

WOMEN IN ISLAM: SELF-PORTRAIT AND THE VIEW WITHOUT

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Abstract

This article is a rejoinder to Uko's perception of the Muslim woman as presented in her Inaugural Lecture entitled *The Feminine Ontology and the African Reality: Changing Dynamics in an Evolving Society*. Through textual analysis, the article draws facts from the Holy Quran, the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, and essays by Muslim men and women to refute Uko's one-sided view of the Muslim woman, and to also present her position as islamically baseless. The article also argues that there is a difference between the manmade laws, as we obtain in our secular systems today, and God's laws as laid down in His Books (The Bible and the Quran). Individual misconduct cannot be blamed on God or His Prophets, like in El Saadawi's *God dies by the Nile*, which Uko quotes often in her work. Men and women have equal rights and duties in Islam, as shown in the Quran, the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, and attested by educated Muslim men and women. Ignorance of one's rights necessarily leads to victimization.

Key words: Islam; Muslim woman; Quran; Hadiths; Woman's rights.

Résumé

Cet article est une réplique au regard que porte Uko sur la femme Musulmane, tel que présenté dans son cours inaugural intitulé *The Feminine Ontology and the African Reality: Changing Dynamics in an Evolving Society*. Procédant par l'analyse textuelle, cet article s'appuie sur des extraits du Quran, des Hadiths du Prophète Muhammad et des essais écrits par des Musulmans, femmes et hommes, pour réfuter la vue réductionniste de Uko, et présenter son point de vue comme étant islamiquement infondé. L'article soutient aussi qu'il y a une différence entre les lois faites par l'homme, telles que nous les vivons dans notre système séculier aujourd'hui, et les lois divines telles que obtenues dans les livres saints (la Bible et le Quran). Les déviances individuelles ne peuvent être imputable à Dieu ou à ses Prophètes, comme dans le roman de El Saadawi, *God dies by the Nile*, que Uko cite très souvent dans son propos. Hommes et femmes ont les mêmes droits et devoirs en Islam, tels que prescrits dans le Quran, les Hadiths du Prophète Muhammad, et attestés par des Musulmans et Musulmanes éduqués. L'ignorance des droits individuels conduit nécessairement à l'abus.

Mots-cles: Islam; Femme musulmane; Quran; Hadiths; Droits de la femme.

Introduction

The Holy Qur'an is held by Muslims to be the last Testament sent to mankind by God, through Prophet Muhammad (SAW¹). No aspect of life is left untouched in this last Testament. In her inaugural Lecture entitled *The Feminine Ontology and the African Reality: Changing Dynamics in an Evolving Society*, Uko presents the Muslim woman in such a pathetic and sympathetic tone that the need to revisit the Holy Qur'an for further enquiries, bearing in mind that a whole Surat (or chapter) of the Quran is entitled "The women" (An-Nissa"), becomes especially pressing. There is a striking difference between what the text (here, the Quran, or the Hadiths) stipulates, and what the individuals say, or feel about the divine injunctions as laid down in the text. Individual opinions/feelings cannot, in any way, replace the spirit of the text. And the fact that individuals feel reluctant to abide by the law does not make the Holy books to be obsolete and irrelevant. What does the Quran say about gender? What does it say about the rapport between man and woman? What does it say about the rights of woman? Most importantly, how does the Muslim woman appreciate her status in respect to the Quran and the Islamic principles? This paper seeks to answer these questions, taking into consideration the contrast between self-discourse and self-portrait by Muslim women, and the "hetero-diegesis" of the outsiders, or the view without.

Gender issues

We will start our enquiries with the analysis of the title of El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*, which Uko uses as one of her primary sources. This work depicts a scenario whereby Muslim women are victims of male regime. On its own, the title of this novel labels the author as an unbeliever, for, the only being that cannot suffer death is God; the reason being that He is the creator of death: "Allah! There is no God but He-the Living, the self-subsisting...no slumber can seize him, nor sleep...and He feels no fatigue..." (Quran 2:255). Fiction is not an avenue for licentious thoughts or self-constructed metaphysics, at least with regard to religion: neither a Christian, nor a Muslim can arrogate himself the courage to postulate that God can die, even in fiction. As such, El Saadawi's title sounds blasphemous in the context of Islam, and can only represent the author's perception of life: an existential view of a world where humankind is left without God. Moreover, the major dramatic setting in this novel is a town called 'Kafr El Teen', which can be understood as 'Kafr El Town', meaning 'The town of Kafr', or the town of unbelievers. In this town, the all-powerful Mayor imposes asphyxiating conditions of life on the citizens that lead to intense lack and disease (Uko 53). These experiences force Zekeya not only to equate Allah to the all-powerful Mayor, but to conclude that Allah has been unkind to them. 'For, if Allah is known to be all-powerful and the Mayor is evidently all-powerful in Kafr El Teen, then the former translates as the latter'(Uko 53). By killing the all-powerful Mayor at the end, whom Zekeya equates to God, it means she has killed God (who dies by the Nile), thereby assuming God's power as a super being, in Kafr El Town. So what is left after God has been

