Islam And Women Essay, Research Paper

The region of the Middle East and its inhabitants have always been a wonder to the Europeans, dating back to the years before the advent of Islam and the years following the Arab conquest. Today, the Islamic world spreads from the corners of the Philippines to the far edges of Spain and Central Africa. Various cultures have adopted the Islamic faith, and this blending of many different cultures has strengthened the universal Islamic culture. The religion of Islam has provided a new meaning to the lives of many people around the world.

In the Islamic world, the religion defines and enriches culture and as a result the culture gives meaning to the individual. Islam is not only a religion, it is in its own way a culture. It may be this very fact that the Europeans have not yet understood, as to how religion plays a significant role in the life of a Muslim.

One of the more commonly misunderstood aspects of the Shariah is the role of the family, in particular the role of the women in the family and in the society in which she lives in. The actual role of a woman in a particular Muslim community may vary according to the part of the world she lives in, nonetheless all Muslim women abide by the same fundamental rules and regulations which the religion clearly defines. Both the Quran and the Hadith are detailed sources that describe the role of women in Islamic History.

The rights and responsibilities of a woman are equal to those of a man, although are not identical with them. The difference is understandable because men and women are not identical but are created equals. Equality is desirable, just, fair: but similitude is not. People are not created identical but they are created equals. With this distinction in mind, there is no room to imagine that women are inferior to men. The fact that Islam gives women equal rights- but not identical ? shows that it takes into due consideration, acknowledges her and recognizes her independent personality. The position of the woman and the role of the family exist side by side in an Islamic community.

Since early times the family has been mentioned as the basic unit for protection, income and status in a society. The larger the family the better equipped it will be economically and in times of danger. Each person in the family depends on the other and this develops into a closely bonded relationship within a family. The individual does not see himself/herself as a person working for his/her personal benefits, rather takes into account the interest of the family. Thus, the extended family becomes unified functional unit which contributes to the much larger community. The tribal villages settled in Iraq still rely on these traditional concepts for a living.

The family structure in Syria is quite different from that in the tribal villages in Iraq. There are two major reasons for this difference. First of all, most of the settled tribes belong to the Shiite sect of Islam. The Shiite believe themselves to be pure Muslims and therefore are very conservative towards religious obligations. Secondly, if we look back at the Arab conquest, The Arab army itself never introduced a new culture in the region, it was actually the fusion of the religion (Islam) and the local cultures of the conquered people which in the time developed into a universal Islamic culture. So, it is understandable that now all the Muslim countries will have the exact same way of life, yet their fundamental family beliefs will , no doubt, stem from the sources of the Islamic law.

The conservative outlook of the Shiite is somewhat misleading, for it may seem that family life is very monotonous, but on the contrary it is rather very complex. Women in this society are rarely seen in the public, but it does not mean they don?t have a public life. For them, the private life, in the sanctuary of their houses, is their public life. It is there that a woman can do anything she pleases. If she does decide to come out into the public she should be dressed according to Islamic Law. That is, she will always be seen wearing an Abayah .

The act of covering one?s body with an abayah is a sunnah, that is, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) decreed it as a wise act for all mature females, including his own wife. The Quran mentions that a woman should lower her eyes when in front of a man and the man, as a sign of respect, should also lower his eyes. For the sake of privacy, the abayah is worn by women in order that they not attract any male attention in public. The presence of the abayah on a female also makes a political statement.

Turning to Syria, the life of a woman becomes less conservative. Women can be seen roaming the streets of the old city, most of them wearing an abayah. She can be seen bargaining with shopkeepers or mingling with friends out in the public. She will take her children to a public bath where she will spend the afternoon cleaning and gossiping with other female friends (Tergeman Daughter, pg.11). This can be well explained, for Syria has always been exposed to the cultures of the Mediterranean. The public areas which were common throughout the Roman empire have still survived their purpose in the present society.

Religion plays an important role in the life of a growing child, both in the Syrian community, (Tergeman Daughter, pg.119), and the Shiite household. Starting at a young age the child learns the moral values and the respect he owes to his elders. The child becomes aware of his/her responsibilities as a member of the family and obligations as a Muslim. The life of each individual within a family member leads to the concept of unity and respect. Among the tribal villages in Iraq, any visitor will find three generations of a family in one household. This is contrary to the style of living in the western world. In Iraq there is unity in the family and the elders are respected by the younger members of the family. Each individual can turn to the family for support during difficult circumstances .

