship their prophets as gods, and He wanted to show that perfection is unique to God.<sup>85</sup> This explains why the Qur’an tells of Joseph’s dilemma and his invoking divine help upon every test that he encountered. However, the Imams also explain that the “proof of his lord” that made Joseph steadfast was exactly his prophethood and wisdom which disinclined him from committing transgressions and ugly behaviour.<sup>86</sup> It seems then, that in spite of this prophet’s humanity, he did not commit a mistake of the sort that would lead him to declare that he does not exculpate himself.

The most problematic aspect of this is the timing of this statement, if it were uttered by Joseph. During the debate between the king and the women Joseph was not present, and the Qur’anic passage shows that after all those statements were made, the king asked for Joseph to be brought to him. This is why those who say this is Joseph’s speech maintain that

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<sup>83</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 129- 130).

<sup>84</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h., vol. 11, p. 153).

<sup>85</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 2, p. 421).

<sup>86</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 2, p. 421).

it was a monologue made in his prison cell.<sup>87</sup> If Joseph asked the women to clear his name by confessing their deeds in public, it would not have been fair of him to proclaim his own lack of innocence in private. That would have been lacking in honesty and grace, to say the least. Rather, one would expect a prophet who does not consider himself innocent to have made that statement in public, before the very assembly that was discussing his innocence. Perhaps, he could have also used that opportunity to teach about “the soul that incites to evil”.

The insistence that Zulaykha could not have said those words because she was an idolatress governed by whim, promotes the pessimistic impression that people are incapable of identifying with and learning the prophetic message. Considering that Qummī considered this to be Zulaykha’s speech and Ṭūsī stated that there would be problems otherwise, in addition to what has been argued regarding the speech being Joseph’s having more serious problems and inconsistencies than its being Zulaykha’s, one finds that perhaps the real issue at stake is a deep-seated misogyny that does not wish to allow this woman her redemption. This is perhaps especially so considering that [12: 53] is the verse that speaks of *al-naḥs al-ammara bi-s-sū’*, a basic idea in Islamic theology, and thus it would be difficult for some to accept that this teaching be done through the character of a wildly passionate woman.

It is interesting to add here that Jacob’s statements to his sons, “No; but your souls beguiled you into something (*sawwalat lakum anfusukum*)” [12: 18, 83], reflect another verse on the soul that beguiles in reference to the Samaritan who convinced the Israelites to build and worship the golden calf, “So my soul prompted me (*sawwalat lī nafsī*)” [20: 96]. Perhaps these statements could remove the stigma of the lower soul being seen as feminine.

The focus on Zulaykha’s character alone may lead to a narrow interpretation of her character and role in the story. Joseph’s brothers provide male examples of guile and of the

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<sup>87</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 204-205).

lowest self. Jacob's love and longing, his forbearance, the loss and restoration of his eyesight, and finally his prostration to Joseph, in a way put Zulaykha's passion in a wider framework of love. Even the women of Egypt help put Zulaykha's experience in perspective. In the end all guile is defeated. Joseph's love for God seems to be the only absolute. The debate on whether or not Zulaykha identified herself as *al-nafs al-ammāra* is important, because if she didn't, then she is not very different from the wives of Noah and Lot, but if she did, then she offers a different example of *al-nafs al-ammāra* that progresses.

## 2.5 The Women in the Life of the Prophet Moses

The four women mentioned in the Qur'an surrounding the prophet Moses, all shaped his life before his prophethood began. His mother and sister, as well as the wife of Pharaoh, were responsible for saving his life and knowingly or unknowingly, carrying God's plan forward by planting Moses in the house of Pharaoh. Moses' bride helped him when he was in refuge until he was ready to return to Egypt and free the Israelites. There are a couple of references that seem to point towards an elevated spirituality within Moses' mother, and there is also an emphasis on her experience as a mother through the focus on breastfeeding in her story. The wife of Pharaoh is given as an example for believing men and women, and the possible reasons for this will be investigated. Moses' bride has been seen by some modern authors as an example for women's proper behaviour in the public space.

### 2.5.1 Moses' Mother and Sister

*Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ* begins by describing the oppression that Pharaoh had spread in the land, dividing the people and suppressing a group of them, killing the men and capturing the women. This is then followed by the divine promise that the oppressed will inherit the earth and become its leaders, and thus Pharaoh, his minister and their soldiers shall see from the believers that which they had feared [28: 4-6].

The story continues, “So We revealed to Moses’ mother, ‘Suckle him, then, when thou fearest for him, cast him into the sea, and do not fear, neither sorrow, for We shall return him to thee, and shall appoint him one of the Envoys’.” [28: 7]. She did, and the child ended up in Pharaoh’s house, “to be an enemy and a sorrow to them” [28: 8]. The wife of Pharaoh, whom the traditions name *Āsiyā*, told her husband that the child could be a consolation for them, and persuaded him not to kill him, perhaps he might benefit them or they may choose him as a son [28: 9]. The story continues, “On the morrow the heart of Moses’ mother became empty, and she well-nigh disclosed him had We not strengthened her heart, that she might be among the believers” [28: 10]. The mother told her daughter, Moses’ sister, to trace him. The girl watched him from a distance while they did not perceive [28: 11]. God made all the women that were brought to suckle Moses prohibited upon him by God, so his sister suggested to them a household that would rear him for them [28: 12]. That is how God restored Moses to his mother, “that she might be comforted and not sorrow, and that she might know that the promise of God is true; but most of them do not know” [28: 13].

Some have suggested that the mother of Moses was a prophet because of the inspiration that God had given her,<sup>88</sup> which is in Arabic the same word for revelation (*wahy*) [28: 7]. This claim however is unsubstantial considering that the term *wahy* has been used in the Qur’an in other contexts than prophetic revelation, in reference to the bees [16: 68] and to the earth [99: 5]. One lexicon finds that the term is used for a swift sign, an indication in some way through body language, the use of symbols or writing, and it is used in reference to divine revelation.<sup>89</sup> Another focuses on the meanings of writing, giving a message, and hidden speech.<sup>90</sup> She is in any case, portrayed as a firm believer in God’s promise. When she

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<sup>88</sup> Refer to: Stowasser (1994, p. 77).

<sup>89</sup> Isfahani (1404h, p. 515).

<sup>90</sup> Fairuz Abadi (n.d., vol. 4, p. 399).

was inspired to throw the child into the river, God consoled her that the hardship will be relieved, “cast him into the sea, and do not *fear*, neither *sorrow*, for We shall return him to thee” [28: 7]. She believed this and acted on it. Soon afterwards, “the heart of Moses’ mother became empty, and she well-nigh disclosed him had We not strengthened her heart, that she might be among the believers” [28: 10]. Exegetes differ in their understanding of the emptying of her heart. Some say it was empty of everything other than Moses, or that it was empty of the inspiration that was given her, or empty of sorrow due to her knowledge that Moses will be returned to her. They do agree however, that the next statement means that she did not disclose him because God strengthened her heart.<sup>91</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī finds that the interpretation of her heart being empty of anything other than Moses does not fit in with the context. Rather, he accepts the latter interpretation and says that her heart became empty of fear and sorrow which are mentioned in a preceding verse. This then means that after the inspiration told her to cast him and neither fear nor sorrow, she put the child into the river, and were it not for that inspiration and subsequent emptying of her heart, she would not have been steadfast and would have come close to revealing the matter.<sup>92</sup>

One may observe that reference to these two psychological states of fear and sorrow is signifying. The people of paradise are described to have neither fear nor sorrow [7: 49, 43: 68]. This is also the state of the *awliyā’*, “Surely God’s friends (*awliyā’*) -- no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow” [10: 62]. The translation of *awliyā’* includes such meanings as, friends, ones that are near, patrons, and inheritors.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to the mentioning of her trust in God, the Qur’an also hints at her knowledge, which many people do not have, “that she might know that the promise of God is true; but most of them do not know” [28: 13].

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<sup>91</sup>Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 7, p. 418). Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 132-133).

<sup>92</sup>Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 12- 13).

<sup>93</sup>Lane (n.d.): *w-l-y*.

Moses' refusal of the wet nurses was the means through which he was returned to his mother, "Now We had forbidden to him aforetime to be suckled by any foster-mother" [28: 12]. The word of forbiddance was the force by which God made Moses refuse the wet nurses that were brought to him, and the forbiddance here is existential, not judicial.<sup>94</sup> This interpretation means that there was no legal impediment that would have made his feeding from these women *ḥarām*, but it was a force that stopped Moses. Even though this issue worked as the means to return Moses, when his sister traced him and suggested to them her mother as a wet nurse, there seems to be an emphasis on the nurturing and emotional relationship between the mother and child through breastfeeding. The first word of the inspiration told Moses' mother to "suckle him" and then cast him. He was later returned to his mother to be suckled "that she might be comforted".

One may add to this also, that Islamic law considers it hateful to allow a woman who is consuming prohibited foods, to suckle Muslim children. Moreover, the Imams recommended that people should consider the psychological state of the wet nurse, as well as her general character, because, they said, breast milk is contagious and affects the character of the child.<sup>95</sup>

Surely, the Qur'an describes the breast feeding incident as a means for Moses' return to his mother, but there is also an insistence on suckling in the story. Considering the depiction of Moses' mother as a faithful and knowledgeable woman, in addition to the dominant view in the traditions that breast milk is contagious, one wonders whether prohibiting Moses from all the wet nurses had to do with the character of Moses' mother as the most suitable person to feed the future messenger.

### 2.5.2 The Wife of Pharaoh

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<sup>94</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 13).

<sup>95</sup> 'Amili (1414h, vol. 21, p. 464- 468).

There is not much about Āsiyā in the story of Moses, other than that scene where she persuaded Pharaoh to keep the child and not kill him [28: 9].

She is however mentioned in one other place in the Qur'an where she is considered, together with Mary, as an example for the believers. That is because she said to God, "My Lord, build for me a house in Paradise, in Thy presence, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his work, and do Thou deliver me from the people of the evildoers" [66: 11]. Āsiyā, in these verses from *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm*, is put in direct contrast to the wives of Noah and Lot, who are examples for the disbelievers. Despite being married to prophets they did not heed advice but on the contrary, mistreated and betrayed their husbands. Āsiyā was married to the ultimate tyrant, yet she was a believer who wished to be saved from her husband and his people, and prayed for a home in heaven. She asked God to deliver her from evil folk by keeping her faith strong.<sup>96</sup> Her words portray her goal in life, and they indicate that a true believer must have his words follow his heart so that the interior and exterior are one.<sup>97</sup>

It is interesting that her request that God build her a home in heaven, is similar in form only to Pharaoh's words, "Pharaoh said, 'Hāmān, build for me a tower, that haply so I may reach the cords, the cords of the heavens, and look upon Moses' God; for I think that he is a liar'" [40: 36- 37]. While she asked God for a home near himself, Pharaoh asked Hāmān for a tower that he may go to the heaven and check if Moses' God really exists. These verses not only show Āsiyā's faith, but the contrast with the silliness of Pharaoh's words, reveals a disparity in their understanding of Moses' message.

However, the Qur'anic choice of Āsiyā to be placed next to Mary as an example for the believers remains intriguing. In spite of being the wife of Pharaoh who is most rich and powerful, Āsiyā considered her husband and the elite around him evil, and she prayed for an abode of proximity to God. It has been suggested that this attitude of relinquishing the

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<sup>96</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 10, p. 54).

<sup>97</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 344).

worldly wealth and power available to her that makes her a fine example for believers.<sup>98</sup> Others have seen in Āsiyā “an example of a free mind and a liberated will.”<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps the latter observation is particularly relevant considering that she is given in contrast to wives of prophets who betrayed their husbands. Āsiyā was married to Pharaoh, the Qur’anic symbol of the ultimate political and religious tyrant, and this necessarily brings politics into the analysis. As Ṭabāṭabā’ī noticed above, her words followed her heart, and therefore, it is possible that she sets an example for religio-political *jihād*. Āsiyā refused to submit to the highest political and religious power, and she withstood tyranny by being steadfast in her faith and prayer. Her *jihād* is not necessarily an outward one, yet it is the foundation for active *jihād*. Imam ‘Alī said, “The first kind of *jihād* that will overpower you is the *jihād* of your hands, then of your tongues, then of your hearts. He whose heart neither knows right conduct nor disapproves of indecency has a heart that has been turned upside down.”<sup>100</sup> While *jihād* with words or actions may be deemed either inevitable or contingent, *jihād* with the heart is indispensable, and without it the human becomes misshapen.<sup>101</sup> The latter kind is perhaps the easiest among the three, but it is also the most basic kind of *jihād* and the prerequisite for the other two.

### 2.5.3 Moses’ Bride

During Moses’ adult life circumstances led him to kill an Egyptian. He received news that people were planning for retaliation, so he fled to Midian, “And when he came to the waters of Midian he found a company of the people there drawing water, and he found, apart from them, two women holding back their flocks. He said, ‘What is your business?’ They said, ‘We do not draw water until the shepherds drive off; and our father is passing old.’” [28: 23]. Moses watered their flocks for them, and then left them to sit in the shade where

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<sup>98</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 344).

<sup>99</sup> Khatib (1964, p. 108).

<sup>100</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 90).

<sup>101</sup> Ibn Abi al-Hadid (n.d., vol. 19, p. 312).



he addressed God saying, “O my Lord, surely I have need of whatever good Thou shalt have sent down upon me” [28: 24]. Then, one of the two women came to him “walking bashfully” inviting him to her father who wished to reward him for his help [28: 25]. Moses told his story to the old man, who assured him that he is now safe from the oppressors. One of the women then asked her father to hire him, “surely the best man thou canst hire is the one strong and trusty” [28: 26]. The old man then expressed his wish to marry Moses to one of his two daughters, on the condition that he would hire himself to the old man for eight or ten years, an offer which Moses accepted [28: 27- 28].

Some modern Muslim literature has seen in this story proof that women’s work outside the house is acceptable only when unavoidable and as long as it does not involve association with men.<sup>102</sup> Traditions from Ḥuwayzī’s exegesis do not explain that story thus, rather, they mention that the women were lean, and that the job Moses did for them required the equivalent of ten men.<sup>103</sup> Another tradition explains the woman’s words describing Moses as “the strong and trusty”, that she saw his strength in the job he performed, and his trustworthiness because while she was leading him to her father, he preferred to walk in front of her rather than behind her so as not to see parts of her body.<sup>104</sup> In fact, Moses seems to have considered their situation of not watering their flock to be odd, which is why he asked them what the problem was, the expression he used “*mā khatbukumā*” denotes surprise because of a grave situation.<sup>105</sup> These explanations might shed light on why the women told Moses that their father was an old man. It is not necessarily to justify their working outside the home, but could be understood that they were explaining why a physically demanding job was being done by themselves. Ṭabāṭabā’ī combines the classical point of view with the modern one when he says that the women were waiting aside, partly

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<sup>102</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 61).

<sup>103</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 121- 122).

<sup>104</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 123).

<sup>105</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 7, p. 426).

because of modesty, and partly because the people oppressed them by not considering giving them space.<sup>106</sup>

Of course, the element of modesty is clearly present in the story when the Qur'an describes the woman's bashful walk (*tamshī 'ala-stihyā'in*), and the tradition above points out to Moses' modest gaze. The theme of segregation between the sexes and women's proper workplace is a later interpretation because it is not discussed either in the early and classical exegeses or in the traditions.

The element of attraction the woman felt towards Moses, and perhaps he to her exists albeit subtly in the text. Her words asking her father to hire Moses, and describing him as strong and trustworthy, were immediately followed by her father expressing his wish to marry Moses to one of his daughters, as if her father realised what she had hinted at.<sup>107</sup> This has not gone unnoticed and traditions confirm that the woman he married was the one who asked her father to hire him.<sup>108</sup> This woman therefore, gives an example of someone who can be honest in their attraction to a member of the opposite sex, but with modesty.

Notice that as soon as Moses expressed to God his need for any good that he might send down for him, the woman came to him and invited him to her father, who eventually gave him a job, and a wife.

In *Sūrat Ṭā Hā*, the Qur'an narrates how God spoke to Moses and informed him of his mission. Moses then asked that his brother Aaron be made his minister, so that he may share the task and help Moses be strong. God granted Moses his request and reminded him of other favours he had conferred upon him, when he inspired his mother to cast him in the river, when their enemy picked him up and he was endowed with love, when his sister traced him and brought him back to their mother so that she does not grieve, when he killed a man

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<sup>106</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 25).

<sup>107</sup> Khatib (1964, p. 110), also claims that strength and trustworthiness are qualities women generally admire most in men.

<sup>108</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 125).

and God saved him from distress and made it a severe test for the prophet, and finally when he tarried among the people of Midian until a time [20: 37- 40]. Thus, God told him, “I produced you for myself” [20: 41]. Notice that four out of the five people who worked God’s plan which was a favour upon Moses were these four women who have just been discussed, and the fifth was the man who warned him of the Egyptians’ plan to retaliate [28: 20]. These verses mention Moses’ mother’s inspiration to cast him in the river, and his sister tracing and returning him. The love that he was endued with is a reference to Āsiyā who loved him and convinced Pharaoh to adopt him.<sup>109</sup> As for his years in Midian, it has been shown that this was organised for him primarily through his bride.

God sent these women to Moses to help in his making. When Moses’ prophethood began, he was reminded of those favours. The women’s relevance however, particularly his mother and Āsiyā, is not limited to their contribution to Moses. His mother received an inspiration or sign, and even though this is not divine revelation, it nonetheless hints at a spiritual experience. Her spiritual state may be confirmed in the expression that her heart became empty, which has been understood to be empty of fear and grief, a psychological state that exists among the *awliyā*’ and the people of paradise. Āsiyā also is not confined to the Moses story. Although she is only explicitly mentioned in one verse, she is made an example to the believers, because she prayed to be delivered from Pharaoh’s work and to be placed close to God. This experience of Āsiyā hints not only at a religious struggle or *jihād al-nafs*, but also contains a political element considering that her fight was, in her words, against Pharaoh and the evildoers.

## 2.6 The Queen of Sheba

In *Sūrat al-Naml* the Qur’an briefly narrates the encounter between King Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba, whom traditions name Bilqīs. This encounter culminated in the

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<sup>109</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 3, p. 379). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 11).

Queen's conversion to monotheism, the religion of Solomon. The queen's conversion, the most important event in the story, describes a gradual change in the queen's heart. The throne that is mentioned repeatedly in the story is controversial, due to its political symbolism. However, the throne may also have religious meanings which would make it the central element in the story. Being a powerful female sovereign remembered favourably in the Qur'an, Bilqīs' mind, including her political tactics will be examined.

#### 2.6.1 Her Conversion

Solomon's hoopoe once came back to him with news of the kingdom of Sheba, "I have come from Sheba to thee with a sure tiding. I found a woman ruling over them, and she has been given of everything, and she possesses a mighty throne" [27: 23]. She and her people however, prostrated to the sun instead of God, and Satan had made their works alluring to them [27: 24]. Solomon sent the hoopoe to them with a letter, which the queen described to her people as a "generous/noble letter" [27: 28-29]. She then proceeded to explain that it was from Solomon and it reads, "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Rise not up against me, but come to me in surrender/as Muslims (*muslimīn*)" [27: 30- 31]. The queen sought the advice of the eminent ones and added, "I am not used to decide an affair until you bear me witness" [27: 32]. They assured her that they are lords of might and great prowess, and added, "The affair rests with thee; so consider what thou wilt command" [27: 33]. She said, "Kings, when they enter a city, disorder it and make the honourable ones of its inhabitants abased. Even so they too will do" [27: 34]. She then decided to send them presents and wait for the response [27: 35]. Solomon refused the gifts and rebuked her messengers saying, "What, would you succour me with wealth, and what God gave me is better than what He has given you? Nay, it is you who exult in your gift" [27: 36]. He told the queen's messenger to return, and threatened, "we shall assuredly come against them with hosts they have not power to resist, and we shall expel them from

there with shame, and they will be abased” [27: 37]. However, Solomon somehow knew that the queen will decide to go to him, and asked for her throne to be brought to him before she arrives in submission/as a Muslim [27: 38]. He brought her throne to himself within a glance,<sup>110</sup> and ordered his people to disguise her throne, to see whether she will be guided or not [27: 41]. When asked, “Is thy throne like this?” the queen answered, “(It is) as though it were the very one” [27: 42]. The verse continues, “And we were given the knowledge before this, and we were in surrender/ Muslims” [27: 42]. Finally, when asked to enter the pavilion she deemed it a pool and bared her legs, but Solomon informed her that it was smooth glass. At that point, the queen turned to God saying, “My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, and I surrender with Solomon to God, the Lord of all Being” [27: 44]. This is where her story ends.

It has been proposed that the queen’s conversion in the Qur’anic narrative is too sudden, and questioned whether an architectural oddity is a good reason for a great queen to bend to the will of a foreign ruler.<sup>111</sup> In answer to this it has been proposed that the conversion did not happen in a moment but that it was a culmination of a process of change in the queen’s heart.<sup>112</sup> This issue is important here as part of the examination of the *jihād al-nafs* theme and the evaluation of this queen’s heart and mind.

Upon receiving Solomon’s letter, the queen described it as noble, generous (*kitābun karīm*), and then continued, as though to justify her judgement regarding its nobility, adding that it was from Solomon, and that it opened with the name of the merciful God.<sup>113</sup> She decided to send presents which were her test to Solomon (discussed in 2.6.3). Solomon refused her luxurious gifts which showed her that he was not a mere worldly king.<sup>114</sup> She

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<sup>110</sup> There is a debate on who brought the throne from Sheba to Solomon, but this is not relevant here.

<sup>111</sup> Lassner (1993, p. 43).

<sup>112</sup> Mir (2007, p. 43-56).

<sup>113</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 15, p. 358-9).

<sup>114</sup> Mir (2007, p. 49).

went to visit Solomon and was faced with the test of the throne. While Solomon was arranging to disguise her throne, he described that test as a “guidance” (*nanḡur atahtadī am takūnu min al-ladhīna lā yahtadūn*), which signifies the importance that Solomon attached to this test.<sup>115</sup> The queen gave a non-definitive answer as to whether that was her throne, which exegetes interpret as a sign of her intelligence.<sup>116</sup> The verse then continues, “And we were given the knowledge before this (*min qabliḡā*), and we were in surrender/ Muslims” [27: 42]. Some have attributed this last statement to Solomon, but such a reading has been considered weak.<sup>117</sup> If Solomon were the speaker then he would have been saying that he was given knowledge before her, that is the queen, and that he had been a Muslim. Whereas, if the queen were the speaker, the statement then shows the queen’s admission that she had been given the knowledge, of Solomon’s power, before this sign (*āya*), and we have surrendered to Solomon, although not yet to God.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, if the statement were Solomon’s then it would be redundant because Solomon was a prophet and was already showing her the signs, so he need not have said that he had been given knowledge and is a Muslim. The very next verse explains, “but that she served, apart from God, barred her, for she was of a people of unbelievers” [27: 43]. This suggests that, while she had inwardly acknowledged the supremacy of Solomon, the pressure of her people’s idolatrous tradition kept her from actually converting.<sup>119</sup> Upon witnessing the sign of the glass floor, she immediately turned to God confessing having wronged herself and modelled her faith on that of Solomon’s, when she said that she submit along with Solomon, to the Lord of all

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<sup>115</sup> Mir (2007, p. 46).

<sup>116</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 7, p. 387). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 15, p. 365).

<sup>117</sup> Tabataba’i (1412h, vol. 15, p. 366-367).

<sup>118</sup> Tabataba’i (1412h, vol. 15, p. 366-367).

<sup>119</sup> Mir (2007, p. 45), based on Islahi’s exegesis.

worlds.<sup>120</sup> By acknowledging that God is the Lord of all worlds, she confirmed that she worships nothing else with him.<sup>121</sup>

According to the Qur'an, the disbelievers' hindrance from following the path of the prophets is always the pressure, or the excuse, of following the existing culture as it had been inherited from the fathers [2: 170, 5: 104, 10: 78, 21: 53, 26: 74, and 31: 21]. The queen of Sheba also experienced that hindrance but soon overcame it.

There is something to be said concerning the nature of the signs that were given to Bilqīs, starting with the bird delivering a letter, passing through the throne which had arrived to Solomon's palace before her, and ending with the "architectural oddity" of the glass floor she presumed to be water. The Qur'an elsewhere, tells that Solomon had prayed, "My Lord, forgive me, and give me a kingdom (*mulk*) such as may not befall anyone after me" [38: 35]. The verses continue to describe how the wind and the devils were subservient to his command, and that Solomon has a place near God [38: 36-40]. A tradition from Imam al-Kāzīm explains these verses saying that, thus the people in his time and after him realised that his reign/estate/authority (*mulk*) is unlike that of other sovereigns, whether they had been chosen by the people or ruled by tyranny and oppression.<sup>122</sup> This indicates that one of Solomon's ways of proving his prophethood to people was through his exquisite *mulk*. A tradition from Imam al-Ṣādiq tells that a prophet always speaks to people in the language that could convince them. That is why for example, Moses brought magic, and Muhammad brought a literary masterpiece.<sup>123</sup> Their people thought that they have excelled in the respective field, until the prophet excelled over them, as a sign of his prophethood. Now, the Qur'an tells that Bilqīs had been given of everything. Ṭūsī understands the phrase "*ūtiyat*

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<sup>120</sup> Mir (2007, p. 50).

<sup>121</sup> Tabataba'i (1412h, vol. 15, p. 367).

<sup>122</sup> Saduq (1379h, p. 353).

<sup>123</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 24-25). Jesus is said to have brought medical miracles which people needed (rather than excelled in), and the tradition continues that in the Imams' time, intellect/ reason (*'aql*) is the way to prove the existence of God.

*min kulli shay'in*”, to exaggerate the fact that she had been given much worldly things and a vast kingdom.<sup>124</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī adds that she possessed all the components of a great kingdom, including her personal attributes of firmness, resolution and sway, in addition to a vast kingdom and treasures, a strong army, and an obedient people.<sup>125</sup> In spite of all that she had however, Solomon demonstrated his sway over elements in nature, and treasures that were beyond her grasp. Perhaps this is how the queen was able to associate with those signs and comprehend them as convincing proofs.

The intersection of the theme of worldly power and abundance with the theme of religion and spirituality, add an extra dimension to the story, as it will be seen in the sign of the throne.

### 2.6.2 The Throne

The symbol of the throne is poignant due to its carrying within it, both political and religious meanings.

A feminist author saw that the throne and its transfer from the female to the male, is the clear message of the story.<sup>126</sup>

It has been observed above that Solomon acted in his capacities, as both prophet and king. His letter inviting the queen and her people not to be haughty with him and to go to him in submission (*muslimīn*) carries in it religious as well as political meanings.<sup>127</sup> However, Solomon's threatening letter was sent after the hoopoe gave news of the kingdom that prostrates to the sun rather than God, and made a short speech about the oddity of people not prostrating to God. As it was pointed above, at the sign of the disguised throne,

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<sup>124</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 88-89).

<sup>125</sup> Tabataba'ī (1402h, vol. 15, p. 355). Although, one wonders why being given of everything has to be understood in the narrow meaning of everything pertaining to her role as queen. Normally, being given of everything would include a wide variety of things such as health, intelligence, beauty etc. Qummi (1404h, vol. 1, p. 7) explains that he understands this general statement to be specific because she had not been given many things including the remembrance of God, and a beard.

<sup>126</sup> Mernissi (1993, p. 142).

<sup>127</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 88).



the queen submitted to Solomon's authority, but not yet to the Creator. Nevertheless, Solomon continued to show the queen the signs until she converted. This interpretation leads to the understanding that had he desired political dominion only, he could have stopped at the sign of the throne. Therefore, according to one point of view, "the Muslim prophet wishes to subdue her for one reason and one reason alone: she is an unbeliever".<sup>128</sup> Her submission to his worldly rule was not enough, she had to submit to his God otherwise, the tale would not have been believable to Muslims.<sup>129</sup>

When the queen accepted the new faith, her final, crucial statement was not a submission to Solomon; rather it was a submission to God, with (*ma*) Solomon, thus putting herself shoulder to shoulder with the king.

The Qur'an and traditions do not speak of what happened next. Therefore it is difficult to speculate further on the problem of whether the transfer of the throne necessarily indicates his taking over her kingdom. It is as one medieval person put it, "the last I have heard of her (Bilqīs) is that she said, 'I surrender with Solomon to God, the Lord of all Being'".<sup>130</sup> Drawing on Islamic history however, it would seem that since Solomon was a prophet whom the queen accepted, that he would have had the ultimate authority even if she continued to rule her nation.<sup>131</sup>

Even so, the question remains whether the transfer of the throne from the female to the male really is "the clear message of the story". This claim is difficult to justify, since the

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<sup>128</sup> Lassner (1993, p. 41).

<sup>129</sup> Lassner (1993, p. 93).

<sup>130</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 7, p. 388).

<sup>131</sup> Although, attempting to apply Islamic law to that ancient event may not necessarily give certain answers because each prophet had some variations in the laws that they brought, and therefore Islamic law need not be considered applicable to Solomon's experience. On another note, in *Surat Saba'*, verse [34: 14] describes Solomon's death, and the following verses [34: 15-16] describe the state of Sheba, whereby its inhabitants were given "a fair land and a forgiving Lord", but they did not show gratitude so they were punished through the flooding of their dam, and subsequently their land produced bitter fruit. These verses have not normally been seen to be connected, and it may well be that [34: 14] marks the end of one passage, and [34: 15] the beginning of another. However, considering the Qur'anic link between Solomon and Sheba, is it possible that these verses imply that its people reverted after his death? If so, does this establish that he indeed ruled Sheba directly or indirectly?

Qur'an does not raise any issue regarding the queen's femaleness throughout. The sole incident when this is mentioned is at the very beginning when the hoopoe tells Solomon, "I found a woman ruling over them". This statement seems to be free from any value judgement, even though it might contain a hint of surprise. It is the hoopoe's following statement on the faith of her nation that has a moral judgement. Throughout the rest of the story the issue of the queen's gender is never raised. Rather, Solomon was inviting Bilqīs to see his power, and the truth of his faith.

The transfer of the throne, as the throne itself, may have meanings beyond politics and gender. When Solomon saw the queen's throne brought in front of him in the twinkling of an eye, he thanked his Lord in what has been described as "a rather puzzling statement",<sup>132</sup> "This is of my Lord's bounty that He may try me (*li yabluwanī*), whether I am thankful or ungrateful. Whosoever gives thanks gives thanks only for his own soul's good, and whosoever is ungrateful -- my Lord is surely All-sufficient, All-generous" [27: 40]. This statement, through the transfer of the throne, brings about in the middle of the story's events, the moral that power and possessions are a test for gratitude.

The Qur'an repeatedly teaches that money is a severe trial [8: 28, 64: 15], and that the wealth and power human beings have over each other are most often an affliction (*balā'*) [6: 165]. Moreover, whenever a prophet spoke, the affluent elite (*mutrafūn*) were always the ones to hinder and fight him [34: 34, 43: 23].<sup>133</sup> Solomon had been given much, and here it is shown that even though he was a prophet, he continued to consider everything God gave him a trial. In his statement, Solomon contrasts gratitude (*shukr*) with ingratitude (*kufṛ*), also the term for disbelief. This theme again has to do with the nature of Solomon's signs to Bilqīs, and Solomon's statement perhaps sheds light on the trial that Bilqīs herself was about to experience.

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<sup>132</sup> Lassner (1993, p. 38).

<sup>133</sup> On this subject, refer to: Musa (1997).

The divine throne is an oft repeated Qur'anic term. After the hoopoe mentions that the queen of Sheba has a mighty throne (*wa lahā 'arshun 'azīm*) [27: 23], the verses continue, "God: there is no god but He, the Lord of the Mighty Throne (*rabbu-l-'arsh al-'azīm*)" [27: 26]. There is a parallel there,<sup>134</sup> which perhaps gives a comparison/contrast between her worldly throne and the divine throne. The religious test of gratitude may be further developed into a spiritual meaning when the throne is set against the theme of God's tremendous throne.

Another element in the story that combines the divine throne and political threat is the *basmala* in the beginning of Solomon's letter, which invoked the name of God with the typically Islamic formula "*bism-i-llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*". It is reported that the Prophet said that the opening of the Qur'an is "the noblest of the treasures of the Throne", and that it was an honour given to Muhammad alone among the prophets, with the exception of Solomon who was given a part of it, namely, the *basmala* that Bilqīs received from him.<sup>135</sup> Thus, another relationship is established between the throne and the exchange between Solomon and Bilqīs. It could be that bringing this tradition here is reading too much into the text, however the tradition sheds light on what is already within the Qur'anic text, that Solomon gave Bilqīs the *basmala*. It may therefore be argued that the prophet wanted political dominion as symbolised by her throne indeed, but he wished to give in return what was in his view at least, a nobler and more enduring piece of the divine throne.

### 2.6.3 Her Politics

Some modern authors suggested that the story of Bilqīs is a story of a woman who has a weakness that is usually praised in women,<sup>136</sup> and that she was submissive in politics

<sup>134</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 15, p. 357).

<sup>135</sup> Saduq (1404hb, vol. 2, p. 270). 'Amili (1414h, vol. 6, p. 233).

<sup>136</sup> Khalafallah (1999, p. 308).

until her throne was stolen from her.<sup>137</sup> This reading may be valid from the strictly political point of view, but not from the religious one.

The Qur'an describes in some detail, how Bilqīs dealt with the political problem. Upon receiving the threatening letter, the queen recognised its noble character. She sought consultation with the notable persons among her people, and informed them that she would not make a decision without their presence. They assured her that they were strong militarily and otherwise, and then confirmed that the matter is for her to decide. She sought wise counsel, and as her chiefs said, it was her final word that mattered. Indeed, even though she listened to them, she decided on a path that was different from what they inclined towards. She made an interesting statement, "Kings, when they enter a city, disorder it and make the honourable ones of its inhabitants abased. Even so they too will do". Her next step was to send gifts to Solomon. Most exegetes understand this move as a ploy to know more about Solomon. They say that she decided that if he accepted the gifts, it would mean that he was a mere worldly king, and therefore he would not be able to vanquish her people.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, she was not in favour of war, but did not rule out the possibility; rather she decided to take the course of war only if necessary.<sup>139</sup> Solomon's ridicule to her messenger of their contentment with their gifts, and his statement that he, Solomon, had been given better than what they had been given, plainly revealed to her what she wanted to know. She wished to know her enemy, and the gifts did indeed serve their purpose. This would mean that after Solomon returned the gifts and she consequently went to visit him, it was not only in submission to a more powerful king, but in awe of an unusual king who had a balanced view of the relationship between this world and the next.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Mernissi (1993, p. 142).

<sup>138</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 128). Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 93-94). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 7, p. 380).

<sup>139</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 15, p. 360).

<sup>140</sup> Mir (2007, p. 49).

The queen's statement on the nature of war is set against her chiefs' assurances of their military might. This hints that her aversion to war was not out of fear, but out of disdain for war in general. She said that soldiers always behave in the same manner, destroying towns and degrading people. In fact, Bilqīs' view on war is repeated twice more in the story. First, Bilqīs' words are confirmed by Solomon himself who said as the messenger was leaving with the gifts, "we shall assuredly come against them with hosts they have not power to resist, and we shall expel them from there with shame, and they will be abased". The second statement was made by the ant after which this chapter was named. This occurred in a valley where Solomon's soldiers were passing and one of the ants there screamed, "Ants, enter your dwelling-places, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you, being unaware" [27: 18]. At that point, Solomon smiled with amusement at her speech, thanked God for the blessings he bestowed on him and his parents, and prayed that he would do good and pleasing work [27: 19].<sup>141</sup> This incident occurs right before the hoopoe episode. These three statements paint a violent picture of kings and soldiers, and affirm that war by its very nature always incurs destruction and humiliation.<sup>142</sup>

Finally, a comparison between Bilqīs and other sovereigns mentioned in the Qur'an would help put her experience into perspective. The Qur'an narrates the debate between Abraham and the king, and a point was reached when the king could not find any more replies to Abraham's propositions, "Then the unbeliever was confounded/astonished. God guides not the people of the evildoers" [2: 258]. The king saw a moment of truth, but unlike this queen, his experience was not fruitful because he was a wrongdoer. Another example is

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<sup>141</sup> It is worth pointing out that Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 15, p. 353-354) infers from Solomon's mention of both his parents here, that his mother was from the people of the straight path whom God bestowed "*ni'am*", and therefore she belongs to one of four categories of righteous people listed in [4: 69], namely, prophets, saints, martyrs, and the righteous.

<sup>142</sup> This is in reference to the nature of war, while acknowledging that there is under Islamic law the distinction between legal and illegal war. The point here is that even though some wars might be legal and necessary, such as that led by the prophet Solomon, this does not make war in itself a beautiful or holy experience.

Pharaoh, to whom Moses and Aaron were sent. Pharaoh, the Qur'an says, was an oppressor who corrupted his people instead of guiding them [7: 123, 20: 79], he was arrogant in front of God's signs [23: 25- 27], and he plainly declared that he was the god [26: 29]. Pharaoh according to the Qur'an did not have a happy ending either worldly or other-worldly. Perhaps the only king remembered favourably was the one who freed Joseph from prison and made him governor, although nothing is told of that king in terms of a spiritual journey or acceptance of Joseph's faith. The queen of Sheba may therefore be the antithesis of Pharaoh and the king who argued with Abraham, in the sense that she was in their position, but she made the opposite choice. If the inner consistency of the Qur'an were to be considered, it cannot be said that Bilqīs is portrayed as a vanquished leader, but a victorious soul.

The queen attempted to understand her enemy. This may be seen as political tact, but this also led her to see that his authority was higher than hers. The story of her gradual conversion shows that the queen had inner dilemmas. Political consciousness and pride might have been one of them at the start, when she acknowledged the generosity and nobleness of Solomon's letter but refused to yield, and discussed the choice of war. She decided to send him presents to test him and found that he was an unusual king. Then, it was Solomon's turn to test her with the throne, which Solomon considered a test of guidance. At that point, the queen accepted Solomon's authority as a matter of fact. Her pride was not a hindrance to conversion, but her idolatrous heritage was. Upon the final test, she proclaimed that she had wronged herself and that she submits to God. Throughout the story there is tension between her heart and her head. That is not to say that she did not reveal qualities of intelligence, but quite the opposite. Her intelligence seems to be exemplary from the religious point of view, precisely because it was neither proud nor stubborn, but led to submission to God. If understanding and softness are feminine qualities, these seem to be favoured in this case.

## 2.7 Mary

The bulk of the story of Mary is told in two passages in the Qur'an. Her consecration and birth, election and purification in her early life, and then the annunciation of the conception in *Sūrat Āl-‘Imrān* [3: 33- 37, 42- 48],<sup>143</sup> and the story of her pregnancy and delivery of Jesus in the chapter named after her, *Sūrat Maryam* [19: 16- 29]. Some of the major themes in Mary's story are the Qur'anic statement upon her birth that "the male is not as the female", her election and purification by God, the nature of the provisions that she was given since early childhood, and the annunciation and delivery of Jesus. Finally, the debate on whether she was a prophet will be briefly presented, and followed by a wider discussion on her representation in the Qur'an.

