

Reconsidering Gender Roles In Modern Islam: A Comparison of the Images of Muslim Women Found in the Works of Sayyid Qutb and ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd Rahmân

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Abstract: Over the last few decades the debate over the role of women and the contours of gender relations in an Islamic society has led to a number of divergent outlook among the school of feminist thought in the Arab world and other Muslim countries. In response to this phenomenon, Muslim scholars have attempted to construct the role of the modern women woman within the framework of Islamic scholarship. This paper seeks to analyse and compare the view of Sayyid Qutb and ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd Rahmân in regard to women. The examination of their views will center around what the value of functional differentiations between individuals, and the question of whether or not these functional distinctions and their values delineate specific values for both sexes in society, as well as whether or not these values are intra or extra-Qur’anic. Various books as well as novel written by the respective authors will be taken into consideration. Sayyid Qutb was the main ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, while ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd Rahmân was an independent scholar. They were contemporaries who both produced a number of pieces of literature. However, although Sayyid Qutb was actively involved in politics and Bint al-Shâti’s was not, her writings nonetheless exhibit a certain agenda, and she has consistently gained the favour and respect of a succession of consecutive Egyptian regimes.

Keywords: Islamic thought, tafsîr, gender, Sayyid Qutb, ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd Rahmân

Date of Submission: 17-10-2017

Date of acceptance: 31-10-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

The debate over the role of women and the contours of gender relations in an Islamic society has led to a number of divergent outlook among the school of feminist thought in the Arab world and other Muslim countries over the last few decades. Inspired in part by the low status of women in the Muslim world as Islamic countries gained independence, Muslim scholars have attempted to construct the role of the modern women woman within the framework of Islamic scholarship. This paper seeks to analyse and compare the view of Sayyid Qutb and ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd Rahmân in regard to women. The examination of their views will center around what the value of functional differentiations between individuals, and the question of whether or not these functional distinctions and their values delineate specific values for both sexes in society, as well as whether or not these values are intra or extra-Qur’anic. Various books as well as novel written by the respective authors will be taken into consideration.¹ Sayyid Qutb was the main ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood² while ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd Rahmân (known by her pseudonym Bint al-Shâti)³ was an independent scholar. They were

¹Qutb’s works include: *Al-Islam wa Mushkilat al-Hadarah, Khasa’is al-Tasawwur al-Islami wa Muqawwimatuh, Ma’alim fi al-Tariq, Fi Zilal al-Qur’an, Al-Ashwak, While Rahman’s such works as Al-Mafhum al-Islami li al-Tahrir al-Mar’ah, SIRR al-Shati’, Sayyid al-Izba: Qissat Imra’ah Khati’ah.*

²Sayyid Qutb was born on October 1906 in the village of Musha near the city of Asyut in upper Egypt, and was executed by Nasir’s regime in 1966. For details on Qutb see, *inter alia*, Adnan Ayyub Musallam, “The Formative Stages of Sayyid Qutb’s Intellectual Career and His Emergence as an Islamic Da’iyah,” Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Michigan, 1983); Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) 57-85 Ahmad S. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1992). Yvonne Y. Haddad, “Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival,” in Jhon L. Esposito (ed) *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: 1983), 67-98.

³She was born in 1913 in the Northern Egyptian of Dumyat, and is still alive at the writing of this paper. A short but useful account on her biography can be found in Kooij, C. “Bint al-Shati’: A Suitable Case for Biography?” in Ibrahim A. El-Sheikh et al., *The Challenge of the Middle East: Middle Eastern Studies at the University of*

contemporaries who both produced a number of pieces of literature. It is worth noting, however, that although Sayyid Qutb was actively involved in politics and Bint al-Shâti's was not, her writings nonetheless exhibit a certain agenda, and she has consistently gained the favour and respect of a succession a consecutive Egyptian regimes.⁴

Toward Women's Liberation in Egypt

At the turn of the century, the issue of women in Egypt gained prominence in the works of contemporary Muslim thinkers, influenced partly by outside force. Activist in the cause of women's liberation, such as Qasim Amin (ca. 1863-1908),⁵ began advocating women's rights in Arab society as a whole, beyond the theological and legal context on which Muhammad 'Abduh focused. Both political and cultural currents contributed to the development of gender discourse in Egypt and many Muslim thinkers wrote about the issue against the backdrop of the political, economic, and cultural conditions prevalent at the time. Amin's, *Tahrîr al-Mar'ah*, published in 1899, provoked great controversy. Among other issues put forward in the book are: educating women, removal of the veil (*hijâb*), outlawing polygamy and granting women equal rights with men. Although these issues had been discussed prior to Amin's time,⁶ this book came during a period of great change, when modern Western ideas were circulating in Egypt, leading to the need for a new wave of social reformist discourse.⁷ Following the 1952 revolution, Egyptian leaders had only a hazy concept the growth and change their society needed. As they developed a social program by trial and error, the state remained theoretically committed to Qasim Amin and Muhammad 'Abduh's proposition that a nation could not advance without the advancement of its women.⁸