killed by a human being, if not unbelief? The critic should take upon himself the right to go beyond mere textual analysis to question the ethical value of every element of the text, including the title. In furthering this postulate, El Saadawi's title (*God dies...*) is more a provocation than a vocation.

Having said this, is gender an issue in Islam? If yes, to what extent is the woman discriminated upon on account of her sex? Is a particular place assigned to woman in Islam? There is a difference between divine injunctions, as noted earlier on, and individual/cultural practices. To blame the crimes of a Muslim on his/her religion is a manifestation of unfairness and, perhaps, a lack of knowledge of Islam as religion. Likewise, to assimilate Arabic culture to Islamic tradition is a demonstration of illogical amalgamation. There exists an Islamic *modus vivendi* based on the Quran and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (hadiths) that should not be confused with individual misconduct, or the practices of a given culture.

The pathetic image of the Muslim woman in Uko's work starts with a caricature of woman in Islam as viewed by Wiebke Walter. According to Wiebke, the ideal woman in Islam is "she who pleases" her husband "when he looks at her, obeys him when he commands, and does not oppose him in things which he rejects..." (Walter 60). Uko concludes that the ideal woman should be pretty and submissive to her husband and the tradition/religion (25), and that is the first blame she casts on Islam. The question we would like to ask here goes thus: what if the husband is right in his choice? What if the beauty and submissiveness of the woman is in tandem with God's expectations? And what type of man would willingly go for an ugly and/or insolent woman as life partner, instead of a pretty and submissive woman? Mankind, today, has separated the time for their own ego and worldly businesses from the time to strive to please God, who is the final destination for all, so much that the rapport between individuals, particularly man and woman, is rather predicated upon divergences than convergences: the ego strives, not to complement the alter ego, but to assert its difference, which is a metaphysical mistake.

The Holy Quran states that women are "garments" for men, as much as men are "garments" for women (2:187), implying that what is good for the man is also good for the woman. Allah says that He "created the pairs-male and female" (53:45) for the sole purpose of complementarity:

And among His signs is this: that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them (30:21)

The major common features of "subservience, docility, acquiescence, (sometimes) invisibility, (and) muteness, as described by Uko (11) about the Muslim woman may actually be alien to Islam and to the Quran. Apart from the ability to bear children, which is peculiar to woman, the Quran does not differentiate between man and woman on any gender-related endeavour. Of

course, “there is a confusion between what Islam teaches and what customs (the) people practice...” (Watson 37). Any angered soul can blame his/her frustration on Islam, the Quran and Prophet Muhammad, like Zekeya in El Saadawi’s *God dies by the Nile*. In the sight of Allah, men and women are equal and no sex is favored over the other. Prophet Muhammad supports that women are sisters of men (Dif 18). In his farewell speech, he had this to say:

Oh, people! It is true that you have certain rights with regards to your women, but they also have rights over you...Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers
(Watson 101)

The word “partners” is very edifying and suggestive here: a partner is a shareholder in a business venture, not a slave or a servant or subordinate. Uko sees Muslim women as “silenced, made invisible...and restricted physically” (25) without any Quranic proof to buttress her point, while Prophet Muhammad (SAW) sees them as partners and helpers of men. According to Uko, “In Muslim cultures...the woman is regarded as man’s property” (14).

