

The Islamic Conception of Women's Liberation

Aisha Abdul Rahman

This lecture, originally in Arabic, was given by Aisha Abdul Rahman better known as Bint al-Shati', at Um Derman Alumni Club, Um Derman Islamic University. It opened the lectures of the cultural season for the academic year 1966-1967, on Wednesday, February 1, 1967. This translation aims to shed light on early Arab Muslim feminist thought. Aisha Abdul Rahman was a leading Egyptian female Islamic writer and scholar. She was a pioneer in her use of her understanding of Islamic scripture to promote equality between men and women in the Arab Muslim world. She has written many books on the history and structure of Islamic scripture as well as literary criticism. Her writing and lectures in support of equality between the sexes enlightened many young Egyptian women in their struggle for gender equality.

"In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. (Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the *Qur'an*. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence)" (55:1-4).

My dear family,

I cannot but express thanks and deep gratitude to the Um Derman Islamic University which made this gathering possible. To me, the invitation to this honorable event at the start of its culture season is a tribute to the Arab woman. While lecturing on "The Islamic Conception of Women's Liberation", I genuinely hope to add something new to the outcry of earlier advocates of women's liberation. They were pioneers in calling for an awakening in the darkest of times, for our Arab East to free its daughters from the bondage of ignorance and exclusion so that they can set out to build a free life for this very East, and provide it with human ammunition.

What a difference between yesterday and today! All over the great Arab nation, from its Asian East in Iraq, along the coast of the Arab Gulf, to its remote Arab African West in Morocco, we witness a new generation of Arab women who are, and

unbelievably so, direct descendants of illiterate mothers belonging to the very generation of Turkish *hareem*. I have always said that the issue here is not about the fact that we have broken out of the *hareem* walls and participated in our people's public life. History has witnessed millions of rural and Bedouin women assuming their active role in society, centuries before we heard of the start of the public debate on removing or keeping the *hijab* (i.e. head scarf). Nor is the issue about the difference between our own taste and dress code and those of our mothers. This is basically the same difference we see in the taste, costumes, and mood of this generation of men, and those of their fathers. They, just like us, have been born in a time different than that of our fathers and mothers.

Again, the issue here is not about the fact that once in a while there rises a female ambassador, a professor, a minister, or artist, representing her people at a foreign country, or reaching a prominent position in college, or occupying a chair in the cabinet, or excelling in fine arts and literature. Since ancient times, our East has glorified its women, even in the brutal times of Paganism, and crowned these females as queens in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sheba, and Palmyra. Throughout the

dark age of *Jahiliya* (i.e. the pre-Islamic period) and our Islamic history, great grandmothers of ours took part in the political, scientific, and academic life on a most effective level. Some of them reached the rank of *sheikha* in mysticism, *fiqh* [i.e. Islamic jurisprudence], *hadith* [i.e. a record of the sayings and doings of Prophet Mohammed and his companions], and in Arab science and literature. One of those women even became a Muslim *khalifa*, ruling over Egypt and Syria, namely queen Esmat al-Din Shajarat al-Durr, who led a triumphant and decisive campaign in our conflict with the Crusaders.

I am not oblivious to the fact that the number of these female achievers in our history is low compared to their counterparts in this generation. Yet, in cases such as this, I tend to disregard number rates and their digital indications, while being content with reporting the principle and registering a precedent. Furthermore, the Arab woman has managed, during her darkest eras of bondage and psychological entombment, to impose her will and her existence, and be a key player in all major events in our history, even though she always remained in chains and behind the scenes.

No! To me, the issue is not about the difference between us and our mothers. It is rather far more lasting and profound. This new Arab female is fulfilling her existence, both genuinely and directly, without having to beg for this existence from her male: if he wills he gives, if he wills he forbids. Moreover, in practicing her right to exist she is not resorting to deviousness or trickery as did the *hareem* women. What I mean is that I realize today that my right in life is self-produced and authentic and equal to the man's right. I don't share the belief of my mother's generation that this right is borrowed and granted. I rather consider it independent of any man's will or of my ability to bear children or give birth to male offspring. If there is someone among you now who believes otherwise, I'm afraid it is because of the persisting residue of ancient ages. The lesson here is the awareness of the determined origin and the unwavering right rather than unwanted remains and residues.

This is the source of progress in our lives, and all essential differences we have with our mothers' generation are derived from it. We don't owe this progress to foreign concepts borrowed from the modernized West. It is an Islamic liberal concept determined fourteen centuries ago in the *Qur'an* which was the last message from heaven.

