

Commentary on Sermon 80 of Nahjul Balaghah

The “Deficiencies” in Women

An eye opener and intriguing read, this booklet explains and puts into perspective the famous and widely misunderstood sermon given by Amir al-mumineen Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb (as) with regard to the “deficiencies” in woman.

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The Sermon at a Glance

As it has been mentioned in the discussion concerning the transmission of this sermon (as seen below), Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) delivered this sermon after The Battle of the Camel (Al-Jamal) which took place in Baṣrah (Iraq) in the year 656 ce/35 ah and the subsequent defeat of the army of ‘A’ysha b. Abi Bakr.

In this sermon, he reproaches women, and of course the meaning of him ‘reproaching women’ are only those types of women who had launched (such calculated) attacks - those who were responsible for instigating The Battle of the Camel. Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) referred to such women as having a “deficiency” and it was because of this shortcoming that they engaged in such detrimental activities. Therefore, he reprimanded them and warned the believers to steer clear of their inductions.

Text of the Sermon

مَعَاشِرَ النَّاسِ إِنَّ النِّسَاءَ نَوَاقِصُ الْإِيمَانِ نَوَاقِصُ الْحُطُوظِ نَوَاقِصُ الْعُمُورِ فَأَمَّا نُقْصَانُ
إِيمَانِهِنَّ فَمُعَوَّذُهُنَّ عَنِ الصَّلَاةِ وَ الصِّيَامِ فِي أَيَّامِ حَيْضِهِنَّ وَ أَمَّا نُقْصَانُ عُمُورِهِنَّ فَشَهَادَةُ
امْرَأَتَيْنِ كَشَهَادَةِ الرَّجُلِ الْوَاحِدِ وَ أَمَّا نُقْصَانُ حُطُوظِهِنَّ فَمَوَارِيثُهُنَّ عَلَى الْأَنْصَافِ مِنْ
مَوَارِيثِ الرَّجَالِ فَاتَّقُوا شِرَارَ النِّسَاءِ وَ كُونُوا مِنْ خِيَارِهِنَّ عَلَى حَذَرٍ وَ لَا تُطِيعُوهُنَّ فِي
الْمَعْرُوفِ حَتَّى لَا يَطْمَعَنَّ فِي الْمُنْكَرِ.

O' people! Women are 'deficient' in faith, 'deficient' in shares, and 'deficient' in intelligence. In regards to the 'deficiency' in their faith, it is their abstention from prayers and fasting during their menstrual period. In regards to their 'deficiency' in their intelligence, it is because the evidence of two women is equal to that of one man.

As for the 'deficiency' of their shares, it is because of their share of inheritance being half that of men. So beware of the evils of women. Be on your guard even from those of them who are (reportedly) good. Do not obey them even in good things, so that they may not attract you to evils things.

The Transmission of this Sermon

It is documented that this sermon is a portion of a letter which Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) wrote after ‘Umro ‘As took over the reins of the rule of Egypt after the martyrdom of Muhammad b. Abi Bakr. In that letter, the Imam (a.s.) related the painful events which transpired after the passing away of the Noble Prophet (S). The Imam (a.s.) ordered that his letter be read publically so that the masses would know what transpired and so that the satanic whispers which were prevalent in the community at that time would not impact the people.

It is not improbable to believe that the Imam (a.s.) spoke the words in this sermon [which we will be reviewing] more than once - the first time being after The Battle of Jamal - the war in which ‘A’ysha played the principle role as one of the leaders in that major act of sedition; and that he repeated his words in another lengthy letter which he wrote.

Ibn al-Jawzi has stated:

The scholars of biography (sirah) have related that when ‘Ali, peace be upon him, had concluded The Battle of Jamal, he ascended the pulpit in Baṣrah (Iraq) and delivered this sermon. In reality, his words point to the instigations for The Battle of Jamal and the misdeeds of ‘A’ysha .¹

As for those who have narrated this sermon before Sayyid al-Rad’i the list includes Abu Talib al-Makki in his book, Quwwatul Qulub; the late Shaykh al-Kulayni in volume five of Furu’ al-Kafi; Ibrahim b. Hilal al-Thaqafi in his book al-Gharat; Ibne Qutyabah in his book al-Imamah wal Siyasah; and al-Tabari in his book al-Mustarshid (with some variations) - this list of references has been derived from Masadir Nahjul Balaghah, vol. 2, pg. 86.

Amongst the commentators on the text of Nahjul Balaghah - specifically the contemporary writers - much has been said in regards to the explanation of this sermon, and it is for this reason that we begin with the following introduction to ensure that the discussions in regards to this sermon are made clear.

During the course of history, the character of the woman has gone through much discussion and many extreme things have been stated as pass judgement on women. Sometimes their status as a human being has been diminished, and at other times, their very nature of being considered a human being has been called into doubt!²

At other times they had been thought of as being nothing more than a mere slave; in other instances, they were considered as the superior sex and the concept of ‘female domination’ of society was brought forth as the ideal notion! In regards to each of these views, it can be said that all of these extreme interpretations have had immense repercussions on one another.

In today’s society, especially in the Western societies, or those who emulate “The West” and claim to follow democracy, we see the same sorts of discussions in regards to women.

During election times, politicians realized that they needed to gain the vote of the women, as men and women tend to vote in similar patterns; in addition, the capitalist system heavily required that women enter the workplace - especially considering the fact that most often, women are paid

less than men and are given less opportunities than men to excel in the work environment. As well, the entire system of marketing and advertising which makes up a large part of the political and economic propaganda also requires the use of women [to market and sell their products].

