
Feminist Theology and Women in the Muslim World:

An Interview with Riffat Hassan

by Betty Milstead

Riffat Hassan, a native of Pakistan, received her doctorate in Islamic Philosophy at Durham, England. Since 1976 she has been a professor in Religious Studies at University of Louisville, Kentucky. Currently, she is a visiting lecturer at the Divinity School Harvard University, where she is working on a forthcoming book entitled "Equal Before Allah".

The following interview was recorded on April 16, 1986 and formed the basis for a November, 1987, Asian Communicate radio program produced by Betty Milstead of the Center of Asian Studies, University of Texas, Austin.

M: *Just in a general sense, what does it mean to be female in a Muslim society ?*

H: That's a difficult question to answer in a simple fashion. Muslim women are going through the same sort of transition as are women in the world in general. In most societies there's a redefinition of sex roles going on. But I think the focus needs to be put on the fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslim women are illiterate. I come from Pakistan where the rate of literacy of rural women is something like 3 %. And I think in urban center it's something like 15 % which is really low. This means that these women are cut off from all the developments that are taking place in the world because they cannot read or write. However mass media, television, radio, etc. is making the world more accessible so that even amongst these illiterate women there are some changes taking place. All in all, it's a very difficult time for Muslim women because Muslims on the one hand want things that are modern, such as technology, science, industry; on the other hand, they're very jealous of their own traditions and are very conservative in many ways. So that there is tremendous tension between this desire to be modern and the desire to be traditional. And women are caught up in the struggle in all kinds of ways because the Muslim home is really the last citadel for the Muslim man and they are very reluctant to permit any changes in the home. That's where I believe the main struggle is in the situation of the Muslim woman, in the home.

M: *Traditionally, what was the role of women in the Muslim society ?*

H: Well, it depends on how far you take the tradition back to,

because in the very first phase of Islamic history, when Islam was established (between 622 and 632), we have clear evidence that both Islam and the prophet of Islam made a tremendous amount of effort to emancipate women. Soon after that period women again became victims of the massive weight of all kinds of inherited traditions. I feel that Islamic tradition has inherited the anti-feminist bias that you find in the Jewish and Christian traditions on the one hand, and the Greek Hellenistic traditions on the other, as well as the pagan Arab cultural biases against women, so that they all got compounded.

M: *So, the so-called downtrodden traditional women in Islam are really victims of a pre-Islamic tradition ?*

H: That's right. I think that Islam tried to liberate them and the Quran if properly interpreted is a very humane document; but the intent of the Quran was subverted by the fact that there were all these inherited traditions and that Muslims don't even know what is Islamic and what is pre-Islamic. So that when you want to know what the traditional role of women is, you have to talk about the period. And the role is affected by a lot of other factors -- political, sociological, cultural -- plus the role that religion plays at any particular moment in history.

Everybody talks about the resurgence of Islam, that in this period of time religious arguments are coming to the fore. Now they've always been there but they haven't always been used as powerfully as they are being-used today. In a sense I think that is good, despite the fact that there is a lot of religious oppression in the Islamic world and women are being oppressed in the name of God. But I think that the very fact that religious arguments are being stated publicly is raising the consciousness of the people with regards to these statements. For instance, a new law was recently passed in Pakistan called the Law of Evidence and that is based on a particular verse of the Quran and a particular reading of that verse. It was amazing to see how many people in the country had come to know about that verse and in how many different ways it could be interpreted. Of course women are very much affected and threatened by some of these religious arguments and so women's groups necessarily have to pay attention to them. The level of awareness is much more heightened now that it has been, I think, in several hundred years.

M: *So you think even though it looks like with Islamization women are going backwards in a certain sense maybe in the long run it's not a bad thing.*

H: I think it's a very good thing. In Islam we have a saying that whenever there is a pharaoh, there is a Moses. So, whenever there is repression there is rebellion and this rebellion can be creative. Of course the traditionalists would say the rebellion is destructive because it is aimed at destroying what are seen as traditional roles and values, but I think every tradition needs to be reviewed from time to time; we have a constantly sift and sort out what is of value and what is not of value. Islam is rigidly monotheistic and says nothing other than God is to be deified. So what happens if we defy tradition ? It's a very interesting time and I think Islamization has done a lot of good if just in terms of raising consciousness.