There are no Muslim cultures but one Islamic life style. The Islamic modus vivendi is based upon two major sources: the Holy Quran and the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, which is a compilation of all his utterances with regards to Islamic ways. None of these sources (the Quran and the Hadiths) views woman as subservient to man, let alone as his slave and property. Watson argues that the idea of woman being man’s property “goes back to the Roman Empire”:

During that time, in order to identify to whom the woman belonged, she was given the last name of her husband. It allowed people to know who she was owned by, as women were looked upon as property. (56)

We may add here that Khadija Watson, formerly known as Sue Malvar, is a white American who converted to Islam in 1993. In her essay entitled *Women’s ideal liberation*, Rukaiyah (another American convert to Islam) supports that “Islam guides individuals and societies clear from the many problems created out of ignorance and blind reliance on manmade laws”(i). Islam confirms equality between the sexes. Men and women were given equal rights by their creator. “For this reason, there is no longer need for competition between the sexes (Rukaiyah 71). The problem with Uko’s perception of the Muslim woman is that, not only does she observe her from a distance, but she observes her through the eyes of a third person fictional narrative, not through a direct contact with Islamic texts. Mojah Kahf argues that “The dominant narrative of the Muslim woman in Western discourse from about the eighteen century to the present basically states, often in quite sophisticated way, that the Muslim woman is innately oppressed; it produces

Muslim women who affirm this statement by being either submissive nonentities or rebellious renegades-rebellious against their own Islamic world” (177). Rukaiyah adds that

Westerners think that because women in Islam keep a low profile, that they do not have a life. Their imagination conjures up scenes of their being in isolation, hidden from others, and reserved only for the husband’s view and carnal delight. This is their fantasy but not the truth. (112)

Rukaiyah further explains that the most important feature of the Islamic family is that it is ideally a solid, unified conglomerate of closeness where the members are co-dependent upon one another (125). Allah has created men and women with different attributes, for each to fulfill part of the essential needs for both to live happily, and to work more efficiently (Saeed 58). Man and woman are indispensable and complementary to each other (Saeed 58). In Islam, men and women don’t engage in an antagonistic struggle for self-assertion, they are guardians of each other (Saeed 60).

For instance, the Islamic literature teaches us that Adam and Eve share equal blame for their expulsion from the Paradise, after disobeying God. But Adam has to bear a greater responsibility, because as the leader, he had the final say (Quran20: 121). In Islam, the man is assigned headship on account of his strength, not because God prefers him to woman. On the man’s shoulder is placed the responsibility to feed, clothe and accommodate his family within his capacities, while, at the same time, Islam does not burden the woman with the same responsibilities (Saeed 65). The Holy Quran (4:34) states that men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more strength than the other.

Thus, contrary to Uko’s pathetic perception, the woman in Islam is not the property of man. Rather, she is an independent partner. Before and after marriage, she remains her father’s daughter and, as Saeed puts it,

She does not have to change her family name after getting married,
unlike the majority, if not all Western countries, where she has to
change her family name, as if she were a property of her father’s family,
then becomes a property of her husband’s family (66).

Watson is of the same opinion when she asserts that the Muslim woman brings into marriage her name and properties which continue to be hers. “Upon marriage, the Muslim woman does not surrender her family name. She continues to carry her father’s name” (Watson 56).

When Uko contends that “The tenets of religions and civilisations operate against only the woman, not the man” (65), she should be able to have a textual back up from the Islamic texts. In Islam, man is not “the subject...the Absolute”, and woman “the other” (Uko 66). Islam

guaranties the wife's rights as part of the divine laws, which is not subject to amendment, like manmade laws, and it is binding on the Muslim husband (Saeed 69), except he chooses to face God's anger. Islam is "a way of life that preserves, protects, comforts, dignifies and liberates man and woman from the snares of manmade ideologies (Rukaiyah iii). Elaborating her position, Rukaiyah maintains that

Islamic society is an environment whereby both sexes are considered equal in worth and are free to be themselves. Islam exhorts men and women to behave in specific ways which protect women from abuse and denies men the right to abuse.(75)

Islam has a strict code of conduct both for men and for women for the betterment of their worldly life. The woman is in no way subservient to man, and both are equal in the sight of God who created them with different attributes, but each for a specific role which is complementary to the other. By equating man and woman as garments one to another, the Holy Quran clearly defines them as two halves or equal partners in the business of togetherness.