Those who think that this progress is foreign, accidental, and imported have either ignorance or misconception of the truth of the *Qur'an*. Therefore, they focus on the West, thinking that concepts of freedom and development came from that direction. This, my friends, is a deep delusion. Many generations and ages have come to pass and consolidated our mothers' thoughts that a woman is nothing but a marginal creature from Adam's rib. So she lived owing her right of life to the "Great Origin" from which she was created, and then she went on beseeching him [i.e. man] for every aspect of her human existence, all the while entertaining the illusion that he is distinguished from her in his mode of creation, him being the perfect creature, and she being a rib taken from his side.

Today we practice our self-produced and genuine right in life, not because of an accidental or borrowed foreign concept. In doing so we are living according to the Book of Islam that never mentioned nor hinted at the story of Eve being created from Adam's rib. It rather stipulates that we all come from one soul and one origin; a woman's humanity is similar to a man's humanity: "O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women;- reverence *Allah*, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for *Allah* ever watches over you" (4:1).

The freedom of the Muslim woman finds its source in this determined origin. In the Islamic view, this freedom is the perfection of the woman's humanity with all the rights and consequences related to this humanity. It is our recognition of this Islamic view of our freedom that separates us from the generation of *hareem*.

In the days of our mothers, if one female had the opportunity to get an education, she considered that to be a gift from her male sponsor. The new woman cannot be considered as having achieved progress until she believes that education is her lawful human right, earned by her birth into the human species. This right is outside anyone's will, for no creature can distort the woman's humanity and force her to live her life as a mute and dumb doll. It is but speech that distinguishes the human being from the dumb animal, and speech can be attained only through intellect and eloquence.

In relation to this fundamental difference, our view of education is totally in contrast to that of our uneducated mothers and sisters. They believed – or maybe it was society that believed on their behalf – that education is a form of opulence and luxury within rich families. In the era of slavery, female slaves were made to receive education, literature, and art, so as to raise their price in the market and prepare them to entertain their male masters and alleviate their boredom and depression. In the lower classes, educating girls was a means to earn a living. Today, we consider education an essential element of our humanity, in a sense that this humanity is not complete unless the conditions of speech and intellect are met. These conditions raise us above the level of beast.

How did we earn this right? Definitely not from the modernized West, but rather from a legitimately determined right for the woman by way of her humanity.

The first verse of the *Qur'an* calls attention to a person's association with education: "Proclaim! (or read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created – Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, – He Who taught (the use of) the pen, – Taught man that which he knew not" (96: 1-5). Also, the Rahman *sura* dealt with God's gift of speech to mankind: "(Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the *Qur'an*. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence)" (55:1-4). The *Qur'an* leads us to the conclusion that our humanity's commission is intellect, without which

humanity is deformed and man is no longer human, but deteriorates to the sublevel of dumb animals: "For the worst of beasts in the sight of *Allah* are the deaf and the dumb, – those who understand not". (8:22).

The free Muslim woman does not allow her humanity to be distorted as such, so that a veil of ignorance and unawareness blinds her mind and senses, rendering her misled and astray. God Almighty says: "Many are the *Jinns* and men we have made for Hell: They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, – nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning)" (7:179).

There is a huge difference between our conception, as newly liberated women, and that of the *hareem* society, concerning the meaning of women's liberation: Men used to believe that confining women in the *hareem* cage and watching over them, would safeguard their chastity and protect them from seduction and temptation. Even some Arab female writers who are stern advocates of progress are still influenced by this backward idea; they depict the new woman as owing her purity to the guardian of the cage: if he fails to watch for one second, she will sneak out of her prison and go wild and reckless, falling for the first male she meets. Our people think that this is the true image of the new woman.

I've said over and over again: No, this is not our picture. It is rather a copy of man's beliefs during the age of *hareem*. He used it to find excuses for keeping the woman in captivity, and making state-of-the-art walls and locks. But this picture was never a reflection of woman's reality, even in the eras of ignorance. Her chastity was always in her own hands and was never determined by any man.

The new Arab woman believes that she alone possesses her own virtue. She demanded her freedom only to correct this huge folly and to make known to society that she alone is responsible for protecting herself. Her dignity as a female emanates from herself and not from a cage guard or a chastity belt. This determination on the part of the new free woman to be responsible for her freedom and

virtue is in the essence of the Islamic conception of women's liberation, according to lawful qualifications for entrustment and responsibility. The guardianship of the father or husband over the woman in no way means that he carries on her behalf the burden of earning a living. The free mature Muslim woman shoulders this responsibility out of nobility, and she is rewarded or punished for faith or infidelity, for virtue or vice: "And no burdened soul will carry another soul's burden" (6:164). Furthermore, "Allah sets forth, for an example to the Unbelievers, the wife of Noah and the wife of Lut: they were (respectively) under two of our righteous servants, but they were false to their (husbands), and they profited nothing before Allah on their account, but were told: "Enter ye the Fire along with (others) that enter!" (66:10).