It is due to all of these reasons that in their speeches, various nations continuously “defend” women’s rights and do their utmost to elevate the character of women; however in their practical actions, we don’t see any attempt in sincerely and honestly working to elevate their honour and status; thus the women of today have been caught up in many levels of frustration and disappointment - the same things which they were also deprived of in the past.

This same thing can also be seen when you wade through the religious texts in which some groups maintained women’s rights as merely slogans to promote and defended them due to some act of pretension; they interpreted the religious texts in such a way as to paint a picture that a majority of the women would relate to and would - albeit in a dishonest way - show the women as having some predisposition [which they do not possess].

The sermon narrated above and other similar limited statements which are contained in Nahjul Balaghah have not remained un-touched from being discussed and commented upon.

Sometimes, the chain of narrators (sanad) has been called into question, and sometimes the explanation of the text has been discussed such that the smallest amount of filth of weakness can be attributed to women. Another one of the plots has been to go to an extreme (in discussing this sermon) such that some state that women in general are the complete totality of deficiencies and incompetency!

However, in the midst of this discussion, there are two things which we cannot deny - the first is that this sermon was delivered after The Battle of Jamal and we know that the person who was at the centre of that war was the wife of the Noble Prophet (S) - ‘A’ysha who had been encouraged by two companions of the Prophet (S) - namely Talha and Zubayr and in an unprecedented move entered the battlefield, resulting in the spilling of the blood of many innocent and uninformed individuals. Some scholars state that the number of people killed in this one battle exceeded 17,000!

Indeed it is true that after the army of ‘A’ysha , Talha and Zubayr lost the war, this wife of the Prophet expressed her remorse (at what she had done), and that the Commander of the Faithful ‘Al i (a.s.), simply due to the respect [which he had for] the Prophet (S) honourably returned her back to Madina, however the ill-effects which this war left on the Muslim society will remain forever in the annals of history.

The second point which must be mentioned is that in many of the verses of the Qur’an we see that humanity on a whole has been condemned - for example:

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا إِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا

Indeed man has been created covetous: anxious when an ill befalls him and grudging when good comes his way.³

In another place in the Qur’an we read:

إِنَّهٗ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا

...Indeed he (the human being) is most unjust and senseless.⁴

In yet another place in the Qur'an we read that the human being is one whose rejection of the bounties of God is transparent and apparent for everyone to see:

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَكَفُورٌ مُّبِينٌ

Man is indeed a manifest ingrate.⁵

In one more place, the human being has been considered as a creation that anytime a blessing reaches him, he goes into a state of rebellion:

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَيْطَعٍ أَنْ رَأَهُ اسْتَعْجَى

Indeed man becomes rebellious, when he considers himself without need.⁶

There are many more such verses as well in the Qur'an.

Without a doubt the human being is not, within his nature, to be a manifest ingrate, nor is he most unfair and senseless, nor is he rebellious. Rather, apparently what is meant here is that these verses are talking about human beings who have - willingly - not gone under the training and nurturing of the Divinely appointed leaders, and just like plants, allow themselves to grow on their own. They do not have a guide, nor do they have anyone to help them wake up from their spiritual slumber, and thus they are caught up in their own whims and desires.

It is for this reason that in the Qur'an there is praise for those people who possess God-consciousness and submit to the orders of Allah, and principally [the existence of] humanity themselves have been introduced as the ultimate purpose behind the creation of the universe:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ
مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

Certainly We have honoured the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and given them an advantage over many of those whom We have created with a complete preference.⁷

When we speak about the female gender as well, we see that the same rules apply (as mentioned above in these verses of the Qur'an).

Amongst women, there are those who are noble such that it is even difficult to find men who have reached their calibre; but the opposite of this is also true that there are many women who have gone astray and are the source of many of the societal evils.

By keeping this introduction in mind, let us now begin the interpretation and clarification of the sermon mentioned (about the "deficiencies in women") and at the end of our discussion, we will bring up some final points in this regards.

Just as we noted above, the Imam (a.s.) delivered this sermon after The Battle of Jamal and it was meant to be a warning for all of the Muslims, so that they would not fall into such a painful predicament in the future.

The Imam (a.s.) started off by saying:

مَعَاشِرَ النَّاسِ إِنَّ النِّسَاءَ نَوَاقِصُ الإِيمَانِ نَوَاقِصُ الحُظُوظِ نَوَاقِصُ العُمُولِ.

O' people! Women are 'deficient' in faith, 'deficient' in shares, and 'deficient' in intelligence.

He then went on to explain the reasons behind each of these three forms of 'deficiency' and states:

فَأَمَّا نُقْصَانُ إِيْمَانِهِنَّ فَتُعْمَدُهُنَّ عَنِ الصَّلَاةِ وَ الصَّيَامِ فِي أَيَّامِ حَيْضِهِنَّ وَ أَمَّا نُقْصَانُ عُمُولِهِنَّ فَشَهَادَةُ امْرَأَتَيْنِ كَشَهَادَةِ الرَّجُلِ الْوَاحِدِ وَ أَمَّا نُقْصَانُ حُظُوظِهِنَّ فَمَوَارِيثُهُنَّ عَلَى الْأَنْصَافِ مِنْ مَوَارِيثِ الرِّجَالِ

As regards to the 'deficiency' in their faith, it is their abstention from prayers and fasting during their menstrual period. As regards to their 'deficiency' in their intelligence it is because the evidence of two women is equal to that of one man. As for the 'deficiency' of their shares it is because their share in inheritance is half of that of men.

There is no doubt that these three forms of 'deficiency' have their own understandings. If Allah has removed the responsibility of praying and fasting from women during their monthly menstruation period, then it is because during the time of their menstruation, they enter into an "almost-ill" period in which they require rest and they are not in a position to engage in acts of worship.