### 2.7.1 "The Male Is Not As the Female"

In *Sūrat Āl-‘Imrān*, the passage concerning Mary's family, the house of 'Imran starts, "God chose Adam and Noah and the House of Abraham and the House of 'Imran above all beings, the seed of one another; God hears and knows" [3: 33-34]. The passage then continues to narrate the story when the wife of 'Imrān, Mary's mother, while pregnant pledged to consecrate what is in her womb for God's service at the temple, "And when she gave birth to her she said, 'Lord, I have given birth to her, a female.' (And God knew very well what she had given birth to; the male is not as the female.)"<sup>144</sup> 'And I have named her Mary, and commend her to Thee with her seed, to protect them from the accursed Satan'" [3: 36].

Most exegetes understood the phrase, "the male is not as the female" to be the utterance of Mary's mother. Some claim, based on inauthentic traditions that the male is not like the female because the latter menstruates, and therefore cannot be consecrated to the

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<sup>143</sup> The occasion of revelation for this was a response to the meeting between the Prophet and the Muslims on one hand, and the Christians of Najran on the other (Nisaburi, 1388h, p. 63-64).

<sup>144</sup> Brackets in Arberry's original.

temple, for she would have to leave the temple during those days,<sup>145</sup> or that the female is better at service, and therefore she is more adequate to serve the people in the temple.<sup>146</sup> Others interpret the difference between the sexes, based on an authentic tradition, that the female cannot be God's messenger.<sup>147</sup> These traditions seem to find that the Qur'anic statement prefers the male, with the exception of the interpretation that women are better fit for service.

Ṭabāṭabā'ī however, is clear that in terms of language, the structure of the statement “the male is not as the female (*wa laysa-dh-dhakarū ka-l-unthā*)” expresses preference to the latter, which is the female. He further explains that Mary's mother, based on the custom of consecrating only the males to the temple, expressed regret when she delivered a female child for not being able to fulfil her pledge, “Lord, I have given birth to her, a female”. Ṭabāṭabā'ī confirms that the statement, “And God knew very well what she had given birth to; the male is not as the female” is all God's speech intercepting that of Mary's mother. Otherwise, due to the regret Mary's mother felt, she ought to have said “the female is not as the male”, preferring the male. He adds that God's first statement confirms that he already knew that it was a female, and that he wished to fulfil the mother's wishes of consecrating the child in the best way possible. For if the mother knew God's reason for making what was in her womb a female, she would not have expressed regret. He continues that this female child was to fulfil her role better than a male child would have done, and ultimately it is this female that would bring Jesus into the world. Ṭabāṭabā'ī reprimands earlier exegetes for

<sup>145</sup> ‘Ayyashi (n.d., vol. 1, p. 170). Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 444). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 332).

<sup>146</sup> ‘Ayyashi (n.d., vol. 1, p. 170). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 332).

<sup>147</sup> Saduq (1404h, vol. 1, p. 101). Huwayzi (n.d., vol. 1, p. 334), based on Kulayni' (1388h, vol. 1, p. 535). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 183-184) insists however that this does not conform to Arabic grammar because it presumes the preference to be to the former.



considering the statement to belong to Mary's mother, and their pretension that it expresses preference to the male.<sup>148</sup>

The passage continues to describe the election and purification of Mary. After the two intercepting statements, the mother gives her new born daughter the name Mary and the passage continues, "Her Lord received the child with gracious favour, and by His goodness she grew up comely" [3: 37]. The story then shifts to Mary's conversation with her guardian Zechariah, and his subsequent supplication for a child of his own. Then it shifts back to Mary, "And when the angels said, 'Mary, God has chosen thee (*iṣṭafāki*), and purified thee (*wa ṭahharaki*); He has chosen thee above all women (*thumma-ṣṭafāki 'alā nisā' al-'ālamīn*)'" [3: 42]. Ṭabāṭabā'ī finds that God's reception of her with gracious favour and her growing up comely in [3: 37] correspond respectively to his choosing her and purifying her in [3: 42]. These he adds, are the answers to her mother's prayers, whereas the second election in [3: 42] is in reference to her delivery of Jesus, and to her being with him a sign to the worlds. To Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the second election above the women of the worlds is a confirmation of the previous statement, "the male is not as the female".<sup>149</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's interpretation thus connects the preference for the female, to Mary's miraculous conception. This is an interesting connection, although not clear. That is because the Qur'an generalises the preference to the female sex (*al-unṭha*), but Mary's election for the miraculous conception is unique to her.

There is a tradition from Imam al-Ṣādiq, not in reference to Mary but in his answer to a man who expressed grief over his wife giving birth to a girl. The Imam explained to him a particular reference in the Qur'anic story of the journey that Moses took with al-Khiḍr, when among the three things that al-Khiḍr did but Moses misunderstood was the killing of a boy who seemed innocent. Part of the Qur'anic defence of al-Khiḍr's actions was that the

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<sup>148</sup> Tabataba'ī (1402h, vol. 3, p. 170-172).

<sup>149</sup> Tabataba'ī (1402h, vol. 3, p. 165, 174).

boy was an infidel and cruel to his good parents, and God wished to replace him for their sake, with one better in purity and nearer to mercy [18: 80-81]. In this authentic tradition, the Imam explained that God replaced the boy with a girl who gave birth to seventy prophets.<sup>150</sup> The Imam's answer is in the context of changing the man's opinion concerning his sorrow at the birth of a female. He argued giving the example of an infidel and cruel boy, as opposed to a pure and merciful girl who gave birth to prophets.

To pursue the claims of Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the common denominator between the female sex in general and Mary's particular conception is perhaps the ability to conceive and deliver great human beings. Can one conclude from this, in conjunction with the tradition above, that part of the preference of the female over the male as it is expressed in the Qur'an, is in her potential for delivering prophets?

### 2.7.2 *Her Rizq*

“Her Lord received the child with gracious favour, and by His goodness she grew up comely, Zechariah taking charge of her. Whenever Zechariah went in to her in the Sanctuary, he found her provisioned. ‘Mary’, he said, ‘how comes this to thee?’ ‘From God’, she said. Truly God provisions whomsoever He will without reckoning. At that, Zachariah prayed to his Lord saying, ‘Lord, give me of Thy goodness a goodly offspring’” [3: 37-38].

The key word here is provision/bounty (*rizq*). It is a reference to what is for the human being to benefit from, without anyone being able to withhold it.<sup>151</sup> In Arabic as in the Qur'an, *rizq* may be restricted to food [2: 233], or generalised to include many services and kindnesses including knowledge and prophethood [11: 88].<sup>152</sup> Kāshānī speculates that it is possible that what is meant here is spiritual food in the form of esoteric knowledge and

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<sup>150</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 6, p. 6-7.)

<sup>151</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 447).

<sup>152</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 137-138).

wisdom.<sup>153</sup> The nature of her provision is not clearly defined here, but it seems to be implied that it was something unusual.<sup>154</sup>

The statement, “Truly God provisions whomsoever He will without reckoning”, is either a continuation of Mary’s speech, or a narration of God’s words.<sup>155</sup> It was the miracles granted to Mary that provoked Zechariah to pray for a son.<sup>156</sup>

Most exegetes narrate weak traditions which identify Mary’s provision as summer fruits in the winter time and winter fruits in the summer time, and they add that that is what inspired Zechariah to pray for a child out of the usual time, meaning in his old age.<sup>157</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s point of view however, is that it was what Zechariah saw of Mary’s sincere worship and her honour in the eyes of her Lord, that provoked him to ask for a good progeny. He finds that *rizq* as related to fruit has no proof in the text, but relates Mary’s *rizq* with her dignity which the sequence of verses prior to this passage actually refers to.<sup>158</sup> Ṭūsī narrates several opinions of his day, among them that this was a foundation for the prophethood of Jesus.<sup>159</sup>

### 2.7.3 Annunciation and Parturition

In *Sūrat Āl-‘Imrān* is a brief recounting of the event when the angels gave Mary the good tidings of the birth of her son, and Mary’s subsequent surprise at the miracle [3: 45-47]. However, in *Sūrat Maryam* is a more detailed description of the events of the conception and parturition. “And mention in the Book Mary when she withdrew from her people to an eastern place, and she took a veil apart from them; then We sent unto her Our Spirit that presented himself to her a man without fault. She said, ‘I take refuge in the All-

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<sup>153</sup> Sands (2006, p. 102), quoting Kashani’s *Ta’wilat*.

<sup>154</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 174).

<sup>155</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 448).

<sup>156</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 448).

<sup>157</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 1, p. 101). Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 448-449). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 332, and vol. 3, p. 323).

<sup>158</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 14, p. 10-15).

<sup>159</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 447).

Merciful from thee if thou fearest God!’... He said, ‘I am but a messenger come from thy Lord, to give thee a boy most pure.’ She said, ‘How shall I have a son whom no mortal has touched, neither have I been unchaste?’ He said, ‘Even so thy Lord has said: ‘Easy is that for me; and that We may appoint him a sign unto humans and a mercy from Us; it is a thing decreed’. So she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a distant place. And the birth pangs surprised her by the trunk of the palm-tree. She said, ‘Would I had died ere this, and become a thing forgotten!’ But the one that was below her called to her, ‘Nay, do not sorrow; see, thy Lord has set below thee a rivulet. Shake also to thee the palm-trunk, and there shall come tumbling upon thee dates fresh and ripe. Eat therefore, and drink, and be comforted; and if thou shouldst see any mortal, say, ‘I have vowed to the All-merciful a fast, and today I will not speak to any human’” [19: 16-26].

Exegetes generally agree that the Spirit in this passage is a reference to Gabriel, who appeared to her as a fully formed man.<sup>160</sup> She was at first wary of him and pleaded for his piety, until he revealed his identity and his message to her from her Lord.<sup>161</sup> Mary expressed surprise to have become pregnant when no man had touched her, and Gabriel implied that he did not know the workings of this miracle either, but confirmed that God had said that this is easy for him, that the child will be made a sign and a mercy, and that it is decreed.<sup>162</sup> Mary conceived and withdrew to a distant place.<sup>163</sup> The pangs of birth led her to the palm tree, perhaps to hold on to it.<sup>164</sup> She wished she had died before this and been utterly forgotten. This to most exegetes is in reference to the “scandal” of her pregnancy, and the fear of people’s talk.<sup>165</sup> At this sentiment, or after giving birth, “the one below her” who is sometimes identified as Gabriel, but most often as Jesus, drew her attention to a little

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<sup>160</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 49). Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 114).

<sup>161</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 114). Tabatabai (1402h, vol. 14, p. 41).

<sup>162</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 49).

<sup>163</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 116).

<sup>164</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 6, p. 417).

<sup>165</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 49). Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 119-120).

stream of water that was made to flow below her and invited her to shake the branch of the palm tree towards herself in order to receive some fruit.<sup>166</sup> It has also been suggested that the dry branch producing fruit upon her touch is one of Mary's miracles.<sup>167</sup> As she carried her newborn back into her town, the people reproached Mary expressing their surprise at the strange thing she had done,<sup>168</sup> and reminded her of her noble ancestry and good parents [19: 27-28].<sup>169</sup> As instructed, Mary maintained her fast of silence and pointed at the newborn who spoke miraculously [19: 29-33].

The choice of Mary in this miracle/scandal "clearly involve(s) the relation of gender to social authority in religious imagination."<sup>170</sup> The people's rejection of Mary and her "illegitimate" son "become emblematic of resistance to the prophet's emergence."<sup>171</sup>

Many interpretations of Mary's experience have been interpreted by Sufis in highly spiritual terms. Mary's withdrawal to an eastern place (*makānan sharqiyyā*), according to most exegetes simply means that she withdrew from people and her family towards an eastern corner for religious purposes, and that the veil emphasises her detachment and aloneness.<sup>172</sup> The term *intabadhat* does not only mean seclusion, but it implies throwing away something of little or no value.<sup>173</sup> Sufis however, interpret the eastern place as the source of divine lights.<sup>174</sup>

Another issue is Mary's wish to have died before this. This is quite a curious statement which is normally explained as her reaction to the "scandal". Indeed, a tradition, although weak explains that this was her reaction to the so-called scandal and her

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<sup>166</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 117). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 6, p. 417-418).

<sup>167</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 119). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 6, p. 418).

<sup>168</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 122). Although "*fariyyā*" could also mean a lie, in this context they prefer the meaning of strange due to what the people have known of her family and her seclusion and prayer (Tabataba'i, 1402h, vol. 14, p. 44).

<sup>169</sup> There is some debate as to why the people called her "sister of Aaron", but that is not relevant here.

<sup>170</sup> Lybarger (2000, p. 258).

<sup>171</sup> Lybarger (2000, p. 248).

<sup>172</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 114). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 6, p. 410).

<sup>173</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 114). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 14, p. 34).

<sup>174</sup> Sands (2006, p. 107).

knowledge that none of her folk was knowledgeable enough to diagnose her innocence.<sup>175</sup>

However, another tradition though unauthenticated from Imam al-Ṣādiq explains that she wished to have died before she saw her heart attached to something other than God.<sup>176</sup>

Perhaps the element of physical pain added to Mary's wish. The pain of parturition is clear when the pangs drove her to the palm tree. Moreover, several traditions explain that the Qur'anic scene teaches post-natal women that the dates of the palm tree are healing for them.<sup>177</sup> In one tradition, a man comes to Imam al-Bāqir telling him that his wife is dying from the pain of labour, the Imam instructed the man to read this passage on Mary's labour [19: 23-25], in conjunction with another Qur'anic passage [16: 78] and pray for a safe delivery.<sup>178</sup> There is therefore, other than the universal spirituality, something in the description of Mary's experience that is uniquely feminine and relevant for women.

The overlap between the spiritual and feminine elements of Mary's experience will be further discussed in the meaning of her prophethood.

#### 2.7.4 Her Prophethood

The debate surrounding the prophethood of Mary could be open-ended. That is partly because the distinguishing traits of prophets and messengers are not identified clearly in the Qur'an and traditions.

The different categories of messenger, prophet, and *muḥaddath* will be discussed here with emphasis on Mary's place among them. Moreover, it will be shown that Mary's representation in the Qur'an indicates an elevated status and places her among the prophets.

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<sup>175</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 3, p. 330).

<sup>176</sup> Sands (2006, p. 105), quoting *Le Tafsir Mystique*.

<sup>177</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 3, p. 330-331).

<sup>178</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 3, p. 329-330).

#### 2.7.4.1 Messengers, Prophets, and “*Muḥaddathūn*”

The debate on the prophethood of Mary is not a modern one. Several traditional scholars, but especially Mālikīs were convinced of Mary’s prophethood.<sup>179</sup> The major debate on this took place in Andalusia, where however, the debate on the prophethood of women was closely connected to the debate on the miracles of the saints.<sup>180</sup>

The view that Mary was not a prophet because prophethood is exclusively the domain of men remains the dominant view of Muslims. The proofs that are normally given for this are some Qur’anic verses that say to the prophet Muhammad “We sent not (*mā arsalnā*) forth any before thee, but men (*illā rijālan*) We revealed to...” [12: 109, 16: 43, 21: 7]. However, Ibn Ḥazm argued that this is in reference to messengers, which is separate from the argument on women as prophets.<sup>181</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī acknowledges that a strict reading of the word *rijāl*, which necessarily excludes women and children from prophethood, would be problematic. He says that while being “sent” has been utilised in the Qur’an in reference to both prophets and messengers [22: 52], the examples of John [19: 12] and Jesus [19: 30], who were both children when they were prophets, ascertain that the aim of the word *rijāl* in this context is to stress the humanity of prophets, as opposed to their being supernatural creatures. He finds his opinion confirmed in the context of those verses, especially [21: 7-8].<sup>182</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī, as we shall see, does not extend this argument to potentially include women among the prophets.

Prophet is more general than messenger, and the difference between them is that the latter is sent with a message, to complete a mission, and consequently has to function as a

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<sup>179</sup> Yusuf (n.d.).

<sup>180</sup> Fierro (2002, p. 183- 194).

<sup>181</sup> Schleifer (1998, p. 82-83), quoting the argument of Ibn Hazm.

<sup>182</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 12, p. 256-257), also vol. 1, p. 85 for more on this notion. In vol. 11, p. 278, he excludes women from prophethood because “men were closer to knowledge than the women *dhawat al-khidr*.”

just judge among the people, either to preserve and bestow favour upon his nation or to destroy it [10: 47].<sup>183</sup>

It is important to further clarify the differences between the three categories, messenger, prophet, and “the one spoken to” (*muḥaddath*). There are many traditions on this categorisation, and with some variations, they generally agree that the messenger is the one who sees Gabriel and speaks to him, the prophet is the one who sees the inspiration/revelation in a dream or a vision, and the *muḥaddath* hears the angels when they speak but does not see them. Being a prophet and a messenger could coexist in one person. According to one tradition the prophet Muhammad was a prophet in his early life, and after Gabriel visited him he became a messenger.<sup>184</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā'ī however, interprets the traditions concerning the *muḥaddath* hearing but not seeing the angel, in the sense that he does not need to see the angel even though he may. As proof he cites the examples of Sarah and Mary who saw the angels as they spoke to them [11: 71, 19: 17]. He expands on this saying that the *muḥaddath* does not see the reality of the angel even though he might see the form, or possibly that the *muḥaddath* does not see the angel in the sense of not receiving legal revelations from the angel.<sup>185</sup> It is interesting that Ṭabāṭabā'ī's argument is derived from the examples of the two women Sarah and Mary, based on the assumption that they could not have been prophets or messengers.

What is problematic however is that Mary was visited by the archangel himself, she saw his form and was informed of his identity and there is no dispute over interpreting this among exegetes. She was also given news of a burden that she had to carry for the sake of God. Therefore, considering Mary as merely a *muḥaddatha* might seem inconsistent with the

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<sup>183</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 198).

<sup>184</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 176-177).

<sup>185</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 221-222). It is important to mention here that when Lot's wife and his people saw his guests who were in reality angels, and when the Prophet's companions saw Gabriel in the famous *Hadith Jibra'il* tradition, they were not aware of the identity of the angels until after the event, and thus they are not related to the *muḥaddath* category.



traditions. On the other hand, excluding women, including Mary, from the potentially vulnerable and/or violent mission of the messenger might be seen to be in line with Islamic reasoning that military *jihād* is a burden not incumbent upon women.

#### 2.7.4.2 Mary's Representation in the Qur'an

Mary's election and purification, discussed above, is often taken as proof of her '*iṣma* (impeccability).<sup>186</sup> While this does not necessarily imply prophetic status, exegetes do speak of Mary as one of the *awliyā'*.<sup>187</sup> Interestingly, one tradition describes her first election as an election to be of the progeny of prophets (*dhurriyyat al-anbiyā'*).<sup>188</sup>

Consider the verses, "God chose (*iṣṭafā*) Adam and Noah and the House of Abraham and the House of 'Imran above all beings, the seed (*dhurriyyatan*) of one another; God hears, and knows" [3: 33-34].

Being elected/purified (*iṣṭifā'*) is mentioned in the Qur'an in reference to Abraham in [2: 130], to Mary in [3: 42], to Moses in [7: 144], and as a group, to Adam, Noah, the house of Abraham, and the house of 'Imrān in [3: 33]. One of the names of the prophet Muhammad is also *al-Muṣṭafa*.

Ṭūsī considers the election/purification in [3: 33] to refer to three possibilities, that God elected/purified their religion, or that he elected them to be prophets, or that he elected them in preference over others.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, their being of one another here is seen either as a reference to them being an assembly around the truth, or as the term *dhurriyya* specifies, a progeny in the genealogical sense.<sup>190</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā'ī observes that the family of Abraham here must be confined to a small group, for all the Israeli prophets and the Arabian prophet were from his offspring. That

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<sup>186</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 188).

<sup>187</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 457), particularly due to her miracles.

<sup>188</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 456). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 214).

<sup>189</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 440).

<sup>190</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 441).

would have included the family of ‘Imrān by implication, but being mentioned in a separate category, shows that the family of Abraham intended here is a smaller group of people.<sup>191</sup> He adds that the verse that follows, “When the wife of ‘Imrān said, ‘Lord, I have vowed to Thee, in dedication, what is within my womb...” [3: 34] is an explanation of the election of the house of ‘Imrān.<sup>192</sup> Thus, the election of *Āl ‘Imrān* is explained through the story of ‘Imrān’s wife and unborn daughter, and later their son Jesus. ‘Imrān himself is never independently discussed in the Qur’an or in the traditions. This gives the impression that the reference to his household is made to include the people that are mentioned within his family, most clearly among them Mary.<sup>193</sup>

That the mention of the household of a prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) may include particular women of that house is seen in other occasions. Among the family of Abraham, the angels address Sarah personally, “What, dost thou marvel at God's command? The mercy of God and His blessings be upon you, O people of the House (*ahl al-bayt*)” [11: 73]. This indicates that Sarah was included in the expression *ahl al-bayt*, also employed above as *Āl Ibrāhīm*. Another occasion is the inclusion of Fāṭima among *Āl Muḥammad* (discussed in chapter 3).

It has been observed by several authors that the Qur’an mentions Mary among the prophets in *Sūrat Maryam* and in *Sūrat al-Anbiyā’*.<sup>194</sup> It may be added that she is mentioned in a style that shows continuity in naming prophets. *Sūrat Maryam* names a list of prophets and concludes the list by explicitly stating that these were prophets.

“And mention in the Book Mary... [19: 16], and mention in the Book Abraham... [19: 41], and mention in the Book Moses... [19: 51], and mention in the Book Ishmael... [19: 53], and mention in the Book Idris... [19: 56]. These are they whom

<sup>191</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 165-166).

<sup>192</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 188).

<sup>193</sup> If Zechariah’s wife was Mary’s sister as some traditions and exegeses point out, then she, being another daughter of ‘Imran, and her son John the Baptist might be included here too.

<sup>194</sup> Schleifer (1998, p. 94).

God has blessed among the Prophets of the seed of Adam, and of those We bore with Noah, and of the seed of Abraham and Israel, and of those We guided and chose [19: 58].”

Exegetes generally agree that the latter verse says that the people mentioned are among the prophets, for other prophets and messengers have not been mentioned, and that these prophets are divided here into four categories as described in the verse.<sup>195</sup>

In *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'* a long list of prophets is mentioned along with some of their exalted traits and experiences,

“and We delivered him (Abraham), and Lot, unto the land that We had blessed for all beings. And We gave him Isaac and Jacob... And Lot -- to him We gave judgment and knowledge... And Noah -- when he called before, and We answered him, and delivered him and his people from the great distress... And David and Solomon -- We bore witness to their judgment; and We made Solomon to understand it, and unto each gave We judgment and knowledge. And with David We subjected the mountains to give glory... And We taught him the fashioning of garments for you, to fortify you against your violence... And to Solomon the wind, strongly blowing, that ran at his command unto the land that We had blessed... And Job -- when he called unto his Lord... So We answered him, and removed the affliction... And Ishmael, Idris, Dhul Kifl -- each was of the patient... And Dhul Nun -- when he went forth enraged and thought that We would have no power over him; then he called out in the darkness, ‘There is no god but Thou. Glory be to Thee! I have done evil’... And Zachariah... So We answered him, and bestowed on him John, and We set his wife right for him; truly they vied with one another, hastening to good works, and called upon Us out of yearning and awe; and they were humble to Us. And she who guarded her chastity, so

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<sup>195</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 7, p. 135-136). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 14, p. 75).

We breathed into her of Our spirit and appointed her and her son to be a sign unto all beings. ‘Surely this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord; so serve Me.’” [21: 71- 92].

Mary is again mentioned among the prophets in her own right, and then Jesus was bestowed, and both of them are a sign for humanity.<sup>196</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā’ī points out that even though Mary and Jesus are considered one sign, Mary is older in this partnership. However he continues that she is honoured to be mentioned among the prophets even though she is not one of them.<sup>197</sup> Hamza Yusuf observes that in a great number of Qur’anic verses Jesus is referred to as the son of Mary, but never Mary as the mother of Jesus (*Umm ‘Īsa*). This to him shows that it is part of the honour of Jesus to be the son of Mary.<sup>198</sup> In fact, out of thirty times Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an, twenty three times his name is accompanied by “son of Mary”. In the brief account of the annunciation the angels say, “Mary, God gives thee good tidings of a Word from Him whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary” [3: 45], making “son of Mary” a part of his name. Mary is described as Jesus’ mother three times in the Qur’an, but only after he is called her son, such as in the expression “and We made Mary’s son, and his mother (*ibna Maryama wa ummahu*), to be a sign” [23: 50 and 5: 17, 75], thereby always giving preference to her name.

A study has shown that the Arabic words and sounds of the Qur’anic passages that describe the conception of Jesus, are almost identical to the text of *Sūrat al-Qadr* (which speaks of the blessed night, awaited every year in the month of Ramadan, when the Qur’an descended on the heart of Muhammad),<sup>199</sup> “The implicit metaphor in the Sura of Destiny is night, personified as a woman, conceiving the prophetic message through the Spirit. This

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<sup>196</sup> For an interesting analysis of this verse in reference to its sounds and their relation to spirit, gender, and prophethood, refer to: Sells (1999, p. 203-209).

<sup>197</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 14, p. 317).

<sup>198</sup> Yusuf (n.d.)

<sup>199</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 20, p. 330-333).

conception by the night of destiny is almost identical, in the language used to depict it, to the conception by Maryam of Jesus through the Spirit.”<sup>200</sup> Mary’s motherhood in this sense is not seen as strictly biological but as a spiritual experience of awaiting and receiving the descent of Spirit, and being impregnated with the prophetic message. This reading might help explain why Mary’s spiritual/motherhood experience is listed among the prophets’ experiences, and why this very particular convergence between motherhood and spirituality is made an example for all believers in [66: 11-12], “God has struck a similitude for the believers... And Mary, Imran's daughter, who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her of Our Spirit, and she confirmed the Words of her Lord and His Books, and became one of the obedient”.

#### 2.7.4.3 The Meaning of her Prophethood

Jesus is identified in the Qur’an thus, “The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him” [4: 171]. In modern discourse, an analogy has been repeatedly drawn between the Qur’an as the word of God, and Jesus as the word of God. Moreover, a comparison has been made between Mary and the prophet Muhammad who were both visited by the Spirit which is said to be Gabriel,<sup>201</sup> and both were thus agents of their Lord through the conception of Jesus and the reception of the Qur’an respectively.<sup>202</sup> This likening of Mary to Muhammad and Jesus to the Qur’an necessarily invites a look into the Qur’anic understanding of Jesus as God’s word because it would be directly related to the nature and meaning of Mary’s prophethood, if she were a prophet. Furthermore, the conception of Jesus and his role have been linked, “the spirit-as-support-for Jesus passages (2: 87, 2: 253, 5: 110) and the Jesus-as-spirit passage (4: 171) echo, in sound quality and vocabulary, the Qur’anic account of the conception of

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<sup>200</sup> Sells (1999, p.208-209).

<sup>201</sup> Exegetes normally concede that the Spirit is Gabriel, however there are some authentic traditions that identify the Spirit as an entity that is different from the angels. Refer to: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 274, 386).

<sup>202</sup> Robinson (2001).

Jesus.”<sup>203</sup> Therefore, while Jesus as “word” and “spirit” communicate very different meanings in Christianity than they do in Islam, they are relevant to the Qur’anic discourse nevertheless.

Most exegetes consider the description of Jesus as “word” to be a reference to the word “Be (*kun*)”, which is God’s command with which he created Jesus without a father [3: 47].<sup>204</sup> Ṭabāṭabā’ī considers this to be from the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*).<sup>205</sup> He inclines to the explanation of the word being “Be”, because he considers everything to be the word of God because everything exists as a result of his command.<sup>206</sup> Indeed, the Qur’an affirms in another context that God’s words are endless [18: 109].

However, in reference to the Qur’anic verse in which Jesus addressed Jewish rabbis and scholars of the scripture, “Be you masters (*rabbāniyyīn*) in that you know the Book, and in that you study” [3: 79], Ṭabāṭabā’ī explains that Jesus is the “word” because he clarified for the scholars what they had missed from their scripture.<sup>207</sup> Here, Jesus as word is related to his capacity to interpret scripture.

In exegeses, the “*rabbānī*” is someone who is a lord in that he manages people’s affairs and/or someone wise and pious. The main meanings of the admonishment to be *rabbāniyyīn*, is to be people who deserve this title by learning the real divine scripture, teaching it to others, and behaving in accordance with it.<sup>208</sup> To Kāshānī, “*rabbānī*” is the perfect human being in terms of knowledge and action.<sup>209</sup>

It has been proposed by a contemporary Sufi sheikh that the Messiah was “the existential reality of lawfulness, in its organic sense,” and that he was not recognised by the

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<sup>203</sup> Sells (1999, p. 203).

<sup>204</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 3, p. 347).

<sup>205</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 37).

<sup>206</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 193- 194).

<sup>207</sup> Tabataba’i, (1402h, vol. 3, p. 277).

<sup>208</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 511-512). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 2, p. 331-332).

<sup>209</sup> Kashani (1416h, vol. 1, p. 350).

Jews because they had turned what was meant to be a scientific law about man “into a legalistic structure exterior to and imposed on man.”<sup>210</sup> This portrays Jesus not only as a primary interpreter of scripture, but also Jesus as a living scripture.

Thus, Jesus’ emphasis that people should be *rabbāniyyīn* seems to be a reflection of his own experience that scripture should be lived, and that it was not sent merely to be studied and taught.

In that sense, the functions of Mary as mother and as prophet may take an additional meaning to reception of and impregnation by Spirit; it is the prophet’s job, generally speaking, to raise human beings and help them grow. Jesus’ teaching on the place of the human being in relation to scripture, that making people *rabbāniyyīn* is the goal of scripture, stresses the importance of Mary’s religious contribution as a mother.

The idea of being as scripture also resounds in the Shī‘ī view of the Imam as the “Speaking Qur’an”,<sup>211</sup> and in this sense Mary as mother of Jesus and Fāṭima as mother of the Imams will have particular affinities.

This also brings to mind Khumaynī’s statement which makes women partners to the Qur’an, “The noble Qur’an raises the human being, and the woman also raises the human being. Women’s job is to raise the human being.”<sup>212</sup>

The question of Mary’s prophethood leaves one with more questions than answers. It has been argued that since all prophets were men, that men have a monopoly over the connection with the divine.<sup>213</sup> However, some cases beg the question whether Mary’s prophethood or lack of it increases or diminishes her essential value, because those titles

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<sup>210</sup> Sufi (2002, p. 81).

<sup>211</sup> Ayoub (1988).

<sup>212</sup> Khumayni (n.d. p. 78).

<sup>213</sup> Fierro (2002, p. 183), where she has a quote analysing men’s monopoly on the connection with the divine, and a subsequent hierarchy of authority.

sometimes seem to have more to do with worldly mission than spiritual status.<sup>214</sup> Moreover, if Mary is deemed a prophet, does this break the monopoly of men or is it a case of an exception that proves the rule? The overlap between her role as mother and as prophet seems to imply that she manifests her exceptional state through her femininity, and therefore, that these two categories are not mutually exclusive but may be corresponding. Mary's example has been further seen to "profoundly redraw(s) the general image of the Qur'anic prophet along gynocentric lines."<sup>215</sup>

Mary was consecrated to the temple before her birth. God's choice to make her a female reveals in retrospect that she was destined for her role. She was elected and purified from early childhood, and was given the provision of knowledge and other miracles. Mary's second election over the women of the worlds was actualised when she conceived and then went to a distant place to give birth to her son, in a scene that combined spiritual hints with images of a woman in pain, that is, the bitterness of a social scandal and the physical anguish of labour. It has been argued that Mary could have been a prophet not only because she saw and spoke to the angels, but also because she was listed among the prophets in the Qur'an. The divine proclamation at her birth that "the male is not as the female", has been linked in the exegesis to her election above the women of all worlds. It was also read here in light of an authentic tradition to refer more generally to the females' capacity to deliver prophets. Jesus' being and teaching placed primary focus on the human in relation to scripture; and even though Mary did not bring a scripture, she bore a perfected being who taught the true meaning of scriptures. In this sense, likening Mary's conception of Jesus to

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<sup>214</sup> For example while al-Khidr is described in the Qur'an merely as one of God's servants unto whom mercy and knowledge were given [18: 65], and while some traditions identify him as a prophet, his encounter with Moses, a messenger, strangely but clearly reveals that al-Khidr had more esoteric knowledge than Moses [18: 78]. For further analysis of this, refer to: Keeler (2006, p. 265). Another example would be the comparison between King Solomon and Imam 'Ali in some exegeses, refer to: Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 11, p. 388, and vol. 15, p. 362-371).

<sup>215</sup> Lybarger (2000, p. 269).



Muhammad's conception of the Qur'an is plausible as a similar, and certainly no inferior contribution, with Mary's legacy being distinctly feminine.

## **2.8 The Wives of the Prophet Muhammad and Other Muslim Women**

Unlike the stories of the past prophets, when the Qur'an speaks of the wives of the prophet Muhammad and other Muslim women, it evokes incidents which occurred during the time of revelation. As such, it will be shown that the historical context becomes a part of the Qur'anic context. The wives of the Prophet are spoken to directly, reminded of the difficulty of their position and the sacrifices it entails, and told that they will not be judged like other women. The seclusion of the Prophet's wives has sometimes been understood as a model worthy of emulation by other women; however, the Qur'an portrays Muslim women around Muḥammad as present both in their moral and political allegiance to the Prophet, and in their engagement with the process of revelation.

### **2.8.1 Mothers of the Believers**

The main passage on the Prophet's wives occurs in *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*. It begins by asking the Prophet to tell his wives, "If you desire the present life and its adornment, come now, I will make you provision, and set you free with kindness. But if you desire God and His Messenger and the Last Abode, surely God has prepared for those amongst you such as do good a mighty wage" [33: 28-29]. Commentators usually agree that the occasion of revelation was some or all the wives' demands for an increased allowance,<sup>216</sup> and some add that there were also issues of jealousy and that this is the incident when the Prophet reportedly withdrew from all his wives for a lunar month, and then returned to them with this ultimatum.<sup>217</sup> The options that were given to the wives were either to be provisioned for and let go without dispute or enmity, or to stay with the Prophet and not have desire for the

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<sup>216</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 192-193). Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 334). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 305, and 314-316).

<sup>217</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 151). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 264).

material world, but for the one to come.<sup>218</sup> God was therefore informing these women that they were in a difficult situation because of their esteem and honour.<sup>219</sup> It is due to their being examples, that the following verses warn and promise the wives double the punishments and double the rewards of other people, “Wives of the Prophet, whosoever among you commits a flagrant indecency, for her the chastisement shall be doubled; that is easy for God. But whosoever of you is obedient to God and His Messenger, and does righteousness, We shall pay her her wage twice over; We have prepared for her a generous provision” [33: 30-31].<sup>220</sup> These promises are for their afterlife and the generous provision is Paradise.<sup>221</sup> However, when the wives at that point reportedly each chose the Prophet, they were given the honorific title “*Ummahāt al-Mu’minīn* (Mothers of the Believers) [33: 6]” in recompense.<sup>222</sup> Therefore, it is not marriage to the Prophet itself that gives them honour, but the Qur’an couples this with their actions, as elsewhere in the Qur’an when judgement is always connected to actions, which is why the following verse again mentions their high status, and connects it directly to their piety, “Wives of the Prophet, you are not as other women if you are god-fearing” [33: 32].<sup>223</sup> If they choose to remain married to the Prophet but do not behave accordingly, then they would have lost both this world and the next, and would have gone even further away from God with evil results.<sup>224</sup> It has been observed that after having addressed the Prophet (*yā ayyuha-n-nabiyyu qul li-azwājika*) in [33: 28-29], God redirected his speech and addressed the women personally (*yā nisā’ al-nabī*) in [33: 30-35] in order to warrant their responsibilities.<sup>225</sup> The Qur’an then continues to define the behaviour that is proper to them, “be not abject in your speech, so that he in whose heart is

<sup>218</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 152). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 306).

<sup>219</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 305).

<sup>220</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 334-335, and 337). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 305).

<sup>221</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 193). Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 338). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 308).

<sup>222</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 334).

<sup>223</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 306). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 238, and vol. 5, p. 372).

<sup>224</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 307-308).

<sup>225</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 307-308), where he also notes that the punishments are spoken in the passive form to denote fairness, and the rewards in the active to denote closeness.

sickness may be lustful; but speak honourable words. Remain in your houses; and display not your finery, as did the pagans of old. And perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and obey God and His Messenger. (People of the House, God only desires to put away from you abomination and to cleanse you.)<sup>226</sup> And remember that which is recited in your houses of the signs of God and the Wisdom; God is All-subtle, All-aware” [33: 32-34]. While these stipulations are generally applicable to all women and to all Muslims, the verses here emphasise that since the Prophet’s wives are not like others, they ought to exaggerate in abiding by these guidelines, and be more careful than other women.<sup>227</sup>

Within this passage on the Prophet’s wives are a couple of verses that deal with the controversial subject of the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh. The verses read,

“It is not for any believer, man or woman, when God and His Messenger have decreed a matter, to have the choice in the affair. Whosoever disobeys God and His Messenger has gone astray into manifest error. When thou saidst to him whom God had blessed and thou hadst favoured, ‘Keep thy wife to thyself, and fear God,’ and thou wast concealing within thyself what God should reveal, fearing other men; and God has better right for thee to fear Him. So when Zaid had accomplished what he would of her, then We gave her in marriage to thee, so that there should not be any fault in the believers, touching the wives of their adopted sons, when they have

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<sup>226</sup> The parentheses here are not in Arberry’s but are added to avoid confusion, because it will be soon explained that this phrase, to all Shi’i exegetes and some Sunni ones, is not a part of God’s speech to the wives. Ibn Sa’d (n.d. vol. 8, p. 199) finds that this verse is part of God’s address to the Prophet’s wives. Muslim (n.d., vol. 7, p. 123) reports that the term *ahl al-bayt* does not include the Prophet’s wives but those members of his family who are not allowed to accept alms after him. Hakim (1406h, vol. 2, p. 416, vol. 3, p. 147, 158) and Ibn Hanbal (n.d., vol. 1, p. 331, vol. 3, p. 259, and 285, vol. 4, p. 107, vol. 6, p. 292) others find that the term *ahl al-bayt* in the *sunna* is a reference to the members of the house of Fatima. Shi’i scholars are all of the latter view: Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 193- 194). Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 339- 341). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 156-157). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 309-312). In addition to the context of the verse as it is described in traditions, they note that the whole passage addressing the Prophet’s wives is in the grammatically feminine plural form, whereas this verse is in the masculine plural. Therefore, there is a discontinuation, and this verse is not part of God’s speech to the wives. Moreover, this verse has been understood as proof of the impeccability of *ahl al-bayt*, and will be discussed in the section on Fatima (3.2.2).

<sup>227</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 308).

accomplished what they would of them; and God's commandment must be performed" [33: 36-37].

The first one of these verses which commands obedience to God and the Prophet is a general rule, yet in this situation it is seen to refer to the incident of Zaynab's marriage to Zayd.<sup>228</sup> The sources explain that when the Prophet arranged Zaynab's marriage to Zayd, she objected because she found herself, a beautiful woman of the prestigious tribe of Quraysh and the Prophet's cousin, to be nobler than Zayd who was the Prophet's freed slave and adopted son.<sup>229</sup> However, the Prophet insisted on the marriage, as the verse says, because it was a divine order (*amr*).<sup>230</sup> The verses continue to describe how Zayd later came to the Prophet asking to divorce Zaynab but the Prophet insisted that Zayd keep his wife. Here, God as the narrator blames the Prophet for insisting that Zayd keep Zaynab, even though he already knew that God had another plan. Commentators point out that Zayd complained to the Prophet of her arrogance and her hurtful words towards him.<sup>231</sup> They also speak of Zaynab's beauty and narrate a tradition on how the Prophet felt attracted to her upon seeing her inside her home one day. They find that what the Prophet kept hidden in that conversation was that if Zayd divorced Zaynab, he himself would marry her.<sup>232</sup> Exegetes tend to explain that this is the Prophet's human nature and is not to blame, even though they also see that the affair was a divine command, the aim of which was to make the statement regarding adopted sons and their wives.<sup>233</sup>

Ṭabāṭabā'ī rejects the saying that what the Prophet hid was an attraction to Zaynab, first because even human nature may be subjected to spiritual training, and second because if it were a physical attraction, God would not have blamed the Prophet for hiding his

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<sup>228</sup> Tabataba'ī (1402h, vol. 16, p. 320-322).