The society of *hareem* used to think that equality between men and women is obtained through drastically changing the situation, distorting sex, and disrupting standards and values. There are still women among us, wrongfully thought to be modern, who see equality from this backward angle and demand the elimination of all distinctions between men and women. They want the woman to be accountable for her manners and behavior only if the man is. These women have even demanded the omission of the grammar suffix that determines feminine gender in Arabic language. And here we cannot help but wonder whether this right of equality allows a woman to be a polygamist! Also, maybe among those females who are demanding the omission of the feminine gender suffix, there are some complaining of carrying alone the burden of pregnancy, childbearing, and breastfeeding. They might even suggest that the husband should share this burden and take turns with his wife in getting pregnant, giving birth, and consequently breastfeeding, according to this right of equality!

The truly new woman has been freed in her understanding of this equality. She can recognize the distortion that cancels natural differences between male and female and social differences between man and woman. To her, equality does not violate corresponding rights and duties, so that a

man stays man and a woman stays woman with no confusion created between the different sexes.

The new attentive Muslim woman does not conceive of her status with man as competition or controversy; for competition is between rivals, and controversy is between adversaries or foes.

We, as modern liberated women, believe that man and woman perfect each other and need each other to realize their full existence. Husband and wife are founding partners of one social cell, and companions in the journey of life. Their joint life is united in pulse, harmony, and conformity. It does not fall apart by a conflict over power and authority.

I've been frequently asked why many educated women have faltering marriages, and if their education was the cause for their marital problems. Every time my answer is this: True education can never be responsible for the breakdown of marriages, just as science is not accountable for the tragedy of Hiroshima and napalm bombs. The homes of some educated women are being broken because of the arrogance of incomplete learning and lack of maturity. In this case, both husband and wife are in a phase of psychological and mental adolescence, with all its complexities and problems. Thus, each assumes that the other is attacking his or her dignity just because this partner has an awareness of his or her own personality. They fail to realize that any equality remains strictly ruled by the logic of instincts and the law of nature that knows not absolute equality between one man and another, one woman and another, let alone one sex and another.

Our right of equality, based on this correct understanding, goes back to an Islamic origin determined by the candid texts of our accurate Book. The *Qur'an* never stated that "a woman is not equal to man", but rather it states: "Say: 'Not equal are things that are bad and things that are good, even though the abundance of the bad may dazzle thee; so fear Allah, O ye that understand; that (so) ye may prosper' " (5:100). "Not equal are the Companions of the Fire and the Companions of the Garden" (59:20).

“Not equal among you are those who spent (freely) and fought, before the Victory, (with those who did so later). Those are higher in rank than those who spent (freely) and fought afterwards.” (57:10). “Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) and receive no hurt, and those who strive and fight in the cause of *Allah* with their goods and their persons” (4:95). “Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?” (39:9). “The blind and the seeing are not alike” (35:19).

So, the cardinal factor for equality or no equality in the *Qur'an* is about the Companions of the Fire [*al-Khabith*] and the Companions of the Garden [*at-tayyib*], fighting or sitting, knowing or not knowing. It is not about masculinity or femininity. Our understanding of this equality is freed through going back to the origin of Islam where a woman with proper instincts recognizes a man's legitimate and natural right in guardianship over her: “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And *Allah* is Exalted in Power, Wise” (2:228).

It is about time for men to understand that the object of guardianship in the *Qur'an* is not just mere male domination, as in the case of inheritance for example: “to the male, a portion equal to that of two females” (4:11). Guardianship, according to Islam, is a right for manhood, and we, as Muslim liberated women, would like nothing better than to willingly and gladly admit this guardianship to our men.

It is also about time for our men to understand that their legitimate right of guardianship over us is neither absolute nor is it for all men in general over all women. It is a conditional right “because *Allah* has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means” (4:34), and if a man could not meet this condition, he loses his right to guardianship. “Men have a degree over them”, decreeing that men and women are essentially equal: “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them” (2:228).

Men have the advantage of one degree only based on maleness, not masculinity. With this degree,

the natural rule becomes sound, and standards become harmonious without abolishing our legitimate right in equality; for there shouldn't be equality in commissions of adulthood and human responsibilities. There were degrees among the apostles themselves: “Those apostles We endowed with gifts, some above others: To one of them *Allah* spoke; others He raised to degrees (of honour)” (2:253). There are also degrees among believers and those given knowledge: “*Allah* will rise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted (mystic) Knowledge” (58:11). This degree then is not meant to degrade us or to bring us down below the level of men, for they and we were created by God from one soul.

So as you see, dear brothers, the new woman practices progress and aspires to fulfill her free existence. And in doing so she is founded on Islamic roots and principles that can neither be questioned nor doubted. You and I know that this Islamic view of women's emancipation is not general, technical, or obvious to all of us. There are some amongst us who are still at fault about the purpose of freedom and its consequences, and still confuse between liberation and disintegration, equality and distortion, letting go and letting loose.