If the testimony of two women is equivalent to one man than it is due to the fact that the sentiments and emotions of a woman often overpower them and they may give testimony in favour of one and to the determinant of another merely based on their emotions.

A woman's portion of the inheritance is half of that of a man only in certain circumstances when children and wives are inheriting from the man; whereas in relation to inheriting from a father and mother - in many instances - the inheritance (of a man and woman) are the same and also in regards to the inheritance of brothers and sisters and their children - their inheritance is also similar. In order words: a woman - as a mother or sister - in many instances, takes an equal share of inheritance as a man.

Another reason why sometimes the man gets double the share of inheritance than the woman is due to the fact that the financial maintenance and all of the woman's daily requirements are the responsibility of the men (in her life) and not only does the woman not have to spend her own money on the maintenance of her children, but in fact her husband must provide all of her requirements, even if a large amount of money comes to her by way of inheritance or anything else.

Therefore, all of these differences (between the genders) which Islam has brought have been carefully calculated (and there are logical reasons behind each one of them).

However one thing which we cannot deny is that in every case, a woman and man are not equal from all aspects and those who propagate the claim of them being 'completely equal' or have, as recently spoken about the woman

being greater than a man merely proclaim this belief of theirs - however their actions are completely different!

We find no President of a country who can state that men and women are completely equal and who would, when appointing his cabinet ministers for the various departments, appoint an equal amount of women and men in his government [simply based on their gender]; and also the Secretary General of an organization, when he is appointing individuals to various posts in the committees, normally do not appoint people merely based on their gender and not look to ensure that they have an equal amount of either gender on the cabinet - this does not occur even in the 'Western world', nor in the secular countries!

That which is closer to the truth and is far removed from all forms of ostentation is that: With all of the abilities that God has given to the two genders, we can easily understand and deal amongst them with justice so that each of these two are able to blossom within their own God-given abilities and with their created talents and powers which are within them, that they themselves and their society on a whole can make use of them. This is the best way that we can describe the issue, and as we continue on and go into our discussion on the finer points, God willing, we will offer a more-in-depth commentary on this issue.

At the end of the sermon, the Imam (a.s.) brings a short conclusion and states that:

فَاتَّقُوا شَرَّالنِّسَاءِ وَكُونُوا مِنْ خِيَارِهِنَّ عَلَى حَذَرٍ

So beware of the evils of women. Be on your guard even from those of them who are (reportedly) good.

He concludes his sermon and says:

وَ لَا تُطِيعُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَعْرُوفِ حَتَّى لَا يَطْمَعَنَّ فِي الْمُنْكَرِ

Do not obey them even in good things so that they may not attract you to the evil things.

It is clear that the meaning of 'not obeying women even in good things' does not mean that if they encourage towards good actions such as the prayers (ṣalat), fasting, justice and goodness that we are to disobey them; rather it means that we must not unconditionally follow them. In other words, 'goodness' must be performed because it is good, and not because one's spouse has commanded it to be done, such that one becomes bold and they think that they now can order you to do bad things and that they will be obeyed.

Even though the wordings in Nahjul Balaghah in this section are not specifically directed to one's wife and all women in general have been included in the discussion, however it is clear that such an issue would usually occur more so within the context of a husband and wife relationship.

Therefore, what has been mentioned in this sermon - and also keeping in mind the verses of the Qur'an which speak on the obligation to enjoin the good and forbid the evil, and the necessity to accept that from others - applies to men and women alike, and the meaning of this sermon is not that one needs to ignore the performance of good deeds! Rather, the meaning of

this sermon is that one's actions must not be done through unconditional obedience (of another person).

In any case, those women with true faith, awareness, intellect and dedication (to the faith of Islam) are definitely exempt from this ruling; those women whose pleasure lies in Allah's pleasure; whose anger is the anger of Allah - such as Fatima al-Zahra (a.s.) - whose commands were nothing other than advising towards goodness and righteousness, and who constantly sought to attain the pleasure and closeness of the Creator.

This point is also clear that when it is said: 'be careful of even the good ones amongst them' that "good" is a relative term and is not absolute, as one should not only not be on the lookout for those who possess 'absolute goodness', rather one must accept such a person's advice and consider their council as being worth something. It is for this reason that in the history of Islam, we see men who gave great importance to the suggestions of their wives.

In some of the verses of the Qur'an we see that asking women for advice has actually been considered as a noble trait. For example in regards to weaning a child off of his mother's milk, we read the following in Suratul Baqarah:

وَالْوَالِدَاتُ يُرْضِعْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ حَوْلَيْنِ كَامِلَيْنِ لِمَنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يُتِمَّ الرَّضَاعَةَ... فَإِنْ أَرَادَا فِصَالًا
عَنْ تَرَاضٍ مِنْهُمَا وَتَشَاوُرٍ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا

*Mothers shall suckle their children for two full years — that for such as desire to complete the suckling ... And if the couple desire to wean, with mutual consent and consultation, there will be no sin upon them...*⁸

Notes

1. Note that what Ibn al-Jawzi has stated and that which Sayyid al-Rad'i have stated in regards to the delivery of this sermon differ from one another.