<sup>229</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 342-343). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 161).

<sup>230</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 343-344).

<sup>231</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 194).

<sup>232</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 344). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 162).

<sup>233</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 345). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 164).

feelings; indeed a Muslim man must not mention another man's wife in that regard. Rather, Ṭabāṭabā'ī maintains that it is clear from the verse itself that what the Prophet hid was the command he received about marrying Zaynab for the sake of making a statement: that adopted sons are not real sons and thus their wives would be lawful for their patrons after they divorce them. He adds that [33: 38] shows clearly that the Prophet did what God had commanded him (*farāḍa-llāhu lahu*), and it was the *farḍ* that he was hiding, not because he was scared of the people as such, but because that might have jeopardised his position and their faith if they were to find his actions vile. Ṭabāṭabā'ī adds that this verse actually strengthens the Prophet's position in this difficult situation, albeit in the form of blame.<sup>234</sup> Despite all the controversy, the Qur'an does not hide the story but announces the Prophet ought not to be afraid of anyone other than his lord.<sup>235</sup> This is further stressed in [33: 39], that those who deliver God's message ought to fear none but him.<sup>236</sup> One modern author regrets the image of the Prophet displayed by Muslims themselves in this incident, and adds that Zaynab had been the Prophet's cousin and therefore he must have noticed her when she was young, before this incident and before the dress code was imposed on women. This reasoning makes his sudden infatuation with her, after he had married her to someone else, absurd.<sup>237</sup>

One of several opinions regarding why the Prophet married Zaynab is that she was his cousin and therefore he was responsible for her, or that he wanted to honour her after she felt humiliated in her marriage to Zayd which anyway did not end well.<sup>238</sup> While this is not entirely compatible with the more pietistic point of view, that it was a divine order to make

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<sup>234</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 322-325). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 281-283) similarly narrates traditions which in their entirety explain that what the Prophet hid was his knowledge that Zaynab was destined to be one of his wives.

<sup>235</sup> Bakhtiar (1996, p. 17).

<sup>236</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 326).

<sup>237</sup> Bakhtiar (1996, p. 21).

<sup>238</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 162-163).

a legal statement, it does point out to Zaynab's feelings regarding the entire affair in the sense that there is reason to believe that she would have desired the marriage to the Prophet. She reportedly used to express her joy before her new co-wives saying that her marriage to the Prophet, unlike theirs, was decreed by God.<sup>239</sup>

Zaynab was twice the means for the divine command issuing some change in the community's cultural perceptions. In the first arrangement of her marriage to Zayd, the desired change was reportedly that people should be humble and intermarry with others from lower social strata,<sup>240</sup> and in the second that adopted sons are not real sons. She is portrayed to have been audibly unhappy upon and during her first marriage, but very pleased with the second. If the proud and beautiful Zaynab was after prestige, she did in the end get the most prestigious marriage she could wish for, and indeed the second might have not been possible without the first.

The theme of protecting the Prophet's wives from potentially harmful men continues within the context of teaching Muslims to be respectful when they visit the Prophet in his home, and this has been revealed on the night of his marriage ceremony to Zaynab when some people stayed lingering about,<sup>241</sup> "And when you ask his wives for any object, ask them from behind a curtain; that is cleaner for your hearts and theirs. It is not for you to hurt God's Messenger, neither to marry his wives after him, ever; surely that would be, in God's sight, a monstrous thing" [33: 53]. It is reported that some people in Medina were saying that when the Prophet dies, they would marry this or that of his wives, which is why the *ḥijāb* was revealed thereby restricting further the wives' movements, with the repeated

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<sup>239</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 64). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 327).

<sup>240</sup> Subhani (1984, p. 467-468).

<sup>241</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 195). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 343).

warning that no one is allowed to marry any one of the Prophet's wives after he passes away.<sup>242</sup>

The Prophet's marriage to Zaynab and the subsequent descent of the *ḥijāb* has been used by many as the gender-defining event in Islam, and as a reference to the Prophet's views on women and sexuality.<sup>243</sup> While the Muslim tradition itself plays a part in advocating such stereotypes,<sup>244</sup> upon reading the Qur'an it may be seen that these two instances are highly contextual.

The Prophet, who is normally considered a perfect example, is not necessarily a legal example in matters of marital relations, considering the freedoms as well as constraints that are unique to him.<sup>245</sup> His wives are also exceptional women in at least three ways. First, they are "mothers of the believers" even though no other woman is any man's mother except the one she actually gives birth to [58: 2]. Second, they carry double the punishments and rewards of the rest of Muslims. Third, they are the only women addressed in the Qur'an with the second person (*mukhāṭab*) rather than the third person (*ghā'ib*). This in itself may point to the androcentrism of the Qur'an as text,<sup>246</sup> but it also signifies that these are really "not as other women". This however does not mean that these verses are of no relevance at all outside that particular historical context.

Barabara Stowasser's extensive study of the Prophet's wives in the Qur'an concludes that, "The Prophet's polygamous household here becomes a prime example of Qur'anic

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<sup>242</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 195). Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 357-358). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 8, p. 173-177). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 5, p. 298). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 16, p. 337).

<sup>243</sup> Varisco (2005, p. 84, and chapter 3 more generally).

<sup>244</sup> A legitimate question for the tradition would be why only the modern exegetes and authors were dismissive of the story regarding the Prophet's uncontrollable physical attraction to Zaynab. Is it because the earlier exegetes were less sceptical of traditions in general and this one in particular, even though they maintained that there was a divine command for the Prophet's marriage to her? Is it that the modern authors, aware of orientalist's galling depictions of the Prophet as sensual, more observing of the incompatibility of that report with the Prophet's excellent character? Is it that modern men/exegetes' views on sex differ from those of their medieval counterparts, and do they therefore project different expectations on to the Prophet's behaviour?

<sup>245</sup> For a legal debate on this, refer to: Ali (2003).

<sup>246</sup> Kecia Ali contends that the Qur'an is androcentric though not misogynist, (2006, p. 132).

reasoning in favor of righteous institutions over individual aspirations. At the same time... the Qur'anic legislation also signifies aspects of the principle of ethical individualism in its linkage between individual select status and individual virtue, clearly expressed in the 'verse of choice'" [33: 28-29].<sup>247</sup>

### 2.8.2 *Bay'at al-Nisa'*

*Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana*, where the text of the women's *bay'ā* (pledge of allegiance) occurs, has three main themes. These are, severing relationships with the pagans in Mecca [60: 1-9 and 13], legal stipulations where severing ties involves spouses [60: 10-11], and finally the pledge of allegiance that the new comers to Medina must give the Prophet [60: 12], after their faith had been examined [60: 10].<sup>248</sup> The text of the pledge reads thus: "O Prophet, when believing women come to thee, swearing fealty to thee upon the terms that they will not associate with God anything, and will not steal, neither commit adultery, nor slay their children, nor bring a calumny they forge between their hands and their feet, nor disobey thee in aught honourable, ask God's forgiveness for them; God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate" [60: 12].

Exegetes explain these terms much more narrowly than the text appears to be. The prohibition of stealing they take to mean stealing from their husband's house primarily. Slaying the children they identify as either infanticide or abortion. The forged calumny between their hands and legs is described as ascribing illegitimate children to their husbands. They do not however explain how ascribing an illegitimate child to their husband

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<sup>247</sup> Stowasser (1994, p. 102-103).

<sup>248</sup> Stowasser (2009, p. 90). It must be added though, that this short Qur'anic chapter is about women emigrants to Medina but not the men, because after the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, the Prophet had a mutual agreement with the pagan Arabs not to accept newcomer convert men and that the Muslims in turn would not take in people from Medina either. The Prophet did not promise the same about women however: Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 240). When women arrived in Medina, their faith was to be examined by swearing that they have come to Medina for nothing other than love of God and his Prophet, their dowers were to be returned to their husbands so that they would be divorced from them, and the women were expected to take the pledge of allegiance to the Prophet: Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 362-363). Tusi (1409h, vol. 9, p. 583-587). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 239-241).



is related to women's hands, but Ṭabāṭabā'ī elaborates that when a woman gives birth, the child falls between her legs and into her hands. Obeying the Prophet in what is good they understand to be a prohibition of mourning and lamenting the dead in the pre-Islamic manners of women striking their face, tearing their clothes, and disheveling their hair.<sup>249</sup>

Obeying the Prophet in what is good does not seem to have a clear interpretation, because one presumes that everything the Prophet orders is good. The semantic meaning of *bi-l-ma'rūf* which may be translated as something recognised, beneficent, or reputable, is taken to mean something that the intellect recognises as good, which in any case applies to all that the Prophet orders.<sup>250</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī finds that the *sunna* of the Prophet, rather than God's commands as such, is what is meant as something recognisable to Muslims.<sup>251</sup>

It has been correctly pointed out however, that the text of the *bay'a* actually enshrines the condition of membership in the *umma* (Islamic community/nation), "in terms of sins/crimes foresworn that are applicable to all believers regardless of gender: polytheism, theft, fornication, infanticide, slander, and disobedience to the Prophet."<sup>252</sup> In fact, according to the early historian Ibn Ishāq, men initially pledged their allegiance to the Prophet, in the first 'Aqaba meeting, in the exact wording of the women's fealty, until war became a part of men's duties.<sup>253</sup> Furthermore, there were a few women who reportedly gave the men's pledge when they went to war with the Prophet.<sup>254</sup> The exegetes discussed above however, collectively fail to mention that the text of *bay'at al-nisā'* (women's fealty) was given by

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<sup>249</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 364). Tusi (1409h, vol. 9, p. 588). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 9, p. 456). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 242). They also elaborate on women's *bay'a* in terms of segregation, such as the stories on the Prophet refusing to shake hands with women: Ibid. Also refer to: Stowasser (2009, p. 92-93). .

<sup>250</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 9, p. 588). Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 9, p. 456).

<sup>251</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 242).

<sup>252</sup> Stowasser (2009, p. 90-91).

<sup>253</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 2, p. 294-295). Moreover, the men's fealty before war was "in the terminology of the historians... called Bay'atun Nisa'": Subhani (1984, p. 299).

<sup>254</sup> Stowasser (2009, p. 91).

men as well, or at least to mention that there is an early and reliable report to that effect.<sup>255</sup>

This seems to help them re-define its terms in very gender-specific language, which is unlike the gender-neutral text itself.<sup>256</sup>

### 2.8.3 *al-Mujādila*

It is reported that a woman named Khawla bint Khuwaylid came to the Prophet complaining of her husband. She explained that after having disseminated her belly for him, and helped him in the affairs of his world and hereafter, he said the words of *zihār* to her; a pre-Islamic practice whereby the man declared that his wife is as his mother to him, thereby dismissing her sexually without actually letting her go by way of divorce. After much debate with the Prophet, he informed her that he cannot issue a ruling without God guiding him to it, so she directed her complaint towards God.<sup>257</sup> Later, revelation decided, “God has heard the words of her that disputes with thee concerning her husband, and makes complaint unto God (*qad sami‘a-llāhu qawl al-latī tujādiluka fī zawjihā wa tashtakī ila-llāh*). God hears the two of you conversing together; surely God is All-hearing, All-seeing” [58: 1]. The very beginning of the verse *qad sami‘a-llāh* indicates that prayers have been answered and relief arrived.<sup>258</sup> The revelation continues to prohibit the practice [58: 2].<sup>259</sup>

This is not the only incident by which revelation descended in answer to a question, whether from a man or woman. However, the acknowledgment of this particular women’s pain in the Qur’an is indeed noteworthy. There is a sense of intimacy when God reassures that he had been listening to her whole argument, as well as to her complaint to him. This however, opens the question for contemporary women, whether God is still listening, and

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<sup>255</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 9, p. 587) completely neglects the event of men giving the women’s bay ‘a when he explains that women gave bay ‘a even though they do not fight, in order to secure their good behaviour towards themselves and their husbands.

<sup>256</sup> Stowasser (2009, p. 91-92 and 94-95).

<sup>257</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, 353-354). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 5, p. 254-255).

<sup>258</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 19, p. 178).

<sup>259</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 354). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 5, p. 255).

how to debate with revelation today? Khawla's *jadāl*, her "manoeuvring left and right in debate",<sup>260</sup> has been described as a "critique of male religio-legal rulings."<sup>261</sup> Perhaps in this story is a proposition that God responds to one who puts questions forth skilfully.

Unlike most of the personalities in the Qur'an, the Prophet's wives seem obedient to their husband's command, and perhaps some of their individuality is lost because of the political situation in Medina, where the women were included in the silent war the hypocrites waged on the Prophet, as the Qur'an repeatedly suggests.<sup>262</sup> The Prophet's marriage to Zaynab is perhaps less problematic today than it was then, because Muslims no longer see the adopted son as a real son whatsoever.<sup>263</sup> As a group, the Prophet's wives may be seen to carry the theme of *jihād al-nafs* in so far as a prominent position in society requires a more stringent struggle to set an example, and that individual sacrifices be made for the sake of the collective good. The women's *bay'a* in the Qur'an shows women as citizens in the *umma*, and since this was revealed after the verses on the seclusion of the Prophet's wives and the modesty of Muslim women, it "acknowledged for the Muslim woman her legal competence to participate in the public act of pledging her moral and political allegiance and stipulated women's admission to citizenship in the *umma* on conditions exclusive of clothing restrictions".<sup>264</sup> The *mujādila* model similarly shows women's participation in the debate with revelation, and is hopeful that these may be skilful in their arguments, and that they might win over the men in at least some of their rights.

## 2.9 The Women of Paradise (*al-Ḥūr al-ʿĪn*)

<sup>260</sup> Kahf (2000, p. 157). *Jadāl* means "to braid" and "to compete in dispute and compare evidence": Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 3, p. 183). Lane (n.d.): *j-d-l*.

<sup>261</sup> Kahf (2000, p. 159).

<sup>262</sup> Above and in the *Ifk* incident [24: 11].

<sup>263</sup> It is some of the Prophet's other conjugations however, such as those within the institution of concubinage, which were not controversial in his day and therefore did not warrant any explanation in the Qur'an, that are seen as problematic today. Refer to the discussion on this in reference to the relevance of the Prophet's example in: Ali (2006, p. 137).

<sup>264</sup> Stowasser (1996, p. 32).

The hereafter and its women in the Qur'an, may be considered as an altogether separate category which does not belong to the earth, and does not fit into human experience as we know it. For example, heavenly fruit resembles earthly fruit but tastes different [2: 25], the milk there does not change taste [47: 15], and the wine does not cause intoxication [37: 47, 52: 23].

Paradise is often depicted as a place of soberness and joy. There is no idle, sinful, or lying talk there [56: 25, 78: 35, 88: 11], there is no fear nor sorrow [7: 49, 10: 62, 43: 68]. The people of paradise are brought nearer to God [56: 11], and the two will take mutual pleasure in each other [5: 119, 9: 100, 58: 22, 98: 8]. There is also a high degree of sensuality in paradise, with gardens and rivers, meat and fruit for food, silk and jewellery for clothing, and many beautiful maidens. It has been observed however, that pleasure there is produced without an earthly counterpart, for there is no excretion or pregnancy in paradise.<sup>265</sup> There is an unusual combination of the utterly spiritual with the utterly sensual. Perhaps that is why some have observed that the Qur'an refers to its own depiction of paradise as a "*mathal*" [13: 35, 47: 15]. This has been translated as parable, similitude, or likeness.<sup>266</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī understands the term *mathal* as description, but adds that perhaps *mathal* here may be understood in what he calls its known meaning. In which case, referring to those descriptions as *mathal* would be saying that paradise is higher and nobler than to be described and limited by words, but that these illustrations function as metaphors to bring paradise closer to the minds.<sup>267</sup>

There is in the Qur'an an emphasis on pairing the men and women of paradise. For example, in paradise the believers will have "spouses purified (*azwājūn muṭahharatun*)" [2:

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<sup>265</sup> Bouhdiba (1998, p. 84).

<sup>266</sup> Abdel Haleem (1999, p. 106).

<sup>267</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 18, p. 232). It is worthy to mention here that on another note, Imam 'Ali had explained that the ordeals of this world give an illustration of the ordeals of the world to come, and the pleasures of this world create eagerness for the pleasures to come, in: Radi (n.d.c., vol. 4, p. 31).

25, 3: 15, 4: 57]. There are also other references to this pairing, “when the souls shall be coupled (*wa idha-l-nufūsu zuwwijāt*)” [81: 7].<sup>268</sup> In these cases the grammar is gender neutral and it seems therefore to apply to both men and women. However, the majority of verses that speak of marriage in paradise refer to the maidens that are reserved for believing men, known as *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn*, or simply as *ḥūr*.<sup>269</sup>

The *ḥūr* (singular, *ḥawrāʾ*), a perfect beauty according to the Arabs, is a woman whose iris and pupil are very black, against a very white background in the eye. Moreover, a woman is not *ḥawrāʾ* unless she has very white skin.<sup>270</sup> *Al-ʿīn* (singular, *ʿaynāʾ*) is a reference to black and very wide eyes.<sup>271</sup>

Some of the Qurʾanic verses that describe the *ḥūr* of paradise are, “houris, cloistered in cool pavilions... untouched before them by any man or jinn” [55: 72-74], “and wide-eyed houris as the likeness of hidden pearls... Perfectly We formed them, perfect, and We made them spotless virgins, chastely amorous, like of age for the Companions of the Right” [56: 22-23, 55-57]. The *ḥūr* also have “and with them wide-eyed maidens restraining their glances as if they were hidden eggs” [37: 48- 49], and again “and with them maidens restraining their glances” [38: 53], and finally they are “maidens with swelling breasts, like of age” [78: 33].

Among these descriptions are also the “maidens good and comely (*khayrātun ḥisān*)” [55: 70]. According to authentic traditions, these unlike the *ḥūr* are actually the believing women of this world who go to heaven, and they are more beautiful than the *ḥūr*.<sup>272</sup>

<sup>268</sup> Refer to: Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 407).

<sup>269</sup> Robinson (1996, p.68, 88, 95 etc) has a valuable but inconclusive argument on how the chronology of the Qurʾanic verses might affect the progressive description of the women of paradise from highly sexualised to “purified”.

<sup>270</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 4, p. 219).

<sup>271</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 13, p. 302).

<sup>272</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 8, p. 156). Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 469).

In Qummi's early exegesis, the "maidens restraining their glances (*qāṣirātu-t-ṭarfī*)" has been consistently understood to mean that the maidens, due to their brightness, cause the men that look at them to restrain their glances.<sup>273</sup> This however, is not what later exegetes say, for they understand these verses to mean that the maidens do not look at any man other than their husbands.<sup>274</sup> Their being cloistered in the pavilions (*maqsūrātun fī-l-khiyām*) seems to give precedence to the latter meaning.

The entire depiction of those maidens, with the exception of [55: 70] which is supposed to be about believing women not the *ḥūr*, focuses on two aspects. First, there is focus on their physical beauty by describing them as *ḥūr* 'in and emphasising their swelling breasts (*kawā'ib*).<sup>275</sup> Second, there is focus on their extreme modesty through the repeated reminder of their modest gaze, being secluded in pavilions, and guarded as pearls and ostrich eggs.<sup>276</sup>

It has been argued that the Qur'anic depiction of paradise is subjective to the Arab view of comfort.<sup>277</sup> On the other hand, it has been suggested that the sensuous picture of heaven need not be understood from a historico-critical perspective but as an appreciation of fundamental human nature as the monotheistic tradition perceives it.<sup>278</sup> One study of various descriptions of paradise among ancient cultures suggests that since most ancient cultures have portrayed a similar vision of paradise, then that place must exist as such.<sup>279</sup> Regardless of the validity of this conclusion, the study is a case in point. It succeeds in showing great similarities in peoples' depictions of paradise, but it neglects certain elements that are

<sup>273</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 346), where he also understands "*maqsurat*" in a similar vein. Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 5, p. 198).

<sup>274</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 9, p. 481, 485). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 5, p. 198).

<sup>275</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 9, p. 482) reports that their comparison to pearls and coral gems emphasises their whiteness.

<sup>276</sup> Perhaps the comparison to pearls and eggs refer to both whiteness of skin and seclusion, and perhaps these two ideas are related anyway, since rich secluded women who do not work do not see the sun and therefore are not tanned.

<sup>277</sup> Wadud (1994).

<sup>278</sup> Rippin (1996, p. 134).

<sup>279</sup> Surty (1986, pp. 179- 188).

culturally specific. One such example describes that in the Japanese paradise robes are hung on their sacred *sakaki* tree.<sup>280</sup>

In any case, the Qur'anic emphasis that in paradise, people will get whatever they wish for [16: 31, 25: 16, 39: 34, 42: 22, 50: 35, 36: 57] hints at the subjectivity of paradise.

*Al-ḥūr al-'īn* may be seen to portray a femininity that is utterly submissive. Women in paradise are how men want them to be, very beautiful and completely secluded as a sign of their devotion to their husbands. Alternatively, at least according to Qummī, the *ḥūr* possess the power of mysteriousness and allure. So while they may be waiting for men and created to be devoted to them, they can still attract men and hold them in some form of subjection.

Traditions tell that the *khayrātun ḥisān*, who are this world's believing women, are more beautiful than the *ḥūr*. It could be argued then, that the emphasis on youthfulness and beauty is appealing to women themselves, and that would be a valid point. Considering what has been argued above regarding the subjectivity of paradise, and its description being a metaphor, the objectification of the *ḥūr* may be tolerated as a male fantasy. However, the real issue at stake will be noted in chapter 4, where much of the *ḥadīth* literature and subsequently Islamic law projects this personality onto the women of this world, not in the emphasis on physical appearance, but in regard to extreme seclusion and submission to the husband.

## 2.10 Summary and Conclusions

In the end, it might be useful to compare and contrast the women of the *Qaṣaṣ* with one another and with the *ḥūr* of paradise, then final and more general conclusions will be made.

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<sup>280</sup> Surty (1986, p. 180).

First, the mothers of several prophets are portrayed as participants in God's plans, and indeed were the hands through which God worked to prepare their sons for their missions. This is particularly true of Hagar, the mother of Moses, and Mary. One may argue that there is a strong matriarchal element in their stories, where Hagar survived alone in the desert, brought water and even a ritual, Moses' mother was responsible for taking and acting on her inspiration and thus changed Moses' life, and Mary was complete without a man. Moreover, the fathers of Moses and Mary are conspicuously absent from their accounts.

Second, Mary has been seen as impeccable and among the *awliyā'*, if not a prophet. The mother of Moses has been described similarly to the *awliyā'*, if one were to accept the interpretation that her heart was empty of fear and sorrow. The stories of these two women particularly have been told in connection to their motherly bodies, through the emphasis on Moses' mother breastfeeding and Mary's delivery. It may be that these feminine experiences which are normally seen by men as merely biological functions are elevated in people's eyes when they are told thus.

Third, in the story of Mary the statement that "the male is not as the female" is the only explicit statement that differentiates between the two sexes albeit without further explication. It has been argued that the preference here is for the female and that the preference may be due to the female's capacity to conceive and deliver prophets. This has been linked to Mary's legacy and the feminine portrayal of spirituality in the Qur'an.

Fourth, Sarah and Mary both saw the angels and conversed with them, but more importantly, both have been included in the term *ahl al-bayt* of Abraham and of 'Imrān.

Fifth, the personalities of the women of the *qaṣaṣ* are so varied that it is near impossible to speak of a certain personality of woman that is being portrayed. The daughters of Lot were offered in marriage by their father to the Sodomites, presumably without their



consent, whereas one of the two women of Midian herself hinted to her father about a marriage proposition. Zulaykha's pursuit of Joseph is condemned whereas the modest pursuit of Moses' bride is acceptable. Zulaykha and Bilqīs are similar in that they are perhaps the only characters not related to a prophet by blood or marriage, yet they each gave two very different stories. Zulaykha opposed the will of a prophet, while Bilqīs allied herself with him. Where Zulaykha showed the drunkenness of emotion, Bilqīs showed intelligence at its best, that is when it leads to faith. Bilqīs may be compared to Āsiyā the wife of Pharaoh. Neither cared for the palaces or thrones of this world, but hoped to be near to God, although Bilqīs did not suffer a husband's tyranny.

Sixth, most of the female personalities of the *qasas* tell stories of the spiritual *jihād* or *jihād al-nafs*. The wives of Noah and Lot were betrayers and spiritually dead, therefore they were doomed. Zulaykha was an example of the lower appetitive soul, but one that was eventually able to judge her actions and therefore possibly progress. The mother of Moses reveals deep trust in God's inspiration and promise, even though she needed divine support to strengthen her heart at the most difficult time. Bilqīs tells a story of the inner mental struggle, between inherited cultural ideas and novel ones which are true to the heart. Mary is a character who did not show much signs of struggle, rather the emphasis was on her obedience and the fruits that she reaped as a result. The wives of the Prophet Muhammad were given a choice between leaving the Prophet's household or struggling in the soul's *jihād*. Being in a position of responsibility as role models for their community, and given the honorific title "mothers of the believers" entails double the rewards and punishments. The stories of Hagar and Āsiyā however, next to their spiritual *jihād* tell a story of a more active *jihād*. Due to her activeness, patience and perseverance Hagar was miraculously given water that appeared in a barren valley. The wife of Pharaoh underwent a spiritual *jihād* when she had faith in the message of Moses, but that was coupled with a basic form of political *jihād*

whereby she refused with her heart and words, the false claims and tyrannical actions of her husband. Even though these characters are women and some aspects of their stories have much to do with their being women, such as being wives or mothers or attracted to men, they do transcend their sex and they speak of the human *nafs* and its varied aspirations.

Seventh, while the personalities of the *qasas* were not subject to but often rebellious against male authority, the wives of the Prophet and the *ḥūr* of paradise do portray the image of women dedicated to their husbands, and the theme of women's seclusion as part of that devotion occurs both times. Both these examples however are portrayed as exceptions rather than the rule for normal earthly women.

Eighth, the *ḥūr* of paradise differ much from the women of the *qasas*. The maidens of the hereafter are beautiful and do not say or do anything that reveals a personality behind the beauty, with the exception of their modesty of course. The women of the *qasas* have interesting personalities; whether pious or impious they are strong and dynamic, and significantly, often act independently of men.

The group of verses from *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm* [66: 10-12] have been referred to often, and they best summarise this chapter. These verses pick certain female personalities from the *qasas* and present them as examples to believing men and women, whereby the wives of Noah and Lot are examples for the disbelievers, and the wife of Pharaoh and Mary are examples for the believers.

Two important observations about these verses are particularly striking. First, the example of women is given in all cases. Second, there is a balance in that there are two examples for the disbelievers and the same number for the believers. Perhaps, this group of verses speaks of women's humanity. This is done by portraying women as examples for all human beings, disbelievers (*li-l-ladhīna kafarū*) and believers (*li-l-ladhīna āmanū*). The exclusive use of female characters here is remarkable. Moreover, by giving the same number

of women in each category, a profound statement about women's common humanity is implied. Women are neither idealised nor vilified. They are not put on a pedestal nor are they debased. These two are in fact the sides of the same coin, because when women are put on a pedestal, any error on the part of a woman would make her fall very low in people's eyes. Also, because of the same number of female examples on both sides, it can hardly be argued, as the *ḥadīth* consistently does, that women may be put into a general category that lacks faith and is destined for either heaven or hell.

The two examples for the believers are *Āsiyā* and Mary. The first portrays a spiritual *jihād* followed by a political one, and the second portrays the epitome of spirituality which yields its fruits through perfect motherhood and the birth of children who are true interpreters of scripture.

The next chapter will move to the female personalities in the *sunna* of the prophet Muhammad, and particularly the three main women of *ahl al-bayt* because through these women, some of the major findings in this chapter may be affirmed. The theme of the striving of the human *nafs* will continue. The idea of motherhood as a spiritual experience that makes impeccable children will be confirmed in the personality of Fāṭima. The political *jihād* as performed by *Āsiyā* will become fully developed by the women of *ahl al-bayt*.

## FEMALE PERSONALITIES IN THE *SUNNA*

### 3.1 Introduction

In Arabic, *sunna* is a line of conduct, or mode of life, and as a verb it means to establish the law, or follow a path.<sup>1</sup> In Islam, and probably during the Prophet's lifetime, the term was applied to his activities and rulings, although after his death, the term came to be applied to the standards set by others.<sup>2</sup> The Qur'an itself does not mention the *sunna* of Muḥammad as such, but it does advise that the example of the Prophet is a good example (*uswa ḥasana*) [33: 21].<sup>3</sup>

Another important reason for studying the *sunna* of the Prophet is that it is the context of the Qur'an; "If one approaches the Qur'an without any preconceptions based on subsequent tradition, one discovers that it contains very few clues to help to determine the provenance of the revelations with any accuracy."<sup>4</sup> References in the Qur'an, to people or events in the Prophet's life are often vague and very difficult to comprehend without some knowledge of his biography (*sīra*) and the time and space he lived in, "Indeed, it would be fair to say that a 'passage' of the Qur'an was a 'passage' in the incidence of inspiration. To that extent *wahy* and *Sirah*, what came *into* speech and *on* to the page came with a psychic awareness without which it could have had neither setting nor relevance."<sup>5</sup> There is an interesting but inconclusive debate on whether *sīra* writing preceded exegesis or followed it, with the ensuing contention that if *sīra* accounts are exegetical, then they are not historical.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lane (n.d.): *s-n-n*.

<sup>2</sup> Juynboll (1987, p. 98- 101).

<sup>3</sup> Juynboll.(1987, p. 101). Refer to the Qur'an, verses [17: 77, 33: 38, 62, 40: 85, 43: 62, and 48: 23] for the *sunna* of God. *Sunna* is also used in a negative sense in reference to previous peoples [8: 38, 15: 13, 17: 77, and 18: 55]. Both *sunna* and *uswa ḥasana* are used in reference to previous prophets and their community of believers [17: 77, 60: 4, 6].

<sup>4</sup> Robinson (1996, p. 30).

<sup>5</sup> Cragg (2001, p. 22).

<sup>6</sup> Rippin (1997, pp. 408- 409).

Therefore, there are difficulties in determining the authenticity of events in the Prophet's biography.<sup>7</sup> The problems there are similar to those of history writing in general, such as the nature and availability of the earliest sources, as well as the various agendas of the compilers and historians.<sup>8</sup> The earliest sources are generally seen as more authentic than the later ones.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on those earliest sources might therefore be the only option if one were to fill in the sketch (between the Qur'an and provenance of the revelations) and sharpen its focus.<sup>10</sup>

The problem of historical authenticity is more severe regarding female personalities, as history often saw women and their activities to be on the periphery of events, and therefore not worthy of documenting.<sup>11</sup> While historicity is certainly relevant, it might be too late to recover. In any case, historical authenticity is not the direct concern of this chapter. Rather, it is the portrayal of certain female personalities of the *sunna* in the major sources of the Shī'ī Muslim tradition. Here, female personalities of the *sunna* are defined as those women who were around the Prophet, and who are themselves authorities and carriers of his *sunna*. Therefore, the three most prominent women of *ahl al-bayt*, Khadīja, Fāṭima, and Zaynab, those who have come to be seen as the major female contributors to the very making of Shī'ī Muslim identity, will be discussed here. Unlike the previous chapter which discusses female personalities who were directly mentioned in the Qur'an, references in the Qur'an to female personalities of Muhammad's *sunna* are obscure and need to be supported by exegeses and traditions. Moreover, some of the women discussed here are among the Prophet's descendents and therefore their roles were played after the Qur'anic revelations. For these reasons, some of the main sources of this chapter will be the exegeses and the

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<sup>7</sup> For serious discussions, refer for example to: Donner (1998). Motzki (2000). Arafat (1958, pp. 453- 463). Zeitlin (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Refer to: Donner (1998, p. 280- 283).

<sup>9</sup> Donner (1998, p. 282- 290).

<sup>10</sup> Robinson (1996, p. 44- 45).

<sup>11</sup> Refer to: Fiorenza (1990, p. 109).

earlier books of traditions. While history is not in itself the concern here, historical sources are needed to set the framework of the discussion, particularly because political *jihād* is one of the major legacies of these women. The major historical sources of the Muslim tradition, those which have come to be seen as reliable by Muslims in general will be referred to. *Asbab al-nuzūl* are not relevant here as an independent genre because they occur in exegesis and they originate in the *sīra*.<sup>12</sup>

In the previous chapter, female personalities of the Qur'an were discussed. It was shown that some personalities were negative examples and others were positive role-models. Women in the stories of the prophets were portrayed as being at different stages of *jihād al-nafs*. Other than the more general themes of *jihād al-nafs*, the examples of Mary and Āsiyā stood out. It was argued that Mary's perfect motherhood is understood in a spiritual sense, whereby a holy mother becomes a receptive vessel and brings a holy child. Āsiyā's *jihād* was shown to have extended into a religio-political one through her defiant words to Pharaoh. In this chapter, *jihād al-nafs* remains an inconspicuous theme, perhaps due to the nature of the sources examined here. While the Qur'an as divine speech would be able to narrate the internal struggles of the heart, traditions and history books are not in a position to do that. However, the idea of a religio-political *jihād* will be expanded here. The three prominent women of *ahl al-bayt* will be shown to be examples for diverse aspects of *jihad*. Khadīja's *jihād* is mainly financial. Fāṭima's *jihād* is primarily in gaining knowledge, and then political and oratory. Zaynab's *jihād* is political, oratory, and activist. One might argue that the outer *jihād* performed by the women of *ahl al-bayt* in the most troubling times is necessarily an indication of an already accomplished *jihād al-nafs*. The example of Fāṭima, particularly her names and knowledge will indicate the most heightened spirituality among the women of

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<sup>12</sup> Rubin (1995, p. 227).

*ahl al-bayt*, and perhaps subsequently the theme of perfect motherhood as of a spiritual nature, will be confirmed in the example of Fāṭima.

The technical use of the term “*Ahl al-Bayt*” as we shall see includes five people, namely the Prophet Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭima, his cousin and son-in-law ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and their male children, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Therefore, Fāṭima is the only female among *ahl al-bayt* in the strict sense of the five impeccable individuals of the Prophet’s family. More broadly however, the term may include other members such as the sisters and daughters of the Imams. This chapter is on three generations of women, the impeccable Fāṭima, her mother Khadīja, and her daughter Zaynab. These are the most significant women of *ahl al-bayt*, particularly in their *jihād* and role in shaping Islam in general, and Shī‘ī Islam in particular. The relevance of the *jihād* of each woman will be analysed in its historico-religious context, followed by a brief discussion on whether theirs are viable models for modern Muslim women in politics. Fāṭima however, has an extra spiritual dimension of esoteric knowledge. Her status as the only impeccable female and mother to the Imams needs to be analysed thoroughly. In that respect, some comparisons with Mary will be noted.

### 3.2 Khadīja

Khadīja is included here among the women of *ahl al-bayt* even though she overlaps with the category of the wives of the Prophet, because of her circumstances and different status, to the Shī‘a at least, from the rest of the Prophet’s wives. She was the Prophet’s only wife throughout their life together in Mecca,<sup>13</sup> and therefore she is not directly included in

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<sup>13</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 391). Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 122). Also, Khadija is the only woman who bore children to the Prophet, with the exception of Mariya the Copt, who bore him Ibrahim who died as an infant. Khadija bore him before the onset of his prophetic career, al-Qasim, Ruqayya, Zaynab and Um Kulthum, and after the revelations al-Tahir, al-Tayyib, and Fatima, and some said that only Fatima was born after the revelations began (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 1, p. 439; Ibn Hisham, 1383h, vol. 1, p. 122- 123). All his male children died in infancy, and all his female children died in adulthood before their father. Only Fatima survived for a short time after the death of the Prophet. Fatima’s children are also the only descendants of the Prophet to survive into adulthood.

the Qur’anic verses (in section 2.8.1) which address the multiple wives the Prophet lived with in Medina. Moreover, she is the mother of Fāṭima and the grandmother of the Imams, and suffice to say that Khadīja is often included in the supplications, taught by the Imams themselves, directed towards the members of *ahl al-bayt*.<sup>14</sup>

Traditions credit Khadīja with two main contributions; her reassurance for her husband the Prophet upon receiving his first revelation, and her financial assistance in teaching his monotheistic message.

Khadīja bint Khuwaylid was a successful businesswoman widowed twice and already a mother to two or three children,<sup>15</sup> when she employed Muhammad, who was fifteen years her senior, then offered to marry him.<sup>16</sup> This woman is portrayed as unbound by conventions, such as when she offered to pay her own dowry due to the Prophet’s poverty, a move which caused controversy among the elders of Mecca.<sup>17</sup>

When the first revelation came to him, the Prophet is said to have returned to Khadīja trembling, asking her to cover him. He was worried he might have become a jinn-inspired poet, or a man possessed.<sup>18</sup> Khadīja reportedly was supportive with a crucial *ḥadīth* reminding Muḥammad of his excellent qualities saying, “Nay by God, God will never disgrace you; you do good unto the kindred, bear the burden of the infirm, bestow alms on the poor, entertain the guest, and you help in cases of recurring obligations”.<sup>19</sup> This tradition implies that Khadīja believed in a God that was good and just, thus her reassurance to her husband, that since you are good to people, God will be good to you.<sup>20</sup> Muslim tradition also

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<sup>14</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 577). Saduq (1404ha, vol. 2, p. 596). Tusi (1390hb, vol. 6, p. 118).

<sup>15</sup> Kister (1997, p. 123-125). Subhani (1984, p. 156).

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 121). Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 34-35). Subhani (1984, p. 147-156).

<sup>17</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 374-375).

<sup>18</sup> Lings (1994, p. 44).

<sup>19</sup> Hadith translation from: Kister (1965, pp. 27- 32). Other traditions narrate that Khadija recognised that Gabriel was an angel not a demon when he was sitting in her house, and then the Prophet informed her that Gabriel left when she and her husband started getting intimate. Refer to: Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 157).

<sup>20</sup> For various interpretations regarding her crucial statement, refer to: Kister (1965), and Dutton (n.d.) (although the latter’s link between sanity and altruism is not entirely clear).



adds that she then went to her uncle Waraqa b. Nawfal, a Christian scholar, and confided in him, but Waraqa assured the couple that this was the very angel that spoke to the prophet Moses before.<sup>21</sup>

Thus Khadīja became the first person to accept Islam,<sup>22</sup> followed by ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet’s cousin who was in his care and a member of his household.<sup>23</sup> The sources describe how early on, these three, namely the Prophet, Khadīja, and ‘Alī were the first to perform the Muslim style prayers in the vicinity of the Ka‘ba while it was as yet an unusual form of worship to the Arabs.<sup>24</sup>

Khadīja was with the Prophet and Muslims when they starved in the desert as a result of the boycott imposed by the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh, on all his clan of Banū Hāshim and the Muslims.<sup>25</sup> Soon after the annulment of the ban, Khadīja died, and was followed by Abū Ṭālib who had been the Prophet’s uncle and protector.<sup>26</sup> Her status as not only a wife and supporter but protector is revealed in an authentic tradition which confirms that the Prophet felt insecure in Mecca without her.<sup>27</sup>

Khadīja is renowned for spending her wealth in the cause of Islam. One Qur’anic verse addresses the Prophet, “Did he (God) not find you destitute and enrich you?” [93: 8] is widely interpreted as a reference to Khadīja’s money which she put in the service of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 123, and 156). Nisaburi (1388h, vol. 3, p. 184).