And I think one fact that a lot of feminists in the West need to know is that Muslim women often do not even have consciousness of what are called human rights. I believe that you have to attain a certain degree of human consciousness before you can understand what human rights are. And women born in a certain situation are in many ways deprived of the opportunity to become what we would call fully human. From the moment of birth to the moment of death they are cast into these roles which are very rigidly defined; there's no opportunity to grow out of

them, or grow beyond them or to question them... so that they don't know what their rights are let alone articulate them. You may be in a cage and not know it. And the others who are out of it of course see that you are in oppression and bondage. Unless you in a sense are able to get out, you don't know what is to be inside. So that's the situation and I think that we really need a couple of generations of very dedicated Muslim women if the rest of the Muslim women are to be made conscious of their human rights.

M: *Do you think education is the secret to this ?*

H: Education is vitally important, I think, and I'm not talking only about formal education. Women have to know that there are other possibilities and that God's word and will can be interpreted in a variety of ways and that that this is not the monopoly of anybody, particularly because Islam has no church.

M: *Is there what you would term a strong feminist movement in other Muslim countries ?*

H: I know that there have been strong feminist movements in the Arab world. For instance, we know quite a lot about the feminist movement going on in Egypt, and we have been hearing about the feminist movement in Iran before and during the revolution. And in other countries that have gone through the revolution, like Tunisia, Morocco, I mean the northern African Muslim belt, you hear of Muslim feminists. All these movements are not identical because the Islamic world consists of 22 countries and the political and cultural situation in these countries is different. So you can't make a generalization about it, but I would say that the woman's question is being forced upon the minds of people. I remember participating in a conference ten years ago and I made a statement about the woman's problem in the Islamic world and one of the Muslim scholars, a man, got up and said to me, "There is no woman's problem in Islam, what are you talking about ?" So, you know, it was a total denial that there is any problem. But now I think that the denial is not as blatant as it was, because in Pakistan in the last two or three years the feminist movement has been the strongest movement. Although they were not that many in number, these women were out in the streets, doing all kinds of very daring things. They had meetings, rallies, they established support networks, and if it were not for them the situation of women would have been much worse. They succeeded in forcing the government to establish a national commission for investigating the status of women. One of the women's groups, the Women's Action Forum which was the most vocal group, was successful in many other ways, in being the voice of the opposition, and I hope that continues.

M: *Could you explain your earlier statement that the poor position of women in Islam has a theological base ?*

H: My thesis is that underneath all the more obvious causes -- sociological, historical, economical -- for the inferior position of women, is a cause that has theological roots. The majority of Muslims, whether they are practicing Muslims or not, believe that God has given men superiority over women. Muslim men believe that, Muslim women believe that. And three assumptions which I think have haunted the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions relating to how women were created have played a fundamental role in determining the attitudes and ideas relating to women in these societies. These assumptions are the story of Eve being created from Adam's rib, therefore being derivative and subordinate, that she got Adam thrown out of the Garden of Eden and that she was created to be a helpmate to him, which makes him a primary creation and her secondary. We have to deal with these myths and images in order to create something different. In

order to do that we have to engage in textual analysis of the Quran.

The Quran says absolutely nothing about Eve and does not talk about the creation of woman from man. It talks about human creation in absolutely egalitarian terms and yet the majority of Muslims believe the Genesis story. So, I think the theological questions are very important at this point in time and once we get past them, once we can establish that it was not the intent of God to create man and woman unequal, then I think the other problems become more easy to solve. But I think that if we do not deal with the theological foundations of these negative attitudes we cannot free women from the burden of guilt and fear, because religion is very powerful and it goes very deep. And so even women who are at one level free, in the sense of being educated, employed, self-sufficient, suffer from guilt that is due to these religious beliefs or assumptions. I think that religion can be a very significant factor in healing people but it can also be extremely destructive. It depends on how you use it and I think that so far it has been used against women.

M: *I wonder if you could give some examples.*

H: One is that the word 'Adam' which most people think means 'man' or the first man in fact does not. It is a Hebrew word coopted into Arabic and is a collective noun meaning humanity. Specifically, it means 'of the hearth' coming from the word adama. So the word Adam means human species. If we analyze the various Quranic passages in which it occurs that changes the complexion of the whole reading.

Another very important term in the Quran which occurs in chapter 4 (called the woman chapter) in verse 34 is the word qawwamun. This is a plural form of a word which is generally translated as lord, master, ruler, governor, manager. Once you make the man the ruler obviously you make the woman the ruled. You've established a hierarchical relationship. In fact this word doesn't mean ruler at all. There are many authorities on the basis of which I can say that it means 'breadwinner' and it is an economic term. If we translate that word as breadwinner the interpretation of the entire verse changes. It's talking about division of functions that, while women have the primary responsibility of being childbearers, during that time when they are undergoing the process of childbearing they should not have the obligation of being breadwinners, and therefore men should be breadwinners during this period. This verse is addressed to the Islamic community in general, not to the husbands. But the verse has been so misinterpreted and so misread that it has given men virtual control over women's lives. If you start an argument with a Muslim man and start talking about equality all they do is to quote the first four words of that verse which says that men are qawwamun over women, that's the end of the argument. And so, I think, perhaps, the fate of women rests in this tradition, on how you translate one word. That really scares you and it also illustrates how very important it is that you deal with words.