2. Refer to the following passes of the Old and New Testament (Bible) - [added by the translator]:

Burn The Daughter: "And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father: she shall be burnt with fire." (Leviticus 21:9)

Cut Off Her Hand: "When men strive together one with another and the wife of the one draweth near for to deliver her husband out of the hand of him that smiteth him, and putteth forth her hand, and taketh him by the secrets: then thou shalt cut off her hand, thine eye shall not pity her." (Deuteronomy 25:11-12)

Female Births Get Penalty: "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean." (Leviticus 12:2) ... "But if she bear a maid (female) child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days." (Leviticus 12:5)

Female Inferiority: "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." (I Corinthians 11:3)

Female Inferiority: "For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man." (I Corinthians 11:8-9)

Jesus Will Kill Children: "Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and they that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works." (Revelation 2:22-23)

Kill The Witches: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. Whoever lieth with a beast shall surely be put to death. He that sacrificeth unto any god, save to the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed." (Exodus 22:18-20)

Rape My Daughter: "Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing. But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go." (Judges 19:24-25)

Silence The Woman: "Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression." (I Timothy 2:11-14)

Stone The Woman: "If a man be found lying with a woman married to a husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her;" (Deuteronomy 22:22)

Stone The Woman: "Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife: so thou shalt put away evil from among you." (Deuteronomy 22:24)

Wives, Submit Yourselves: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." (Ephesians 5:22-24)

Women Shall Not Speak: "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church." (I Corinthians 14:34-35)

Women's Sorrow: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." (Genesis 3:16)

Rip Up Pregnant Women: "Samaria shall become desolate; for she hath rebelled against her God: they shall fall by the sword: their infants shall be dashed in pieces, and their women with child shall be ripped up." (Hosea 13:16)

The Wicked Woman - Part 1: "Give me any plague, but the plague of the heart: and any wickedness, but the wickedness of a woman." (Eccles. 25:13)

The Wicked Woman - Part 2: "Of the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die." (Eccles. 25:22)

The Wicked Woman - Part 3: "If she go not as thou wouldest have her, cut her off from thy flesh, and give her a bill of divorce, and let her go." (Eccles. 25: 26)

The Wicked Woman - Part 4: "The whoredom of a woman may be known in her haughty looks and eyelids. If thy daughter be shameless, keep her in straitly, lest she abuse herself through overmuch liberty." (Eccles. 26:9-10)

The Wicked Woman - Part 5: "A silent and loving woman is a gift of the Lord: and there is nothing so much worth as a mind well instructed. A shamefaced and faithful woman is a double grace, and her continent mind cannot be valued." (Eccles. 26:14-15)

The Wicked Woman - Part 6: "A shameless woman shall be counted as a dog; but she that is shamefaced will fear the Lord." (Eccles.26:25)

The Wicked Woman - Part 7: "For from garments cometh a moth, and from women wickedness. Better is the churlishness of a man than a courteous woman, a woman, I say, which bringeth shame and reproach." (Eccles. 42:13-14)

3. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Ma'arij (75), 19-21
4. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Ahzab (33), 72
5. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Zukhruf (43), 15
6. Al-Qur'an, Suratul 'Alaq (96), 6-7
7. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Isra' (17), 70
8. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Baqarah (2), verse 233

Important Points

1. Similarities And Differences Between Men And Women

Many researchers and experts have entered into discussions on the topic that: from the point of view of their physiology and also their privileges, are men and women identical or are there differences between the two genders?

In most cases, the belief that was espoused was that in their physiology, emotional level and intellectual capacity, differences exist between the genders, however they stated that these differences do not take away anything from the character of a woman, nor do they add anything to the character of a man. However undoubtedly, the differences which are present can lead to a differentiation in the responsibilities which exist in society between men and women.

From the societal point of view, many people believe that men have been created to be the leader, and this way of thinking led to an extreme ideology and another group rose up in opposition to them and believed that women were to be the leaders of society. Meanwhile, a third group came forth and rejected both ideologies and came with the notion of 'human leadership' (not based on gender).

What we glean from the Islamic sources and what logic and intellect dictate in this area of discussion is that the human being has three aspects to their character:

- **The humanistic and Divine nature;**
- **The scientific and cultural nature;**
- **The economic nature.**

2. The Humanistic And Divine Nature

At the first level - which makes up the principle values of the human being, there is no difference between the man and woman and both are equal in the sight of Allah (S.w.T.) and both genders are able to traverse the path towards attaining closeness to Allah (S.w.T.) and continue on this path for perpetuity (until death). In other words, the way towards perfection has been kept open equally for both genders.

Therefore, the Qur'anic address in this area includes both men and women in an equal fashion and in one verse we read:

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

Whoever acts righteously, [whether] male or female, should he be faithful, —We shall revive him with a good life and pay them their reward by the best of what they used to do.¹

In another place in the Qur'an we read:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

Indeed the muslim men and the muslim women, the faithful men and the faithful women, the obedient men and the obedient women, the truthful men and the truthful women, the patient men and the patient women, the humble men and the humble women, the charitable men and the charitable women, the men who fast and the women who fast, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, the men who remember God greatly and the women who remember [God greatly] — God holds in store for them forgiveness and a great reward.²

In addition, this well-known verse of the Qur'an also classifies the spiritual proximity which one can attain to Allah (S.w.T.) as being accessible by anyone regardless of their gender - male or female:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-consciousness among you. Indeed God is All-knowing, All-aware.³

There are also other such verses in the Qur'an which we will not quote here for sake of brevity.

In the Islamic traditions (statements from Prophet Muhammad (S) and his 12 Successors (a.s.)) this reality is also clearly visible.

In a hadith which the late Shaykh al-Kulayni quotes in his book Al-Kafi, we read the following:

The sister, by way of suckling with the same wet-nurse who also took care of and fed the Prophet Muhammad (S), came to the Prophet and when she entered into his room and saw him, she became extremely elated and spread her own coverlet on the ground and made him sit on it.

She then began to speak warm words with him and when she was about to leave the Prophet (S), her brother came (this sister and brother were two of the children of Halima Sa'diyah who was the suckling mother of the Prophet (S)), however the Prophet (S) did not treat his sister (by way of suckling) in the same way that he treated her brother (even though he treated them both with respect and love).