General Overview of Women

Both Sayyid Qutb and Bint al-Shâti' believe that men and women have equal rights⁹, a principle enshrined in the Islamic scriptures. They write within a context concerned with the role of women in Islam viewed against the backdrop of pre-Islamic culture and the idea that the current Muslim male attitudes towards women arose from Muslim misinterpretations of Islam. They share a position criticizing the emergence of modernity. Qutb views Western civilization as bankrupt, with no roots, no moral values and unable to understand the very principle of human rights.¹⁰

Amsterdami (Amsterdam: 1982), 67-72. Bin al-Shati's works falls into 5 categories. 1) creative writing, 2) autobiography, 3) historical studies on Islamic women, 4) social studies, and 5) Qur'anic studies. She has received the most credit for her work in Qur'anic studies. For an analytical examination of her contribution to Qur'anic exegesis see Issa J. Boullata, "Modern Qur'an Exegesis: A Study of Bint al-Shati's Method," *Muslim World* 64 (1974): 103-113, which also provides a list of her scholarly works; also by Boullata, "The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an; *I'jaz* and Related Topics," in Andrew Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 139-157; for a list of the work, see Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists; The Formative years and Beyond* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 184-187.

⁴For example her *Al-Shakhsiyyah al-Islamiyyah: Dirasah Qur'aniyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm li al-Malayin, 1977), as evident from the introduction, was most likely written against the backdrop of the Muslim identity crisis, if not Arab identity, vis a vis other identities.

⁵For detail on the emergence of Men's Feminist Discourse in Egypt, see, Margot Badran, *Feminist, Islam and Nation; Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 16-19.

⁶See *inter alia*, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992) and Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, tr. By Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, Addison-Wesley, 1991). These two books critically explore new directions in women's history and gender issues in Islam. The former is a broad yet complex treatment of women's experience from pre-Islamic Mesopotamia to the contemporary Middle East while the latter is an illuminating and probing work. Of particular interest is Mernissi's treatment to the gendered division of space, the appearance of the *hijab* in the Verse of the Curtain, Islam's resistance to defining women as polluted beings.

⁷See Valerie J. Hoffman Ladd, "Polemical on the Modesty and Segregation of Women in Contemporary Egypt," *IJMES*, 19 (1987): 24-29.

⁸Sherifa Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender ideology in Contemporary Egypt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 51.

⁹Sayyid Qutb, *Al-'Adalah al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Islam* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1980) 59-60; Bint al-Shati', *Al-Mafhum al-Islami*, 6.

¹⁰Sayyid Qutb, *Ibid.*, 64. His criticism of the West and its culture can be found in his "The Ideological Bankruptcy of Europe and the Future Prospects of Islam," *The Voice of Islam* 12, 1 (1979) 5-16, 2 (1963) 65-77.

Sayyid Qutb's romantic novel *al-Ashwak*, commonly considered his autobiography¹¹, portrays an unfulfilled romantic relationship between Sami and Samirah, an engaged couple, following the confession of Samirah to Sami that she had had a love affair with someone else. This confession drives Sami away, creating doubts about his idealized fiancée and her moral standards. Although their relationship collapses due to Sami's suspicions, his deep love for Samirah continues. However, his suspicions have already done permanent damage. It is a moving story, which does not place blame on the girl presents her confession as a sign of integrity and future loyalty. Whether Qutb's shattered love affair prevented him from marrying is a matter of conjecture. However, one can argue that Qutb's view of marriage is based on love and trust, in contrast to family arrangements which frequently neglect social emancipation and feminist freedom.¹²

Women, according to Qutb, is not a play thing created for man's pleasure. As the point of contact between man and woman is one of pleasure, man forgets that God has elevated this relationship, purified and ennobled it, and used to extend and improve human life. By making the family the nursery of the future, women can be seen as the guardian of the precious product, the human essence. The difference of men and women is more than simply their physical organs: he says that the female body is vaccinated by chemicals emanating from the ovaries. As woman's role in the future is more important than that of man, she must therefore not try to vie with him¹³.