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 158-159).

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 162). Hakim (1406h, vol. 3, p. 133).

<sup>24</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 250). Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 56). Ibn Sa’d (n.d, vol. 8, p. 18). Hakim (1406h, vol. 3, p. 183).

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 234, and 251-254). Subhani (1984, p. 260-264).

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 2, p. 282). This came to be known as “the year of sadness”, in; Lings (1994, p. 96).

<sup>27</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 8, p. 340). Moreover, he used to mention her often in his later life in Medina, and he continued to honour her friends and the people that loved her by sending them meat for food any time he received it or slaughtered an animal (Hakim, 1406h, vol. 3, p. 186, and vol. 4, p. 175, 286).

Prophet of Islam.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it is reported that the Prophet declared, “No money has been more useful to me than that of Khadīja”.<sup>29</sup>

Her piety and excellence are often repeated themes in traditions.<sup>30</sup> For example, it is narrated that while in her home, Gabriel asked the Prophet to send to Khadīja his regards/peace, to which Khadīja replied, “Verily, God is peace, from him is peace and to him is peace, and upon Gabriel may there be peace”.<sup>31</sup> A widely reported tradition mentions that she is among four women who are “the most excellent women of paradise”; these are Khadīja, Fāṭima, Mary, and Āsiyā,<sup>32</sup> thereby putting Khadīja and her daughter Fāṭima next to the two examples for the believers in the Qur’an.

Khadīja is therefore credited with two favours to the Prophet. The first one is her positive reassurance to him regarding his sanity when he was in self-doubt. She is portrayed as the voice of calm and reason during his emotional distress, and she took the Prophet a step forward by consulting Waraqa. The second favour is her spending in the cause of Islam, when it was still a small movement which broke from customs and brought about much persecution. The Qur’an very often encourages financial *jihād* as a necessary and intrinsic aspect of *jihād*, “Such believers as sit at home -- unless they have an injury -- are not the

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<sup>28</sup> Kufi (1410h, p. 569). Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 20, p. 311).

<sup>29</sup> Tusi (1414h, p. 468). Several other traditions exist around the value of Khadija’s money to the Prophet and to Islam, but these have not been authenticated.

<sup>30</sup> For example, she was promised paradise, in: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 3, p. 218, 219). Hakim (1406h, vol. 3, p. 185).

<sup>31</sup> ‘Ayyashi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 279). Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 1, p. 158-159).

<sup>32</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 5, p. 377). Hakim (1406h, vol. 2, p. 497, and vol. 3, p. 185-186). Unfortunately, there is a peculiar but allegedly sound tradition which narrates that while on her death bed, the Prophet told Khadija to send his greeting for her co-wives in Paradise. She enquired about them and he answered that they are Mary, Kulthum the sister of Moses, and Asiya. Notice that this implies that his wives in Paradise are the women described as the excellent women of Paradise, except for his daughter Fatima being replaced by Moses’ sister. Khadija allegedly congratulated him (Saduq, 1404ha, vol. 1, p. 139). Several issues make this tradition suspicious, not least is the insensitivity towards his wife to whom he remained loyal throughout her life. The expression used for co-wives is the pre-Islamic “*dara’ir*” which was not used in Islam because it comes from the word *darar* or harm, signifying that polygamy is harmful to the wives (Ibn Manzur, 1405h, vol. 4, p. 486-487). Worst of all, but the element most telling of this tradition’s falsity is the lack of shame in neglecting the status of the virgin Mary accorded to her by the Qur’an, by including her among the Prophet’s co-wives. It is as though the male chauvinist mind, through this tradition, wished to portray the most respected women who happened to be either unmarried (Kulthum and Mary) or not subdued by their husbands (Asiya and Khadija) as *dara’ir* and therefore “put in their right place” in Paradise.

equals of those who struggle in the path of God with their possessions and their selves. God has preferred in rank those who struggle with their possessions and their selves over the ones who sit at home...” [4: 95].<sup>33</sup>

Khadija is an interesting example because she is a woman of both the so-called *Jāhiliyya* period as well as Islam. She is seen by later Muslims themselves as a financially independent woman, who possessed the courage and power to challenge social customs when she married a younger man and paid her own dowry, and later when she actively supported the project of monotheism. She is also seen, with Abū Ṭālib, as the Prophet’s protector in Mecca, and her death was one instigator for the emigration of Muslims. Therefore, it must be taken into consideration that there is a link between her financial independence and her courage to move independently in society. Khadija sets the example of an active spiritual *jihād*, that is, faith followed by action. But especially significant for women, is that she is the example of financial independence being a necessary step towards forcing social and even religious change. This is made clear in the Qur’an where financial *jihād* is seen as an integral part of *jihād*.

### 3.3 Fāṭima al-Zahrā’

Fāṭima is a member of *ahl al-bayt* and considered by the Shī’a to be one of the “Fourteen Impeccables”,<sup>34</sup> which include the Prophet Muḥammad, Fāṭima, and the twelve Imams beginning with her husband ‘Alī, and their children Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Not much is known about her by way of biography, and yet she is considered a role model for Muslim women. Her names point out to her spiritual status, as do the Prophet’s sayings about her. Some of the major Qur’anic verses and traditions that describe *ahl al-bayt* will be included here since she is among them. Furthermore, various dimensions concerning her position as the only impeccable female member of *ahl al-bayt* and as mother of the Imams will be

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<sup>33</sup> Other verses that mention financial *jihad* are: [8: 72], [9: 20, 44, 81, and 88], and [49: 51].

<sup>34</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 22).

analysed. Fāṭima's experience in politics after the death of her father will be examined. The final events of her life followed by her death constitute a landmark in Shī'ī history and identity. A mystical doctrine has developed around Fāṭima, particularly in Ismā'īlī and later Imāmī texts.<sup>35</sup> This section is based on the earlier and more authoritative sources; however, in the final discussion on the general image of Fāṭima, the various trends in her hagiography, past and present, will be described.

### 3.3.1 Her Names and Traits

The many names given to Fāṭima in the traditions tend to highlight her spirituality and excellence, as well as her closeness to the Prophet.<sup>36</sup>

The most commonly used name for Fatima is *al-Zahrā'*, which means "the radiant". Traditions explain that she was named *al-Zahrā'* because God created her from the light of his grandness (as he created the Prophet and Imams), and another tradition explains that when she prayed, her light shone to the people of heaven like the light of the planets shine to the people of the earth.<sup>37</sup> The theme of Fāṭima's light will also occur in the Qur'anic context, in relation to her children the Imams (in 3.3.5.2).

Another one of her names is *al-Batūl*. *Al-Batūl*, in language, is originally a description of a palm branch that is disconnected from its mother and does not need it.<sup>38</sup> In its religious meaning, it is to be disconnected from the world and loyal to God, as for example in the Qur'an [73: 8].<sup>39</sup> The woman *batūl* is one who is detached from men and has

<sup>35</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 159 footnote no. 152). Also refer to: Lawson (2007, p. 149-150), where the author briefly discusses the differing views of each of Lammens and Massignon on Fatima. Corbin (1977).

<sup>36</sup> For example, some names that won't be discussed here due to their seemingly later origins are "*hawra' insiyya*" (a human angel) and "*umm abiha*" (her mother's father). On the former, traditions explain that the Prophet was instructed to withdraw from Khadija for forty days and spend them in fasting and prayers. On the final night he was told to conjugate with Khadija, with the promise that a pure offspring will be conceived (Qazwini, 1991, p. 31-39). Other similar reports on the name *hawra'* may be found in: Saduq (1404h**b**, vol. 2, p. 107). On the latter name of *umm abiha*, very little is known and its possible meanings remains a subject of speculation.

<sup>37</sup> Saduq (1386h, vol. 1, p. 179-181).

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 11, p. 42-3).

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 11 p. 42-43).

no desire for them, or is a virgin and does not marry.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Mary was called *al-Batūl* in the Islamic tradition because she was a virgin and had no desire to marry, and Fāṭima was called *al-Batūl* because she departed from the women of her time and her nation in that she exceeded them in favour, religious path, and lineage.<sup>41</sup>

In Shī'ī *ḥadīth* however, *al-Batūl* takes an unusual meaning, which is to be cut off from menstruation. One authentic tradition says that God instructed the Prophet to name his daughter Fāṭima (literally “the woman who weans”) because “God had weaned her on knowledge, and off menstruation (*innī faṭamṭuki bi-l-‘ilm wa faṭamṭuki ‘an al-ṭamath*)”.<sup>42</sup> However, in what may seem as a contradiction, a tradition that discusses legal tenets pertaining to menstruants indicates that this is what the Prophet instructed Fāṭima and what Fāṭima taught Muslim women, and in another version that he instructed this to Fāṭima and his wives.<sup>43</sup> The compiler’s footnote explains that this is not a reference to Fāṭima al-Zahrā’, but another woman named Fāṭima who happens to be mentioned often in legal books due to her long menstrual periods.

Concerning the contradiction among these authentic traditions, it is important to note that when Shī'ī traditions mention Fāṭima, it is normally taken to mean the daughter of the Prophet, since in other cases additional identification is made. Moreover, the manner in which Fāṭima is mentioned here, as the one who taught the rest of the Muslim women, or as one who received the Prophet’s instructions along with his wives, gives the impression that this was the Prophet’s daughter and that he gave these kinds of instructions only to the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 11, p. 42-43), and compiler’s footnote in: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 509).

<sup>41</sup> The fact that the term *batul* has several meanings is evident in a tradition which narrates that a woman came to the Prophet and told him that she is a *mutabattila*. He asked her “what does *tabattul* mean for you (or what do you mean by *tabattul*)?” She answered that she does not marry, so the Prophet inquired about the reason, she answered that she seeks God’s favours. The Prophet then answered her that if there were favours in that, Fatima would have done it before her for no one exceeds Fatima in grace (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 5, p. 509).

<sup>42</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 460). Another tradition in *al-Kaḥī* claims that all daughters of prophets do not menstruate (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 1, p. 458).

<sup>43</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 3, p. 104-105, and vol. 4, p. 136).

female members of his household due to the intimacy of the matter, expecting them in turn to teach it to other women.

The problem of Fāṭima's lack of menstruation might be related to the traditions' competition with Mary, or an answer to the problem of Fāṭima being an impeccable female. These possibilities will be analysed thoroughly in the discussion (section 3.3.7).

Fāṭima was also reportedly given the title “doyenne of the women of the worlds (*Sayyidat Nisā' al-‘Ālamīn*)” by the Prophet, and her husband ‘Alī is portrayed to have taken pride in it.<sup>44</sup> However, there is some ambiguity in this title, as the traditions sometimes call her the “doyenne of the women of Paradise”,<sup>45</sup> and other times, more common among Muslims in general, she is the “doyenne of the women of the *umma*”.<sup>46</sup> Some traditions report that the Prophet said that Fāṭima is the doyenue of women, with the exception of Mary.<sup>47</sup> These variations point out to the obvious tension between the claim that Fāṭima is the doyenue of all women and the Qur’anic description of Mary as having been elected over all women [3: 42]. In Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s interpretation of the verse, he explains that confining Mary’s excellence to the women of her world and age is not compatible with the generality expressed in the verse.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Ṭūsī mentions an opinion that the election of Mary over all women is only in reference to the miraculous birth of her son.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, while traditions agree in so far as Fāṭima is the doyenue of women, they disagree

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<sup>44</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 459). Tusi (1390hb, vol. 6, p. 118). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 336 and vol. 5, p. 599).

<sup>45</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 2, p. 603). Hakim (1406h, vol. 3, p. 151). Saduq (1386h), reports a tradition which claims that the angels used to speak to Fatima and tell her that she has been elected, purified, and elected over the women of all worlds, in exactly the same words with which the Qur’an narrates Mary’s episode. So Fatima enquires whether this is not the place of Mary, to which the angels answer that Mary was the doyenue of women of her age, while you Fatima are the doyenue of women of her age and your age, and the doyenue of the first and the last women (Saduq, 1386h, p. 182). But it is to be noted that Saduq himself did not include the latter in his authentic compilation (1404ha), which might show that he was aware of the weakness of this tradition.

<sup>46</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 2, p. 420). Bukhari (1401h, vol. 4, p. 183, 209, 219, and vol. 7, p. 142). Muslim (n.d., vol. 7, p. 143- 144). Ibn Sa’d (n.d., vol. 2, p. 248).

<sup>47</sup> Hakim (1406h, vol. 3, p. 154, vol. 4, p. 44).

<sup>48</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 189).

<sup>49</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 2, p. 456).

about her prominence over which women. In all cases, this title indicates to the Shī'a at least, that Fāṭima is the best role model for Muslim women, and hence the relevance of her experience.

Finally, an important tradition which is considered authentic by all Muslims reports that the Prophet said of his daughter, "Fāṭima is a part of me (*biḍ'atun minnī*), whoever angers her has angered me,"<sup>50</sup> and in another version that God gets angry for her anger, and is pleased when she is pleased.<sup>51</sup> Being a part of the Prophet is understood to mean more than a physical biological part of him, but an organic connection with the Prophet.<sup>52</sup> The reference given her anger and her satisfaction indicates that Fāṭima's emotions are given credence, because when Fāṭima gets angry it is for the sake of God and religion.<sup>53</sup> While women's emotions may normally be subject to ridicule and even contempt, Fāṭima's emotions are cause for reverence, considering what they may be telling of God's own feelings.

To sum up, Fāṭima's names, among them *al-Zahrā'* and *al-Batūl*, reflect her radiance, detachment from the material world and commitment to worship. The theme of light will be explored further in reference to the light of prophethood and *imāma* (heirdom/guardianship) which Fāṭima is said to assemble. The understanding of *al-Batūl* as a non-menstruant might correspond to her perceived angel-like qualities, although this understanding will be challenged in the discussion section (3.4) as potentially derogatory to women and further, as possibly indicative of efforts to subdue her power. Fāṭima is also *Sayyidat Nisā' al-'Ālamīn*, which makes her a role model for all Muslim women. The idea that Fāṭima's anger causes

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<sup>50</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 4, p. 125). Bukhari (1401h, vol. 4, p. 210, 219).

<sup>51</sup> Saduq (1404hb, vol. 1, p. 51). Hakim (1406h, vol. 3, p. 154).

<sup>52</sup> Fadlallah (1421h).

<sup>53</sup> Fadlallah (1421h). The seriousness of this statement causes Fadlallah to stress that, being God's messenger, the Prophet does not speak out of his personal inclinations [53: 3], particularly when he makes statements with such far-reaching consequences as Fatima's anger being an extension of God's anger, or that she is the doyenne of women.

divine anger sets Fāṭima as a criterion by way of whom actions may be judged. This statement will prove crucial for the Shī'a who define themselves in relation to Fāṭima's satisfaction in this world, by being on her side in her political stance, and in the hereafter by hoping for her intercession (*shafā'a*).

### 3.3.2 Among Ahl al-Bayt

As discussed in this chapter's introduction, many statements in the Qur'an, including those understood to be on *ahl al-bayt* are obscure and depend on traditions and *sīra* literature to corroborate them. Four verses on *ahl al-bayt* will be discussed here, in addition to the one reference which is to Fāṭima exclusively. There is detailed treatment of the status of *ahl al-bayt* in the traditions. These describe *ahl al-bayt* as an exemplary family, and they discuss their creation from light, their worship, their knowledge, and their material poverty and generosity. The depiction of *ahl al-bayt* in the Qur'an and traditions here aims to reveal Fatima's status as among impeccable persons, with the authority that is due to her as a result.

#### 3.3.2.1 In the Qur'an

The Qur'anic reference to *al-Kawthar* [108: 1] is interpreted by several exegetes as a reference to Fāṭima. This Qur'anic chapter of three verses is said to have been revealed when some people called the Prophet *abtar*, someone who has no son hence his blood line is severed, after the death of his boys in infancy.<sup>54</sup> These verses were revealed saying, "Surely We have given thee abundance (*al-kawthar*); so pray unto thy Lord and sacrifice. Surely he that hates thee, he is the one cut off/without posterity (*al-abtar*)" [108: 1- 3]. In language, *al-Kawthar* is a derivative of the word "many" and means "much goodness", and in religion it is a river in Paradise.<sup>55</sup> Exegeses understand *al-Kawthar* here in both its meanings.<sup>56</sup> Some

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<sup>54</sup> Nisaburi (1388h p. 306- 307).

<sup>55</sup> Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 10, p. 458- 460).

<sup>56</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 10, p. 417- 418).



exegetes however, add that it is also a reference to the purified descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fāṭima.<sup>57</sup> These explain that this revelation was an answer to the people who tried to slander the Prophet because he had no sons, and without this interpretation, the final verse, that his insulter is the one without posterity, would be meaningless.<sup>58</sup> Fāṭima's children were the only surviving descendants of the Prophet, but since her children were not yet born at the time of this revelation, *al-Kawthar* is understood as a reference to Fāṭima herself, and the children she would bring in the future.<sup>59</sup>

Other verses are on *ahl al-bayt* as a collective, four of these are seen as most important, and they clarify Fāṭima's status in Shī'ī piety.

First is the “verse of purification”, “People of the House (*ahl al-bayt*), God only desires to put away from you abomination and to cleanse you with a thorough cleansing/purification” [33: 33]. According to traditions, the Prophet called on ‘Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn, brought them together under his cloak and spoke to God saying these are my family and my elite (in another version, my weight) so purify them a thorough purification. Umm Salama, the Prophet's wife whose house they were in wished to come under the cloak with them and asked the Prophet, “Am I not of your family?” He did not allow her to join them but answered, “You are on the right path.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the verse is understood to be proof of their impeccability.<sup>61</sup>

Second is the “verse of the challenge (*al-mubāhala*)”, “And whoso disputes with thee concerning him (Jesus), after the knowledge that has come to thee, say: ‘Come now, let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, our selves and your selves, then let

<sup>57</sup> Kashani (1416h, vol. 5, p. 382). Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 20, p. 370- 371).

<sup>58</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 20, p. 370).

<sup>59</sup> Refer to: Fadlallah (2002, p. 13-14).

<sup>60</sup> Nisaburi (1388h, p. 239). Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 287). Muslim (n.d., vol. 7, p. 130).

<sup>61</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 8, p. 339-341). Moreover, in the traditions, the Prophet is said to have advised his community that the Qur'an and *ahl al-bayt* are “the two weighty matters (*al-thaqalayn*)” which he is leaving behind, and that these two will not separate until they meet him in the pool of *al-kawthar* in Paradise, in: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 294). Muslim (n.d., vol. 7, p. 123).

us humbly pray and so lay God's curse upon the ones who lie” [3: 61]. The occasion of revelation is that a Christian delegation came to the Prophet and debated with him about Islam and the nature of Jesus, as the passage preceding this verse indicates. Then when the conversation reached a deadlock, this verse was revealed and the Prophet proposed the challenge. Muslim traditions record that the Prophet took with him to the challenge ‘Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn,<sup>62</sup> and Shī‘ī scholars view this incident as highly significant.

Ṭabāṭabā‘ī notes that the two statements about the knowledge that has come to the Prophet, and the invitation to the challenge are linked grammatically with the letter *f* (*fa qul*), which makes the challenge a branch or a result of that knowledge.<sup>63</sup> He adds that the prayer to invoke the curse of God upon the liars infers that the people present at both sides are all participants in certain claims, because lying does not occur except in someone who has a claim. To him, this makes *ahl al-bayt* present at the challenge, partners with the Prophet in his claims and calling.<sup>64</sup> He did not bring members of his community even though they were believers, because faith alone has no stakes in such a challenge that involves cursing and punishment.<sup>65</sup>

This leads to another observation which is that the people the Prophet brought to the challenge were not merely a sample of the Muslim community; otherwise he would have brought at least two men in addition to himself, along with three women and three children, since the verse commands to bring from each side, the children, the women, and the men, all in the plural form (neither singular nor the Arabic double). Yet there were present two children, one woman, and two men, therefore, neither group amounts to the grammatically

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<sup>62</sup> Nisaburi (1388h, p. 67-68). Muslim (n.d., vol. 7, p. 120-121).

<sup>63</sup> Tabataba‘ī (1402h, vol. 3, p. 222).

<sup>64</sup> Tabataba‘ī (1402h, vol. 3, p. 224- 227).

<sup>65</sup> Tabataba‘ī (1402h, vol. 3, p. 226).

plural. This is taken to mean that he found none other than these individuals to supplicate with.<sup>66</sup>

Third is the “verse of the relatives”, “Say: ‘I do not ask of you a wage for this, except love for the kinsfolk” [42: 23]. In traditions and exegeses, this is love for the Prophet’s kindred, particularly *ahl al-bayt* and the Imams.<sup>67</sup> In Shī’ī exegesis, the verse’s specification that love for the Prophet’s kin is a fee means that it is a part of accepting the message.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, this fee of love for *ahl al-bayt* is interpreted as a means to explain to people that they ought to refer to them in all matters of religious knowledge.<sup>69</sup> A religious and philosophical argument on the relationship between love and authority has been made elsewhere.<sup>70</sup>

Fourth is a passage which narrates that the righteous shall drink of a cup whose mixture is of camphor, that these are those who fulfil their vows, fear the day of judgement, and give food in spite of their love for it, to the needy, the orphan and the captive, saying, “We feed you only for the face of God; we desire no recompense from you, no thankfulness”

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<sup>66</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 3, p. 226).

<sup>67</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 413, vol. 8, p. 93). Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 275-276). One tradition elaborates with the observation that other prophets particularly Noah and Hud say in the Qur’an, that they ask for no fee and that God will give them their due fee, whereas Muhammad asked for love for his kindred because, the tradition contends, God knew that they would always be on the path of truth, in: Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 2, p. 349 and 372).

<sup>68</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 18, p. 42-43). Moreover, Tabataba’i goes through the various other interpretations of *al-qurba*. The idea that the verse asks Quraysh to love him for his kinship if not for his prophecy is wrong because Quraysh did not accept Islam so they could not be asked for a fee. Moreover, if they did accept it then accepting Muhammad as Prophet would have erased hatred from their hearts and no such love for kin would have been asked. Asking for a fee assumes their genuine faith and gratitude for what he brought. The second opinion that this could be addressed to the *ansar* since they are related to the Prophet from his mother’s side is also untenable because they are the people who welcomed him and the emigrants of Mecca with him. Third, as for the fee being a love for kindred in general, Tabataba’i explains that even though love for kindred is highly recommended in Islam, it is in the sense of maintaining good relations with them and supporting them financially, but Islam is not concerned about love for family members as such, because religion is only concerned about love for God and equates nothing with it. In this respect, Tabataba’i refers his readers to the Qur’anic verse [58: 22]. Moreover, Tabataba’i reminds us that pagans also love their kin therefore, that may hardly be considered a fee for the Prophet’s message (Tabataba’i, 1402h, vol. 18, p. 43-46).

<sup>69</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 18, p. 46). He adds that this does not negate the other verses whereby the Prophet, as the ones before him, asks for no fee [12: 104] because this is a reminder for human kind, and [25: 57] where he further explains that he asks for no fee, except that whomsoever wills may take a way unto his Lord. However, since God has prescribed love for all believers, the Prophet would consider love for his kin, who are among the believers, to be his fee.

<sup>70</sup> Lawson (2007, p. 167-170).

[76: 5- 10]. It is narrated, with slight variation, that the occasion of revelation of this was when Ḥasan and Ḥusayn got ill, and their parents vowed to fast for three days upon their recovery. Fāṭima prepared some barley bread to break their fast with. On the first day a needy person came to them and asked for food so they gave it to him, on the second day an orphan asked so they gave him their bread, and on the third day a captive came to them and they did the same.<sup>71</sup> The Qur’anic passage continues to describe the heavenly rewards for these righteous people [76: 11- 22]. This particular passage does not mention *al-Ḥūr al-ʿĪn* even though it describes luxurious rewards, and even though *al-Ḥūr al-ʿĪn* are normally among the frequently described rewards of Paradise, which has been interpreted as a token of respect for Fāṭima who is intended in this passage.<sup>72</sup>

It must be kept in mind, that Fāṭima, who is seen as *al-Kawthar* or much goodness and the one to carry the Prophet’s descendants, is not only a mother therefore, but shares *ahl al-bayt*’s attributes of purification and impeccability, firm knowledge and partnership in the Prophet’s mission, love and authority are due to her, and she is a model of servitude for all Muslims.

### 3.3.2.2 In the Sunna

Authentic traditions explain that the angel had informed the Prophet to “marry the light to the light”, and upon the Prophet’s further enquiry the angel explained that he meant Fāṭima to ‘Alī.<sup>73</sup> Another report from the Prophet is that, had God not created ‘Alī for Fāṭima, she would have never found her match.<sup>74</sup>

Traditions speak of the material poverty this exemplary couple lived in, in addition to their cooperation within their household.<sup>75</sup> There are many traditions, particularly in the

<sup>71</sup> Nisaburi (1388h, p. 296). Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 398).

<sup>72</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 20, p. 131).

<sup>73</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 460- 461).

<sup>74</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 461). Saduq (1404h, vol. 3, p. 393).

<sup>75</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 377- 378).

later *ḥadīth* compilations, on Fāṭima's generosity and alms giving. These serve various purposes, such as to show her contentment with the little that she had, or to teach the moral that alms return to the person who gives them, or to show that *ahl al-bayt* are required to be servants and live as the poorest in their community.<sup>76</sup> Several traditions describe the couple's cooperation in the housework, one states that "The Prince of the Faithful ('Alī) would chop the wood, irrigate, and sweep the floor, while Fāṭima would grind, knead, and bake."<sup>77</sup>

Perhaps the most important feature of *ahl al-bayt* is the depiction that they were taught privately by the Prophet, all aspects of the Qur'an and its meanings. There is a long tradition from 'Alī, in which he refers to the differences among the companions in their capacity for knowledge. He then adds that he used to sit with the Prophet twice a day, once during the day and another at night, when the Prophet would teach him the Qur'an, its meanings, its esoteric interpretations, and all the various aspects of it. 'Alī added that these sittings happened mostly in his own house, in which case neither Fāṭima nor their children were asked to leave. That is contrary to when anyone other than *ahl al-bayt* was present.<sup>78</sup>

In other traditions however, it is the transmission of light from the Prophet to his heirs which is the most important element in their heirdom (*waṣīyya*).<sup>79</sup> These narrate that before the creation of the world, God made a luminous ray spring forth from his own divine light, and from that ray he made a second one. The first ray is that of Muḥammad and prophethood, and is the domain of exoteric knowledge, the second ray is that of 'Alī and the *imāma* or *wilāya* (guardianship) and is the domain of the esoteric.<sup>80</sup> Of course, the Prophet also has the esoteric knowledge and is therefore also a *walī*, but he reserves teaching this to

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<sup>76</sup> Majlisi (1403h vol. 43, p. 81-89).

<sup>77</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 86).

<sup>78</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 63-64). This excludes Salman al-Farisi, who as history and traditions report, was considered among *ahl al-bayt*.

<sup>79</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 42).

<sup>80</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 29-30).

the Imams. On the other hand, the Imam is never considered a prophet.<sup>81</sup> Other traditions relate how the primordial light that was derived from divine light belongs to *ahl al-bayt*, the five “people of the cloak”, or to the “Fourteen Impeccables”, Muḥammad, Fāṭima, and the twelve Imams.<sup>82</sup> In the latter case, where the light of the twelve Imams represent the *wilayā*, Fāṭima’s light is placed at the junction of the two lights of prophethood and *imāma*.<sup>83</sup> She is therefore known as the “Confluence of the Two Lights (*Majma‘ al-Nūrayn*)”.<sup>84</sup> Sometimes however, Fāṭima and her light are passed over in silence in favour of the light of the Prophet and Imams.<sup>85</sup>

In an authentic tradition, Imam al-Ṣādiq is asked about the Qur’anic verse [24: 35]; “Concerning God’s word, may He be exalted, ‘God is the light of the heavens and of the earth. His light may be likened to a lamp-niche,’ Abū ‘Abd Allāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq), peace be upon him, said the following: Fāṭima, peace be upon her, ‘Within her is a lamp.’ Ḥasan is ‘the lamp within a glass.’ Ḥusayn is ‘the glass, like unto a glittering star.’ Fāṭima is a ‘glittering star’ among the women of the people of the lower world, a star that ‘is enkindled from a blessed tree.’ Abraham, upon him be peace, is ‘an olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west,’ neither Jewish nor Christian. ‘Its oil gives light almost of itself’: Knowledge virtually bursts forth by means of it. ‘Even if untouched by fire. Light upon light’: that is, one Imam after another proceeds therefrom.”<sup>86</sup> Here, the lamp-niche is interpreted as Fāṭima, in a womb-metaphor which describes her as the birthplace and the very source of light of the Imams.<sup>87</sup> This image of Fāṭima is reminiscent of her as *al-Kawthar*.

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<sup>81</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 29).

<sup>82</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 30), quoting Ibn Babuʿay among others.

<sup>83</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 30).

<sup>84</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 29).

<sup>85</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 30).

<sup>86</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 195). This translation is borrowed from Pinault (1998, p. 74), although Pinault understands Abu ‘Abd Allāh as Imam Husayn, it is more likely Imam al-Sadiq.

<sup>87</sup> Pinault (1998, p. 74-75).

Fāṭima also has her own unique contributions to worship, such as the words of praise reportedly taught to her by the Prophet known as “the Praise of the Radiant” (*Tasbīḥ al-Zahrāʾ*)<sup>88</sup> as well as a particular set of prayers that are named after her (*Ṣalāt Fāṭima*), presumably because she used to perform them.<sup>89</sup>

There are also two traditions which describe Fāṭima’s appreciation and recording of knowledge. In an authentic tradition, a man came to her asking her to teach him something, she asked her maid for the writing piece, when she couldn’t find it, she said, “Get it, it is for me equal to Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. This is the inheritance of the messenger of God”.<sup>90</sup> This narration seems to suggest that Fāṭima used to be visited by men and answer their religious queries.<sup>91</sup>

Also, the famous and mysterious book of Fāṭima (*Muṣḥaf Fāṭima*) is said to be a book three times the size of the Qur’an. Traditions report that when the Prophet died, the angels used to speak to Fāṭima to comfort her, tell her of her father’s station, and the future of her descendents. She told this to ‘Alī, and complained about not being able to memorise what she was told by the angel, so he suggested that she tell him what she hears and that he would record it. One tradition explains that there is no information on the legal and the prohibited in the book but revelations concerning future events. Another tradition says that in this book is not another Qur’an, as some accusations against the Shī‘a suggest, but it contains what makes the people refer to the Imams for knowledge, while the Imams refer to no one. Another report says that in the book is Fāṭima’s will.<sup>92</sup> In an authentic tradition that

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<sup>88</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 1, p. 321).

<sup>89</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol.3, p. 368-369).

<sup>90</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 6).

<sup>91</sup> Fadlallah (2002, p. 47).

<sup>92</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 238-241). It may be added here that the Imam does not know the hidden (*ghayb*) except if he asks to know (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 1, p. 257).

is in line with the view of Fāṭima as the source of the Imams' knowledge, Imam al-Riḍā explains that the rightful Imam is the one who is in possession of *Muṣḥaf Fāṭima*.<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, Fāṭima shares all the attributes of light and knowledge with ahl al-bayt, but is distinguished from them through her unique feminine position which makes her a daughter and mother, thereby serving as a link between prophethood and *imāma*. Thus, she is “Confluence of the Two Lights” as well as al-*Kawthar*. While the light metaphor sometimes favours emphasis on the Prophet and Imams, in one authentic tradition which explains a Qur’anic verse, she is seen as the source of the light and knowledge of the Imams. Fāṭima’s appreciation of knowledge is apparent in the traditions where she is described as eager to keep the knowledge that was given to her by the Prophet and the angels. Possession of her written legacy is one sign of the true Imam. In the discussion section (3.3.7), her motherhood of the Imams in light of her own status will be analysed further.

### 3.3.3 Her Jihād

There are no reports on Fāṭima’s involvement in politics except after her father’s death. The scale of her contribution is relative; it mostly revolves around one major speech directed at the new caliph, and some talks to the people and women of Medina, in addition to her will regarding her burial arrangements. To understand the reasons for her fierce political stance and the relevance of her contribution, some background is needed.

#### 3.3.3.1 Background: *Ghadīr Khum*, *Saqīfa*, and *Fadak*

There are a number of verses and traditions which the Shī‘a understand to be on the *wilāya* of ‘Alī.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps the most important among them is the Prophet’s declaration at Ghadīr Khum. After his last pilgrimage, on the way back to Medina, the Prophet and Muslims stopped at Ghadīr Khum, where they all prayed, “and then he took ‘Alī by the hand

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<sup>93</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 4, p. 418-419).

<sup>94</sup> For a concise list of such traditions and their various Sunni and Shi’i sources, refer to: Momen (1985, p. 12-17). Also refer to [5: 55] and its ‘occasion of revelation’ as the proclamation of the *wilāya* of ‘Alī.



and said to the people: ‘Do you not acknowledge that I have a greater claim on each of the believers than they have on themselves?’ And they replied: ‘Yes!’ And he took ‘Alī’s hand and said: “Of whomsoever I am lord, then ‘Alī is also his lord (*man kuntu mawlāhu fa ‘Aliun mawlāh*). O God! Be thou the supporter of whoever supports ‘Alī and the enemy of whoever opposes him’.”<sup>95</sup> While the Shī‘a understand the word *mawla* as master, and patron, others understand it as a friend, nearest kin, and confidant.<sup>96</sup>

The main disagreement among Muslims upon their Prophet’s death was a disagreement on the issue of succession. This, to the Shī‘a at least, was not merely a political disagreement but essentially a religious one as well.

According to Ibn Ishāq, upon the Prophet’s death, the *anṣār* (“helpers”, people of Medina who welcomed and supported the Prophet and Islam) gathered in the hall (*saqīfā*) of Banū Sā‘ida inclining towards the leadership of Sa‘d b. ‘Ubāda, a few companions withdrew with Banū Hāshim into the house of Fāṭima, while the rest of the *muhājirūn* (“emigrants”, converts to Islam who migrated with the Prophet to Medina) gathered around Abū Bakr. Then someone came to Abū Bakr and informed him of the *anṣār* gathering in *saqīfat Banī Sā‘ida*, warning him to take action if he wished to have command over the people, before the *anṣār*’s actions become serious. At that point the Prophet’s body was still in his house, and the burial arrangements not yet completed, and his family had closed the door of the

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<sup>95</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 287, 294-296, vol. 4, p. 566, vol. 8, p. 27). Translation from: Momen (1985, p. 15), who quotes Ibn Hanbal’s version, although for some odd reason the author writes lord with a capital “L”. The more precise context of this tradition is sometimes told that some people had complained about ‘Ali upon their return with him from a campaign to Yemen. His army wished to dress some of their acquired linen clothing to meet the Prophet in pilgrimage, but ‘Ali ordered them that the booty must be handed to the Prophet untouched. When the Prophet heard of their resentment towards ‘Ali, he told the people not to blame ‘Ali for being too scrupulous in his path towards God, and then made the famous declaration, in: Lings (1994, p. 335), and Subhani (1984, p. 743-744).

<sup>96</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 21). Also refer to Ibn Sa‘d (n.d., vol. 5, p. 320), who shows that while the tradition is widely accepted, its meaning is subject to disagreement.

house.<sup>97</sup> ‘Umar suggested to Abū Bakr that they go to their brothers the *anṣār*, to see what they are doing.<sup>98</sup> After a lot of clamour, and tribal feuds had been rekindled,<sup>99</sup> it was decided that there must be one leader to the unified community and that he ought to be from Quraysh.<sup>100</sup> Finally, Abu Bakr exacted homage for himself,<sup>101</sup> but the popular and official pledge of allegiance however, occurred the next day at the mosque.<sup>102</sup>

*Ahl al-Bayt* were not aware of the events at *saqīfa* as they were taking care of the Prophet’s body. They came to know about it later when they were summoned to the mosque for the formal pledge of allegiance to consolidate Abū Bakr’s caliphate. They refused to go however, and were gathered with Banū Hāshim and some other companions in Fāṭima’s house.<sup>103</sup> ‘Alī was opposed to the procedure and decision of the *saqīfa* gathering. He argued that this office belongs to *ahl al-bayt*, as long as they have among them the one who is truly knowledgeable.<sup>104</sup> In another version, Fāṭima reproached the band who came to her house to exact homage, for deciding among themselves without consulting or respecting the rights of *ahl al-bayt*.<sup>105</sup> In some accounts, it was when the tension almost erupted into violence that Fāṭima came out of her house reproaching the people and threatening to dishevel her hair and cry out to God if the band did not leave immediately.<sup>106</sup> This stopped the problem for a while, and ‘Alī with all Banū Hāshim as well as some of his friends withheld their pledge of

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<sup>97</sup> It seems that the reason the Prophet’s family closed the door is that there was a row around the Prophet. While he was on his deathbed (Tabari, 1879, vol. 2, p. 436, and 439), and the incident hinted at by Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 4, p. 302-303).

<sup>98</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 4, p. 306).

<sup>99</sup> Ayoub (2003, p. 12), where he suggests that Abu Bakr played a role in this.

<sup>100</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 4, p. 308), where Abu Bakr also makes his case based on the centrality and nobility of Quraysh among the Arabs.

<sup>101</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 4, p. 309), where the author adds that the original candidate Sa’d was being trampled, so someone cried “you have killed Sa’d b. ‘Ubada”, to which ‘Umar replied “God kill him”.

<sup>102</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 4, p. 309-310).

<sup>103</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 50), with an analysis of the different timing in the various sources.

<sup>104</sup> Ayoub (2003, p. 17-18), based on Ibn Qutayba.

<sup>105</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 51), quoting Baladhuri.

<sup>106</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 8, p. 238). Ya’qubi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 126), and in Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 443), the incident is mentioned without Fatima. Abu Bakr later expressed remorse for a number of things, among them exposing Fatima’s house “even though its door was closed for/as a sign of war”, and accepting the office of caliph instead of giving it to ‘Umar or Abu ‘Ubaida (Tabari, 1879, vol. 2, p. 619).

allegiance until after the death of Fāṭima, which was around six months after the death of the Prophet and the events at the *saqīfa*.<sup>107</sup>

The arguments with which Abū Bakr and ‘Umar convinced people at the *saqīfa* in favour of Abū Bakr’s succession, particularly his membership in Quraysh, early conversion to Islam (*sābiqa*), services rendered to the cause of Islam, and his closeness to the Prophet, are all arguments to which ‘Alī’s claims are stronger.<sup>108</sup>

The problems between the new caliph and Banū Hāshim did not end there. Abū Bakr refused to give Fāṭima her inheritance from her father, which was the estate of Fadak, instead he claimed that he had heard the Prophet say that “we, the company of prophets do not give an inheritance, whatever we leave is alms (*ṣadaqa*)”.<sup>109</sup> He maintained that he will follow the example of the Prophet in that the Prophet’s family may eat from the estate, but that they shall not own it.<sup>110</sup> The Shī‘a find it difficult to believe that the Prophet would have made that statement without informing the people it concerns about it.<sup>111</sup> They also maintain that Fadak had already been given by the Prophet to Fāṭima,<sup>112</sup> and that it was in her possession when the Prophet died.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, Fāṭima took the case to the caliph with two witnesses, but ‘Alī’s word was refused because he is her husband, so that the word of Umm Ayman alone was not enough. ‘Alī then argued with Abū Bakr concerning his sending

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<sup>107</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 448).