Marriage is another important part of the religion, and therefore the culture as well. In Islam, it is said that when a man marries a woman, and vice versa, half of his/her obligations to God are fulfilled. Although polygamy was widely practiced in the early Islamic period, most Muslims today adhere to monogamy.

Married life in Islamic societies are based on mutual love, sincerity, cooperation and sacrifice. Also, Islam realizes the requirements of the society and the individual in special circumstances where polygamy can be the solution to problems. For example, in most tribal regions, the Sheik of one tribe may marry a woman of a rival tribe in order to cement a political alliance . This is the reason why polygamy is allowed in Islam. The Shariah . Limits the number of wives of four, but does not require or even recommend polygamy. Polygamy fills the social and economic needs of all the members of the extended family .

In a polygamous household, there is tension between the wives of one particular man. The wives get a chance to criticize each other and their husband. This does not, however, lead to the demise of the family .

The immediate relationship between the husband and wife may seem fragile, but it is far from that. Such is the case with numerous stories collected from the past. Men were willing to do anything for the women they loved, going through great hardship to gain their hands in marriage and going farther in order to safeguard them from others and keep them to themselves. The story of Aladdin depicts such a case where a street boy falls in love with a princess and, even though he is not permitted to wed her by custom, he eventually wins her hand in marriage .

As long as the wife remained faithful to the husband she was bound to receive the respect she deserved. The wife of a particular vizier in the early period lived lavishly, slaves at her service all day long. She was showered with love from her husband. The ancient heroes did, however, seem to be very possessive. Whenever a man suspected his wife of adultery, the matter was dealt severely, usually with the execution of the female at the hands of her husband (Dawood Arabian Nights, pg.16).

The stories collected from the time of the caliphate of Harun-Al-Rashid clearly mention that wealthy men, were highly in favor of multiple marriages as well as keeping concubines within their households. Nowadays, most men prefer to spend their life with one woman rather than going through multiple marriages ( Tergeman Daughter,pg 92). In Syria, the reason for there no longer being a functional economical entity is that the family has reduced greatly in number. Now, the man has a greater responsibility for supporting the family. The woman keeps to the daily house chores.

The story in 1001 Nights suggests that the female was in more of a commanding position in the Medieval Islamic Empire than she is today. Women controlled much of their destinies and did what was in their best interest. They were best at seducing men with her enchanting beauty. They were both beautiful and cunning (Dawood Arabian Nights, pg 19). Unlike the women of the tribal villages where they are not challenge the authority, that fantasy lady could demand for more freedom. In some instances, she was able to revert a decision taken by the Sheik (Dawood Arabian Nights, pg 107).

Another very important aspect of life in the Islamic world is the honor of the family. This honor highly depends on the condition woman of the family. If the women in the family are steadfast in their duties and abide by the rules and regulations then the family is considered to be very respected. If a woman should commit an act that would bring the respect and honor of the family down, such as elopement, she is bound to be punished by one of the elders of the family.

Arranged marriages protect the honor of the family from coming under threat. After careful decision making and negotiations the parents will see to it that daughter stays within the boundaries of the house until she is finally wed to the man of their choice. Among Shitte families this is usually the case and women usually have an idea whom they are going to marry since inter-family marriages are a custom (Farnea Guest,pg 158).

All aspects of the life of the family and the individual members are in some way or other dependent on each other. The family adapts to the condition of the society and the relationship between the men and women should be suitable enough to raise the family and support it financially. The family structure differ throughout the Middle East, and with it the culture of each region.

The status of women in Islam is something unique, without similarities to any other system. Muslim women have a great responsibility to the family. They have been brought up to focus on the family rather than look out for themselves alone in the male dominated world outside.

It is the situation in today?s world that women find themselves alone and helpless, yet an Islamic family role provides them with security and ensures them with a social and economical shelter, first within the family then in the community. However strange the family life and relationship between Muslim men and women may seem to outsiders, the Muslim family system has resulted in stable and productive Islamic communities throughout the world.

Fernea Guest, pg 165

Fernea Guest, pg 166

Dawood Tales From The Thousand And One Nights pg 184

Officials in charge of a particular city within the Islamic Empire