I was at a conference last year when this Law of Evidence was passed and the women were very agitated and a big seminar was held at which the speakers, mostly men, spoke in support of the women's cause. One of the speakers, a noted journalist, whose talk was after mine, said, "I don't see the need for this word by word translation of the Quran; what do we gain by it ? We should just sort of talk about the spirit of the Quran and say, well, that's fair and that's egalitarian." But, you know, you can't establish the spirit of the Quran if you don't deal with the letter of the Quran. You really can't separate the letter and the spirit. I think a textual analysis of the Quran is necessary at this point because the spirit has to be reconstructed by means of the words. Of course, we can be overly literal in our understanding of the words, but on the other hand, if we mistranslate words, we can really do a lot of damage to the spirit by rendering the complex concepts in too simplistic a fashion. Most of the translators have been men, of

course, and even women translators suffer from an anti-feminist bias and just continue the tradition.

M: *Do you feel that if the Koran is correctly interpreted and that knowledge is made widespread, improvement in the status of women would automatically follow ?*

H: I think it would have a strong impact because the Quran is regarded as the prime resource of Islam and so if you can show by means of scholarship that something is indeed in the Quran it becomes very difficult for believing Muslims to ignore it. Secondly, the women's movement in Islam needs a direction. It can become totally secular. I personally feel that that would be tragic because I think that you really cannot have a concept of human rights that is not grounded in some sort of a transcendental vision, however you define it. It's got to be something higher than the mundane reality that we call this world and only then can it become an ideal. Now for me that is belief in God and belief that God is just. I would like for the feminist movement in Islam to be religiously rooted we have to present the positive content of the Quran which has been lost because of centuries of male chauvinist interpretation of it.

M: *How important is the feminist theology movement in Islam and does it transcend Islam ?*

H: Well, the movement is hardly born, let's say it's about to be born. Feminist theology altogether is a rather new discipline and one that I think is going to be of enormous significance in the next few decades.

M: *How do women react to your work ?*

H: I think that the majority of the women are very happy to hear what I have to say. A lot of eyes light up with hope and it's like perhaps for the first time in their life they think that there is a possibility of liberation.

M: *And that liberation wouldn't be wrong ?'*

H: Right. On the other hand, of course, I do encounter quite frequently hostile reactions and these come from two types of groups of women. One type considers itself very conservative and regards my work to be absolutely out of line and unnecessary and dangerous and destructive. The other women are women who are afraid of the consequences of accepting what I am saying. At some level they are excited by it but at another level they are terrified by it because if you really start believing that you are equal to men, well, how's that going to affect your lifestyle ? Are you then going to continue to be a slave, are you going to assert your rights ? I think that's a real challenge because knowledge also brings with it some responsibilities. If you really begin to know then you have to make some changes and it's at the level of changes that the real difficulty arises. The price for changing your lifestyle is very high in Muslim society. And there are not very many Muslim women who are willing to pay the price.

A woman who does not wish to conform to the traditional pattern of life is perceived as a deviant and has to be ostracised. Islam doesn't have a church so that we don't have excommunication, but it means being made into an outsider. This could mean your parents don't acknowledge you or if you are married, your marriage breaks up. It's not necessary that the marriage break up but there are so few liberated men in Muslim societies who are not threatened by a woman who's not liberated. In Islamic society there is really no concept of a woman alone. Even talk about human rights is always in terms of the marriage, the rights of the

wife, of the mother. What about all these other women ? This is a problem that feminists will have to deal with. It's not necessary that the marriage break up but there are so few liberated men in Muslim societies who are not threatened by a woman who's liberated.

I had never seen this before, but I saw that in Pakistan in the last two years there are these groups of women who are willing to say okay, if it means that we can't be married, fine, we accept that, if it means that we have to fend for ourselves, fine, we'll accept that. This spirit was not present before and I think when women are ready to pay the price for being free so that the next generation of women will be free, then there is real hope, because it's not a matter of rhetoric. If we believe in it then we have to live it. Change is going to take time and a lot of effort. And it is not going to happen until women change their roles and then men will be forced to. This just seems to be a law of nature that anybody who is in a dominant position, in a position of power, is not willing to give that up unless they are forced to or unless they have a change of insight.

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