<sup>108</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 49). Imam ‘Ali expressed in poetry his surprise and disagreement with the actions and arguments at the *saqīfa*, that if homage to Abu Bakr was decided through consultation, then how is it that the weight men to be consulted were absent, and if homage was exacted on the basis of proximity to the Prophet, then others (meaning himself) are closer heirs to the Prophet and nearer to him, in: Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 43-44).

<sup>109</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 448).

<sup>110</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 448).

<sup>111</sup> Qazwini (1991, p. 348-349), where this question was first posed by Umm Salama.

<sup>112</sup> When the verse [17: 26] was revealed: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 543), also refer to Imam ‘Ali’s speech on the changes he made during his caliphate including returning Fadak to Fatima’s heirs (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 8, p. 59).

<sup>113</sup> ‘Ayyashi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 287).

Fāṭima's agent away from Fadak, which to him was illegal because it is the person who is reclaiming the estate that needs proof, not the one who is already managing it.<sup>114</sup>

The issue remained the subject of much debate, and indeed the estate was repeatedly given to Fāṭima's heirs by some caliphs and then withdrawn from them by others.<sup>115</sup> In the interpretation of verse [8: 41], the Imam explains that land taken without a fight, referred to as *anfāl*, totally belongs to the Prophet and the Imām after him, to do with as he sees fit, and Fadak was from the *anfāl*.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, the attitude of *ahl al-bayt* in confirming their rights to Fadak, even though they considered themselves above material desire, is that they saw this inheritance from the Prophet as a token of their authority status, and that is why it is viewed as an extension of the problem of succession.<sup>117</sup>

### 3.3.3.2 Her Speech

While historians generally remark that after being denied Fadak Fāṭima never spoke to Abū Bakr again until her death,<sup>118</sup> Shī'ī authentic sources narrate a speech she gave, presumably at the mosque in Medina, in which she spoke about religion, succession to the Prophet, and Fadak. In the authentic books it is reported on the authority of her daughter Zaynab bint 'Alī,<sup>119</sup> and the Shī'a insist that the elders of the house of Abū Ṭālib transmitted this speech from their parents and taught it to their children.<sup>120</sup>

Upon hearing the news regarding Fadak, Fāṭima put on her head-scarf and went to Abū Bakr, who was with people from the *muhājirūn* and *anṣār*, accompanied by her

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<sup>114</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 155-156), where Abu Bakr insisted that he has the words of Aws b. al-Hadthan, 'A'isha, and Hafsa, therefore, a man and two women, concerning the *hadith* that prophets do not leave an inheritance, and where the Imam also put the case of the impeccability of Fatima in the Qur'an confirming that she does not lie.

<sup>115</sup> For example, the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz returned it to Imam 'Ali b. al-Husayn, then it was taken back from them, then the 'Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun returned it to the heirs of Fatima, and so on (Ibn Abi al-Hadid, n.d., vol. 16, p. 216-217).

<sup>116</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 538-539).

<sup>117</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 63).

<sup>118</sup> For example: Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 448).

<sup>119</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 567-568). Tusi (1390hb, vol. 10, p. 27), refers to a book which interprets the *khutba*.

<sup>120</sup> Ibn Abi al-Hadid (n.d., vol. 16, p. 252-253).

grandchildren and a group of women. She hanged her robe, sat down, and sighed, then spoke.<sup>121</sup>

She began by offering her gratitude to God, briefly spoke about *tawḥīd*, prophethood, the pre-Islamic era, and the accomplishments of Muḥammad. She reminded Muslims of their place, “You are God’s worshippers... trustees towards yourselves, and his messengers to the nations. The Prophet enjoined you to do what is right, and gave you a covenant, a remnant to succeed him, the speaking book of God, and the truthful Qur’an.”<sup>122</sup> Reference to the “speaking book of God” as separate from the Qur’an is understood to mean the right interpreter of it from *ahl al-bayt*, as in the variations of this statement, which again points out to the relation between prophet/Imam and scripture, as was Jesus’ teaching. She continued to speak about the Qur’an and explain the reasoning behind several of the *sharī‘a*’s main tenets, among these “obedience to us the order of the nation, and our *imāma* a security from separation”, where she seems to have included herself in the *imāma*, outside the technical use of the term as the domain of the designated men of *ahl al-bayt*. She then reminded the people of her own status saying, “Know that I am Fāṭima, and my father is Muḥammad... I do not say what I say wrongfully, and I do not do what I do unjustly.” This seems reminiscent of the tradition regarding Fāṭima as a part of the Prophet, and that God gets angry for her anger. She spoke of the difficulties the Prophet faced during his mission, and added that upon his death, disagreements among Muslims became apparent even while the Prophet’s body had not been buried, adding, “and now you claim that we have no inheritance, ‘is it the judgement of pagandom then that they are seeking?’ [5: 50].” She

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<sup>121</sup> Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 12-19), where two versions, which have slight variations between them, are given.

<sup>122</sup> The translation of the phrases starting with ‘the Prophet’ until ‘to succeed him’ might be shaky or not entirely accurate as the original Arabic is also obscure (*za’imu haqqin lahu fikum, wa ‘ahdun qaddamahu ilaykum*). One author proposes that there might be an omission or obstruction here (Qazwini, 1991, p. 258). Notably, in Ibn Tayfur’s other version, she continues, “and us (*ahl al-bayt*) a remnant to succeed him, and with us the book of God”. The two versions might well carry the same meaning since “the speaking book” is normally understood as a reference to the Imam. Her contention here is clearly a reminder of “*ḥadith al-thaqalayn*”.

incorporated this Qur’anic verse here, as she did throughout her speech, in reference to the pre-Islamic custom of not giving women an inheritance.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, she referred to the inheritance of *ahl al-bayt* in the plural, and then to her own material inheritance which she was denied as a woman. She then reproached the new caliph saying, “O son of Abī Qaḥāfa! Is it in the book of God that you inherit from your father and I do not inherit from mine? ... Have you (plural) purposefully left the book of God and threw it behind your backs, whence it says, “And Solomon was David’s heir” [27: 16]. She continued to recite a number of Qur’anic verses which speak about prophets leaving an inheritance to their children [19: 6], about inheritance in general [8: 75, 2: 180], and women’s inheritance in particular [4: 11].<sup>124</sup> Therefore, this was her attempt to combat the reported tradition from the Prophet that he left no inheritance, by use of Qur’anic verses and interpretation. She challenged whether they know the generals and particulars of the Qur’an regarding inheritance better than her father and her husband. Here, despite her own arguments, she is portrayed to have referred the people to the knowledge of her father and husband, and it is not clear whether she considered the Imam’s knowledge fuller than hers even though she is his partner in *ahl al-bayt*, or whether referral to male authority was a tactic to persuade the people. She ended her address to Abū Bakr telling him to take Fadak and with a last piece of advice saying that the estate will meet him again during his judgement. It is as though she were aware that change was not going to happen, but felt the need to make a statement anyway. She then moved to the *anṣār*, reminded them of their stature and services to Islam, wondered at their heedlessness regarding her rights and reminded them of the Prophet’s saying “a man is preserved through his children”. Interestingly, the use of Qur’anic verses and the Prophet’s traditions were used very early on in dispute over the true meaning of the Prophet’s

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<sup>123</sup> Qazwini (1991, p. 300-301).

<sup>124</sup> For the exegeses of these two verses, and the debates surrounding them, that prophets’ inheritance in the Qur’an refers to material inheritance, refer to: Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 15, p. 349, and vol. 14, p. 22-24).

teachings. She expressed deep disappointment that inviolability was lost after his death. She spoke of the greatness of the *anṣār* and their accomplishments, but blamed their changed position towards *ahl al-bayt* on their fear and the weakness of their souls.<sup>125</sup> Here, Fāṭima is seen to have diagnosed the first split as essentially a spiritual weakness of souls, thereby linking the religious and political aspects of *jihād* together. Indeed, this is also how her speech began, whence she reminded Muslims of the depth of their religious principles and its laws, and reminded them of their position as trustees over themselves and as the Prophet's messengers to the nations. Her words bring to mind the theme of vicegerency, with the extra obligation incurred on Muslims because of the last message having been sent to them. In that sense, her speech may be characterised as holistic, because the talk about succession and her inheritance was not merely political and legal, but was put into a larger framework of theology and history. Even though her words sound more disappointed than optimistic, they nonetheless serve as a summary, after her father's death, of the meaning of Islam, the sacrifices people had made for the sake of emerging out of the *jāhliyya*, and crucially at that critical moment, it is a reminder of the idea that the *jihād* is not finished, and that as individuals and as a group the struggle continues for the souls and for proper guardianship of the community in order to continue walking in the Prophet's footsteps.

Abū Bakr insisted that he had heard the Prophet say the *ḥadīth* that prophets' inheritance become alms after their death.<sup>126</sup>

There are a few points to highlight in Fāṭima's speech. First, her talk about *tawḥīd*, prophecy and the reasons for the various *sharī'a* articles are considered gems of theological, religious, and literary value independent of the politics of her speech.<sup>127</sup> In fact, her words are quoted in Shī'ī sources most often as religious teachings rather than as a political stance,

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<sup>125</sup> This is the second version of her speech, reported by Zaynab in: Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 14-18).

<sup>126</sup> Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 18-19).

<sup>127</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 567-568).

although the latter surely have been a major instigator of Shī'ī sentiments. This shows that she has been seen by Shī'ī scholars as an authoritative teacher despite being a woman. Meaning that her status, as they understood it in the Qur'an and traditions to be a possessor of divine knowledge and an impeccable woman, was indeed taken seriously, even though unfortunately, not much else besides this occasion has been reported about her. Second, she talked about the *imāma* of *ahl al-bayt* and the obedience that is due to them, herself among them, as well as her disappointment at the events that transpired concerning their inviolability after the Prophet's death. Therefore after delving at length into the religious dimension, she moved into the religio-political issue of the heirship of prophethood. While the issue of her inheritance is reported as the direct occasion for her talk, the speech itself only mentioned Fadak briefly, but she fits it into a larger religious and political framework. This is evident in the way her discussion progressed from religion to guardianship to her own estate, and finally back to religio-political awareness in her address to the *anṣār*. Third, her mention of her own genealogy and character traits portrays a great deal of self-confidence, even while she was going against the caliph and the majority of Muslims. If one were to consider the Prophet's reported statement on his daughter as a part of himself (*biḍ'a*) and then his linking that to her anger and satisfaction as the ultimate criteria; then her mention of her genealogy and the truthfulness of her words and actions might be taken to indicate Fāṭima's understanding of the responsibility the Prophet had placed on her shoulders as a part of him and as a guide to her community, interestingly enough, through the expression of her feelings. This understanding would explain her fierceness here and her insistence on talking, despite the apparent embitterment, because of a sense of duty. Fourth, she argued strongly for her right to her inheritance, using Qur'anic verses to prove her claims to it, but also pointing out that denying a woman her inheritance is a remnant of the pre-Islamic customs. Her insistence on arguing even for a material inheritance is normally



commended as a legitimate claim and an example for people not to give up on their rights in general.<sup>128</sup> More than this however, Fāṭima is portrayed here as having the consciousness of being denied her rights *as a woman*. This insistence on even the material rights from someone who is normally depicted as completely detached from the material, as well as her awareness of the role of gender in oppressive tactics, both might be seen as useful lessons for modern Muslim women.

During her final illness preceding her death, Fāṭima was reportedly visited by a group of women, and she again explained to them why she has become withdrawn from them. She complained about their men displaying adoration for her husband saying,

“And what do they dislike about Abi-l-Ḥasan (Imam ‘Alī)? By God, they dislike the pungency of his sword, his carelessness about his own death, the firmness of his tread and his punishments which give severe warnings (to others than those being punished), and his tiger-like anger in matters of God.<sup>129</sup> By God, had they desisted from (holding) the bridle the Prophet left behind, he (‘Alī) would have led them through a pleasant journey, without injury to the mount or annoyance to the rider, to a place of rest where water overflows, and they would have advanced with fulfilment... ‘And which is worthier to be followed -- he who guides to the truth, or he who guides not unless he is guided?’ [10: 35].”<sup>130</sup>

After lamenting the loss of the opportunity to choose the right successor, she warned them of the results of their choices, continuing with the analogy of the camel as the *umma* saying,

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<sup>128</sup> Qazwini (1991, p. 232-233).

<sup>129</sup> Here, Fatima is referring to Imam ‘Alī’s reputation as a chivalrous warrior in the battles he fought with the Prophet against the pagan Arabs. She means that even though Arab Muslims were also on the Prophet’s side or later moved to it, they still held grudges against ‘Alī for having slain their kin. This is understood thus, considering similar sentiments that have been expressed against ‘Alī, when in Karbala his son al-Husayn was referred to by ‘Umar b. Sa’d as “son of the killer of the Arabs” in: Abu Mikhnaf (1398 h, p. 197). There is also Yazid b. Mu’awiya’s poetry in front of the *sabaya* of Banu Hashim, where he considered Karbala a revenge for his ancestors who were slain in Badr (Tabarsi, 1386h, vol. 2, p. 34).

<sup>130</sup> Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 19).

“I swear, it has conceived, but wait until it produces, then draw from it barrels of fluid blood, and a bitter and fatal poison. It is then that the men of falsehood will lose, and the latter generation will know the effects of what the former had founded. Then, enjoy yourselves, be content with the affliction composedly, and rejoice in the tidings of a stern sword, total injury, and the oppression of tyrants who will reckon your monetary rights of little value, and will slay your community. Woe to you, what will be done to you! And it is obscure from you; do we make it (this understanding or the *wilāya* of *ahl al-bayt*) incumbent upon you while you are averted from it?!”<sup>131</sup>

These revelations of Fāṭima concerning the future of the nation have not been considered a case of knowledge of the unseen, but foresight based on an understanding of causal relations.<sup>132</sup>

Indeed, Ṣadr observes that the Qur’an presents history as a science in that it functions according to laws, and these laws pertain to people’s adherence to divine guidance.<sup>133</sup> When people abandon their revealed laws, they become annihilated, for there is a definite relationship between the injustice of the elite and the ensuing destruction of the nation.<sup>134</sup> Societies, as do individuals, have an appointed time, but unlike individual judgement, when social death happens, it is both the culprit and the innocent that suffer the results because the rulers’ acts are performed at least with the tacit consent of the community.<sup>135</sup> With this in mind, it becomes easy to contend that Fāṭima in this case diagnosed the situation based on a clear understanding of history as it is taught in the Qur’an. If there are recognisable laws, then they can be manipulated,<sup>136</sup> thus she

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<sup>131</sup> Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 20).

<sup>132</sup> Qazwini (1991, p. 392).

<sup>133</sup> Sadr (1991, p. 78-83).

<sup>134</sup> Sadr (1991, p. 91-92).

<sup>135</sup> Sadr (1991, p. 85-90, 107-108, and p. 86-90 especially deal with the difficult notion of an all-encompassing punishment).

<sup>136</sup> Sadr (1991, p. 94).

significantly pointed out that it is the actions of the early Muslims which will shape their future. Fāṭima's ideas are also politically significant; whether they played a defining role or not, they do reflect Twelver Shī'ī political theory which "adopted an attitude towards the administration of divine authority that ruled out any compromise leading to the identification of actual power with divine authority."<sup>137</sup>

According to authentic traditions, Fāṭima asked to be buried secretly as she did not wish for the caliph and the larger community to attend her funeral.<sup>138</sup> Imam 'Alī performed the burial rituals but kept the location of her grave secret.<sup>139</sup> Crucially, traditions describe the first "*Shī'a*" as the three, or seven, people who prayed over Fāṭima.<sup>140</sup> 'Alī did not marry another woman in Fāṭima's lifetime.<sup>141</sup>

The clandestine burial of the prophet's daughter at night, in order to avoid the attendance of the caliph, clearly would have been a clear message that she died in a state of embitterment.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, Fāṭima continued to express her indignation even beyond her last breath. It is not entirely clear why 'Alī paid homage to Abū Bakr only after Fāṭima's death. One modern historian attributes two factors to 'Alī's homage to Abū Bakr, the first being the demoralising factor of Fāṭima's death, and the other possibly being the eruption of apostasy and rebellion among the Arab tribes after the Prophet's death, which would have

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<sup>137</sup> Eliash (1969, p. 28). This however was written before the Islamic revolution in Iran, where arguably political power and divine authority are presented as one.

<sup>138</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 2, p. 448).

<sup>139</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 458-459). Radi (n.d.c, vol. 2, p. 182-183), where after her burial Imam 'Ali faced the Prophet's grave and sorrowfully expressed his diminishing patience particularly for what had happened to Fatima. Later Imams, however, confirm that she was buried in her home (for example, Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 461). A tradition reports that the shroud Gabriel gave to the Prophet for him to be buried in was divided into three parts, one for each of the Prophet, Fatima, and 'Ali, in: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 3, p. 151).

<sup>140</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 2, p. 244 with footnote).

<sup>141</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 118). Some have claimed that Imam 'Ali wished to marry another woman while married to Fatima, and that the Prophet forbade it for the sake of his daughter's feelings. The Shi'a refuse this story categorically, not only because of the conspicuous choice of bride which is alleged to be the daughter of Abu Jahl, an arch enemy of Islam and the Prophet, but more importantly because they consider it a hypocrisy not characteristic of the Prophet, that he would allow polygamy based on the Qur'an, and practise it himself, yet make an exception for his daughter's feelings (this analysis from Qazwini (1991, p. 143-147). One of the things mentioned in her will is her wish that her husband marry her niece Umama after her so that she may take care of her children, which he did (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 5, p. 555).

<sup>142</sup> Madelung (1998, p. 52).

compelled ‘Alī to reconcile with the existing order so that Islam stays unified in those troubling times.<sup>143</sup>

Even though Fāṭima’s life is normally ignored, with attention given to spiritual status and names/traits, she is portrayed in the sources as having stepped up to action when the situation demanded it, and indeed is shown to have been very fierce at that. First, she calmed the situation at her house when it was threatened, then she took the case of her inheritance to court followed up by a fiery speech to Muslims, and finally she used her own death as an occasion to express her disapproval of the events that culminated after the Prophet’s passing away. The contents of her speech and then her talk to the women reveal a well versed woman, knowledgeable in religion, and with an understanding of history and politics. Her mannerism, her train of thoughts and clear expression do not seem to indicate petty emotion. She is depicted as confident in the righteousness of her cause and in her person. When she used her own death as a protest, she was well aware of her position in the community. Her speech and her burial became landmarks in defining the earliest Shī‘a and their stance. It is quite curious that she is seen, in the reports on those events, as far more vocal than her husband in their objection to the manner in which the succession was carried out. Perhaps her intervention and reproach would have been more palatable to the Muslims, considering that she is their Prophet’s daughter. Also, perhaps since Fadak was her own affair, she was the one to defend it, and there was no need to call ‘Alī for her plight. In any case, she is often commended for realising her responsibility to act for what she thought was the public good, and for not remaining silent about anything concerning her personal rights. Therefore, this chapter of her life is incompatible with the often propagated image of a domesticated and segregated Fāṭima. In this regard however, two questions must be asked. The first is why this woman was not present in the affairs of society outside times of crisis?

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<sup>143</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 59).

The second question is whether Fāṭima's role in politics is an adequate model for modern Muslim women. Some attempts will be made to discuss these in the following.

### 3.3.4 Discussion

The two main dimensions of Fāṭima's legacy are her image as mother of the Imams, and her political *jihād* following her father's death. That is because while she shares the knowledge and impeccability of the Imams, the men of *ahl al-bayt* normally take precedence as religious teachers of the wider community. Fāṭima seems to serve a different role; her motherhood of the Imams becomes celebrated in itself. Her political stance is another legacy because it is seen by the Shī'a as a sign of their early protest. Both her motherhood to the Imams and her political stance play a major role in defining Shī'i identity.

Some of the relevant issues in discussing Fāṭima's motherhood, especially from a feminist perspective, are her position as the only female among the "Fourteen Impeccables", as well as her lack of menstruation. Then, there will be a discussion on her political role as it has been described by her modern hagiographers, or even ignored, to suit their particular aims. Finally, some observations will be made on how her political role may empower women in politics, and how it may be improved upon.

It has been shown that much of what is said of Fāṭima in the Qur'an and authentic *ḥadīth* compilations is associated with the larger group of *ahl al-bayt*. In all the verses, except for *al-Kawthar*, Fāṭima is one of five. In *al-Kawthar*, she is the image of daughter to the Prophet and mother of his offspring. Fāṭima is also the only female among the fourteen impeccable persons. Even her daughters from 'Alī are not technically part of *ahl al-bayt*, and therefore not considered impeccable. In that way she may be seen in a traditional role as daughter, wife, and mother of impeccable men. Perhaps, it is this very role that requires her impeccability, that is, to ascertain the greatness of her children the Imams, their continuity from the Prophet, and their distinction from other men. However, another way to view her

position among them is that she is central, as one author noted that “without her, they would not be brought together nor would their number be complete”.<sup>144</sup> This point of view may gain credence in light of the Imams’ traditions which sometimes do put Fāṭima at the centre, by offering prayers and peace “upon Fāṭima and her father, her husband and her sons (*Fāṭima wa abīha wa ba‘liha wa banīhā*).”<sup>145</sup>

Fāṭima’s relationship with the Imams is reciprocal. She may be seen as designated impeccable due to them, but they also gain their authority from her. In early Islamic history, after the death of the Prophet, many attempted revolts against the state were made in the name of the Prophet’s family.<sup>146</sup> Traditions however, came to define the rightful Imams as “sons of Fāṭima”,<sup>147</sup> not sons of ‘Alī because he had descendants through other women. As mentioned above, another one of the defining traits of the Imams which narrows down the list of contenders even further, is that the rightful Imam possesses *Muṣḥaf Fāṭima*. Therefore, Fāṭima is seen as in the authentic tradition explaining [24: 35] above, that she is the origin of light and knowledge of the Imams.

Similarly, while her description as “Confluence of the Two Lights” is ambiguous considering that she is in effect neither a prophet nor an Imam, without her the two would not have been brought together in the sense that there would have been no adequate heirs of the Prophet’s esoteric knowledge. Similar to the case of Mary, Shī‘ī religious texts seem to infer that while impeccable men function as prophets and Imams, impeccable women contribute by bearing impeccable children.

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<sup>144</sup> Marandi (1328h, p. 10).

<sup>145</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 8, p. 165).

<sup>146</sup> Momen (1985, p. 61- 84), such as the Abbasids from the Prophet’s uncle al-‘Abbas, and Muhammad ibn al-Hanafīyya, Imam ‘Alī’s son from another woman.

<sup>147</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 215).

It has been argued that having impeccable women, like Mary and Fāṭima, is an indication to women that they, like men, may reach the highest levels of exaltedness.<sup>148</sup> However, this argument is not without its shortcomings, because both women are portrayed as distinguished from other women, at the basic biological level.

There is a competitive edge regarding the two women in the Islamic texts.<sup>149</sup> This is clear in the contradictory traditions over who “the doyenne of all women” really is, and who is only “the doyenne of the women of her age”. This is also evident in the other name the two women share, *al-Batūl*. In the case of Fāṭima, it is clear that she married ‘Alī and bore children from him, so *al-Batūl* is not understood as virgin. The genderless meaning of spiritual commitment which is available in the Qur’an is also dismissed in Fāṭima’s case and traditions insist on an unusual meaning of the term, namely that she was cut off from menstruation or any post-natal blood. The tone of these traditions, such as the one that generalises that all daughters of prophets do not menstruate, seem to point out that this is understood as a miracle or an honour. It was explained above that there is a contradiction between these traditions and others which imply that Fāṭima did in fact menstruate. However, if this uncommon meaning of *al-Batūl* were a miracle, it is a strange choice of miracle because no one could really see it, and to announce it to people would have been

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<sup>148</sup> Fadlallah (2002, p. 65).

<sup>149</sup> The similarities have been restricted here to those discernible in the authentic sources. However, if one were to consult later traditions, one finds that the similarities and competition grow into an extreme. There are for example the narrations that ‘Alī would find food brought to Fatima miraculously, and the Prophet would then explain to ‘Alī that his is similar to the case of Zechariah when he would see Mary provisioned, sometimes the traditions add that the Prophet expressed gratitude to God for letting him live to see of his daughter what Zechariah saw of Mary (Tusi, 1414h, p. 615-617; Majlisi, 1403h, vol. 14, p. 197-200, vol. 21, p.20, vol. 37, p. 104-106, vol. 41, p. 30, vol. 43, p. 29, 31, 50 etc). Even more than that, in *Bihar al-Anwar*, Fatima is sometimes referred to as “The Grander Mary (*Maryam al-Kubrā*)” (Majlisi, 1403h, vol. 22, p. 484, vol. 43, p. 16, vol. 88, p. 376, vol. 89, p. 113, vol. 99, p. 201, with the exception of vol. 30, p. 81 where Fatima is *Sayyidat al-Nisa*’ after *Maryam al-Kubrā*). These traditions serve the opposite purpose of what they set out to do. They try to stress Fatima’s exalted position by forcing upon her a competition with Mary. This continuous mention of Mary’s name and experience while referring to Fatima only makes the latter look like she is in a constant need to prove herself. Because it is obvious that Mary’s miracle of the virgin birth is unique to herself, the comparison between the two women only makes the image of Fatima seem of lesser value. That is why such traditions serve the opposite of their purpose. To show genuine appreciation for Fatima, one has to accept her on her own terms.

socially inappropriate. This is evident in the traditions where the Prophet out of decency, is said to have instructed Fatima and his wives to teach the rest of Muslim women about legal issues pertaining to menstruation. However, if this were an honour bestowed on Fāṭima, then such an understanding is demeaning to the female body.

To give these traditions on Fāṭima the benefit of the doubt, one may propose that they be seen as part of a wider circle of traditions about the physical purity of the Prophet and Imams. This tendency towards the Prophet exists in Sunni Islam which reports him saying that he was honoured by being born circumcised so that nobody saw his pudendum.<sup>150</sup> This tendency extends to the Imams in Shī'ī Islam where an authentic tradition claims that the Imams are born with their umbilical cord cut (*masrūr*) and already circumcised (*makhtūn*).<sup>151</sup> Again, the contention here appears to be that since they were born with their umbilical cord cut and already circumcised, nobody, or perhaps more correctly, no stranger such as a midwife needed to look at their genitals. In any case, understanding the traditions on Fāṭima's physical purity in this context is limiting because it simplifies the problem. Being born circumcised cannot be equated with lacking menses for two reasons. First, is the issue of ritual purity (*ṭahāra*), for the umbilical cord and circumcision are not themselves linked to *ṭahāra*, whereas menses is. There is the widely circulated understanding of Fāṭima's lack of menses, being a corollary of the Qur'anic verse "They will question thee concerning the monthly course. Say: It is hurt (*adha*); so go apart from women during the monthly course, and do not approach them till they are clean" [2: 222].<sup>152</sup> This verse describes menstrual blood as a pollutant, but in a very specific context of sexual intercourse.<sup>153</sup> In this sense, a male parallel would be semen, which is described in the

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<sup>150</sup> For example, refer to: Kister (1997, p. 12).

<sup>151</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 384-389).

<sup>152</sup> For example, refer to: 'Amili (1997, p. 93)

<sup>153</sup> For an enlightening discussion of this verse, refer to: Naguib (2010, p. 33-49).



Qur'an as "mean water (*mā' mahīn*)" [32: 8, 77: 20].<sup>154</sup> The second issue with menses, and why it cannot be equated with circumcision, is the tradition on Fāṭima's name referenced above which declares that she is Fāṭima because she was "weaned on knowledge and off menstruation." This implies that knowledge and a body that menstruates cannot coexist. Moreover, a very similar attitude has been discussed in a tradition (in section 1.3.1), where Eve was not taught by God the names of all things as Adam was, but was given partial knowledge by her husband as a dowry. Therefore there seems to be a pattern in the traditions of disassociating the female body from knowledge. Thus, to argue that the Imam being born circumcised is the same as Fāṭima's lack of menses is not the whole picture. After all, there is no claim that the body of a male impeccable did not produce semen. Such a proposition would probably be seen not only as against the biology of reproduction, but insulting the virility of these men. One theory in the anthropology of menstruation is particularly insightful in Fāṭima's case,

"On the one hand a society may have a consciously developed *ideology* of male superiority but, on the other, it may also permit women access to at least some kinds of power, thereby in a sense undermining its own ideology of male dominance. The common fact of menstruation among all women challenges the social order of a male-dominated society and defines and bounds a female subgroup within the society, thereby creating a new separate and dangerous order. Here is a social situation, then, that contains a powerful contradiction, and... it is in such societies

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<sup>154</sup> In some exegeses, this despised fluid is "*al-nutfa al-mani*", a reference to the male *nutfa* rather than the female *nutfa*; liquid that contributes to making the foetus (Qummi, 1404h, vol. 2, p. 168; Kashani, 1416h, vol. 4, p. 154; Huwayzi, 1412h, vol. 4, p. 222). However, even if these interpretations are wrong and the fluid here is the *nutfa* of either sex, the case remains that it is only the male fluid which is considered ritually impure (*najis*).

that strong concept of menstrual pollution will arise, signalling the contradiction [*sic*].”<sup>155</sup>

In the present context, it is the contradiction between men’s monopoly over the positions of prophethood and *imāma*, and the inclusion of Fāṭima among the impeccable persons of *ahl al-bayt*, that demands an explanation. By portraying her as different from other women at the basic physiological level, the impeccable Fāṭima is excluded from the female group and the structure is maintained.

Mary and Fāṭima share the names *Sayyidat al-Nisā’* and *al-Batūl*, both indicators of their exceptional status, and are similar in that they are two impeccable women who gave birth to impeccable men. One author gives further insight on the similarities between the two women,

“As the female was increasingly identified as the core of the family unit, she also emerged as a politically galvanizing symbol for the group she represented. With the establishment of a matriarchal figure at its center, what might otherwise be just another political faction was transformed into a spiritual family-the social group that creates the deepest affective bond among its members.”<sup>156</sup>

This statement was not made about the historical Mary or Fāṭima but of their portrayal in their respective traditions. It has been shown that the majority of Sunni sources do accept Fāṭima as the doyenne of women.<sup>157</sup> While reverence to other members of *ahl al-bayt* is not equally acknowledged, the choice of Fāṭima might indicate competitiveness between Islam in general with Christianity by suggesting that the Prophet’s daughter is on a par with Mary. Shī‘ī identity in particular is also very much dependent on Fāṭima. When the

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<sup>155</sup> Buckley & Gottlieb (1988, p. 28-29). The lengthy Introduction where this quote is located convincingly argues that this particular theory has been beneficial but also limiting. While accepting its limitations in some cases, it seems to be beneficial and very relevant here.

<sup>156</sup> Thurlkill (2007, p. 68).

<sup>157</sup> McAuliffe (1981, p. 19-28).

authentic tradition suggests that the first Shī'a are those who attended Fāṭima's burial, they are highlighting Fāṭima's defiance as it is expressed in her secret burial, along with the idea that they were allowed to attend her burial and therefore are not included in Fāṭima's anger, one which begets God's anger. This tradition also moves out of the politics of succession into the feminine/spiritual domain of *ahl al-bayt*. The event of the burial binds the Shī'a in a feeling of sorrow coupled with self-assurance that they were there to honour the last of the Prophet's offspring. In later Shī'i sources, the image of Fāṭima also functions as the emotional glue of the community when she is portrayed as a weeping mother mourning the sufferings of her children the Imams, even while she dwells in Paradise, and the one who will offer intercession on judgement day to protect her Shī'a from hellfire.<sup>158</sup> The *shafā'a* of Fāṭima is for those who share her grief and cry for Imām Ḥusayn especially.<sup>159</sup>

It has been suggested that a part of Fāṭima's revolutionary role was in her being a daughter rather than a son, to carry the Prophet's message and his line of successors, but this point has been received with some sarcasm.<sup>160</sup> While it is clear that glorifying biological functions and destiny is far from being unique or revolutionary, the proposition ought not to be dismissed entirely. Certainly, the Arabs understood that biologically children are attributed to their mothers as well as fathers, but they gave all moral weight and legal rights to the father's line, and so they did not consider a man's grandsons through his daughters to be real sons.<sup>161</sup> That is why until the late Umayyad period the Imams were arguing that they are sons of the Prophet, even though through his daughter.<sup>162</sup> The Prophet set this example of honouring lineage through women not only for his daughter, but for his own ancestry as

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<sup>158</sup> Ayoub (1978, p. 48, 212-216 etc).

<sup>159</sup> Ayoub (1978, p. 142-145).

<sup>160</sup> Kashani-Sabet (2005, p. 16), where the author explains Dr. 'Ali Shari'ati's point with the remark, "Fatima's unique position, then, as the surviving heir of the prophet is revolutionary in and of itself."

<sup>161</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 7, p. 261-264), where he includes two verses from Arabic poetry, one to the effect that real sons are the sons of our sons, and the sons of our daughters belong to distant men, and the other considers mothers as mere reservoirs and that genealogy belongs to men.

<sup>162</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 8, p. 317-318).

well. It is reported that he used to say, “I am the son of *al-‘Awātik*, I am the son of *al-Fawātim*”, in reference and courtesy to several of his female ancestors who were named ‘Ātika or Fāṭima.<sup>163</sup>

Until here, the various dimensions concerning the representation of Fāṭima as mother of the Imams have been explored. There remains her legacy of political *jihād*, potentially controversial for her hagiographers because it implies a public role for women. Being *Sayyidat al-Nisā’*, the representation of the life of Fāṭima necessarily overlaps with her hagiographer’s views on how a Muslim woman should live. Modern conservative hagiographies of Fāṭima consider her the perfect example for Muslim women, because she fulfilled her maternal duties, upheld her religion, and guarded her chastity.<sup>164</sup> To Khumaynī, Fāṭima is an example for women to give up western clothes in favour of a more modest traditional dress, but he ignores the more public aspects of her life.<sup>165</sup> Another modern hagiographer, before discussing the contents of her speech, mentions that she entered the mosque and sat “in the place made for her behind a curtain”, although he does not reference this piece of information which does not seem to exist anywhere else.<sup>166</sup> Conservative hagiographies also tend to portray her as a woman weeping incessantly on earth and in heaven, in order to emphasise the suffering of *ahl al-bayt* after the Prophet, and of her progeny after her. Contrary to these however, ‘Ali Shari‘ati, the intellectual of pre-revolutionary Iran, drew an image of Fāṭima that seems closer to his socialist and

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<sup>163</sup> Ya’qubi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 120-122) identifies twelve *‘Awatik* and four *Fawatim*. Ibn Sa’d (n.d., vol. 1, p. 61-66) identifies thirteen *‘Awatik* and ten *Fawatim*. Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 51) only mentions *al-‘Awatik*.

<sup>164</sup> Kashani-Sabet (2005, p. 1-3).

<sup>165</sup> Afshar (1982, p. 63).

<sup>166</sup> Qazwini (1991, p. 235). The same author considers what might have been said about Fatima nursing people injured in battle as shameful and unacceptable because it is disrespectful to Fatima, and aims at introducing the social mixing between the sexes (p. 106-107).

revolutionary ideas.<sup>167</sup> Therefore, he contrasted the hard-working Fāṭima with the trivial existence of the consumer woman.<sup>168</sup>

Faḍlallāh criticises the emphasis in legendary compilations of traditions on the metaphysical stories of Fāṭima's creation of celestial light and her marriage ceremony to 'Alī in heaven, and explains that the transmitters ought to have emphasised her religious, social, and political activities. To him, Fāṭima could become a model for modern Muslim women to participate in the social and cultural life, while preserving their morality, and who may even attain the highest level of religious authority as *mujtahida* and *marja' taqlid*.<sup>169</sup> Faḍlallāh's views however, these among others, were seen as radical and a threat to the Shī'ī community's faith, and he was subject to various forms of attack.<sup>170</sup> A publication called "The Tragedy of al-Zahrā' (*Ma'sāt al-Zahrā'*)" aimed at countering Faḍlallāh's views.<sup>171</sup>

Two examples of the argument would be useful here. While Faḍlallāh considers Fāṭima as "the first author in Islam", in reference to *Muṣḥaf Fāṭima*,<sup>172</sup> his adversary finds that the name *Muṣḥaf Fāṭima* does not necessarily indicate that she was the author, and it could simply mean that she possessed the book. He adds that this idea that Fāṭima was an author is unnecessary and baseless.<sup>173</sup> It has been shown above that Fāṭima's authorship of the book named after her is not claimed in the authentic traditions, rather she seems to have asked 'Alī to write down what was dictated to her by the angels.<sup>174</sup> In any case, this

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<sup>167</sup> Kashani-Sabet (2005, p. 9-10, 14).

<sup>168</sup> Kashani-Sabet (2005, p. 18).

<sup>169</sup> Rosiny (2001, p. 210).

<sup>170</sup> Rosiny (2001, p. 207-219), where the author discusses Fadlallah's open-mindedness and popularity, and the religio-political reasons his qualities were perceived as a threat to the authority of the religious institution in Qum, and the sole *marja' iyya* of Khamenā'i over the Shi'a of the world in general, and Lebanon in particular.

<sup>171</sup> 'Amili (1997).

<sup>172</sup> Fadlallah (2002, p. 49).

<sup>173</sup> 'Amili (1997)

<sup>174</sup> Modarressi (2003, p. 17-20), where the author puts forward all the possibilities concerning the authorship of *Muṣḥaf Fatima*, and especially p. 17-18 which shows that most reports suggest, as this chapter had done above based on *al-Kaḥf*, that the angels talked to Fatima, and 'Ali recorded what was said. The suggestion that the book was God's word to Fatima, dictated by the Prophet to 'Ali is actually an attempt to compromise two reports, the one which says it was given by Gabriel to Fatima and recorded by 'Ali, and another which says it

argument disregards Faḍlallāh's fundamental point that in the authentic traditions Fāṭima is portrayed as a devoted student who equates knowledge with her own children, and a woman keen to record the knowledge that had reached her, for the sake of future generations. Another issue in the debate is regarding Fāṭima's menstruation or the lack of it. While the author of the *Ma'sāt* considers the lack of menstruation in Fāṭima as a sign of her grandeur,<sup>175</sup> Faḍlallāh's viewpoint is that if those traditions were true, they might be referring to a case of amenorrhoea not honour.<sup>176</sup>

Later traditions indeed tend to put Fāṭima's "ontological value before her sociological value."<sup>177</sup> The prevailing image of her as a victim is strange when compared to the politically active Fāṭima who could easily inspire others to similar action.<sup>178</sup> The question as to why Fāṭima is not present at the centre of events, except in the time of crisis is open. Was it a matter of social customs even during the Prophet's lifetime, or is it that Muslim historians typically did not find women's events worth recording? The answer might be in the middle, in the sense that women might have been present but not in the heart of issues that occupy traditional historians' priorities, such as political and military events. In any case, Fāṭima's actions indicate an awareness of responsibility to action. In other words, her previous inaction was not necessarily a passivity, but simply that there was no situation that demanded her interference. It has been shown above that her speech at the mosque and then her talk to the women reveal Fāṭima's religious knowledge in general, but also her view of history as a constant movement in which individuals in a society collectively reap what they sow. She was vocal about the rights of *ahl al-bayt*, and in line

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was revealed by God, and dictated by the Prophet to 'Ali. Majlisi however, finds the expression, that it was dictated by "the messenger of God" as a probable reference to Gabriel.