Some people asked the Prophet of Allah (S), "The same level of respect which you displayed to your sister you did not extend to your brother (by way of suckling) - is it because he is a man?" The Prophet (S) replied:

لِأَنَّهَا كَانَتْ أَبْرَ بِوَالِدَيْهَا مِنْهُ

"[This was because] she is much nicer to her mother and father than he (the brother) is."⁴

It is interesting to note that the companions felt that how you treat a person should be based on their gender, however not only did the Prophet (S) not consider that as being a means of distinction (in society), rather he placed a woman - his sister, due to her upholding the Divine values and morals, at a loftier position.

The story of Nusaybah and the bravery which she displayed during the Battle of Uhud is yet another incident that we should ponder upon. During

this intense battle, she provided water to the troops with no regard for the dangers involved in what she was doing and even when the enemy forces began to attack her, she defended herself from all angles!

When she finally escaped the battlefield, she had thirteen injuries on her body, and she eventually became a martyr in an area known as Yamama while she was fighting against Musaylama, and this is a well-known historical event.

The Prophet (S) said the following about her and her bravery in the Battle of Uhud:

لَمَقَامُ نُسَيْبَةَ بِنْتِ كَعْبٍ الْيَوْمَ خَيْرٌ مِنْ مَقَامِ فُلَانٍ وَ فُلَانٍ

Today, the rank and status of Nusaybah bint Ka'b is better than so and so (some of the people who were engaged in fighting in the Battle of Uhud).⁵

In addition, the story of Shatitah Nishaburi is also one which is well known. During her time, an individual named Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Nishaburi had collected a large amount of wealth and gifts for Imam Musa b. Ja'far (a.s.) from the Shi'a of his region. He then proceeded his journey to where the Imam was living and presented all of the cash and gifts to the Imam, after giving the things, the Imam (a.s.) said to him:

From amongst the 30,000 dinar and 50,000 dirham and the pieces of cloth that you have brought me, there is only one dirham and one piece of cloth which belongs to that faithful lady named Shatitah which I accept. You may return everything else back to its owners!⁶

This historical event also clearly shows us that the value of a person is not based on whether they are male or female; in fact we see that sometimes, women end up with an even greater status than men!

3. Mental And Cultural Similarities And Differences

In this section as well, there are no differences between men and women - meaning that the ways which one can attain knowledge are open to both genders equally - just as the famous Prophetic sentence states:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ وَ مُسْلِمَةٍ

Seeking knowledge is compulsory upon every Muslim man and Muslim woman.⁷

This sentence proves our statement (even if the word المسلمة - female Muslim) is not a part of the original saying of the Prophet (S) - however what is established is that this word (المسلم - Muslim) refers to the 'species' - regardless of gender just as can be seen in other traditions.

Therefore, there are no limitations from Islam (in this regards) and no limitations can be imposed upon women at any stage of their quest for knowledge and they too are able to traverse the road towards attaining perfection and completion in knowledge. In the history of Islam as well we see some great women personalities and some of these women have been mentioned in the books of hadith and have been introduced as women who have narrated traditions (from the Prophet (S) and the Infallible Imams (a.s.)).

4. Economic Similarities And Differences

In addition to the points mentioned above when we examine this third level, we see no difference between women and men - women too are permitted to possess their own wealth, just as men are.

Within the religion of Islam, women have been given true economic freedom which is in complete contrast to what we see in some “Western nations” which until today, do not afford women unfettered economic freedom and do not allow women the independence to spend their wealth as they see fit, except with the permission of their husbands.

In Islam, a woman has complete over her wealth and is not required to have her husband’s permission to spend it, and therefore can spend it in any legitimate (from the religious perspective) place, on anything, anyone or for anything!

However, if we put aside the slogans which are circulated [in terms of the economic status of the genders and look at this issue on a practical level], then we cannot deny the fact that in most instances, men are typically more active in the work place; and this could be due to some reasons:

Men, generally speaking, have more strength and muscle which allows them to accomplish strenuous tasks, and it is for this reason that they have a more prominent role in the economic affairs of the society.

The challenges which women face during pregnancy, delivery and subsequently the nurturing of children (especially for those who breastfeed their babies - even though Islamically this period only lasts for two years which is the maximum that a woman can breastfeed her child) plays a big part in taking away many years from the woman [in which she could have been a productive member of the outside workforce].

In addition, during this period, a woman may also lose some of her physical energy [if she merely sits at home taking care of her child and is not as physically active as she might have been on the job]. If we presume that on average, every woman has three children and spends a minimum of four years bringing up each one of them - from pregnancy until the time when they are able to be semi-mobile and on their own, then this means that twelve years have been spent outside of the workplace.

Perhaps it is for this reason that in almost all of the countries in the world, even in those countries in which there is an apparent equality amongst the sexes in all areas of life and in which religion does not play any role whatsoever in the over-all daily life experience, many jobs are placed on the shoulders of men and the majority of individuals who fill key positions of political, economic and social responsibility happen to be men.

Therefore, if we see that in some areas of life there are differences which are imposed between the responsibilities which exist between men and women - such as in the area of the judicial landscape, or differences in terms of the number of witnesses required based on their gender, or the differences in receiving inheritance, then these are all based on the discussions which we have mentioned above.

We can never state that there is a universal law or principle between these two genders being completely equal at the Divine and humanistic level, or the level of knowledge, culture and economic issues. Rather, we

must state that the natural differences which exist between them must be accepted and that the baseless slogans of both genders being completely identical must never be accepted.