At this juncture, the idea of the importance of the family comes into play.¹⁴ He states this even more clearly in *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq*. The family is the foundation of society; it is based on the specialization of the spouses in different fields. Raising the next generation is the most important function of the family; this undertaking constitutes a civilized society. Existence within such a family conforms to the development of the Islamic program of human values and manners; in fact, such values can only exist within the family unit¹⁵. It would be fair to say that Sayyid Qutb's position is not unlike that of the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood encouraged women to take an active role in a nationwide movement devoted to the regeneration of religion and the purification of corrupt governments.

Bint al-Shâti, on the other hand, realizing that the prevailing image of the status of women in her time is male-dominated, singles out the attitude of those who seek Western methods of liberating women due to, what she calls, their misunderstanding of the true essence of Islam. Moreover, she supports the idea of men and women as complementary beings rather than competitors.¹⁶

The inferior status of women in Arab society was a recurring theme in Bint al-Shati's fiction. In her book, *Suwar min Hayatihinna*, she tells the tragic story of some female acquaintances who were among the first women to join the university.¹⁷ Similarly, *Sayyid al-'Izbah: Qissat Imra'ah Khati'ah* depicts the story of Samirah, a young woman who suffered at the hands of both a cruel father and a vicious landowner; the elucidation of this story is beyond the scope of this paper, however.¹⁸

Destiny (*al-qadar*) is central theme in her novels; the heroine's fate is both predetermined and unescapable. Even when other characters seem to precipitate her fate, they are explained as mere instruments of the hand of destiny, the hidden force that controls all events. In addition, the terms destiny, God and Heavenly power¹⁹ are used frequently and interchangeably in her autobiography *'Ala al-Jisr*, to explain a variety of significant events that shaped her life, including the course of her studies and her marriage. Following this argument to its logical conclusion, it is possible to see Bint al-Shâti as "a mere spectator and not an actor vis-à-vis her own life."²⁰ On the whole, these novels represent the social conditions that shaped Bint al-Shâti's life, vividly dramatizing the predicament of women living in a hostile environment.

¹¹Mahdi Fadl Allah, *Ma'a Sayyid Qutb fi Fikrihi al-Siyasi wa al-Dini*, second ed. (Beirut, 1979) 44.

¹²I rely on Musallam in analysing Qutb's *al-Ashwak* because the copy is not available to me, See Adnan Ayyub Musallam, "The Formative Stages of Sayyid Qutb's Intellectual Career and His Emergence as an Islamic Da'iyyah," Ph.D. Dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1983) 150-153.

¹³ Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Islam wa Mushkilat al-Hadarah* (Cairo: al-Babi al-Halabi, 1962), 130-131.

¹⁴Olivier Carre analytically discusses Sayyid Qutb's views on women and the Muslim family according to *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an. See Mystique et politique: lecture revolutionnaire du Coran par Sayyid Qutb, frere musulman radical* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1984) 75-101.

¹⁵ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, n.d) 138-140.

¹⁶Bint al-Shati', *Al-Mafhum al-Islami*, 11. For a further analysis of this account, see Jane I. Smith, "Women in Islam: Equity, Equality, and the Search for the National Order," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1979) 517-537.

¹⁷See generally, *Suwar min Hayatihinna* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub, 1991).

¹⁸For a brief account, see Zeidan, *Arab Women*, 80-81.

¹⁹See her *'Ala al-Jisr*, 59, 84-85, 90, 97, 122, 148.

²⁰Zeidan, *Arab Women*, 296.

Identifying Sexual Equality

Bint al-Shâti' argues that a close reading of the verses of the Qur'an, shows no mention of inequality between the sexes. She points to specific verses in the Qur'an V: 100; IV: 95; VI: 50; XL: 58; XLI: 34. In establishing her argument, Bint al-Shâti' focuses on the phrases *la yastawi*, *hal yastawi*, and *wa ma yastawi*, to denote areas in which the Qur'an discusses inequality. She concludes that the Qur'an delineates differences only in terms of good versus bad, belief and disbelief, knowledge and ignorance, guided or lost.²¹

As for Sayyid Qutb, he frequently uses the idea of complementary sexes in his discussion of the Islamic understanding of the roles of men and women in society. The concept is especially popular in radical Islamist circles whose approach to the Qur'an requires the continued support of legal concepts that differentiate between men and women. Women must fulfill roles as mothers and home-makers while men should shoulder the economic responsibility of maintaining the family.²²