<sup>175</sup> Amili (1997)

<sup>176</sup> Rosiny (2001, p. 214, footnote 19), which quotes a book (Nur al-Din's *Ma'sat Kitab al-Ma'sat*) that defends this point of view of Fadlallah.

<sup>177</sup> Lawson (2007, p. 163).

<sup>178</sup> Laswon (2007, p. 152).

with later Shī'ī political theory, she considered the *imāma* of *ahl al-bayt* as the only divine authority. Moreover, even though she knew that her words were to no avail, she made it a point to record her anger even in the manner of her death. It has been suggested above that her consciousness as a wronged woman, when she linked her experience to the *jāhiliyya* custom of denying women their inheritance, is a useful model for modern Muslim women in politics and otherwise. That is because it highlights that women may be doubly subject to oppression, because they are women.

To push the argument further in evaluating Fāṭima's politics, the critical question of *bay'at al-nisā'* must be brought to the picture. While the Prophet's homage was paid by men and women of the community, his successors only received the allegiance of men. This was of course damaging to women's standing in the community.<sup>179</sup> One might argue that the troubling times following his death did not allow the Prophet's ideal model to be practised; however, in the twentieth century examples also, women's rights were very often pushed to the back, because "it is never the right moment" (more on this in 3.4.3).<sup>180</sup> The underlying perception seems to be that women's opinion and participation in social and political affairs is a bonus, not a necessary requirement for sound decision making. Fāṭima cannot be blamed for not standing up for the women's vote, because such a critique would be highly anachronistic. The idea however, is to point out the elements in her politics which are useful today, and offer a view of how her model may be improved upon, based on what women now know.

A recent study has shown that religious Shī'ī women today do find a political role for themselves, but place it within a framework of their motherhood towards society. While this "culture of motherhood" has certainly allowed political participation, the tension between this idea of motherhood and the powerlessness of women in society may be seen to have

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<sup>179</sup> Ziyada (2001, p. 210-213).

<sup>180</sup> Helie-Lucas (1990, p. 112-113).

restricted women who remain “kept outside the main circles of power and decision making.”<sup>181</sup> Here, it would be useful to note that despite what has been said on Fāṭima’s prominence as mother, it was shown that the authoritative religious texts emphasise this strictly in the religious dimension of her relationship to the Imams. As a political role-model, Fāṭima provides an example of not only political participation, but leadership exhibited with confidence and courage, despite swimming against the current. She made it a point to speak from a position of authority, both as daughter of the Prophet, and as her own self whose moral character she considered to be well-known to the people.

To conclude, the various aspects of Fāṭima as impeccable mother of the Imams have been discussed. It was argued that she may be seen in the traditional role of daughter, wife, and mother, and that she may also be seen as the centre that brings *ahl al-bayt* together. Similarly, while she is described as the source of the Imams’ knowledge, through giving birth to them and also symbolically by giving them her *Muṣḥaf*, it is also said that her name denotes that she was weaned on knowledge and off menstruation. If this tradition were to be accepted, it would be problematic because it promotes an image of Fāṭima being impeccable because she is exceptionally outside of womanhood, which in turn, maintains men’s monopoly over spirituality and divine knowledge. It was also shown that her motherhood symbolically extends beyond the Imams to cover the Shī‘ī community as a whole, making her a spiritual mother that binds the group into a family. Fāṭima’s political role however, was one she did not play as a mother. She sought to get some authority by linking herself to the Prophet; however her main arguments were based on her knowledge of the Qur’an and *sunna*. Her very politics were framed in terms of theology, law, vicegerency, guardianship, history, and the soul’s struggle for the sake of individual and collective good.

### 3.4 Zaynab

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<sup>181</sup> Zaatari (2006, p. 35-36 and 41).



The importance of Zaynab in the Shī'ī tradition is primarily due to her role in the aftermath of the battle of Karbalā'. Hers is neither the traditional female role of nursing, nor the combat which is reserved for men. Like her mother, her contribution is oratory. Moreover, Zaynab's particular situation made her oratory role necessarily coupled with religious preaching and political activism. Being Ḥusayn's partner in his mission, an understanding of Zaynab is necessarily preceded by an understanding of Ḥusayn. Then, her role after the battle of Karbalā' will be examined. Finally, her *jihād* will be discussed within the context of women's *jihād* in Islam, and it will be evaluated as a possible model for today's women.

#### 3.4.1 Historical Background

Following the rule of the “four rightly guided caliphs”, Mu'āwiyā b. Abī Sufyān took charge. Muslim historians normally viewed Mu'āwiyā unfavourably.<sup>182</sup> The character of his son Yazīd, whom he tried to secure homage to, is portrayed as having been highly offensive to pious Muslims.<sup>183</sup> Thus, Mu'āwiyā was cautioned by his advisors to mend his son's ways.<sup>184</sup>

Traditional Muslim historians record that the Kufans soon started writing Ḥusayn who was in Mecca, complaining of Yazīd's oppression, and pressing him to come to them.<sup>185</sup> 'Abd Allāh b. Ja'far b. Abī Ṭalib, Zaynab's husband, wrote to Ḥusayn inviting him to come to a friend's house in Ta'if for security, Ḥusayn thanked him but preferred to stay on his path.<sup>186</sup> This is possibly the only thing recorded of the role of Zaynab's husband in Ḥusayn's movement, and it will be matter of controversy for those modern interpreters wishing to excuse Zaynab's movement independently of her husband (in section 3.4.3). An army

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<sup>182</sup> Hitti (1970, p. 197).

<sup>183</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 174).

<sup>184</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 224-225). Jafri (1979, p. 180-181).

<sup>185</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 261-262).

<sup>186</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 291-292).

commanded by ‘Umar b. Sa’d was sent to Karbalā’, where Ḥusayn with his family and friends had settled, and the Umayyad army blocked their access to the Euphrates so that they suffered terribly from thirst.<sup>187</sup> On the fateful day, the tenth of the month of Muḥarram (‘*Āshūrā*’), all the men were killed.<sup>188</sup> When they reached Ḥusayn last, Zaynab reportedly came out and exclaimed “May the sky fall to the earth!”, then turned to the approaching Ibn Sa’d saying, “Abū ‘Abd Allāh (al-Ḥusayn) is being killed while you watch?”, so he turned away from her.<sup>189</sup> According to Ṭabarī, Ḥusayn was slain, decapitated, and his was the “first head (in Islamic history to be) hung on a spear”.<sup>190</sup> The wailing women, with the young Imam ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn who did not fight due to his illness,<sup>191</sup> were taken as prisoners to Ibn Ziyād the governor of Kufa, and then to Yazīd in Damascus.

In his letter to Yazīd, Ibn ‘Abbās considered that even worse than the slaughter of Ḥusayn and his family, was the captivation and parading of the women and girls of Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib from Kufa to Damascus, for the sake of showing victory and power.<sup>192</sup> Zaynab, Ḥusayn’s sister, was twice the defender of the family. When Ibn Ziyād ordered the only surviving son, ‘Alī, to be killed, and again in Yazīd’s court when a man asked the caliph to grant him one of Ḥusayn’s daughter.<sup>193</sup> These events will be discussed more thoroughly in Zaynab’s role. However, to better understand the values she defended, it is important to take a closer look at the objectives of Ḥusayn’s mission.

It has been argued that Ḥusayn did not heed any advice about the lack of support he will find in Kufa, and that he doesn’t seem to have tried to mobilise an army for his cause

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<sup>187</sup> Ya’qubi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 243). Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 308-312) so he sent his half brother ‘Abbas b. ‘Ali with others to fetch water but they were unsuccessful.

<sup>188</sup> Ya’qubi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 245).

<sup>189</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 345).

<sup>190</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 297). For a discussion of the political significance of the move, refer to: Shams al-Din (1981, p. 225-233).

<sup>191</sup> Ya’qubi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 244).

<sup>192</sup> Ya’qubi (n.d., vol. 2, p. 248-250).

<sup>193</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 293).

even when he met empathetic people along the way,<sup>194</sup> therefore, Shī'ī historians contend that Ḥusayn's movement was not merely a political one but that "from the very beginning Ḥusayn was planning for a complete revolution in the religious consciousness of the Muslims," because in any case a political victory would have been temporal, but a victory made through sacrifice would leave a permanent imprint on the consciousness.<sup>195</sup> It is in this two-fold mission of the battle itself and the battle for its aftermath that Zaynab becomes in the Shī'ī tradition, truly Ḥusayn's sister and partner in his calling.

Some of Ḥusayn's reported words would shed light on Shī'ī views on the meaning of his movement. In a letter to his half-brother Ḥusayn wrote, "My movement is not of defection or desire, but I have decided to act seeking uprightness in the *umma* of my grandfather."<sup>196</sup> On another occasion he explained that the Prophet had said,

"Whosoever sees an oppressing tyrant, violating what God has made inviolable, breaking God's covenant, opposing the *sunna* of the Prophet, committing crimes and atrocities towards God's worshippers, and does not respond to change this through actions or words, then God may rightly allocate to that person what he does to the tyrant. Indeed these people (Umayyads) have committed themselves to obeying Satan and left obedience to al-Raḥmān..."<sup>197</sup>

### 3.4.2 Zaynab: the Aftermath of Karbalā'

It has been mentioned that according to the traditional Muslim historians, nearly all of Zaynab's male relations died at Karbalā',<sup>198</sup> with most of their heads being hung on spears. If these reports were to be accepted, then such a gruesome scene of the procession of

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<sup>194</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 200). Husayn reportedly got a timely offer of refuge in unreachable mountains by his travel guide who proposed to mobilise his own tribe and strike the Umayyads in due time with an army of twenty thousand men. He simply refused and answered that he is committed to his word, and will go to Kufa no matter what happens (Tabari, 1879, vol. 4, p. 306-307; Jafri, 1979, p. 201).

<sup>195</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 201-202).

<sup>196</sup> Ayati (1991, p. 62). Shams al-Din (1981, p. 39).

<sup>197</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 304).

<sup>198</sup> Abu Mikhnaf (1398h, p. 165). Isfahani (1385h, p. 60).

female captives being accompanied with their men's heads suspended must be kept in mind in order to appreciate the emotional context in which Zaynab and the other women's speeches were made.

There are several poetic verses and speeches attributed to the various women captives addressing the people of Kufa who had reportedly gathered to look at them and cry.<sup>199</sup> For the sake of limiting the discussion, only the major stances and speeches of Zaynab will be discussed here. The Shī'a know her as *al-'aqlīla*,<sup>200</sup> meaning the honourable and precious lady.<sup>201</sup>

Before entering Ibn Ziyād's court Zaynab tried to disguise herself, but he asked about her, and while she did not answer him others did. He told her, "Gratitude to God who exposed your vices, killed you, and disclaimed your innovation." She said, "Gratitude to God who honoured us with Muḥammad prayers and peace be upon him, and purified us a thorough purification, not as you say, but it is the wicked who is exposed and the deviate who lies." He said, "Then how do you perceive what God has done to your household?" She said, "Murder was ordained for them, so they went forth towards their resting place, and God will assemble you with them so that you dispute with him and altercation in front of him." Ibn Ziyād got angry and one of his men advised him that she is a woman and therefore cannot be blamed for what she says. The former persisted, "God has cured my soul from your tyrants and the disobedient rebels of your household." Zaynab wept then said, "I swear you have killed my middle age, stabbed my family members, severed my branch, and pulled out my roots, if this is your cure then you have been cured." Ibn Ziyād said, "She is a rhymist! I swear, your father was a rhymist and poet!" She answered, "What does this

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<sup>199</sup> Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 23). Tabarsi (1386h, vol. 2, p. 29). Tusi (1414h, p. 92). Mufid (1403h, p. 321-322). For a far more comprehensive reference of the women's words, refer to: Shirazi (2000).

<sup>200</sup> Abu Mikhnaḥ (1398h, p. 165). Isfahani (1385h, p. 60).

<sup>201</sup> Ibn Manzur (1405h, vol. 11, p. 463).

woman have to do with rhyme? I am diverted into my affairs, and only blurting out what I say.”<sup>202</sup>

When Ibn Ziyād ordered ‘Alī killed, Zaynab objected, “Ibn Ziyād, enough of our blood!”, then enfolded her nephew and asked to be killed before him.<sup>203</sup> This move spared the young Imam, and with it the line of Imams was protected. It was also common practice after Karbalā’ for the Shī’a to use Zaynab’s name instead of her nephew’s, ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Abidīn, in the transmission of knowledge and the narration of traditions for the sake of the Imam’s protection.<sup>204</sup>

When brought to Yazīd, Zaynab had to protect her niece Fāṭima b. al-Ḥusayn with the power of her words, when a man in Yazīd’s court wanted to take her. Zaynab said he is not allowed, Yazīd answered that he can do whatever he wishes, but Zaynab answered that if he does it then he will have officially renounced their religion and departed from the practices of their community. Yazīd said, “You come to me with these words! Indeed it is your father and brother who extricated themselves from the religion.” She answered, “It is through the religion of God, the religion of my father, brother, and grandfather that you, your father and grandfather are guided.” He said, “You lie you enemy of God.” She said, “You are an autocratic prince, you curse wrongfully, and oppress with your dominion.” After these words were said, the man repeated his wish to be granted Fāṭima but Yazīd angrily wished that God grant the man death.<sup>205</sup> On this incident as well as others, Shī’ī interpretations find that Yazīd may indeed have harmed the women if he so wished, but Zaynab’s words seem to have swayed some of the people in his court and especially his

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<sup>202</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 350). Abu Mikhnaf (1398h, p. 205), Mufid (1413h, vol. 2, p. 115-116). Saduq (1417h, p. 229-230).

<sup>203</sup> Ibn Sa’d (n.d., vol. 5, p. 212). Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 350). Abu Mikhnaf (1398h, p. 206).

<sup>204</sup> Tusi (1411h, p. 230).

<sup>205</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 353). Abu Mikhnaf (1398h, p. 214). Saduq (1417h p. 231).

women, so that he felt the need to eventually disassociate himself from the event of Karbalā' and later blame it on Ibn Ziyād, the governor of Kufa.<sup>206</sup>

When Ḥusayn's head was brought to Yazīd, he struck its still mouth and allegedly said some poetry gloating that he has avenged his family members killed in the battle of Badr (the first battle in which Muslims fought the pagan Arabs). Zaynab then stood up and spoke.<sup>207</sup> She expressed gratitude to God, and then rhetorically asked Yazīd whether he believed that his power and captivation of her family was due to God's contempt towards them, and beneficence and honour for him. She described him as having raised his nose in pride, and shown amazement and jubilation when he saw that the world is driven by his command, then she added, "This is God's saying, 'And let not the unbelievers suppose that the indulgence We grant them is better for them; We grant them indulgence only that they may increase in sin; and there awaits them a humbling chastisement' [3: 178]." She addressed him as "the son of *al-ṭulaqā'* ("freedmen", those who were pardoned by the Prophet upon his victorious return to Mecca)" and asked whether it were just that he keeps his women guarded, while the daughters of the Prophet are paraded in the streets for all kinds of men to stare at. She continued, "I swear, you have scraped the wound and rooted calamity, by shedding the blood of the Prophet's progeny... you will arrive at God's presence soon where they have arrived, then you will wish you had been made blind and mute and that you had not said (the poetry of vengeance for Badr)." She ironically told them to carry on their rejoicing and jubilation, and then turned to God asking him to avenge her family and their rights. She then warned Yazīd, "You only cut your own flesh, and your opulence is only skin-deep." She explained that her speech is not out of any delusion that words might benefit him, "but because the eyes are tearful and the chests vehement; Ḥusayn is killed and the party of Satan is giving us to the party of the foolish, giving them God's

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<sup>206</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 66).

<sup>207</sup> Tabarsi (1386h, vol. 2, p. 34). Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 20-21). Abu Mikhnaf (1398h, p. 225 footnote).

money to violate his prohibitions... so if you take us as booty, you will also take perdition.”

She closed her speech with the vital words,

“I swear, I have not feared except God, and my complaints are for none other than him. Then devise your schemes, seek what you will, and exert your efforts, for by God who honoured us with revelation and the book, and prophethood and purification, you will not overtake our time, you will not reach our destination, you will not erase our memory, and the shame of it (Karbālā’) will not be washed off you. Is your opinion but falsehood, your days but numbered, and your gathering but dispersed when the caller summons God to curse the wrongful transgressor? Gratitude is for God who decreed happiness to his friends, and impressed martyrdom upon his elect...”<sup>208</sup>

Muḥammad Jawād Mughniyyeh (d. 1979 A.D.) comments on Zaynab’s words, when she was sarcastically asked how she viewed what God had done to her family, and answered that she has “not seen anything except that it was beautiful (*mā ra’aytu illā jamīlā*)”; he writes, “that spirit which addressed Yazīd in that atmosphere does not in any way resemble our spirits, the people of the earth.”<sup>209</sup> Therefore, the strength of her political stance is understood to have necessarily derived from a calibre of spirit which is not found except in *ahl al-bayt*, as Mughniyyeh contends.

Several women are remembered as champions in Karbalā’, among them are some who pushed their husbands to go to Ḥusayn and fight on his side, and Ibn Sa’d’s wife who held a sword and proceeded towards Ḥusayn’s tents to protect the daughters of the Prophet.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Tabarsi (1386h, vol. 2, p. 35-37). Ibn Tayfur (n.d., p. 22-23). Abu Mikhnaḥ (1398h, p. 226-227 footnote).

<sup>209</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 61 and 65).

<sup>210</sup> Ayati (1991, p. 146-149). On the hostess of Muslim, and the wife of Zuhayr b. al-Qayn, refer to: Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 263, and 299 respectively).

It is reported that the first commemoration of Ḥusayn was held by Zaynab in her captivity in Yazīd's very palace, when for three days the women of Mu'āwiya's house joined the captives in mourning.<sup>211</sup> Commemorating the journey of Ḥusayn, its religious and political motives as well as the massacre itself was Zaynab's preoccupation for the remainder of her life.<sup>212</sup> It is normally accepted among the Shī'a that Ḥusayn took the women on his journey, in order to fulfil that particular role.<sup>213</sup> However, this role in the aftermath is not clearly recorded anywhere, with the exception of the first commemorations she performed in the palace. Some wrote that upon her return to Medina, she resumed teaching religion to the women there, and focused the gatherings on lamenting Ḥusayn and discussing the religio-political situation of the day and the reasons for Ḥusayn's movement and martyrdom.<sup>214</sup> This "propaganda" role she played was eventually the reason she was forced into exile from Medina.<sup>215</sup> Others simply say that her presence in Medina and performing the commemoration gatherings all served Ḥusayn's purpose of causing a stir that would eventually destroy the Umayyad government.<sup>216</sup> Despite the significance of this task that scholars allege she performed, they unfortunately do not elaborate on it. This role however, is always implied particularly because it is presumed to be essential for the completion of the story of Karbalā'. Ḥusayn had taken the women and children with him because he knew that this would publicise his message, and make him a lasting reminder for Muslims to distinguish between Islamic norms and the character of rulers.<sup>217</sup>

Zaynab is fully recognised by the Shī'ī tradition as Ḥusayn's partner in his *jihād*. She is seen to have defended Islam and the *sharī'a* of her grandfather. She is described as

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<sup>211</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 353, 355). Abu Mikhnaḥ (1398h, p. 215). Also noted in: Pinault (1998, p. 71) and Hamdar (2009, p. 86).

<sup>212</sup> Jawad (2005, p. 275-278).

<sup>213</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 52-54).

<sup>214</sup> Jawad (2005, p. 279).

<sup>215</sup> Jawad (2005, p. 279-280).

<sup>216</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 54-55).

<sup>217</sup> Jafri (1979, p. 204). A similar idea is expressed in: Pinault (1998, p. 72).



eloquent, steadfast, not submissive to tyrants, fearless except of God, speaks the truth sincerely, not moved by storms nor removed by tempests, and truly the sister of Ḥusayn and his partner in his ideology and *jihād*.<sup>218</sup>

Zaynab's stance in the face of Yazīd, informing him of the victory of her family and his impending doom, completely turned the understanding of the results of the battle of Karbalā' upside down. Her commemorations revived Ḥusayn's memory, and she told the story from the point of view of those who had perished.<sup>219</sup> Her work was so important that the religious aspect of it was carried on after her by the Imams themselves.<sup>220</sup>

### 3.4.3 Zaynab's Legacies

It has been shown above that Zaynab and the women of Karbalā' are portrayed as models of self-sacrifice, they accompanied and encouraged their husbands and children to battle. They were also brave and steadfast women, so that their own fate after the battle had to be overcome for the sake of preserving Ḥusayn's cause and attaining moral victory. It has also been mentioned that Zaynab's precedent in commemorating 'Āshūrā' has been carried on by the Imams and their Shī'a until today. Such commemoration rituals narrate the stories of Karbalā' during the first days of the month of Muḥarram, and conclude on the tenth day of 'Āshūrā' with a procession on the streets of major Shī'ī cities. It is in these rituals that tension around the portrayal of Karbalā's women, and Zaynab in particular become apparent.

One contemporary author has outlined the main themes of the Karbalā' narratives and divided them into two categories, one is gender-neutral and the other gendered. Gender-neutral themes include loyalty to Ḥusayn, courage, self-sacrifice for Islam, and general

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<sup>218</sup> Khoei (1413h, vol. 24, p. 219).

<sup>219</sup> Commemoration rituals are dominated by poetry attributed to various women of Husayn's family: Ayoub (1978, p. 129-132, 173-176).

<sup>220</sup> Ayoub (1978, p. 148-153) on the early stages of *ta'ziya* rituals including the Imams' impetus.

moral conduct.<sup>221</sup> Leadership, fighting, and martyrdom are specifically male activities, for men are associated with martyrdom and women with mourning.<sup>222</sup> Gendered themes pertaining to women are, women as victims of humiliation through captivity, women as mourners of the dead, women as the conscience of the community, evident in Kufan women mourning after the battle as well as the women of Mu'āwiya and Yazīd's house, and finally, women as spokespersons, preservers, and transmitters of Ḥusayn's message.<sup>223</sup> This latter theme is significant because it assures women, particularly Zaynab, centrality to the story.<sup>224</sup> Men and women however, are encouraged to take on the gender-neutral traits from models of the opposite sex. Moreover, Ḥusayn, and sometimes Zaynab, are role models for both.<sup>225</sup> Therefore, these are "not rigidly exclusive categories but tendencies within a fluid dynamic of interpretation."<sup>226</sup> Another author commenting on Zaynab's prominence and her protection of the young 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn, finds that "Male helplessness among the survivors of Karbala led to role reversals and unexpected inversions of traditional gender-linked behaviour."<sup>227</sup> He attributes the tension surrounding the figure of Zaynab in devotional and political writings to this role reversal.<sup>228</sup>

To conservative clerics, Zaynab's forceful emergence into the public domain constitutes a problem. In Iran before the revolution, the Shah was likened to Yazīd, and women were encouraged to emulate Zaynab. After the revolution succeeded and things were put in the "right order", they found Zaynab's model no longer useful and propagated a return to the more "peaceful" model of Fatima.<sup>229</sup> This break between the two women might have existed only in some clerics' minds; for those outside revolutionary Iran, Zaynab's strength

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<sup>221</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 118).

<sup>222</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 118-119).

<sup>223</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 121-122).

<sup>224</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 122).

<sup>225</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 123).

<sup>226</sup> Aghaie, (2004, p. 123).

<sup>227</sup> Pinault (1998, p. 83).

<sup>228</sup> Pinault (1998, p. 83).

<sup>229</sup> Pinault (1998, p. 94-95).

could only have been possible as a result of the seeds her mother Fāṭima had planted in her, and they find even the manner of Zaynab's speaking to be reminiscent of Fāṭima's.<sup>230</sup>

One problem with Zaynab's experience, to the clerics' minds, seems to be that her husband was not a partner in her mission. He did not accompany her to Karbalā' even though he was sympathetic to Ḥusayn.<sup>231</sup> This issue has been most problematic for Zaynab's hagiographers who do not seem to agree about where to place her husband within the events of her life.<sup>232</sup> They normally find that her husband was loyal to the Imams, and even though he did not accompany Ḥusayn, he did send his children to die with him.<sup>233</sup> However, they also feel the need to explain that Zaynab herself would not have acted so publicly were it not for a sacred duty that needed to be done.<sup>234</sup> Therefore, despite her success in playing her role even for the Shī'a of today, her example is contained by continuous mention of Ḥusayn's *need* for these women.

In the Lebanese context, a shift occurred in the last three decades from what has been termed a "traditional" understanding of 'Āshūrā' to an "authenticated" one.<sup>235</sup> With it, the image of Zaynab has shifted from a mourner to a revolutionary role model, and the commemorations are no longer merely lamentation gatherings but an education about the meanings of the tragedy.<sup>236</sup> Here, Zaynab teaches women to stand strong in the face of oppression, yet one wonders whether this revolutionary model is relevant in contemporary Lebanon because of its war with Israel.

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<sup>230</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 60-66). Hussein (2008, p. 281), where the author proposes, "One is left to wonder if there is not something in Zaynab's militancy- used by the Islamic Republic to harness the power of women in the late 1980s and early 1990s- that Fadlallah finds deeply disturbing."

<sup>231</sup> As in Tabari's account described above.

<sup>232</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 127-128). Some said he was too old, others suggested she was divorced, and yet others (not mentioned in Aghaie) claimed that she had stipulated in her marriage contract the condition that she would be allowed to accompany her husband to Karbalā', the assumption being that *ahl al-bayt* foresaw the future.

<sup>233</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 35-38).

<sup>234</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 54).

<sup>235</sup> Deeb (2005, p. 244).

<sup>236</sup> Deeb (2005, p. 253-258).

On the domain of Karbalā's women's *jihād*, it has been suggested that even though (the female role of) crying for Ḥusayn has always been considered worthy of merit, it is not the same as that (male role) of martyrdom.<sup>237</sup> This point of view however, supposes that the only real sacrifice occurs in combat; therefore it devalues the sufferings of those who actually survive the atrocities, especially parents and mothers who have to outlive their children. If Islam did not force military *jihād* on women, it follows that women do not miss a reward by not fighting.<sup>238</sup> What the retellings of the incident of Karbalā' have always maintained, is that the sacrifices and sufferings of women are genuine contributions which are worthy of merit. This traditional view point seems to honour women's part in war for itself, instead of forcing men's experience on them as more admirable, the way that some modern interpretations do.

The major element in Zaynab's *jihād* is not nursing and perhaps not even lamenting, but it is her activist role in the aftermath of the battle. Imam 'Alī said, "The finest *jihād* is a word of justice with an inequitable leader."<sup>239</sup> Imam al-Ṣādiq further explained that this is so, provided one follows those words with action.<sup>240</sup> Zaynab's model is of a woman who spoke very bluntly and fearlessly of the truth as she saw it, and she did so in the courts of the rulers. Then, she followed this by continuous commemorations of Karbalā', with what that entails regarding teaching Ḥusayn's message. Perhaps the most important legacy of Zaynab is that the literary recounting of the Shī'a's pivotal event survived through her, and has acquired a religious significance by being "regarded as an act of covenant renewal

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<sup>237</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 121).

<sup>238</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 3, p. 184-185).

<sup>239</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 90). The observation of this hadith regarding Zaynab has also been made in: Hamdar (2009, p. 90).

<sup>240</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 60).

between the Holy Family and their followers.”<sup>241</sup> In this regard, Zaynab’s role seems very similar to Fāṭima’s religio-political task which came to define Shī‘i identity.

Two notions in the model of Karbalā’s women must be examined critically. First, the idea that women play a central role during times of “male helplessness” might be exploited negatively in a way that keeps women behind the scene at all other times. Here, the example of Fāṭima who played her role while ‘Alī was alive may be useful to remember along with Zaynab’s. Indeed, Mughniyyeh has argued that Fāṭima was the first to speak, and actually spoke for ‘Alī, when she set the standard of defending the rights of *ahl al-bayt*, making the case for their supreme status and demanding the people’s allegiance, and he finds that this model was followed by none other than Zaynab.<sup>242</sup> In this sense, Zaynab and Fāṭima seen as an extension of each other is important for a better understanding of the example of women’s *jihād*, set by these two ladies. Zaynab’s task may have been more public and activist, but Fāṭima’s role was not due to male absence. The second notion in the narratives on Karbalā’s women that needs to be examined critically is self-sacrifice, which has often been an ideal that is promoted to the detriment of women. This perceived virtue is required of women mostly in respect to the men of the family/society. In Islamic Iran, while men were expected to modernise economically, socially, and politically, Karbalā’s women were utilised as “a preservationist model of womanhood, according to which the women of the nation are to preserve and pass on the ‘true’ nature of the Iranian nation.”<sup>243</sup> Thus, Karbalā’ symbolism was used to promote women as a symbol of resistance to foreign moral corruption.<sup>244</sup> This idea of “us” and “them” with the women in particular being expected to uphold traditional values in the face of westernisation is a discourse that has also been used

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<sup>241</sup> Ayoub (1978, p. 184), where the author makes his remark in reference to *ziyara*, and act of physical or literal visitation of the shrine of Husayn in Karbala’.

<sup>242</sup> Mughniyyeh (1992, p. 58-61).

<sup>243</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 115).

<sup>244</sup> Aghaie (2004, p. 116).

outside Iran and therefore points towards a pattern.<sup>245</sup> However, why is this role restricted to women, and what does it have to do with Zaynab?

In the twentieth century, many Muslim women were disillusioned by being permitted and even encouraged to be politically active, but then as soon as the war of independence was won or the revolution succeeded, the new order forced women to go back to their domestic place.<sup>246</sup> This seems to be a trend. thus, a major concern for Muslim women today is not mere political participation, but the need to advocate a program of female liberation and empowerment, no matter advocated by whom, since there are politically active women who advocate very conservative attitudes.

Muslim women today might need to be wary for what cause they sacrifice themselves, and which understanding of Zaynab they accept. Self-sacrifice merely for the sake of other members of the family or the preservation of traditional patriarchal values might prove destructive to women, whereas self-sacrifice for an understanding of Ḥusayn's vision as one of freedom from tyranny and oppression might prove constructive. For example, one may chose to emphasise Ḥusayn's words on those ultimate human values, such as when he said, "The adopted, son of the adopted (reference to Ibn Ziyād's unknown grandfather) has given us two choices, war or humiliation. Humiliation is far from us! God refuses this for us, as do his messenger, and the believers, and (people with) pleasant bosoms/hearts, purified barriers/genitals, vehement noses/pride, and souls noncompliant, to prefer obedience to the depraved over the deaths of the honourable!"<sup>247</sup> In Karbalā', he spoke in universal terms when he told some Umayyad soldiers, "if you have no religion and do not fear judgement day, then be free persons of esteem, in the affairs of your world..."<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Zaatari (2006, p. 43-44).

<sup>246</sup> For the Algerian example, refer to: Helie-Lucas (1990, p. 106-112). For the Iranian example, refer to: Afshar (1998, p. 43-45).

<sup>247</sup> Husayni (1417h, p.59). Tabarsi (1386h, p. 24-25).

<sup>248</sup> Tabari (1879, vol. 4, p. 344).

In conclusion, Zaynab's main role as Ḥusayn's partner was to transform through her *jihād* the battle of Karbalā' from a tragedy into a victory. Her activism was at once religious and political, and it has been argued that women's *jihād*, whether it is through losing loved ones and remaining steadfast, or through their struggles with their words and actions to change the status quo, both are seen from the tradition's point of view, as equal to or finer than actual military combat. Zaynab's strong image in the aftermath of Karbala' even makes the men around her fade into the background. She offers an innovative kind of *jihād* which does not fit into the traditional female role, although it is not military either. This activism of Zaynab in public affairs, albeit without taking on typically male activities makes her a perplexing image. There is a gender role-reversal in Karbalā's narratives regarding women's strength and their taking charge, but this has been accompanied by a focus on Ḥusayn's need for these women, as though to justify their very public roles especially in view of the problem of the absence of Zaynab's husband. The women's loss of their men in the battle and their own captivity and suffering has come to promote women's self-sacrifice for the sake of tradition and nation. However, one may also argue that quite the opposite of this, Zaynab is not portrayed to have sacrificed a grain of her beliefs. In fact, she refused to keep quiet even in front of Yazīd. It is through her faith and commitment to her cause, in addition to her unceasing defiance and activism that Zaynab becomes a valuable role model for women today.

### 3.5 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, the three most prominent women of *ahl al-bayt* have been studied as women whose life constitutes an extension of the Prophet's *sunna*. The main theme in all three experiences is their *jihād*, and it has been shown that even though *jihād al-nafs* is not the major theme here as it was in the Qur'anic personalities; the political struggles of the women of *ahl al-bayt* are often portrayed in the literature as subsidiary to their religious

achievements. Furthermore, the female personalities of the *sunna* exemplify three types of political *jihād*, financial, oratory, and activist. Khadīja believed in monotheism and the prophethood of her husband, therefore she spent her wealth in that cause. Fāṭima's fierce stance against the new caliph and community was explained to the people within the context of a skilled religious argument. In the end, she utilised her body as the final statement of resistance. Zaynab similarly used her literary talents in order to reap the victory of Karbalā'. Like her mother, she derived her strength in the face of the ruler through references to Qur'anic verses and traditions. Zaynab lived in different circumstances however, and she is said to have committed her life to activism. All three women were in the similar position of being anti-establishment, and none of them conceded or compromised their vision until their death. Their ability to withstand such pressures hints at an inner strength that is drawn from faith.

Fāṭima is distinguished from them however in her spiritual rank. While all of them are highly revered in the Shī'ī tradition, Fāṭima is considered impeccable. It has been argued that her exceptional status might mean that her impeccability is not entirely liberating for women. However, in view of Khadīja and Zaynab, it must also be noted that it is liberating to have revered females who are not impeccable.<sup>249</sup> While all male role models are impeccable (Prophet and Imams), having highly revered non-impeccable women makes their example a little bit more feasible to accomplish by ordinary women. In any case, Fatima, similar to Mary through her uniqueness serves to stress the value of the feminine in religion. Like Mary, she is an impeccable mother that bore impeccable children. Her very emotions, normally despised in women, are seen to be foretelling of God's feelings. Being the only woman among *ahl al-bayt* serves as a glue both, in linking the holy family together, as well

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<sup>249</sup> For a brief account of the life of Imam Rida's sister who popularly came to be known and called the "impeccable (ma'sumeh)", though not technically so from the theological point of view, refer to: Waddy (1980, p. 49-55).



as in joining the Shī'a together at a deeper emotional level. Her power as mother and possessor of *shafā'a* makes her akin to a matriarch for her devotees. In the next chapter, female personality in the *ḥadīth* literature will be set against the female personalities of the Qur'an and *sunna* studied thus far.

## FEMALE PERSONALITY IN THE ḤADĪTH

### 4.1 Introduction

*Ḥadīth* in Arabic may mean something new or recent, something which came into existence, or the relation of discourse.<sup>1</sup> In Islam, the term was applied to the human record of the Prophet's words and deeds, and came to mean a "tradition".<sup>2</sup> It is therefore considered the second source of Islamic knowledge after the Qur'an. However, the two are not of equal value, but differ in "their provenance and roles, as well as their form and style."<sup>3</sup>

The subject of *ḥadīth* has been one of much controversy since the beginning of the twentieth century, when voices that rejected the authority or authenticity of the *ḥadīth* were heard throughout the Islamic world.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the history of *ḥadīth* from its outset was one of continuous scrutiny to find the best ways to determine whether traditions were authentic or not. That gave rise to different grades marking the degree of authenticity of individual traditions, in addition to different collections of *ḥadīth* varying in esteem. In traditional Islam, emphasis is placed on the *ḥadīth* as complementary to the Qur'an, because it helps explain it. There are several Qur'anic verses that ask Muslims to obey God and the Prophet, to follow the Prophet's example, and indeed to take everything the Prophet had given them and to refrain from everything that he had forbidden.<sup>5</sup> This shows that the *ḥadīth* is authoritative by virtue of the Qur'anic command itself. It is also known that the family and companions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Lane (n.d.): *ḥ-d-th*.

<sup>2</sup> Denny (1993, p. 99).

<sup>3</sup> Denny (1993, p.104).

<sup>4</sup> For a history of the twentieth century debate around *ḥadīth*, see Brown (1996).

<sup>5</sup> See the Qur'anic verses [8:20], [3:21], and [59:7].

Prophet were recording his traditions during his lifetime.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, the argument of those who wish to neglect the *ḥadīth* and focus solely on the Qur'an in the name of scripturalism, that is, a return to the pure Islam,<sup>7</sup> is unfounded.

It has been suggested that the “dividing lines between Qur'an and Ḥadīth, scriptural revelation and prophetic inspiration, divine word and prophetic word, were not so absolute in the first century of Islam; instead, a much more unitive notion of the prophetic mission and authority on the one hand and of the divine activity and revelation on the other hand is hypothesized.<sup>8</sup> Here, it is important to question the choice of the word “*ḥadīth*” rather than “*sunna*”, because the lack of distinction between *ḥadīth* and *sunna* which is apparent in Western as well as modern Muslim scholarship, actually reflects “the post-Shāfi‘ī, ‘classical’, view that, although the two terms are not the same, the *ḥadīth* is nevertheless the total record of the *sunna* and thus the *sunna* can be reconstituted from *ḥadīth*”.<sup>9</sup> However, for the more ancient schools the two terms were always distinct, moreover, “the rejection of certain *ḥadīths* was in no way considered a rejection of the *sunna* of the Prophet: on the contrary, it was considered a clarification of it”.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is acknowledged by the Muslim tradition itself, which created a science out of the authentication process,<sup>11</sup> that “the Hadith as vehicle of the prophetic *sunnaḥ* is mutable and historically contingent.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Azami (1992, p.18-60). Also see Azami (1992, p. 8-15) on some orientalist misconceptions of this literature.

<sup>7</sup> Brown (1996, p.40).

<sup>8</sup> Graham (1977, p.107).

<sup>9</sup> Dutton (1999, p.168-169).

<sup>10</sup> Dutton (1999, p.173).

<sup>11</sup> Such as *‘ilm al-rijāl*, or knowledge of the men and women transmitters of *ḥadīth*, particularly their piety, the times they lived in, and whether it is likely that they met the persons preceding and following them in the “chain of transmitters”.

<sup>12</sup> Graham (1977, p.14).

While the *ḥadīth* in Sunni Islam consists mainly of traditions from the Prophet, in Shīʿī Islam, *ḥadīth* expands to include traditions from all the sinless persons (*maʿṣūmīn*).<sup>13</sup> The Imam himself is an authority in transmission and need not find a chain of narrators leading back to the Prophet. Imam al-Ṣādiq explains this when he says that the *ḥadīth* of every Imam is the same as the *ḥadīth* of the Imam before him, in a chain that goes back to the first Imam ʿAlī, the Prophet, and ultimately to God.<sup>14</sup> One implication of this is the doctrine of the “unity” of the teachings of the Imams, which therefore need to be understood in an integral manner.<sup>15</sup> This is why all traditions, no matter from which *maʿṣūm*, will be considered together as co-texts when relevant.