Notes

1. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Nahl (16), verse 97
2. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Ahzab (33), verse 35
3. Al-Qur'an, Suratul Hujurat (49), verse 13
4. Al-Kafi, vol. 2, pg. 161
5. Safinatul Biharul Anwar, under the letter “نسب”
6. Biharul Anwar, v. 58, pg. 73
7. This tradition has been mentioned by the late 'Allamah Majlisi in his book, Awali al-Layali from the Noble Prophet of Islam (S) and has also been mentioned in Mizan al-Hikmah from the book Majmu'atul Warram.

A Word About ‘A’ysha And Her Life History

‘A’ysha was the daughter of Abu Bakr, the first caliph, who came from the clan of Taym - one of the branches of the tribe of the Quraysh. Her mother was Umm al-Ruman who was the daughter of ‘Amr b. ‘Uwaymir.

It is commonly held that ‘A’ysha was born in the 4th year of the appointment to Prophethood (of Prophet Muhammad (S)) in Mecca and was brought up there. After the death of his [first and most beloved] wife Khadijah (a.s.) , the Prophet (S) married her and it was in the month of Shawwal after the Battle of Badr, following the relentless insistence of her father Abu Bakr, that she finally moved into the house of the Prophet (S).

After the death of the Prophet (S) and during the period of the caliphate of her father Abu Bakr, and also after him, during the rule of ‘Umar and even in the first-half of the caliphate of ‘Uthman, ‘A’ysha was a strong proponent of the governments of her time.

However in the second-half of the caliphate of ‘Uthman, ‘A’ysha began to brutally pester him and it was during this phase that a huge rift emerged between ‘Uthman and ‘A’ysha. This division slowly grew into full-blown enmity and with this, ‘A’ysha took a stand within the ranks of the opponents of ‘Uthman. Not only this, but she also tried to acquire a position of authority over the Muslim society and also played a key role in the revolution which was taking form against the rule of ‘Uthman which continued until ‘Uthman was eventually killed. ‘A’ysha had hoped that after the killing of ‘Uthman, the caliphate would be given to her cousin, Talha, thus the caliphate would return back to the tribe of Taym (her father’s tribe).

However when she realized that the people had given an oath of allegiance to the Commander of the Faithful ‘Ali (a.s.) and that all of her schemes had been ruined, she altered her modus operandi and launched the declaration that she was seeking vengeance for the innocent blood of ‘Uthman which had been shed! Thus, she became one of the founders of The Battle of Jamal in Baṣrah (Iraq) and fanned the flames of war alongside Talha and Zubayr!

When the primary supporters of The Battle of Jamal were defeated and the two staunch advocates, namely Talha and Zubayr, were killed and Imam ‘Al i (a.s.) , due to the immense respect he had for the Prophet (S), returned ‘A’ysha back to the city of Medina with full respect and honour, she relegated herself to staying at home. Indeed she was a very conniving woman and it is for this reason that she considered herself worthy of issuing religious edicts (fatawa), and due to her political inclinations, we see that the previous caliphs allowed her the leeway to carry this out!

Ibn Sa’d in his work, al-Tabaqat, writes that ‘Umar had set the yearly stipends for the wives of the Messenger of Allah (S) at 10,000 dinar, however he gave ‘A’ysha 12,000 dinar! However when a difference broke out between ‘Uthman and ‘A’ysha, according to the famous historian, al-Ya’qubi, in his book of history, he cut her allowance by 2,000 dinar.

A dispute which arose between ‘Uthman and ‘A’ysha in relation to the deputation of Walid b. ‘Uqbah became exasperated, as in addition to being one who consumed alcohol, Walid also treated some of the prominent companions of the Prophet of Allah (S) - such as Ibn Mas’ud with utter

disregard. Even when he was brought to ‘Uthman and witnesses bore testimony to the fact that he consumed alcohol, according to the historian al-Baladhari in his book Ansab al-Ashraf, not only did ‘Uthman not reprimand his adopted brother Walid, rather he proceeded to punish the witnesses!

After this event, the witnesses sought refuge in the house of ‘A’ysha, however ‘Uthman let out a cry in the city of Medina:

Are the refractory Iraqis seeking refuge anywhere else other than the house of ‘A’ysha!?

When ‘A’ysha heard these words from ‘Uthman, she took the shoes of the Messenger of Allah (S) in her hands, raised them high in the air and said:

The shoes of the Messenger of Allah (S) have not even become old yet and you have [in such a short period of time] thrown the tradition (sunnah) of the Prophet behind your back!?

When the people heard these words, a group of them took ‘A’ysha’s side, while another group stood beside ‘Uthman and both factions made their way to the masjid, physically accosting one another.

Eventually when ‘Uthman was killed¹, ‘A’ysha became elated; however when she saw that authority was now in the hands of ‘Ali (a.s.), she became extremely upset since Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) was known for his meticulousness when it came to maintaining justice, and because of this the plots that ‘A’ysha made would not take shape, so she began to harbor even deeper animosity in her heart for the Imam.

Al-Tabari in his book of history, Al-Umam wal Muluk, Ibn Sa’d in his book Al-Tabaqat, and Ibn Athir in his book Al-Kamil have all stated:

When the news reached ‘A’ysha about the martyrdom of ‘Ali (a.s.) she became elated, went into prostration (sajdah) to thank Allah, and then out of the joy that she felt, recited the following words of poetry:

فَأَلْقَتْ عَصَاهَا وَاسْتَقَرَّتْ بِهَا النَّوَى كَمَا قَرَّ عَيْنًا بِالْإِيَابِ الْمُسَافِرِ

He dropped his staff and found comfort and ease;

Just as the person who is elated when his beloved returns from a journey.

Thus, she wanted to say that her state of grief was finally and she found tranquility in her heart [at the death of Imam ‘Ali (a.s.)]!