Moreover, there are some women amongst us who, in their quest for freedom and progress, still resort to a foreign commodity that only serves to distort their nobility. They also resort to a backward understanding that retains outdated residues from the *hareem* society.

But time passes and is guaranteed to have an inevitable effect on correcting all misconceptions. I even look forward to see our daughters suffer less than we did in this conflict, for we, before them, have crossed the treacherous passage of transition by confronting a society that wasn't prepared to welcome the new woman. What an ordeal we had in facing men of our people who wanted to distort our humanity in the name of Islam. These men denied us the right to learn and work and broaden our minds. They wanted us to be content living like numb and dumb dolls, playing with necklaces,

bracelets, and anklets that were nothing but chains decorating our necks, arms, and legs.

This is not how God intended us to be, for He created us along with men from one soul. This is not how our history knew the Muslim woman in the times of the Prophet Mohammed and *Al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun* [i.e. rightly-guided Caliphs].

Moreover, we meet men of our people who, in the name of civilization and modernization, want the woman to get rid of all her *hijabs*, both material and moral. They see her liberation as nothing but a transition from the husband's private property to a public source of pleasure exhibited in the market and available to all.

Yes, I aspire to see our daughters free of the pressure we had to undergo. I want to see them reject any form of distortion, and I want to see an end to the age of numb, dumb dolls with closed hearts, eyes, and ears. I also would like to see an end to the other type of dolls that spend long hours applying make up and beautifying their faces, so they can later reveal themselves to people and become merchandise available for pleasure. They fail to realize that they have escaped the old slavery to a modern one that is uglier and graver by far.

It is true that pioneer women have successfully crossed the treacherous path from the walls of *hareem* and the labyrinth of blind illiteracy to the broad horizons of light and awareness. Nevertheless, today's woman, who faces the consequences of freedom and responsibilities of maturity, is surmounting an equally dangerous stage. It is the stage where concepts are confused, standards are lost, and measures are imbalanced in anything related to the cause of women and development. It is in the nature of this stage to increase the burden on the new woman and make her pay a huge price for every slip on the road and every misunderstanding, be it hers or the society's.

The only way to avoid more victims is through settling once and for all this imaginary and irregular antagonism between man and woman or between woman and society. This cannot be

achieved single-handedly by the woman. So walk with her on this path, for she is your daughter, your sister, and your partner for life. She is the mother of your children and maker of your future, so remember God's *aya* [i.e. verse] on her behalf: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect" (30:21).

Brothers and friends, I am aware that there are those among you who find it offending that a woman like myself might stand here and argue about situations imposed by the Islamic society on its women for ages in the name of Islam. Maybe some of you are wondering: how can a lady like me talk about the Islamic conception on woman's freedom, and since when were women allowed to discuss these religious issues that are the jurisdiction of male theologians?

In this respect, the prophet's words come to mind when he was giving advice to his companions, some of whom were knowledgeable experts in Islam: "learn half your religion from this woman" [his wife Aisha]. So who am I to compare with Aisha *Um al-Mu'minin* [mother of the believers]?

I also remind you of the incident when *Amir al-Mu'minin* [i.e. prince of the faithful], Omar Bin al-Khattab, was preaching at a mosque. A woman argued with him about his decision to ban an increase on women's *mahr* [i.e. bridal dowry], and to return any amount over twenty five dirhams to *Beit al-Mal* [i.e. treasury]. As Muslim historians reported: "a woman approached him and said: 'you have no right, Omar'. Now Omar was on his way out when he heard what she said, so he stopped and asked her: 'why?' She answered: 'because God far above says: "But if ye decide to take one wife in place of another, even if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, Take not the least bit of it back: Would ye take it by slander and manifest wrong?" (4:20). At that, the prince of the faithful returned to the pulpit to announce his famous words: "a woman was right and Omar was wrong".

Never mind then if someone like me speaks of Islamic conception of woman's freedom without any fear of breaking concrete conditions set by righteous ancestors, men of religion who thought that these conditions can neither be questioned nor debated. I don't believe I could stand here today had there not been in my family noble *sheikhs* [i.e. spiritual leaders]. God has honored me by sending teachers of *fiqh* who educated me and directed me towards a deep study of the Holy *Qur'an*. Then God Almighty honored me by giving me the chance to meet with you here in this prosperous place that holds splendid memories of the Muslim woman in our noble past before she was condemned with the *hijab* of ignorance and negligence. And I find myself saying in deep humility and contemplation: "(Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the *Qur'an*. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence)" (55:1-4).

Translated by Nazih Khater

All English translations of the suras are taken from Yusuf Ali's translation

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