In the Shīʿī tradition, the meaning of the content of a tradition is the main criterion for determining its authenticity.<sup>16</sup> One authentic tradition explains, “Everything should be in accordance with the Qurʾan and *sunna*, and every *ḥadīth* that contradicts the Qurʾan is an embellishment.”<sup>17</sup>

However, discovering the meaning of the Qurʾan is not a simple task, and as it will be seen in the variety of interpretations of even a single verse, the Qurʾan itself allows for multiple meanings. As Imam ʿAlī said, “Do not altercate with them using the Qurʾan, because it carries many angles so that you will say (something) and they will

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<sup>13</sup> Shiʿī *ḥadīth* and therefore also its apostolic age stretch over a period of two centuries. The sayings of the Imams are not only a continuation of the Prophet’s, but also a kind of commentary and elucidation of prophetic traditions, “often with the aim of bringing out the esoteric teachings of Islam”, in Tabatabaʿī (1980, p. 6-7).

<sup>14</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 53).

<sup>15</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 24).

<sup>16</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 25-26).

<sup>17</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 69).

say (something else), rather dispute with them using the *sunna*, because it is clear and they cannot run from it.”<sup>18</sup> The mention of *sunna* instead of *ḥadīth* here is duly noted.

Therefore, in dealing with the meanings of traditions and their authenticity, a balance needs to be found among the interpretation of the Qur’an, the normative established *sunna* of the Prophet, and other traditions as representative of the unity of the teachings of the *ma‘ṣūmīn*.

Four books came to be known as the most authoritative Shī‘ī *ḥadīth* collections,<sup>19</sup> and their authenticity has been examined.<sup>20</sup> Not among those is the monumental work entitled *Nahj al-Balāgha*, meaning “the path of eloquence”.<sup>21</sup> This was collected by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406 h) and is attributed to Imam ‘Alī. The book comprises sermons, letters, and sayings of ‘Alī. The authenticity of *Nahj al-Balāgha* has been subject to speculation, but when Henri Corbin enquired about the sources of this book, Ṭabāṭabā‘ī simply answered, “For us, whoever wrote *Nahj al-Balāgha* is ‘Alī, even if he lived a century ago.”<sup>22</sup> In line with this sentiment, and Shī‘ī attitudes towards *ḥadīth* in general, the discussion here will focus on the content of the traditions, not their chain of transmission.<sup>23</sup>

The *ḥadīth* literature is especially controversial for the study of the status of women in Islam considering its often misogynist attitudes. Perhaps this is why it has

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<sup>18</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 3, p. 136), in his instruction to Ibn al-‘Abbas’ altercation with the *Khawarij*.

<sup>19</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994, p. 27-28). The four books are Kulayni (1388h), Saduq (1404ha), Tusi (1390hb), and Tusi (1390ha).

<sup>20</sup> Refer to Kohlberg (1987).

<sup>21</sup> It has been translated as “The Peak of Eloquence” in the book’s translation edited by: Yasin T. al-Jiboury (Radi, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Tabataba‘ī (1980, p. 9). Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din explained that al-Radi only included in the book, sayings and writings by ‘Alī which he deemed of significant literary value, and he (Shams al-Din) wished that more of ‘Alī’s sayings were included in the book to give further insight into the Imam’s thought (Shams al-Din, 1972, p. 18 and 46).

<sup>23</sup> For a wider discussion on the sources, authenticity, and Shi‘i attitudes towards *Nahj al-Balaghah*, refer to Shah-Kazemi, (2006, p. 1-10).

been neglected by most feminist and feminist-informed Muslim scholars and is normally addressed in broad terms. For example, Riffat Hassan criticised the high reverence that Muslims and their jurisprudence give the authentic *ḥadīth* collections,<sup>24</sup> and Amina Wadud advised that women's reinterpretation of scripture extend to the traditions.<sup>25</sup> However, women's studies on *ḥadīth* are scarce, and Islamic feminism seems to have a tendency towards "Qur'an-only" hermeneutics. This attitude risks abandoning a necessary agent in explaining even the basic precepts of Islamic thought and practice. Moreover, some traditions are actually beneficial to women in the way they interpret the Qur'an or even affect the issuing of certain laws. It will be seen (in section 4.5) that the single most problematic verse for women in the Qur'an [4: 34] is made milder by use of the *ḥadīth*. In addition, some legal issues normally favoured by women such as for example, the unreserved permissibility of birth control is only explicitly available in the *ḥadīth*.<sup>26</sup>

In this chapter, traditions from *Nahj al-Balāgha* will be the main focus of discussion due to the high popularity of the book and its general acceptance among Muslims as an unimpeachable authority, and because it is perceived by Shī'ī scholars and laypeople as unsurpassed except by the Qur'an, thereby making its sayings most relevant for Shī'ī thought on women. Out of eleven statements on woman/women in *Nahj al-Balāgha*, four will be taken as samples here. These four are singled out mainly because they reflect the major themes on women in the *ḥadīth* literature more generally, but also because they correspond to the areas that have been discussed in the previous

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<sup>24</sup> Roald (1998, p. 27).

<sup>25</sup> Wadud (2006, p. 7).

<sup>26</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 504). The reasoning behind the permissibility of controlled abortion is also deduced from the *ḥadīth* that the soul enters the body in the fourth month after conception.

chapters. The other seven traditions on women in *Nahj al-Balāgha* are unique in their content compared to the wider traditions on women, so even though they would make for a necessary and interesting discussion of Imam ‘Alī’s views on gender, they will be left for another occasion. The four traditions that will be discussed here seem to describe woman as evil, women as deficient in faith and intellect, the fragility and seclusion of women, and woman’s *jihād* as towards her husband. Therefore, they elaborate on the themes discussed in the previous chapters, such as the full personhood of women and their potential vicegerency, particularly in reference to their faith and intellect, women’s greater and lesser *jihād*, their seclusion, and their private and public roles. Finally, a brief analysis of the few traditions with positive tones towards women in the “four books” will be included, and compared to the prevailing views on women in the *ḥadīth*. That is in order to get a better picture of what the *ḥadīth* literature amounts to. The method of analysis will be textual and comparative. The traditional method of authentication by applying each tradition to the Qur’an and *sunna* will be used, making use of the preceding chapters on the female personalities there. Further, comparisons with co-texts, that is, variations of the same tradition, or even traditions discussing a similar issue will be made. The aim of this chapter is to attempt to switch the reading of *ḥadīth* from a literature that informs Islamic law, into one that is subject to the tradition’s broader views on womanhood, in light of the conclusions already made on the female personalities. This chapter will therefore deconstruct these four sample traditions and show how unlike the colourful and varied female personalities in the Qur’an and *sunna*, woman here is repeatedly presented as a monolithic personality, which is usually lesser than man, particularly in relation to her husband.

## 4.2 Woman as Evil and Necessary

Consider the tradition, “Woman is wholly evil (*al-mar’a sharrun kulluhā*), and the worst of her evil is that she must needs be (*wa sharru mā fihā annahu la budda minhā*)”.<sup>27</sup>

The first part of this tradition seemingly proclaims womankind as evil. The generalisation that this is about womankind stems from the tradition’s use of the word “*al-mar’a*”, meaning woman in the singular, which in turn implies a generalisation based on sort. The second part of this tradition however, complicates the meaning by linking the evilness of woman with the necessity of her existence. It is not saying that woman is a “necessary evil”, but that she is wholly evil because she is absolutely necessary.

In another tradition, Imam ‘Alī describes three qualities that are favourable in women but not so in men,<sup>28</sup> and it has been suggested that this shows that the Imam does not regard woman as totally evil but that both women and men have positive and negative traits.<sup>29</sup>

It was argued in chapter 1 that woman was created a full person, and that the human being and the human soul are described in the Qur’an in general terms, irrespective of sex, as containing the good and the evil within them, “We indeed created the human being in the fairest stature, then We restored him the lowest of the low -- save those who believe, and do righteous deeds” [95: 4-6], and, “By the soul, and That which shaped it and inspired it to lewdness and god-fearing! Prosperous is he who purifies it, and failed has he who seduces it” [91: 7-10].

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<sup>27</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 53). Also note that while the word used here (*sharr*) means evil, similar words to this have more positive meanings, such as *sharar* meaning a spark of fire, and *sharir* meaning riverside or seaside (Lane, n.d.).

<sup>28</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 52), these are pride, cowardice, and thrift.

<sup>29</sup> Subayti (2006, p. 188-189).



Faḍlallāh finds that this tradition's apparent meaning is irreconcilable with the foundations of Islam, unless another meaning is intended.<sup>30</sup> If the first part of this tradition cannot mean what it appears to mean, perhaps the second part explains it.

A few Qur'anic verses may be taken to express a similar sentiment of wariness from women, "O believers, among your spouses and children there is an enemy to you; so beware of them... Your wealth and your children are only a trial; and with God is a mighty wage" [64: 14-15]. In exegesis, this has been taken to refer to some not all spouses and children, who try to pull people away from religion. These are a trial because they cause distress to the soul forbidding itself from following desire.<sup>31</sup> In another verse, wealth and sons are described as adornments of this world, and the good deeds which endure are described as better in the sight of God and better in expectation [18: 46]. Wealth and sons are not a problem in themselves and are indeed necessary tools for a good life in human society.<sup>32</sup> However, the problem is in the hearts which cling to these things expecting ultimate benefit and endurance from them.<sup>33</sup>

In this context, where something is condemned which is not necessarily wicked in itself, an incident comes to mind, when a man cursed this world (*dunyā*) in front of 'Alī. Now, 'Alī himself had often condemned the world for its changeability, its danger, and its misleading hopes, and declared that he had "divorced" it irrevocably.<sup>34</sup> However, when this man cursed the world in front of him, 'Alī criticised him and asked rhetorically whether the man should be accusing the world or whether it is the world that ought to be accusing him. He continued to describe the man's situation

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<sup>30</sup> Fadlallah (1998, p. 40-41).

<sup>31</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 10, p. 24).

<sup>32</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 15, p. 288-289).

<sup>33</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 13, p. 318-319).

<sup>34</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 3, p. 73-74) and Radi (n.d.c, vol.4, p.16-17).

reproachfully, saying to him that it was he who was seduced by the world and then he accuses it, even though the world is actually clear about its ephemeral nature, and is not deceptive. Then he went on to describe all the hints and the possibilities for growth that the world offers.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, even when the Imam condemned the world, his condemnation was mistakenly understood to mean that the problem originates in the world itself. Perhaps this example might also be taken as a warning against misunderstanding his condemnation of woman in a similar manner.

Another tradition from Imam ‘Alī might help understand his literary style, he says, “To God be attributed the good that has proceeded from envy; how just it is! It originates with its possessor and then it struggles with/kills him.”<sup>36</sup> Here, he begins by praising envy and therefore immediately captures the listener’s attention with the unlikely declaration. Then he continues to explain that envy is just because it punishes the person who produces it. This tradition might help understand the link between the first part of the tradition on woman as evil, and its second explanatory part on the peak of her evil being her indispensability.

The context of this aphoristic tradition has not been narrated with it, and one wonders how much the context would have defined the meaning of these words.<sup>37</sup> It is especially true of a literary text that, “It is necessary to take the viewpoint of the hearer or the reader and to treat the novelty of the emergent meaning as the counterpart, on the author’s side, of a construction on the side of the reader. Thus the process of explanation is the only access to the process of creation... In the asymmetrical relation between the

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<sup>35</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 31-32).

<sup>36</sup> Majlisi (1403h, vol. 70, p. 241). The translation of “*lillahi darru*” is from Lane (n.d.)

<sup>37</sup> The description of traditions as aphoristic and the problematic lack of context is borrowed from Rahman (1965, p. 76).

text and the reader, one of the partners speaks for both. Bringing a text to language is always something other than hearing someone and listening to his speech.”<sup>38</sup>

There is a paradoxical meaning in this tradition, between woman’s evilness and the necessity of her existence. It has been argued that this extremist language leaving no space for good ness in woman is inconsistent with the Qur’an, and even with Imam ‘Alī’s own views on favourable traits in men and women. His statement might however be in line with the Qur’anic warning from spouses, children, and wealth that are a trial for the clinging hearts. Moreover, one can understand from the incident with the man condemning the world, that even though Imam ‘Alī appears to have done so himself, such condemnation coming from that man was considered a lack of understanding and was corrected by the Imam. The literary style of shocking the listener with an unusual declaration and then turning the meaning around had been used by ‘Alī on at least one other occasion. The unavailable context leaves the meaning of this tradition open for interpretation. However, the Qur’anic context and the co-texts of Imam ‘Alī’s more general outlook and style, may inform the understanding that the tradition does not simply say that woman is evil, but points at woman’s necessity and, possibly, her place in the hearts of men. This tradition therefore need not be a statement against the full personhood of woman and her potential for vicegerency.

#### **4.3 Women as Deficient in Faith, Fortune, and Intellect**

With this *ḥadīth*, interestingly, the context is recorded as “after the War of the Camel”. Imam ‘Alī said,

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<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur (1981, p. 174).

“O multitude of people, indeed women are deficient in faith (*nawāqis al-īmān*), deficient in fortune (*nawāqis al-huḥuḏ*), and deficient in intellect (*nawāqis al-uqūl*). As for their deficiency in faith, it is in their refraining from prayer and fasting during their menstruation, as for their deficiency in fortune, it is in their share of inheritance being half the men’s share, and as for their deficiency in intellect, it is in the statement of two women witnesses being equivalent to the statement of one man. Therefore, guard yourselves from evil women and be cautious of the good ones among them. Do not obey them in good deeds so that they do not get greedy for your obedience in bad deeds.”<sup>39</sup>

To begin with, the recorded occasion of this tradition is after the War of the Camel. This was named so in reference to ‘Ā’isha’s camel which was the rallying point for the soldiers rebelling against ‘Alī’s caliphate and it was the first civil war among Muslims.<sup>40</sup> The occasion is interesting because that time seems to have had strong anti-women sentiments. For example, in Sunni authentic *ḥadīth* literature a tradition occurred around that time, which condemns women’s political leadership.<sup>41</sup> The opinion of the esteemed religious scholar, Muḥammad Mahdī Shams al-Dīn (d. 2001 A.D.) is that Imam ‘Alī wanted to warn people from following ‘Ā’isha in a manner that did not offend her personally, so he resorted to describing some of the particulars of Islamic law

<sup>39</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 1, p. 129). This particular version of the tradition is graded “*mursal*”, and therefore not entirely reliable (Shams al-Din, 1995, p. 101). A simplified version of the first part, particularly women as deficient in faith and intellect (*naqisat ‘aql wa din*) is reported by Bukhari (1401h, vol. 1, p. 78, and vol. 2, p. 126), where the occasion is recorded as the holiday (‘*id*) of either *Fitr* or *Adha*. This helped some to speculate that the Prophet was merely joking. Khaled Abou el Fadl correctly rejected this opinion as implausible in Abou el Fadl (2003, p. 229).

<sup>40</sup> Hitti (1970, p. 179-180). Moreover, ‘Ā’isha was standing on very shaky grounds, as one historian noted, her vague demands for reform show that she was in fact reluctant to reconcile with the program that the election of ‘Alī implied (Peterson, 1964, p. 10). However, for a more understanding view of ‘Ā’isha’s role in the war, refer to Ziyada (2001, p. 328-444).

<sup>41</sup> Bukhari (1401h, vol. 5, p. 136, and vol. 8, p. 97). The *sanad* of the tradition (*Ma aflaha qawmun wallu amrahum imra’a*) and the time it appeared are analysed thoroughly in Mernissi (1991).

regarding women, as his way of showing that despite ‘Ā’isha’s position as the Prophet’s wife, she is still a woman like all women and Muslims have no obligation to follow her, particularly because she did not listen to admonishments nor feared sedition, and she did not abide by the Qur’anic command for the wives of the Prophet to stay in their homes.<sup>42</sup> This brings Shams al-Dīn to the second part of the tradition which recommends being wary of women and not obeying them in any matter. He explains the admonishment to be wary of good women as only pertaining to situations when such women do not abide by the practice of consultation and the law.<sup>43</sup> The aim, Shams al-Dīn says, was to protect the public from following ‘Ā’isha who is in the view of the majority Muslims a good woman.<sup>44</sup> This explanation that the Imam would spite women in general for the sake of one woman is unsatisfactory. If he did not wish to discredit her personally, why would he allow himself to discredit all women on her part? It may be correctly argued that intending the individual by referring to the general is a common rhetorical feature. This may have been so in its given context; however since this statement has too often been used as a confirmation of women’s inferior capabilities, it needs to be deconstructed, particularly because of the grave theological and legal consequences of its inner reasoning.

To claim that women are deficient in faith is perhaps the most dangerous, from a religious point of view. The Qur’an repeatedly and clearly puts men and women on an equal footing in matters of faith, “Men and women who have surrendered, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful

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<sup>42</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p. 102).

<sup>43</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p. 103).

<sup>44</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p. 103).

women, enduring men and enduring women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give in charity, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God oft -- for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty wage” [33: 35].<sup>45</sup> As it also promises rewards for both of them without reservations, “And whosoever does deeds of righteousness, be it male or female, believing -- they shall enter Paradise, and not be wronged a single date-spot” [4: 124].<sup>46</sup>

It has been argued in the previous chapters that women are represented in the Qur’an as being on various levels of the *jihād al-nafs*, with some of them, like the mother of Moses, Āsiyā, and Mary reaching exalted levels, and others like Bilqīs overcoming their conditioning and accepting the new message of the prophets. Moreover, Khadija is portrayed as the first person to accept Islam and support the prophecy of Muḥammad. There were also many women who left their families and everything they had in Mecca and migrated to Medina to proclaim their faith, as is evident in the occasion of revelation of verse [60: 10].<sup>47</sup> To accept the claim that women are deficient in faith, not only goes against the Qur’an, but also betrays those pioneers.

The legal aspects mentioned here, that women’s deficient faith is in their abstention from fasts and prayers during menstruation, is peculiar. Faḍlallāh argues that by refraining from prayer and fasts during menstruation, women are actually obeying God’s legal commands. Moreover, he poses the question whether people’s faith becomes

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<sup>45</sup> Also [9: 72], [24: 12], [33: 58, 73], [47: 19], [48: 5], [57: 12], [71: 28], [85: 10].

<sup>46</sup> Also [16: 97], and [40: 40].

<sup>47</sup> Ibn Hisham (1383h, vol. 3, p. 789).

reduced during travel, because according to Islamic law prayers should be shortened and fasts broken during travel.<sup>48</sup>

While the Qur'an accords spiritual equality between men and women, the *ḥadīth* is very far from this because it often condemns women for their lack of faith and warns them of their situation in the hereafter. It would be useful here to consult some other traditions, particularly those which speak of women's judgement. For example, in one tradition the Prophet urged a group of women to give alms as much as possible because most of them are the firewood of hell, the women objected reminding him of the good natured ones among them, this made Prophet tender and explained that were it not for the harm they cause their husbands, no prayerful woman would enter hell.<sup>49</sup> The position towards women shifted from being the firewood of hell to the assertion that no prayerful woman would enter hell, based solely on the women's attitude towards their husbands. On the other hand, the Prophet allegedly told women not to lengthen their prayers in order to hold back their husbands from their sexual rights, for such women are cursed by the angels.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, women are not allowed to fast voluntarily except with their husbands' consent,<sup>51</sup> nor are they allowed to perform the pilgrimage on someone's behalf even if it were from their own money, except with their husband's consent.<sup>52</sup> When the traditions are brought together, it will be observed that their inner reasoning is not clear. If a woman lacks in faith and is doomed, it would be sensible to encourage her to increase her worship, and particularly her prayer. However, the advice that these traditions give is that she does not cause harm to her husband and that she allows him

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<sup>48</sup> Fadlallah (2005, p.43).

<sup>49</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 514).

<sup>50</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 508-509).

<sup>51</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 151).

<sup>52</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 516).

sexual access. It is not specified here what kind of harm is supposed, nor is the character of each husband taken into consideration. What redeems women in any case, is their relationship with their husbands, not with God.

Therefore, while the Qur'an does not support the claim of women's deficient faith, and while the legal reasoning provided here is inconsistent, traditions tend to carry this point of view and break from the Qur'an when they put service to the husband before service to God.<sup>53</sup>

The claim about women's lack of fortune is not found in any of the other variations of this tradition. The lack in fortune is portrayed as a lack in oneself. This is very different from the Qur'anic point of view, "So he went forth unto his people in his adornment. Those who desired the present life said, 'Would that we possessed the like of that Korah has been given! Surely he is a man of mighty fortune (*ḥazzin 'azīm*)'. But those to whom knowledge had been given said, 'Woe upon you! The reward of God is better for him who believes, and works righteousness; and none shall receive it except the steadfast'" [28: 79-80].

As far as the legal aspect of this statement is concerned, a quick reading of the Qur'anic passage on inheritance would readily show that women's share being half of men's is only one possible situation within the very complicated inheritance laws. The proportion of two-to-one is the general rule, but not applicable in every situation [4: 11-12].<sup>54</sup> In addition to that, a tradition from Imam al-Ṣādiq explains that women generally have a lesser share in inheritance because men have the extra responsibilities of financial

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<sup>53</sup> Refer to Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 213-214 and p. 218-222).

<sup>54</sup> Nimr (1996, p.100). Wadud (1994, p. 87).



support (*nafaqa*), *jihād*, and the payment of blood money (*diyya*).<sup>55</sup> According to this point of view, the men's larger share in inheritance is due to their larger spending responsibilities as well as *jihād*.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it cannot be said that women are lacking in fortune because the lesser share in inheritance functions as part of a system that sees itself to be distributing the wealth and the responsibilities fairly. Moreover, wealth and fortune cannot be measured by inheritance alone. Khadīja was far wealthier than her husband, and Mary surprised Zechariah with the *rizq* that descended upon her as a young girl.

With the claim of men's greater intellectual capacity, the issue becomes more complicated because this idea has weight among many '*ulamā*'. In the previous chapters, it was shown that women in the Qur'an and *sunna* are often presented as intelligent. This is particularly the case with Bilqīs who is portrayed as having correctly calculated every step she took, political and religious, as well as Āsiyā who had a much better understanding of the message of the prophets than did her husband. Fāṭima is represented in the sources as having the mental capacity to grasp esoteric religious knowledge, which was not the case with men outside of *ahl al-bayt*, and she is portrayed to have possessed a profound understanding of politics and history, which enabled her to foresee the destiny of her nation.

It is important to mention that one verse in the Qur'an, may be seen to contend females' incapacity to engage in debate. The verse reads, "What, one who is reared amid

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<sup>55</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 7, p. 85).

<sup>56</sup> Fadlallah (1998, p. 42). El-Nimr has made a similar observation on the Islamic system of inheritance in general in Nirm (1996, p. 100). This point of view as expressed in the *hadith* of al-Sadiq does not take into account the economic realities of modern life where many women are also breadwinners. The *ijtihād* regarding this is a strictly legal issue and therefore outside the scope of this discussion.

ornaments and, in dispute cannot make himself plain?” [43: 18].<sup>57</sup> This verse is located within a passage that reproaches the pagan Arabs for claiming that the angels are females and that they are God’s daughters instead of God’s creatures and servants [43: 15-16, and 19]. The passage criticises the discrepancy between allocating female daughters to God, but when an Arab man is given tidings of what he had attributed to God, that is the birth of a daughter, his face darkens with suppressed sorrow and rage [43: 17]. The passage criticises their whole system of thought, especially that the angels are not material to be identified by either sex,<sup>58</sup> and that they look down on daughters but attribute them to God.<sup>59</sup> In this context of looking down on the female, the verse [43: 18] is located and the exegetes do understand it to be about women in general.<sup>60</sup> To them, woman is naturally more passionate and compassionate, as she is less intellectual compared to man, and one sign of her powerful emotion is her love for ornaments and adornments, while she is weak in her intellect and therefore cannot provide effectual arguments.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, an early tradition, even though not authenticated, does portray the verse as being applicable to men, when it is narrated in reference to Moses.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, despite the fact that the context of this verse is about females, its grammar is masculine which in Arabic means that it cannot be exclusive to females (*awa-man yunashsha’u fi-l-hilyati wa huwa fi-l-khisami ghayru mubīnin*). Moreover, unlike the exegetes’ understanding that this is woman’s nature, the verse itself expresses nurture

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<sup>57</sup> The second part of the verse, following the “and”, is borrowed from Pickthall (2002) rather than Arberry’s translation of the Qur’an (Arberry, 1955) which is used throughout. That is because Arberry translates this, “when the time of altercation comes, is not to be seen”, which is not accurate in context.

<sup>58</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 18, p. 90-91).

<sup>59</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 18, p. 89-90).

<sup>60</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 9, p. 189-190).

<sup>61</sup> Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 18, p. 90).

<sup>62</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 282-283). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 4, p. 595).

when it says that one, male or female, who is bred in ornaments cannot make himself clear in dispute.<sup>63</sup>

Imam ‘Alī said, “Every container becomes narrow when it is filled, except for the container of knowledge, it becomes wider”, in reference to the intellect (*‘aql*).<sup>64</sup> Imam al-Ṣādiq, when asked whether a woman may perform the pilgrimage rites on behalf of a man he answered, “If she had already performed her own pilgrimage, and was a Muslim with knowledge of the law, then a woman may be more knowledgeable (*afqah*) than a man.”<sup>65</sup>

These traditions assert that the intellect may grow when the mind is fed with knowledge, moreover, when that happens, a woman may excel over a man. This is different from the contention of the main tradition being discussed here, which portrays a deterministic sense of women’s inferior intellectual capacities, by utilising a tenet of Islamic law to draw conclusions about women’s nature.

This brings the discussion to the legal aspect which is the Qur’anic verse on witnessing, where two female witnesses are required for every male, “that if one of the two women errs the other will remind her” [2: 282]. This verse however, begins by advising believers to record their debt contracts.

Every other instance in which the Qur’an prescribes witnesses, it mentions the number of witnesses needed and their piety, but not their sex. Four witnesses are needed in cases of adultery [24: 4, 6, 13], two just witnesses are needed to observe a dying

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<sup>63</sup> This is similar to the opinion of Shams al-Din (1995, p. 74) and Fadlallah (2005, p. 17-20), who both understand this verse to be primarily about women’s nurture rather than nature, even though they do not observe that it is grammatically masculine and therefore they do not extend this potential condition to males.

<sup>64</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 47).

<sup>65</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 4, p. 306).

person's will [5: 106], and the same for divorce [65: 2], and two judges who are just are needed to settle hunting trespasses [5: 95]. In none of these is the sex of the witness or judge mentioned.

The incident when Imam 'Ali and Fāṭima went to the caliph demanding Fadak to be returned to Fāṭima is relevant here. It is reported that they took with them Umm Ayman to witness, along with Imām 'Alī that the Prophet had given Fadak to Fāṭima. Their testimony was refused on the grounds that 'Alī is Fāṭima's husband and would naturally have inclined to her, but if there were another woman with Umm Ayman the case might have been considered.<sup>66</sup> Shī'ī jurisprudence considers Imam 'Alī the most knowledgeable of the law, and his rulings are binding. Therefore, had he considered the word of one woman inadmissible, he would not have gone to the caliph with that set-up. Moreover, a tradition from al-Ṣādiq narrates that Imam 'Alī allowed the witnessing of two women in some cases, and when asked about the verse on two female witnesses as equal to one man, Imam al-Ṣādiq answered that this is in reference to the recording of debts.<sup>67</sup>

The early and medieval Muslim scholars did not necessarily relate the witnessing verse with women's mental capacities. The testimony of women had been accepted by all Muslims in the narration of *ḥadīth*, which involves the very making of Islamic scripture.<sup>68</sup> Shams al-Dīn argues that there is absolutely no proof for women's incapacity to occupy the position of an Islamic judge for example. In fact, there is no consensus on the issue because there is no text or *sunna* regarding it. Any talk about

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<sup>66</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 2, p. 155-156). Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 3, p. 154, 156, vol. 4, p. 186, and vol. 5, p. 276).

<sup>67</sup> Huwayzi (1412h, vol. 1, p. 300).

<sup>68</sup> Khoei (1413h, vol. 24), which is dedicated in its entirety to female transmitters of *ḥadīth* (*muhaddithat*).

manhood being a pre-requisite in a judge, is based on the personal opinions of jurists, not on any solid grounds.<sup>69</sup>

In modern times, it has been argued that the verse in question “is the product of a specific context in which women were under-educated and did not normally engage in business. Consequently, if we no longer believe that a woman, or all women, will ‘forget’, there is no justification for the two women for one man rule, in debts or otherwise.”<sup>70</sup>

If the verse on female witnesses is understood to be in the recording of debts, and today it is being argued further that this given context is not necessarily applicable anymore, then what remains of the Imam’s contention that women lack in intellect because their word in court counts for half a man’s? Indeed, “The cultural evaluation of a woman was transmitted in some of the *ḥadīth* reports that were used to overcome the conditional denotation of the Qur’anic law of evidence.”<sup>71</sup> Rather than allowing the law to make use of the Qur’anic contextualisation, this tradition uses the verse to make generalisations about women, at once fixing Islamic law and fixing “women’s nature” into a comprehensive system, which then becomes very difficult to mend.

The tradition ends with the admonishment to be guarded from evil women and to be cautious of the good ones, and not to obey them in any thing they might demand.<sup>72</sup> Some have claimed that there is nothing wrong with this conclusion. They explain that

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<sup>69</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p.117-123).

<sup>70</sup> Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 157-158). Contextualising the verse is also the opinion of Fazlur Rahman in Wadud (1994, p. 85).

<sup>71</sup> Sachedina (2000, p. 172).

<sup>72</sup> An authentic tradition reports almost identical words attributed to the Prophet (Kulayni, 1388h, vol. 5, p. 516-517). Some traditions contextualise this, either explaining it to be concerning women’s modesty so that the man does not allow them to go out excessively or to wear thin clothes, or that women must not be obeyed when they intercede (wrongly) for the benefit of their relatives.

it is only saying that people should be careful in their relationships, and that it is a valid advice to tell men not to grant women too much lest they get spoiled and start manipulating men's feelings and desires for their own personal advantage.<sup>73</sup> Shams al-Dīn finds that to ask men to disobey women's demands even when the demands are good is not reasonable and needs further interpretation. He suggests that the meaning is that goodness must be done regardless who demands it, whether it is a woman or a man, because these are not the source of *sharī'a*. He adds that women must not be obeyed when they become autocratic in their opinions and powers, and this applies to men as well.<sup>74</sup> This opinion attempts to make sense of the tradition, but seems apologetic. It is a clear expression here that women in particular, not men, must not be obeyed in any matter, even the good. Faḍlallāh repeats that this is a sensible precaution so that women do not use all their powers over men, but adds that the Imam in another occasion warned one of fully trusting his brother for similar reasons.<sup>75</sup> It is interesting that another tradition, perhaps realising the tension between such admonishments and the stories that the Prophet sometimes consulted his wives,<sup>76</sup> explains that he consulted them and then did the opposite of what they said.<sup>77</sup>

#### 4.3.1 Some Thoughts on the Issue of Intellect Versus Emotion

Conservative clerics tend to generalise that woman's emotional nature interferes in her affairs to the detriment of her intellect, and that is why she is incapable of

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<sup>73</sup> Subayti (2006, p.226-227).

<sup>74</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p. 103-104), where he considers the *sanad* authentic.

<sup>75</sup> Faḍlallah (1998, p. 43-44), based on the tradition in Ibn Abi al-Hadid (n.d., vol. 20, p. 314).

<sup>76</sup> For example, his consulting Umm Salama at the Hudaybiyya when many Muslims were not obeying him, in Ziyada (2001, p. 249).

<sup>77</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 517-518).

anything more than child rearing and household duties.<sup>78</sup> Shams al-Dīn argues differently. He says that experience has shown that women are not lesser than men in their intellectual capabilities. Therefore, he suggests that what is meant here is the role emotions play on most women in some situations, in addition to their occupation with household duties in most cases. He adds that if a woman has knowledge and experience then this does not affect her.<sup>79</sup>

The contemporary mystically inclined cleric, Jawādī Āmulī provides several examples that indicate that the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* present the heart as more favourable than the intellect in matters of faith.<sup>80</sup> For example, he explains that the prophets in the Qur'anic narrative seem to have convinced their people of their message as far as the intellect was concerned, but the disbelievers were unable to allow their hearts to follow what they acknowledged in their heads, therefore their knowledge remained devoid of resolve.<sup>81</sup> Āmulī continues that according to the Qur'an, faith is precisely in the unity between the head and the heart.<sup>82</sup> He adds that discussions ought not to be about the size of the brain of each sex, because when a woman cries faster than a man, it is a signal that her heart is alive.<sup>83</sup>

Philosophy in general, beginning with Aristotle, has generally condemned the way of the heart and raised the way of the intellect as the ultimate human achievement.<sup>84</sup> However,

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<sup>78</sup> Tafsir and fiqh literature are replete with this argument, for a typical case which seems airtight through its use of the Qur'an and traditions is Tahrani (1993).

<sup>79</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p. 106).

<sup>80</sup> Amuli (1994, p. 51-54).

<sup>81</sup> Amuli (1994, p.55-59).

<sup>82</sup> Amuli (1994, p. 59-63).

<sup>83</sup> Amuli (1994, p. 68).

<sup>84</sup> McMillan (1982, p.p. 16-29).

“even if the contention that women are emotional or more susceptible to compassion than men are is actually true, it does not prove that they do not reason but live on an animal-like level of subjective intuitions. And the corollary to this is that the desire to make loving kindness a cardinal virtue of morality... does not mean that one is asking for a return to savagery. What it does mean is that the rationalist attempt to construe morality as a peculiarly masculine achievement, as one that depends on the subject-object dyad and on the suppression of feelings, is tantamount to the assertion that what we normally call goodness is something of which men must logically be incapable... At any rate, to think that feelings are important and have their place only in human life is not to commit oneself to a denial of objectivity and the possibility of knowledge because, as we saw above (in the author’s analysis of the compassionate behaviour of some female characters to be not out of selfish egoism but of moral wisdom), the notion of objectivity need not be restricted to those activities which are independent of feelings and emotions.”<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, in *Ḥadīth Junūd al-‘Aql*, compassion is recommended and contrasted with anger, as knowledge is contrasted with ignorance.<sup>86</sup> This poses the difficult question as to why “women’s compassion” is considered an emotion in the first place, and why emotions such as anger which according to traditions, prevail in many men and

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<sup>85</sup> McMillan (1982, p. 28). Fadlallah commenting on women’s alleged deficient intellect makes a similar point, that heightened emotions in women do not necessarily denote lesser intellect, in Fadlallah (1998, p. 42).

<sup>86</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 21).



divert away from reason and destroy faith,<sup>87</sup> are not included in discussions on emotionality versus intellect.

#### 4.3.2 “Women’s Deficiency” and Islamic Law

This tradition claims that women are deficient in intellect and in faith, which are arguably two characteristics which define a human being and would make him a potential vicegerent of God on earth. It portrays women as naturally inferior and wretched creatures at every level of their being. Therefore, the woman here is presented as less than a full person. Some have passed by this narration very lightly. They would explain it away, saying for instance that it is only explaining legal issues, and that it is not really condemning women because it is saying that God has made them this way and therefore all these problems are beyond women’s control.<sup>88</sup> According to that rationalisation, God has created women deficient and gave them roles to fit their deficiency, so this seems reasonable and merciful. However, that is not the case because if other aspects of Islamic law were considered, it will be found that it does not treat women as inferiors as far as religious duties and the penal code are concerned. Particularly with regards to accountability for one’s actions, the law has consideration for the circumstances of each individual who trespasses the limits.<sup>89</sup> Following this precision in judgement, if women lack in faith and intellect, then it should follow that

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<sup>87</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 2, p. 300-305).

<sup>88</sup> Subayti (2006, p.212).

<sup>89</sup> This is best portrayed in an authentic report when Imam ‘Ali to the surprise of the caliph, judged five adulterers with five different punishments, not one of them similar to the other. The Imam explained that the non-Muslim who committed adultery with a Muslim woman was no longer under the protection of Muslims and deserved to die, the married adulterer deserved a bigger punishment than the non-married one, the slave got half the punishment of the free person in accordance with the law, and the insane person was excused: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 7, p. 265).

women should receive lesser punishments for the same crimes committed by men. This however, is not the case.

One of the main problems with this tradition is that it uses some tenets of the law to draw conclusions about women, disregarding the historic and Qur'anic contexts of those tenets. Women are seen as lacking in faith, despite evidence to the contrary, based solely on the fact that they do not perform their religious rituals during menstruation. Herein lays the conundrum of setting nature against scripture. Women's deficiency in faith is explained at the biological level so that it is seen as pre-determined, and the *sharī'a* is equally portrayed as immutable, so that women remain in this situation where their nature and scripture cause a constant strain. Women's lesser share in inheritance is explained as a lesser fortune, disregarding the situations when women get an equal share in inheritance, and more importantly, disregarding the economic system for which these shares were set. Finally, women's lesser weight in testifying does not take into account the contextualisation of this verse and the example of Imam 'Alī himself, who took women's word in evidence. Therefore, rather than viewing legal tenets as depending on situational contexts and aiming at a just society for all its members, this tradition interprets them as pertaining to women's inherent deficiency. What might have been a situational law becomes a law that understates women's existence. This gives a pessimistic view of womanhood, and an equally pessimistic view of Islamic law;

“It should be noted that what might be called the ‘facts’ of women's oppression - etc.- may be assimilated within a number of competing explanatory frameworks.

The meaning adduced from such facts will differ depending upon the logic of

explanation within which the facts are lodged. Facts are given meaning through their absorption into a conceptual framework.”<sup>90</sup>

When the law is explained not as a result of a social system or a larger system of justice, but as a result of women’s inherent deficiency, the meaning of these legal “facts” becomes oppressive to women. Faḍlallāh who does try to explain the tradition, finds that if it had stopped at describing women as deficient in faith and intellect, one may have left it open for interpretation, however, the justifications of these premises are strange and refutable.<sup>91</sup>

#### **4.4 Women as Flowers to Be Secluded**

Towards the end of his will to his son, Imam ‘Alī allegedly wrote a few lines about women,

“Do not consult women because their view is deficient and their determination feeble. Hold back their sight by keeping them behind the veil because strictness of veiling preserves them. Their going out is not more intense than your allowing an unreliable man to visit them. If you can manage that they not know anyone (meaning any man) other than yourself, do so. Do not give woman control over her affairs beyond those pertaining to her self, because woman is a flower not a subduer. Do not pay her regard beyond herself and do not encourage her to intercede for others. Do not show jealousy out of place, for this invites the healthy woman to illness and the innocent woman to suspicion.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Fiorenza (1993, p. 205).

<sup>91</sup> Fadlallah (1998, p. 42).

<sup>92</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol.3, p.56-57). This version it is graded *mursal* and therefore not binding, and other versions are *da’if* (Shams al-Din, 1995, p. 96).

Some of the main issues in this tradition are women's deficiency of opinion, feeble determination, and that they not be allowed to intercede for others. This is somewhat similar to the advice in the previous tradition regarding women's deficient intellect and that they not be consulted or obeyed in any matter. Then there is the admonishment for their extreme veiling and seclusion, as well as showing them jealousy in moderation. Finally, the tradition compares women to flowers and contends that they are not subduers and therefore should not be given any responsibility beyond what pertains directly to their person.