Even more mindboggling than this was that she began to praise Ibn Muljim, and when Zaynab the daughter of Umm Salama heard this, she condemned ‘A’ysha at which point she (‘A’ysha) realized what she had done, and albeit merely pretending to be remorseful, apologized and said:

I was completely unaware of what I was doing! Anytime this happens, please remind me! (At this point in time, ‘A’ysha was nearly 50 years old.)

One of the most astonishing episodes in the life of ‘A’ysha was her rapid change of attitude in regards to ‘Uthman.

According to the [Sunni scholar] Ibn Abi al-Hadid:

Whoever reviews the books of history will see things clearly written that ‘A’ysha was one of the most staunch opponents of ‘Uthman. She was the first person to ever use the word “نعثل” [na’tal] in regards to him when she said:

أُقْتُلُوا نَعْتَالًا قَتَلَ اللَّهُ نَعْتَالًا

Kill the na'thal! May Allah kill the na'thal!

The meaning of na'thal is an old, foolish man and meant a man with a long, full beard. In some references, it is noted that the word na'thal also refers to a Jewish man who has an exceptionally long beard - however it is not clear why 'A'ysha used this word to describe 'Uthman.

In any case, when 'A'ysha heard that following the death of 'Uthman, the people had chosen 'Ali (a.s.) as this leader, she said:

If what I hear is true, then I wish that the sky would fall down upon me!

It is from this point in time that she initiated the slogan of:

فُتِلُوا ابْنَ عَفَّانَ مَظْلُومًا

['Uthman] Ibn 'Affan has been killed unjustly!

From here, through the instigation of Talha and Zubayr, she began her quest to "avenge the blood" of 'Uthman and invited the masses to stand up against [the rightful caliph] 'Ali (a.s.)!

The Sunni scholar, Ibn Abi al-Hadid then states:

When 'A'ysha began her revolt against 'Ali (a.s.) she wanted Umm Salama (one of the wives of the Prophet (S)) to accompany her and invited her to join the movement. She also spoke to her about the oppression that 'Uthman had faced during his life.

Startled, Umm Salama was taken aback and said to her: "Until yesterday, you encouraged the masses to work against 'Uthman and referred to him as a na'thal - how is it that today, you have risen up to avenge his blood!? Bear in mind that you know that the status of 'Ali (a.s.) is much greater (than others) with the Prophet (S), and if you have forgotten this, then I will remind you!"

'A'ysha replied: "Go ahead and tell me."

From here, Umm Salama began to relate the story during the lifetime of the Prophet (S) when he mentioned to the people that 'Ali (a.s.) was the only one fit for the caliphate after him. 'A'ysha confirmed that this event had occurred to which Umm Salama asked her: "Then why are you trying to rise up against him?" 'A'ysha replied: "To rectify the situation among the people."²

The famous historian, al-Tabari also narrated the following:

When 'A'ysha said that 'Uthman has been killed unjustly and that she was going to rise up to avenge the innocent blood of 'Uthman, someone said to her, 'I swear by God! The very first person who sought to pick a flaw with 'Uthman was you and it was you who stated:

أُقْتُلُوا نَعْتَالًا فَقَدْ كَفَرَ

Kill the na'thal ('Uthman) as he has renegaded from the faith!

'A'ysha replied: "Yes, however the people first wanted 'Uthman to repent and this is exactly what he did and after repenting they killed him. I accept that I said what I did about him however now I say that he was oppressed and this (what I now say) is better than what I said in the past!"³

The same thing has been narrated by Ibn Athir in his book Al-Kamil.⁴

Al-Bukhari in his book, al- Sahih has also narrated the story, and how there was jealousy which ‘A’ysha harbored in her heart towards Sayyida Khadijah (a.s.) even though Khadijah died before the Prophet (S) married ‘A’ysha.⁵

The story of ‘A’ysha’s travel towards Ba’srah and her reaching a city named Haw’ab and the loud scowls which the dogs of that area made is a well-known historical event as well.

It has been narrated that when ‘A’ysha reached Haw’ab and was told the name of the locality, she recalled the words which the Prophet (S) had warned her about when he said:

Be aware of that day when you will be travelling and the dogs of Haw’ab will gather around you, and begin to bark and scowl!

When she reached Haw’ab and the dogs began to gather around her and make loud noises, ‘A’ysha became extremely upset and decided to turn back and go home; however there were some people with her who forced her to reconsider. These individuals searched for and subsequently gathered 50 of the Bedouin Arabs of that region and asked them to swear an oath that they were actually not in Haw’ab!⁶

It was on a Monday night on the 10th of Shawwal, either in the year 57 ah (677 ce) or 59 ah (679 ce) that ‘A’ysha died in Medina. Prayers over her body were performed by Abu Hurayrah and she was [apparently] laid to rest in the graveyard known as Al-Baqi’.

Notes

1. The death of 'Uthman has been related as such from www.Wikipedia.org [last accessed on November 18, 2011] - TR.

"Finding the gate of 'Uthman house strongly guarded by his supporters, the rebels climbed the back wall and sneaked inside, leaving the guards on the gate unaware of what was going on inside. The rebels entered his room and struck blows at his head. Naila, the wife of 'Uthman, threw herself on his body to protect him. Raising her hand to protect him she had her fingers chopped off and was pushed aside, and further blows were struck until he was dead. The supporters of 'Uthman then counterattacked the assassins and in turn killed them. There was further fighting between the rebels and the supporters of 'Uthman, with casualties on both sides, after which the rebels looted the house.