Further Thoughts on Gender Roles

Although Bint al-Shâti' was not known as an active feminist,²³ she often discussed that issue of women, bitterly attacking social attitudes that oppressed them. In the short story collection *Sirr al-Shati'* (Secret of the Beach, 1942), she explored some of the social problems that Egyptian women face. In one story, the family held that mother responsible for the "disaster" of giving birth to a girl instead of a boy. As for Qutb, the centrality of women in his scheme of thought is illustrated in his various works. He maintains that the perfect model for society can be found in the early Muslim community which was "the age of purity most favorable in all ages," in contrast to "our sick, defiled fallen age."²⁴ However, this is not to deny the importance of today's women. Rather, he asserts that, "I am not able to rely on the supervision of governesses and court officials; a mother's supervision is unparalleled. Her perception of her child's needs is based on instinct. The child instinctively finds in her what he cannot find in any other human being."²⁵

Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood called for *tajdid*, renewing reform, but in limited doses. They proposed an avoidance of both the "narrow-mindedness" of the East and the moral laxness and individualism of the West. Although al-Khuli stated that men and women are equal under Islam, he acknowledged a "limited superiority" of the male, based on that man's economic responsibility within traditional family arrangements. Therefore, cooperation and consultation between a man and women is necessary to establish an equal relationship.²⁶ During the early years of the new Egyptian regime, Sayyid Qutb held that the sexes could mingle or associate for "logical reasons" and under conditions of necessity.²⁷ "Decent dress" was required, although this did not imply the veil.

According to Qutb, Islam guarantees women complete equality the precedence of one sex over the other is established only in specific situations connected with natural and recognized capacities, skills or responsibility, which do not affect the essential nature of the human situation. Wherever these capacities, skills and responsibilities are equal, the sexes are equal, and wherever they differ in some way there is a corresponding difference between the sexes.²⁸

In order to establish sexual equality in areas of religious and spiritual matters, Sayyid Qutb utilizes a number Qur'anic verses like "And whosoever does deeds of righteousness, whether male or female, believing-they shall enter Paradise, and not be wronged a single datespot" (Qur'an, 4: 124), "And whosoever does a righteous deed, whether male or female, believing, We shall assuredly give him to live a goodly life; and We shall recompense them their wage, according to the best of what they did" (Qur'an, 16: 97). "And their Lord answers them: I waste not the labour of any that labours among you, whether male or female-the one of you is as the other," (Qur'an, 3: 195).²⁹ Similarly, equality between the sexes also applies in terms of economic and financial competency. "To the men a share of what parents and kinsmen leave, and to the women a share of what parents

²¹Bint al-Sharati', *al-Mafhum al-Islami*, *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²²Sayyid Qutb, *Al-'Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 59-63.

²³Bint al-Shati's writings on the issue of woman marks only one aspect of her works she earned more recognition with her contribution to Qur'anic exegesis, see *supra* note no 3. However, Stowasser observes that Bint al-Shati's work on the Prophet's wives *Tarajim Sayyidat Bayt al-Nubuwwah*, is widely read and influential. See Mahdi Fadl Allah, *Ma'a Sayyid Qutb fi Fikrihi al-Siyasi wa al-Dini*, second ed. (Beirut, 1979). 119.

²⁴Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (Cairo: 1953), Vol. II, 13-14.

²⁵Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Madina al-Mashura*, 6-7.

²⁶Sayyid Qutb, *Al-'Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 65.

²⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Alam wa al-Islam* (Cairo: 1951), 57-60; Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: 1969), 256.

²⁸Sayyid Qutb, *Al-'Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 59.

²⁹*Ibid.*

and kinsmen leave” (Qur’an, 4: 7). “To the men a share from that they have earned, and to the women a share from what they have earned” (Qur’an, 4: 32).³⁰