It has been suggested that this being a will to his son, possibly also an Imam,<sup>93</sup> 'Alī was giving advice not to common Muslims but for the leader not to put the affairs of the state under women's command.<sup>94</sup> This however does not explain the rest of the tradition describing women's opinion and determination as feeble, advising their extreme seclusion, and disallowing them control over their own affairs. More importantly, if this tradition is to be understood as particularly the will of one Imam to another, it contradicts the example set by the women of *ahl al-bayt*, as described in chapter 3. Fāṭima and Zaynab were shown to be, as far as Shī'ī sources are concerned, among the makers of Shī'ī identity and the preservers of the Imams' religio-political legacies. Keeping women away from the Imams' political affairs is the direct opposite of what the renowned speeches of Fāṭima and Zaynab stand for, besides Khadīja's funding of the Prophet's early movement.

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<sup>93</sup> It is not known whether this was 'Alī's will to al-Hasan, an Imam, or Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya, not an Imam.

<sup>94</sup> Subayti (2006, p.209-210).

Shams al-Dīn observes that in another version of this tradition, the advice against consulting women is followed with the statement, “except for the one whose fullness of intellect has been tested.”<sup>95</sup> To him, this particularisation of consulting only the capable women is more appropriate than claiming that they are all weak in intellect, which is not realistic.<sup>96</sup> He also considers the strict veiling of women prescribed here problematic, because juridical texts have proven that women’s veiling is restricted to her modest dress, and that the decent mixing between men and women is allowed.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, he rejects the claim that a woman should not manage her own personal affairs, partly because this statement from *Nahj al-Balāghah* is not found in other variations of the tradition,<sup>98</sup> and partly because juridical texts prove that a mature woman is fully responsible for herself, and that she shares this responsibility in two particular situations.<sup>99</sup>

While there is an agreement that the seclusion of women is not an absolute requirement, some consider it a question of morality. Murtaḍa Muṭahharī (d. 1979 A.D.) for example, understands this tradition to advise the total seclusion of women, but he adds that jurists do not find this obligatory for lack of evidence and indeed for the presence of evidence otherwise. However, he insists that this tradition be accepted as a moral requirement even if it is not legal.<sup>100</sup> This however, is a question of moral relativism. The “moral” seclusion of women is questionable from a religious point of

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<sup>95</sup> Majlisi (1403h, vol.100, p. 253).

<sup>96</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p. 94-97).

<sup>97</sup> Shams al-Din (1995, p. 97). For his views on the extent of women’s modest dress, refer to Shams al-Din (1994).

<sup>98</sup> Refer to Kulayni (1388h, vol.5, p. 337-338) and Saduq (1404ha, vol.4, p.392).

<sup>99</sup> These are consulting her father about her marriage if she were a virgin, and allowing her husband sexual access if she were married, in: Shams al-Din (1995, p. 97-98).

<sup>100</sup> Mutahhari (1987, p. 154-157).

view. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, the imprisonment of women in their homes is a punishment for indecent action [4: 15].<sup>101</sup> Muṭahharī also understands the implications of this verse to be against the seclusion of women, but he tries to find middle ground when he adds that Islam allows neither the imprisonment of women nor their total interaction with men.<sup>102</sup> There seems to be an inconsistency however, between the Qur'an considering women's imprisonment as a punishment for indecent action, and the tradition's admonishment for the total seclusion of women as a moral procedure. Placing all women under house arrest actually shows that the underlying mentality is that women are guilty until proven innocent, because the act of punishment is applied to all women as a precaution rather than as a punishment for an actual crime.

Another religious problem with this is best portrayed in another tradition, when Imam al-Ṣādiq said concerning a man who despite the admonishment to study religion, preferred to stay in his house and did not meet his brethren, "How does this man understand his religion?!"<sup>103</sup> This implies that the seclusion of any person will be a hindrance from acquiring first hand knowledge. From a feminist point of view this is equally problematic; "human beings need to live with and among others in relations of concrete particularity, in space, extending over and through time. If we are deprived of such relations we are damaged and distorted in body and spirit."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> This is normally understood to have been erased by the later stoning verse [24: 2]. However, people who reject such understanding of *naskh*, argue that imprisonment is for indecency whereas stoning is for proven adultery, in: Abou el Fadl (2001, p. 172-173).

<sup>102</sup> Mutahhari (1987, p. 157).

<sup>103</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 1, p. 31), this has been interpreted to mean that acquiring knowledge requires continuous meetings with those who have knowledge and posing questions (Mazandarani, *n.d.*, vol. 2, p.18-19).

<sup>104</sup> Elshtain (1981, p.318).

Finally, the statements on seclusion to the extent that this tradition goes, that is to advise the man that if possible, his women shall not know any man other than himself, is soon followed by the advice not to show jealousy out of place because this corrupts the good woman and makes the innocent one become doubtful. This may be seen as an inner contradiction within the text; if not allowing a woman to know any man is not jealousy out of place, then what is?

Some attention needs to be given to the comparison of “woman” to a flower. Another version of this tradition says, “If you can manage that she does not control affairs beyond those pertaining to herself then do it, for this prolongs her beauty and affords her well-being... indeed woman is a flower, not a subduer.”<sup>105</sup> This has been understood to be referring to the wife in particular because other women may be employed, but the wife must not be made to carry a burden nor be made for service. This does not mean that she is incapable but simply that she should be excused.<sup>106</sup> Despite the comfort this gives to women in general, and wives in particular, and consideration for economically poor women notwithstanding, it must be asked whether it is empowering. By not giving women any responsibility and limiting their experiences, one also inhibits their maturity and growth. In the previous chapters, it was seen that women often took control of difficult situations, and then grew stronger with them. For example, Hagar was left alone in the desert to fend for herself and her child. Her very *sa‘y* however, was the reason the blessing of Zamzam was sent to her. The mother of Moses had to decide by herself what to do with her child in the face of Pharaoh’s oppression, and her acting upon the sign she received not only saved her son who was a

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<sup>105</sup> Saduq (1404*ha*, vol. 3, p. 556).

<sup>106</sup> Shams al-Din (1996*b*, p.114) and Shams al-Din (1995, p.88).

messenger to the world, but it also strengthened her heart and her submission to God. Zaynab had to witness the massacre of her family, and then she was given the banner of *ahl al-bayt*, so to speak, in order to preserve their message. Without the suffering and the responsibility, it is doubtful that she would have been pictured as a revolutionary role-model, the way she has been throughout the ages. What this tradition reflects however, is the image of *al-Hūr al-ʿĪn*, the women of the hereafter who are confined to their pavilions, and who restrict their glances to their husbands. The problem is that these women belong to the realm of Paradise, which it has been argued in chapter 2, is in every way different from the earthly realm. It seems to be the case, therefore, that this dreamlike world which is the promised reward for believing men in the hereafter is being presently demanded of the women of this world.

This tradition portrays women in general as weak in mind and determination, that they ought to be secluded, and that they are like flowers and therefore should not be given any responsibilities beyond their immediate personal affairs. There are however variations of this tradition whereby an added or deleted statement might help explain its meaning further. The issue of extreme seclusion has been challenged from the religious point of view, particularly its incompatibility with the Qur'anic understanding of seclusion as a punishment, as well as the hindrance to religious learning which is supposed to be the duty of every Muslim man and woman. It was also observed that there is an inconsistency within the text of this tradition whence it promotes seclusion to the point of not allowing women to know any other man than their immediate family on the one hand, and its admonishment not to show jealousy out of place lest women get spoiled on the other. Finally, it was argued that despite the seeming comfort comparing



woman to a flower affords, it may be seen based on the experience and portrayal of female personalities in the Qur'an and *sunna*, as not empowering because it retains women in an almost childish existence.

#### 4.5 Woman's Jihad towards her Husband

“Prayer is the *qurbān* (offering/means of access to God) of the pious, pilgrimage is the *jihād* (striving) of the feeble, and for everything there is a *zakāt* (levy); the *zakāt* of the body is fasting, and the *jihād* of woman is *ḥusn al-taba‘‘ul*.”<sup>107</sup>

The meaning of *ḥusn* ranges between seeming good, beautiful, comely, pleasing, and conferring benefit upon someone, and acting graciously towards them. When *taba‘‘ul* is said concerning a woman, its meanings include, taking a husband, being obedient to her husband, as well as adorning herself for him.<sup>108</sup> There are various sound traditions which indeed describe the good wife as one with physical and moral beauty, in addition to her obedience to her husband.<sup>109</sup> The aspect of taking a husband however, is never emphasised.

The recommended personality of the wife in this verse is interpreted differently, often depending on the interpreter's understanding of the Qur'anic verse [4: 34], “Men are the managers of the affairs of women (*qawwamūn ‘ala al-nisā’*) for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another (*bimā faḍḍala allahu ba‘dahum ‘ala ba‘ḍ*), and for that they have expended of their property (*wa bimā anfaqū min amwālihim*). Righteous women are therefore obedient (*qānitāt*), guarding the secret for God's

<sup>107</sup> Radi (n.d.c, vol. 4, p. 34). Kulayni's version of this tradition in al-Kafi is graded ‘*da‘if*’ and therefore unreliable (Shams al-Din, 1996b, p. 53-54). A similar tradition is attributed to the Prophet in Sunni sources (Ziyada, 2001, p. 218-219).

<sup>108</sup> Lane (n.d.): *b-‘l*.

<sup>109</sup> For example: Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 327). Also refer to Bahr al-‘Ulum (1986, p. 105-118) for a list of similar sound traditions.

guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish (*nushūzahunna*); banish them to their couches, and beat them (*wa-ḍribūhunna*). If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great”.

This verse is often regarded as the most problematic for women, and its interpretation is not final.<sup>110</sup> While the patriarchal meaning of the verse remains near impossible to challenge,<sup>111</sup> there are legitimate questions whether the *qiwāma* of men is applicable when the two conditions of *faḍl* and *nafaqa* cease to exist or are reversed for example, whether the *nushūz* of women means disobedience, and whether it is disobedience towards the husband or towards God. Some have observed that the *faḍl* is given to some men over some women and is therefore not for all men over all women as traditional exegeses maintained.<sup>112</sup> Others however, are of the opinion that even though the man may lose one aspect of his *qiwāma* if he is not the financial sustainer of his wife and family, the verse still accords him the degree of *faḍl* and therefore the *qiwāma* of men cannot be fully annulled nor reversed.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, while traditional exegeses usually understand women’s *nushūz* as disobedience to the husband,<sup>114</sup> modern interpretations have pointed out that another verse which mentions the husband’s *nushūz* is not taken to mean disobedience to his wife [4: 128].<sup>115</sup> The opinion of the

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<sup>110</sup> For some summaries of the traditional exegeses point of view on this verse as well as modern feminist efforts towards a more egalitarian understanding, refer to Wadud (1994, p. 66-78), Stowasser (1998, p. 30-44), Shaikh (1997, p. 49-73), Faruqi (2000, p. 77-101). Mubarak (2004, p. 261-289), Rispler-Chaim (1992, p. 315-327), Mahmoud (2006, p. 537-550), Scott (2009), Ali (2007), Ibrahim and Abdalla (2010, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 327-349). For a radical reinterpretation of the verse, refer to: Abou el-Fadl (2001, p. 167-188).

<sup>111</sup> This is the general outcome of contemporary discussions, as it is the recent view point of Wadud (2006).

<sup>112</sup> Hibri (1982, p. 218).

<sup>113</sup> Fadlallah (1986, vol. 7, p. 154-155).

<sup>114</sup> Tusi (1409h, vol. 3, p. 188-191), Tabarsi (1415h, vol. 3, p. 77-80), and Tabataba’i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 343-352), all understand the retribution as sequential.

<sup>115</sup> For example: Mubarak (2004, p. 273). Rispler-Chaim (1992) alludes to this in his introduction but fails to take it into consideration in his conclusion.

earliest exegetes however, and the predominant view of classical jurists is that *nushūz* is primarily the wife leaving the marital bed,<sup>116</sup> which is in Shams al-Dīn's opinion, the only duty that the wife has towards her husband.<sup>117</sup> Some classical, but especially modern interpretations, tend to utilise the Prophetic statements on *nushūz* and *ḍarb* to make the verse less severe by pointing out the Prophet's identification of *nushūz* as prohibited act or indecent behaviour (*fāḥisha mubīna*),<sup>118</sup> in addition to his extreme repugnance towards wife beating.<sup>119</sup> Ṭabāṭabā'ī for example, lists the Prophetic traditions on honouring the wife and refusing her beating, and then without explicitly giving his opinion regarding the apparent contradiction between the Qur'anic verse and the Prophet's sentiments, he advises the reader to meditate on the traditions in order to understand Islam's position on the matter.<sup>120</sup> Classical exegetes based on the *sunna* context of the verse and its sequential retribution of the wife, understood it to be restricting male violence.<sup>121</sup>

It has been correctly pointed out that even though the verse shows a hierarchy between men and women, which may not be removed without doing violence to the text itself, it is also the case that the verse must not be read in isolation of scriptural and

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<sup>116</sup> Qummi (1404h, vol. 1, p. 137). Rispler-Chaim (1992), where he finds that this has been the main definition of *nushuz*, and that the list of what constitutes *nushuz* is growing in the modern period.

<sup>117</sup> Shams al-Din (1996b, p. 28-42, and 65-66).

<sup>118</sup> Hujjat al-wada'. Abou el-Fadl (2001, p. 167-188), where he makes the direct link between *nushuz* and *fāḥisha mubīna* based on the Prophet's statements in his final sermon. For the opinions of classical and modern jurists who generally limit *nushuz*, refer to Shams al-Din (1996b, p. 28-42) and Kulayni's hadith on obedience to husbands *bi-l-ma'ruf* (Kulayni, 1388h). For the history of the legal debates on the subject, refer to Rispler-Chaim (1992, pp. 315-327).

<sup>119</sup> For example: Mubarak (2004, p. 276), where she notes the irony of feminists rejecting the *hadith* despite its utmost usefulness in the most problematic verse in the Qur'an, and Mahmoud (2006, p. 537-550).

<sup>120</sup> Tabataba'i (1402h, vol. 4, p. 349-351).

<sup>121</sup> Shaikh (1997, p. 72).

social contexts.<sup>122</sup> There are discrepancies for example between the *faḍl* men have over women in this verse [4: 34], and the mutual friendship/guardianship (*wilāya*) of men and women over each other in [9: 71].<sup>123</sup>

Jurists have two opinions regarding woman's obedience to her husband. Some believe that this is an absolute requirement,<sup>124</sup> while others believe that it is restricted to the husband's marital rights of co-habitation and sexual gratification.<sup>125</sup> The former crucially do not take into consideration Shī'ī theology and *fiqh* which prohibit obedience to anyone other than an impeccable person.<sup>126</sup> The latter consider the Qur'anic description of the marital relationship as *ma'rūf* [2: 228, and 4: 19] and *sakan* [7: 189, and 30: 21], to be incompatible with the notion of obedience.<sup>127</sup> This particular tradition on the woman's *jihād* as *ḥusn al-taba'ul*, is in the latter case understood as a recommendation for the wife to show her husband kindness, not because of a right that is due but out of graciousness.<sup>128</sup> Put differently, the tradition points out to the wife that the marriage relationship is a struggle (*jihād*) to overcome petty issues, such as overcoming the hurt that the husband or children may cause, and serving them out of love even if it were not out of duty, in order to ensure closeness to God by providing a

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<sup>122</sup> Ali (n.d.)

<sup>123</sup> Hibri (1982, p. 218).

<sup>124</sup> For example: Bahr al-'Ulum (1986, p. 315-316).

<sup>125</sup> Shams al-Din (1996*b*, p. 25-73) for the discussion, and Shams al-Din (1996*b*, p. 188-119) for the general conclusions.

<sup>126</sup> Fadlallah (1987, p. 153-154). Moreover, they do not discuss the problem that if a wife is supposed to obey her husband in everything except that which is wrong, then it follows that she is already capable of making informed decisions, therefore what is the point of her obedience to her husband, when it is readily admitted that he may err and that she should correct him?

<sup>127</sup> Shams al-Din (1996*b*, p. 97).

<sup>128</sup> Shams al-Din (1996*b*, p. 53-54).

good family environment, just as one would perform optional prayers and serve other people not out of obligation but in seeking nearness to God.<sup>129</sup>

In an effort to understand “*jihād al-mar’a ḥusn al-taba‘‘ul*” further, in the context of the *ḥadīth* literature, attention must be drawn to the two available pools of meaning in traditions about the marital relationship. The first category includes traditions which describe the wife as in complete service and submission towards her husband. The second category includes traditions which speak of the man and woman’s efforts towards creating a peaceful and prosperous home environment.

In the first group, the woman is portrayed as submissive. In one authentic tradition, the best of women is described as one who is “honoured among her kin and abased with her husband.”<sup>130</sup> In another one, the Prophet allegedly said, “If anyone was required to prostrate to another human being, it would be the wife to her husband”.<sup>131</sup> Other weaker traditions claim that a woman serving water to her husband qualifies her to enter Paradise, and is better for her in the afterlife than prayers and fasts.<sup>132</sup> While these are considered weak, they are sometimes taken to represent that it is recommended for the wife to serve her husband. Shams al-Dīn however, felt that they might have been forged traditions and was wary of their message.<sup>133</sup>

Again, such traditions reduce the woman’s capacities and role in life to the menial service of the husband. Her relationship with God becomes indirect and mediated by her husband, thereby reducing her to a sub-human level.

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<sup>129</sup> Fadlallah (2005, p. 88-89).

<sup>130</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 324-326).

<sup>131</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 507-508).

<sup>132</sup> Amili (1414h, vol. 20, p. 172).

<sup>133</sup> Shams al-Din (1996b, p. 119-121).

It is perhaps in this context that one can understand the following authentic tradition. When a woman came to the Prophet and asked about the wife's marital obligations, he repeated what has been discussed above such as her obedience, allowing her husband sexual gratification even if she were on the back of a camel, that she does not leave the house without his permission, and so on. So the woman asked, "Do I not have the same rights over him as he does over me?", the Prophet answered, "No, and not even in a proportion of one to a hundred", so the woman answered, "I swear by the One who sent you as a Prophet of Truth, no man shall ever own me (*lā yamliku raqbatī rajulun abadan*)."<sup>134</sup> The tradition ends here. Irrespective of the legal issues on marital duties it raises,<sup>135</sup> it seems abrupt. If the Prophet sang the praises of marriage and recommended it as his *sunna* as other traditions report,<sup>136</sup> one wonders why he did not in this instance try to persuade this woman of the benefits of marriage after he had dissuaded her from it. According to Khaled Abou El Fadl, "These traditions and their counter-traditions are indicative of the vibrant negotiative process that took place in early Islam – a process that most certainly included the re-definition of gender relations... The responses of the women who refuse the institution of marriage altogether can be read as a protest against the patriarchal religious dogma that places women in a submissive and degrading position. The symbolism of these reports conveys a compelling message: if need be, women will just have to do without men."<sup>137</sup>

The second available pool of meaning regarding marital relationships is mutual kindness, rather than unilateral obedience, within the home environment. One tradition

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<sup>134</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 507).

<sup>135</sup> These are discussed in Shams al-Din (1996b, p. 58-63).

<sup>136</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 328-329).

<sup>137</sup> Abou El Fadl (2003, p. 231-232).

confirms that “The one who toils for the sake of his family/household, is the same as the one who fights the *jihād* in the path of God”.<sup>138</sup> In other traditions, the care for daughters in particular brings rewards and Paradise closer.<sup>139</sup> Such traditions show that a man’s care for his family is also akin to fighting the *jihād*. Amina Wadud’s reading of woman’s place in the Qur’an understands her “skills and participation on the home front... as significant and meaningful”, she adds, “The family acts as the initial arena of practice. Surely, as the Prophet says, ‘The best of you is he who is best to his family....’”<sup>140</sup>

It may be argued that the traditions are not entirely reciprocal, because the man’s *jihād* is towards his dependents in general, whereas the woman’s *jihād* is specifically towards her husband. However, it is also the case that men’s family responsibilities are legal duties, and the husbands’ duty of kindness towards their wives is already stipulated in the Qur’an [2: 228].<sup>141</sup> On the other hand, women’s domestic roles are not required by law, perhaps this is because Islam wants women’s particular role to be performed out of a spirit of giving, not under obligation.<sup>142</sup>

According to this point of view, the tradition discusses the marital relationship because it is here that there might be trouble and where the woman might not wish to be kind. For example, while a variation of this tradition explains that the wife’s *jihād* is her

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<sup>138</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 88).

<sup>139</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 6, p. 6).

<sup>140</sup> Wadud (1994, p. 90-91).

<sup>141</sup> For a discussion on this, refer to Shams al-Din (1996b, p. 82-85). Moreover, the degree men have over women in [2: 228] has often been understood as a degree of forgiveness on the men’s part, in: Shams al-Din (1996b, p.106-107 and p.156-161), Mubarak (2004, p. 276). Amina Wadud’s idea that this is strictly about divorce (Wadud, 1994, p. 68) is problematic because women and jurists are now arguing that women actually have a right to divorce, which would make men and women equal in this regard (refer to Mir-Hosseini (2000)).

<sup>142</sup> Fadlallah (1998, p. 60).

patience regarding her husband's hurt and jealousy,<sup>143</sup> it does not imply that the man has the right to mistreat his wife, nor that she has a duty to be patient, for ill treatment is an illegal act and the wife may choose not to accept it.<sup>144</sup> However, beneficent behaviour generally means forgiveness, and such behaviour is a message to the believers in general, not restricted to any type of relationship.<sup>145</sup>

The first group of traditions then understands obedience as absolute, and reflects on [4: 34] thus. The second group of traditions procures a family environment of servitude among its members. This understands the wife's obedience being towards God primarily, and to her husband in so far as God's law gives the husband certain rights, as it gives the wife certain rights as well. The variety of traditions regarding the wife's recommended personality informs the variety of interpretations of [4: 34], and perhaps only an understanding of obedience in its theological and legal dimensions could help resolve the issue of the wife's obedience. This tradition seems less harsh than [4: 34] in that it asks of the woman *ḥusn* rather than *ṭā'a*, and in that it describes this not as an obligation, but a struggle. This tradition is not incompatible with the Qur'an and might possibly shed new light on the interpretation of verse [4: 34].

More importantly for the purpose of this study, it has been argued in the previous chapters that the Qur'an and *sunna* portray female personalities as primarily concerned with spiritual *jihad* as well as political *jihād*. This tradition about woman's *jihād* as *ḥusn al-taba'ul* might lead some to believe that this is her only *jihād*.<sup>146</sup> This

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<sup>143</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 9).

<sup>144</sup> Shams al-Din (1996b, p. 32).

<sup>145</sup> Shams al-Din (1996b, p. 32).

<sup>146</sup> Subhani (1984, p. 432-434), where he ironically places this *hadith* in connection with Nusayba and right before he describes her bravery at the battle of Uhud, whence he says that "it is indisputable that



however would be incompatible with the detailed depiction of the *jihād al-nafs* of most of the female personalities in the Qur'an, as shown in chapter 2. Moreover, the religio-political *jihād* of Āsiyā was made an example for all believers, and the women of *ahl al-bayt* also set an example for men and women in their political *jihād* with its financial, oratory, and activist dimensions. Yet, this tradition need not be seen as incompatible with those examples; rather it seems to be referring in particular to the physical exertion aspect of *jihād* when it affirms that pilgrimage is the *jihād* of the feeble. Therefore, the tradition does not necessarily mean that women ought not to perform the *jihād* in its social and cultural aspects, but it aims at elevating women's domestic role by making its reward equivalent to that of men's *jihād*.<sup>147</sup> Considering the problems in the debate in regard to equating women's *jihād* with obedience to the husband, the spiritual and earthly *jihād* of the female personalities offer women indisputable models of actualising women's potential outside the domain of the family.

#### 4.6 Women-friendly Traditions in the "Four Books"

There are a few authentic traditions which exalt women and which might seem contradictory to the general tone of the traditions. For example, one authentic tradition states, "Among the morals of prophets, is the love for women",<sup>148</sup> and another one similarly finds that love for women increases when faith increases.<sup>149</sup>

There are some problems with this trend however. One such problem is the variations of the traditions which explain the so-called love for women in a strictly sexual manner. While one tradition claims that the Prophet said, "I love nothing of your

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*jihad* is unlawful for women in Islam." Then he presents Nusayba as a lawful exception without further comment.

<sup>147</sup> Ziyada (2001, p. 220-222).

<sup>148</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 320).

<sup>149</sup> Kulayni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 320-321).

world, except women and perfume”,<sup>150</sup> another one proposes that he said, “(God) made the relief of my eyes in prayer, and my pleasure in women.”<sup>151</sup>

These variant readings reveal that what is meant in those seemingly positive traditions is not necessarily an elevation of women’s status or an announcement about the pleasure of women’s company, but a sexual objectification of women. It has been proposed that these traditions were placed as a reaction against Sufi tendencies to withdraw from the world of pleasures.<sup>152</sup>

Another problem with this trend is the explicit contradiction it poses to other more numerous traditions on women’s inferiority. For example, while many traditions speak of the rarity of the good believing women, that most of them are doomed to hell, and that women and anger are the army of Satan,<sup>153</sup> one authentic tradition claims that, “Most goodness is in women”.<sup>154</sup> Here, the compiler comments that that is so because of childbirth which preserves the human kind, and because women take care of the house. This interpretation reads into the text a preconceived notion about women, the space of their contribution, and their worth. However, the fact that this tradition stands alone in view of the more pessimistic ones, makes it difficult to take it at face value.

Some of the traditions discussed above claimed that women are deficient in intellect, and it was then argued that Islam as a faith places as much emphasis on a healthy heart as the seat of compassion, as it does on a fully functioning intellect. One may therefore assume that the alleged deficiency in women’s intellect is not necessarily directly related to her faith and spirit, and that she might make up with her heart what

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<sup>150</sup> Kualyni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 321).

<sup>151</sup> Kualyni (1388h, vol. 5, p. 321).

<sup>152</sup> Rahman (1965, p. 266).

<sup>153</sup> Kualyni (1388h, vol. 515).

<sup>154</sup> Saduq (1404ha, vol. 3, p. 385).

she lacks in her mental capacity. Thus, one might see the traditions on her inferior mind as potentially compatible with those on the prophets' love for women. However, the contradictions among the traditions are even within the capacity of faith itself, so that most traditions warn of women's inferior faith, and then a few others elevate women to the extent that love for them becomes a measure of a man's faith. One says that women are the army of Satan and another says that most goodness is in women.

Surely, there is every possibility that a meaning which is not made clear may be retrieved from those traditions, but if one were to accept what was proposed above, on the *ḥadīth* literature being a space where negotiations on gender were being made, the question becomes whether these positive-toned traditions are a part of that negotiation process? Moreover, if these "positive" traditions are not genuine, then are they consolatory?

What is a commonly problematic feature of all traditions, negative and positive, is that they constantly group women together, as though assuming that women have no individuality. It was argued in chapter 2, based on the verses [66: 10-12], that the Qur'an offers two women as negative examples and two as positive role-models for all people. It was argued then, that this group of verses portrays women as human without showing any tendency to abase them or elevate them as a group, but presents individual female personalities as negative and positive models for men and women together. The *ḥadīth* literature on the other hand, often speaks of woman in the singular or generalises about women in the plural, in a manner which it does not do with men as a sex or gender. Where the Qur'an assumes women's common humanity and therefore their separate individualities, the *ḥadīth* literature seems to assume that women are a

category that is separate from men, even in basic matters which the Qur'an teaches are universally human issues pertaining to the human *nafs*, such as faith, evilness and goodness.

#### 4.7 Conclusions

It has been explained in the introduction to this chapter that any authentication process of the *ḥadīth* must apply each tradition to the Qur'an and *sunna*. This has been done here in a limited capacity and in direct relation to the Qur'anic verses and *sunna* traditions which are widely discussed in the literature and which have already been analysed in the previous chapters. It would require another study to compare and contrast Imam 'Alī's particularly harsh statements on woman/women in *Nahj al-Balāgha*, with his renowned leniency towards women in his jurisprudence and daily life. Several authors have pointed out details of his compassionate attitude towards women,<sup>155</sup> "Stories of 'Alī's sympathy for female victims of unfortunate circumstances or malicious oppression indicates another thread running throughout the Shi'ite perspective on women - namely, an intrinsic sympathy for, and even identification with, the oppressed and helpless members of society."<sup>156</sup> Therefore, a comparison of the Imam's reported words and his reported actions is necessary before reaching any conclusions about his views on women.

In any case, these traditions were picked as representatives of the *ḥadīth* literature at large, in its perception/portrayal of women. Each tradition was applied to the Qur'anic teachings for verification, and to the female personalities of the Qur'an and

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<sup>155</sup> Dakake (2007, p. 227), where for example he considered the adultery of a poor and thirsty woman a legitimate *mut'a* contract and the wage she received as her *mahr*. Abou El Fadl (2001, p. 181-182 and 187), that 'Alī prohibited beating the wife even if it were in response to an assault of defamation or cursing, and that he actually punished physical violence against wives.

<sup>156</sup> Dakake (2007, p. 227).

*sunna* in order to compare how the traditions see women with how the Qur'an and *sunna* see them. Moreover, traditions were also analysed in view of their contexts and co-texts. In the case of woman as evil, it was shown that a missing context and a reading of other literary sayings from Imam 'Alī might point out to a completely different meaning from the apparent one. In other cases, variations among the same tradition shed some light on the complexity of reaching a final understanding, due to the different and sometimes contradictory statements that texts of the same original tradition have. That is true of the exception made in one variation, that women must not be consulted except those whose intellect has been tested. In another instance, a contradiction of meaning was observed within the same tradition, between the advice to seclude women completely and the following advice not to show jealousy out of place. Moreover, in the tradition on woman's *jihād*, it was shown that consulting the *ḥadīth* literature may offer more than one meaning to a tradition, depending on how it is read and in light of which available pools of meaning. In every case, some examples of the female personalities discussed and analysed in previous chapters were brought as counter-proof to what the traditions portray as women's nature. Where the *ḥadīth* makes sweeping generalisations about women, the female personalities of the Qur'an and *sunna* offer real life examples of women and the way they behave in particular situations, often but not always, in contradiction to the theory of women's deficiency advertised in the traditions. Moreover, if the female personalities of the Qur'an and *sunna* do not necessarily contradict the traditions as in the case of woman's *jihād*, they do at least broaden the horizon for women, when their *jihād* within the family is understood as a moral message, but not the only *jihād* a woman is capable of and ought to perform. Finally, it

was argued that even traditions with a positive tone are problematic, partly because they may be read as objectifying women, and partly because they may be seen as a consolation, but mostly because they follow the same underlying logic as the negative toned traditions, and that is that women are a category separate from men at their very basic level, and that women may be grouped together as though they do not have separate personalities the way men do. Similarly, it was pointed out that while Islamic law may be dynamic and subject to textual context, traditions portray the law and “female personality” as derived from one another and both of them as static.

Not all traditions can or need be dismissed due to the complicated issues of context and varying texts. However, most of these traditions are descriptive of woman/women and prescriptive of men’s attitude towards them, but for this reason they may be seen as self-fulfilling prophecies. The examples of female personalities in the Qur’an and *sunna* counter these deterministic prophecies and offer one way out of the loop.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the female personalities of the Qur'an and *sunna* may be seen to be in diametric opposition to what *ḥadīths* demand and expect of women. Most of these women, if not all, acted completely independently of men in general and their husbands in particular. This applies to the negative and positive models; the wives of Noah and Lot, as well as the wife of Pharaoh. Mary had no husband. Hagar managed to conjure the blessed water into the desert when her husband left her, and due to her own active pursuit. Zulaykha's husband was subdued by her. The mother of Moses' husband had no mention in the story. The queen of Sheba was her own mistress and ruled over men. Khadija served her husband's cause, however before and after his prophethood, she is portrayed as having had the upper hand, financially and socially; indeed Muhammad is said to have felt insecure in Mecca without her. Even Fāṭima, the prototype daughter, wife, and mother in fact acted on her own, and on her husband's behalf, even while he was available to take charge. Zaynab also acted independently, and her husband is not heard of much, even though she is said to have been married. There are some exceptions to this, such as Lot's daughters, the Prophet's wives, and the *ḥūr* of paradise who are portrayed as obedient to the father or husband. It has been argued that the very variety of personalities presented in the authoritative sources, the very difficulty to group them into a single entity, is in itself empowering because it acknowledges women's humanity. The variety gives women reading the texts ample personalities to be inspired by and emulate. This is unlike the *ḥadīth* which tends to either subjugate or elevate women as a group, and attempts to project a monolithic personality on women.

Therefore, women are not normally defined by men, as traditions would have us believe, but the authoritative texts of Qur'an and *sunna* tend to describe individual women in terms of a human *nafs* on its journey. Decisions taken by women independently were the ones deemed worthy of comment by the Qur'an. While Eve remained a silent partner to Adam, even though a partner, it is the voices of women like Moses' mother, Āsiyā, Bilqīs, and even Zulaykha that are heard. Where the *ḥadīth* teaches that women are fragile and therefore must not be given any responsibility, the female personalities in the Qur'an carry their own vicegerency as their responsibility. They are often also responsible for their children who are chosen to be or become prophets or Imams. Far from advocating comfort, the Qur'an implies that hardship causes growth, as with Hagar and Zaynab whose extreme suffering coupled with perseverance helped change history positively, as far as Muslims are concerned.

It has been argued that despite the androcentric language of the Qur'anic text, and while acknowledging the patriarchy of the Islamic social structure, when looking at women outside of the legal sphere, one finds gynocentric elements in the Qur'an and *sunna* narratives. Femininity and things normally associated with it are sometimes extolled. The womb is described in the opening verse of *Sūrat al-Nisā'*, in addition to its literal sense, as a mysterious entity which warrants reverence and causes God to honour whoever honours it. This, along with the intellect, has been linked to the concept of human beings' vicegerency on earth. Mary's trustful receptivity is her greatest strength to the extent that as a young girl, she inspires God's prophet Zechariah by her example. Even the social scandal associated with her miracle tells of the world's injustice towards truthfulness. Fāṭima plays a similar role to Mary in her matriarchal status, although she



is more dependent than Mary on a male figure. She assures the continuity of the Prophet's scripture, and is sometimes herself seen as the source of the Imams' knowledge and light. Furthermore, the emphasis on Fāṭima's feelings as authoritative criteria for what is right and wrong strangely portrays the often despised women's emotions as something to be taken rather seriously and revered as a sign of God's feelings. Of course, these examples are specific to these women, but they still do break from much of the prevalent contempt towards women's biological functions and feelings. With the other, less exceptional personalities, the Qur'an and *sunna* also bring women's experiences to the forefront. There are the jealous wives and the desperate and victims among those, the women worrying about their children's physical and spiritual safety like Moses' and Mary's mothers, the emotional attachment of breastfeeding, the pain of labour and social scandal. There is the uncontrollable passion towards such a beautiful man like the women of Egypt felt, and the more composed attraction to the strong and trustworthy man, like Moses' bride disclosed. There is the intelligent queen who is both calculating in politics, and trusting in divine signs in matters of religion. There are also the ungrateful women who mock their good husbands, as the wives of Noah and Lot, and there is the wife subject to a tyrannical husband who is in any case lower than herself in intelligence and righteousness, like Āsiyā. The women of Karbalā' who did not get killed but saw their husbands and children get killed nonetheless are also given space for empathy within the tradition.

The Qur'an quite clearly includes women within the expression *ahl al-bayt*, the assembly around truth, as it did with Sara, Mary's mother, and others. Tradition also includes non-impeccable women within this holy group. Therefore, in addition to the

revered Fāṭima as among the *ahl al-bayt* of Muḥammad, Zaynab is unanimously portrayed by the religious authorities as having had the spirit of *ahl al-bayt*, even if she did not, in their view, attain the status of impeccability as such.

The theme of *jihād al-nafs* unites these women, thereby portraying them as human beings, and the gendered themes in their description help bring women's experience to the centre. The universally human and the specifically feminine overlap without much difficulty in the Qur'an and *sunna*, as perfectly formulated in verses [66: 10-12] where two women are made as examples for the infidels and two for the faithful.

Sometimes but not always, traditions and exegesis try to limit these women's human experiences. Zulaikha's passion and guile is incorrectly read as a feminine example, but the similar behaviour of men in her story was not seen as gendered. Mary is not considered a prophet despite apparent evidence to the contrary, simply because she is a woman. The impeccable Fāṭima, traditions insist, did not experience menstruation or any kind of post-natal blood, thereby denying her a main element of her femininity. There is an attempt to restrict women to men's projected image of them as passionate; coupled with an attempt to remove women from the capacity for knowledge and spirituality. This has its beginnings in the story of Eve, when she is seen in traditions not as a person and vicegerent in her own right, but as a wife; a *zawj* but not a *nafs*, a follower who has zeal towards nothing other than her husband, and who had no knowledge planted in her like Adam, but was given it as a bride-price.

Yet, it is the theme of *jihād al-nafs* that has been found recurrent in the depiction of the personalities. The coupling of the two sub-categories of spiritual motherhood and earthly *jihād* is important. That is because, as it was explicitly concurred with in some

traditions, active involvement in the world and with fellow human beings opens the possibilities for a person's growth, including religious growth. This was also the underlying situation in most or all of the stories of these women. The theme of spiritual motherhood, a status reached through difficult *jihād*, highlights the relevance of feminine characteristics in spirituality; and it portrays the womb and child birth not as a burden that constricts women's lives and makes them dependent subjects, but as the best contribution to human civilisation, akin to the contributions of prophets, if and only if, the mother herself was of the calibre of Moses' mother, Mary, or Fāṭima. It is the narrative traditions' salient understanding of motherhood not as a self-sacrificing and mundane job, but ultimately as one that is concerned with nothing short of the woman reaching her highest personal potential and coming close to impeccability. Such a change in the position of the mother would eventually cause change to the position of the father/husband and his priorities. It has been proposed that,

“The symbolic positioning of the mother is the linchpin for both the perpetuation and the destruction of patriarchal values. When the maternal position shifts, the patriarchal order is subverted from within. This means that those with a vested interest in the perpetuation of patriarchy, whether theologians or psychoanalysts, must expend considerable energy on making sure that the mother remains in the place assigned to her.”<sup>1</sup>

If one were to look into Islamic law for equality between men and women, this may be hard to find, with preference belonging to the man. However, if one looks into the narrative literature, the stories provided in the authentic sources, one finds an

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<sup>1</sup> Beattie (2002, p. 108)

elevation of things that are feminine. A case in point are the two verses [4: 34] and [3: 36]. While the first is explicit about male superiority, it speaks of *al-rijāl* and *al-nisā'*, that is, adult men and women and the more particular context of the verse is the marital relationship. The verse also puts two conditions on the man's authority. However, in [3: 36], though preference for the female is implicit, it may be easily inferred from the sentence structure and Qur'anic context of the verse. Moreover, it expresses preference for *al-untha* over *al-dhakar*, that is, the female sex over the male at their basic level. Therefore, it is perhaps not a question of who the Qur'an prefers, but where to look for the answer. Differences have to be acknowledged, away from the suppositions of liberal feminism, but these have to be reread by women interpreters; and the scholarship in this pursuit ought to be honest and meticulous. The difference between the two sexes, the relativity of their excellence, and their single goal of actively progressing towards God may be seen in the verse, "Do not covet that whereby God in bounty has preferred one of you above another. To the men a share from what they have earned, and to the women a share from what they have earned. And ask God of His bounty; God knows everything" [4: 32].

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