The rioters wanted to mutilate his body and were keen that he be denied burial. When some of the rioters came forward to mutilate the body of 'Uthman, his two widows, Naila and Ramlah b. Sheibah, covered him and raised loud cries which deterred the rioters. The rebels left the house and the supporters of 'Uthman at the gate hearing this, entered but it was too late.

Thereafter the rioters maintained a presence around the house in order to prevent the dead body from being carried to the graveyard.

After the body of 'Uthman had been in the house for three days, Naila, 'Uthman wife, approached some of his supporters to help in his burial, but only about a dozen people responded. These included Marwan, Zayd b. Thabit, Huwatib b. al-Farah, Jabir b. Muta'am, Abu Jahm b. Hodayfa, Hakim b. Hazam and Niyar b. Mukarram. The body was lifted at dusk, and because of the blockade, no coffin could be procured. The body was not washed, as Islamic teaching states that martyrs' bodies are not supposed to be washed before burial.

Thus 'Uthman was carried to the graveyard in the clothes that he was wearing at the time of his assassination.

Some people say that 'Ali attended the funeral, but there is however, overwhelming evidence to the effect that he did not. Naila followed the funeral with a lamp, but in order to maintain secrecy the lamp had to be extinguished. Naila was accompanied by some women including 'A'ysha - 'Uthman's daughter.

The body was carried to Jannat al-Baqi, the Muslim graveyard. It appears that some people gathered there, and they resisted the burial of 'Uthman in the graveyard of the Muslims. The supporters of 'Uthman insisted that the body should be buried in Jannat al-Baqi. They later buried him in the Jewish graveyard behind Jannat al-Baqi. Some decades later, the Omayyad rulers destroyed the wall of the Jewish cemetery and widened the Muslim graveyard to make his tomb inside.

The funeral prayers were led by Jabir b. Muta'am, and the dead body was lowered into the grave without much of a ceremony. After the burial, Naila the widow of 'Uthman and 'A'ysha the daughter of 'Uthman wanted to speak, but they were advised to remain quiet due to possible danger from the rioters."

2. Commentary of Nahjul Balagha of Ibn Abil Hadid; vol. 6, pg. 215 (summarized)

3. The History of al-Tabari, v. 3, pg. 477

4. Al-Kamil of Ibn Athir, v. 3, pg. 206

5. Sahih al-Bukhari, v. 5, pg. 48, Section on the Marriage of Khadijah and her merits.

Note from the translator: The following traditions have been extracted from <http://www.sahih-bukhari.com> [last accessed on October 13, 2011]:

Volume 5, Book 58, Number 164: Narrated by 'A'ysha: I did not feel jealous about any of the wives of the Prophet as much as I did for Khadijah (although) she died before he married me, for I often heard him mentioning her, and Allah had told him to give her the good tidings that she would have a palace of Qasab (i.e. pipes of precious stones and pearls in Paradise), and whenever he slaughtered a sheep, he would send her women friends a good share of it.

Volume 5, Book 58, Number 165: Narrated by 'A'ysha: I did not feel jealous about any woman as much as I did of Khadijah because Allah's Apostle used to mention her very often. He married me after three years of her death, and his Lord (or Gabriel) ordered him to give her the good news of having a palace of Qasab in Paradise.

Volume 5, Book 58, Number 166: Narrated by 'A'ysha: I did not feel jealous about any of the wives of the Prophet as much as I did of Khadijah even though I did not see her, but

the Prophet used to mention her very often, and whenever he slaughtered a sheep, he would cut its parts and send them to the women friends of Khadijah. When I sometimes said to him, “(You treat Khadijah in such a way) as if there is no woman on earth except Khadijah,” he would say, “Khadijah was such-and-such, and from her I had children.”

Volume 5, Book 58, Number 168: Narrated by Abu Hurayra: Gabriel came to the Prophet and said, “O Allah’s Apostle! This is Khadijah coming to you with a dish having meat soup (or some food or drink). When she reaches you, greet her on behalf of her Lord (i.e. Allah) and on my behalf, and give her the glad tidings of having a Qasab palace in Paradise wherein there will be neither any noise nor any fatigue (trouble).

“Narrated ‘A’ysha: Once Hala bint Khuwailid, Khadijah’s sister, asked the permission of the Prophet to enter. Upon that, the Prophet remembered the way Khadijah used to ask permission, and that upset him. He said, “O Allah! Hala!” So I became jealous and said, “What makes you remember an old woman amongst the old women of Quraish, an old woman (with a toothless mouth) of red gums who died long ago, and in whose place Allah has given you somebody better than her?”

Volume 7, Book 62, Number 156: Narrated by ‘A’ysha: I never felt so jealous about any wife of Allah’s Apostle as I did of Khadijah because Allah’s Apostle used to remember and praise her too often and because it was revealed to Allah’s Apostle that he should give her (Khadijah) the glad tidings of her having a palace of Qasab in Paradise.

Volume 8, Book 73, Number 33: Narrated by ‘A’ysha: I never felt so jealous about any woman as I did of Khadijah, though she had died three years before the Prophet married me, and that was because I heard him mentioning her too often, and because his Lord had ordered him to give her the glad tidings that she would have a palace in Paradise, made of Qasab and because he used to slaughter a sheep and distribute its meat among her friends.

Volume 9, Book 93, Number 576: Narrated by ‘A’ysha: I never felt so jealous about any woman as I felt of Khadijah, for Allah ordered him (the Prophet) to give Khadijah the glad tidings of a palace in Paradise (for her).

6. This event has been narrated by Ibn Abil Hadid in detail in vol. 6, of his Commentary of Nahjul Balagha on page 225. In addition, ‘Allamah Amini, in his work Al-Ghadir, vol. 3, has also narrated this event from many sources of the Ahl as-Sunnah (page 188).