In connection with gender relations in Islam, it is important to discuss the issue of inheritance than a woman, Qutb reasons that it is due to the responsibilities he bears in life. When he marries a woman, he has the obligation to support her and their children; he also undertakes other financial responsibilities necessary to maintain a family. The payment of blood money and other legal compensation is his responsibility alone. It is right that he should have a double share if only for this reason. If a woman marries, her livelihood is guaranteed by the support her husband provides, and if she remains single or is widowed, it is guaranteed by what she inherits or by the support of her male relatives.³¹ However, Bint al-Shati argues that the underlying reason for allotting a greater share is not due to masculinity but rather guardianship.³² Thus, if a man does not comply with the *Shari’ah* to support a woman financially, he loses his right to authority. Furthermore, she argues that this does not “diminish the importance of equality in humanity that women have with men, for according to the Qur’an there is no creation of Eve from Adam’s rib; rather, both men and women are created from a single soul”.³³ Bint al-Shati’s argument is quite logical examining first creation of the first human beings, which it has led to serious effects on attitudes concerning men and women, the most important of which is the assumption that human creation begins with a man, an act which gives all men *a priori* superiority over all women.³⁴ However, although Sayyid Qutb and Bint al-Shati appear to have a different point of departure in their analysis of this verse, in fact, they reach similar conclusions: a difference in responsibilities requires a difference in inheritance.

The idea that men are the managers of women’s affairs (*Qawwam/alaiha*) also comes to the fore in discussion of gender roles in Islam. Sayyid Qutb affirms this position and cites the Qur’an, surat al-Nisa’, 34: “Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for what they have expended of their property”. He further argues that this preference is based on natural capacities, skills and the flexibility with which the authority for management is specified. Because a man is free of the obligations of motherhood, he is able to confront the affairs of society over a longer, more continuous period of time; all his mental faculties fit him for this task. The obligations of motherhood restrict women but at the same time allow them to develop reflective and deliberative capabilities that enable them to manage the affairs of women; Qur’anic financial arrangements are closely linked to this management authority. Qutb concludes that a man’s rights correspond to his duties in the broader perspective of relationship between the sexes and of life as a whole.³⁵ In contrast to Sayyid Qutb, Bint al-Shati is not interested in the states of manhood Qutb puts forward, for she maintains that, to an extent, there is no basis for such assertions. Rather, she argues that male guardianship over women in the *shari’ah* is not absolute but conditional on the phrase *bima faddalla hub ba’dahum ‘ala ba’ wa bima anfaqu min amwa lihim*. In the absence of this condition, a man loses his right of guardianship. In addition, she maintains that men have privileges over women; after establishing equality, women have similar privileges.³⁶

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

From the above discussion, the following implications and conclusions become evident. First, Muslim women were always buffeted by the powerful forces of social, economic, and political changes. With the acceleration of these forces in the recent history of the Muslim world, women’s status and traditional roles could no longer be maintained. Thus, new ideologists and new readings of the scripture on the issues of family, female education and women’s role emerged. Sayyid Qutb and Bint al-Shati were among those who responded to the issue as reflected in their respective works. Second, Sayyid Qutb insists on the literal interpretation of the Qur’an and translates the sacred text directly into contemporary thought and action. Therefore, with regard to discussions of the Islamic understanding of the role of men and women in society, he frequently uses the idea of complementary sexes. As such, the question in this perspective does not concern ‘subjugation’ or ‘inferiority’, but rather ‘natural order’, reflected in the concept ‘equal but different’. Third, Bint al-Shati, despite her moderately conservative outlook, also seeks to understand the Qur’anic perspective on the issue. Since the status and perception of women in her time was self-evident to her. She affirms the principle of male guardianship over women. Even while firmly rejecting male responsibility for the behavior of women. Bint al-Shati and

³⁰Sayyid Qutb, *Al-‘Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah*, 62.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Bint al-Shati, *al-Mafhum al-Islami*, 12.

³³*Ibid.*, Valerie J. Hoffman Ladd, “Polemics on the Modesty”, 36.

³⁴For a discussion of human creation in Qur’anic perspective, Amina Wadud Muhsin, *Qur’an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajr Bakti SDN. BHD., 1992), 15-28.

³⁵Sayyid Qutb, *Al-‘Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah*, 62.

³⁶Bint al-Shati, *Al-Mafhum al-Islami*, 12.

Sayyid Qutb appear to share a positive response to the call to return to the Qur'an and the re-examine the roots of Islamic values. This is not only a reaction to western values and culture patterns that they perceive as decadent and immoral, but also an opportunity to integrate God's vision for family life into modern Islamic societies in order to create a united *ummah*, committed to an Islamic world view.

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Mhd. Syahnhan. "Reconsidering Gender Roles In Modern Islam: A Comparison of the Images of Muslim Women Found in the Works of Sayyid Qutb and 'Â'ishah 'Abd Rahmân." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention(IJHSSI)*, vol. 6, no. 10, 2017, pp. 37-42.