Veiling in islam

Another issue discussed by Uko in her lecture, and which is closely related to gender issue, is that of veiling. But before we discuss this topic, two points are to be clarified here. The first point is that veiling is not an invention of Islam, as asserted by Uko, and it did not start with the advent of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, women had been veiling themselves (Watson 27). Moreover, women around Jesus veiled themselves according to the practice of the women around the earlier prophets. "Their garments were loose and covered their bodies completely, and they wore scarves which covered their hair" (Bilal 96). In the Bible, it is reported that when Rebecca saw her husband-to-be from a distance, she asked Isaac's servant: "Who is the man yonder, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master". So she took her veil and covered herself (Gen. 24:64-65), surely informed by her religion and its laws. So when Uko, quoting van Sommer and Zwemer, supports that "in Arabia before the advent of Islam, it was customary to bury female infants alive", and that (Prophet) "Muhammad (SAW) improved on the barbaric method and discovered a way by which all females could be buried alive and yet live on-namely, the veil" (32), she is not only showing resistance to the text where she could get the right information, she is also helping to sustain ignorance. Scholars should engage texts critically rather than just "lifting" it.

The Quran warns the culprits of such a barbaric act that on the day of Judgment, the girl child shall be asked why she was buried alive and they, the culprits, will testify against themselves (Quran 81:8). This revelation was given to mankind through no other than Prophet Muhammad (SAW), who goes further to say in one of his Hadiths, that "Whoever brings up two girls, he and

I will come side by side on the day of Judgment” (Kahtany 116). Prophet Muhammad (SAW) confronted many unjust practices that were institutionalised by the pre-Islamic society against women (Kahtany *Women's rights* 52).

The second point to be clarified here is about wrong information given by Uko on the Quran. According to her, “...even though the veil is not mentioned in the Quran, it is actually Quranic in spirit” (32). The Quran has one hundred and fourteen chapters, or Surah. In Surah 33, verse fifty nine, it is written:

O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and believing women, that they should cast their outer garments (veils) over their persons: that is most convenient, that they should be known and not molested.

The Arabic text uses the word ‘hijab’, which translates as veil. This verse shows that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is not the inventor of veil, as Uko contends; he did not impose it on his followers and veiling is, in actual fact, a divine injunction, not a manmade law. Moreover, veil as a divine law came after Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had assumed prophethood, which means that before this revelation, women used to neglect their veils, which was already in existence, because the revelation does not ask Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to make veils for women, or ask women to make veils for themselves. It rather asks him to exhort women to put on their veils. In another verse of the Quran, women are asked to draw their veils on their chests (24:31) to avoid undue attention from them. Apart from that, men and women are enjoined to lower their gaze and preserve their chastity (Quran 24:30). It is also noteworthy to add here that a whole Surah (Surah 4) in the Quran is devoted to women, entitled “An-Nissa”(the women); it deals with the rights of women in every aspect of life.

Having said that, the sole reason why Allah enjoins veiling on women is to avoid undue attraction, or distraction. Paglin et al argue that “...the eye is the avenue for Eros” (119). It is an undeniable fact that women whose beauty is exposed inspire more lust than those who are well covered. Uko sees in the Muslim woman’s dress style a function of her enslavement, her invisibility. She says:

The concept of female invisibility is worse in Muslim cultures where the hijab (veil) covers the woman’s mouth, signifying that she really should not talk. Cloaking herself entirely is emblematic of a ghost, an invisible entity that should at best be regarded as non-existent (40).

In a society where nakedness is fashionable, there is nothing more visible than a woman entirely cloaked. What is ‘abnormal’ attracts more attention than what is held by the majority to be ‘normal’. In today’s societies, the ‘normality’, with regard to women’s dress, is the “see me”

fashion. Therefore, a woman who cloaks herself entirely is definitely more 'visible' and existent. "Islam calls women to cover their beauty and not to use it as a means of attracting attention" (Rukaiyah 74). Rukaiyah further laments the fact that in today's societies, "prostitution is legal and public nudity tolerated; yet people who want to be fully clothed are harassed and discriminated against (79). Uko would have done well to do a survey of opinion, than to restrict herself to mere fiction. An author's view is not necessarily a collective view, or the view of the majority that can easily be gotten through a survey. Of course, literary analysis does not provide information other than what is in the text. But when one deals with questions like religion, fictional narratives cannot take precedence over the Holy texts.

Khaula Nakata observes that viewing hijab from outside, she did not understand its significance to Muslims (1). Khaula Nakata is a Japanese convert, and she embraced Islam in France in 1991, where she was doing a Ph.D. in French. As if reacting to Uko's lamentation of the Muslim woman's status, Khaula has this to say:

Man seems to have a conservative tendency and consequently rejects
and reacts ignorantly against the new and unfamiliar. He seldom stops
to investigate or understand whether it is good or bad. So it is with
non-Muslim people who judge the hijab as a sign of oppression. They
believe that Muslim women are enslaved by tradition and are unaware
of their "lamentable" situation...(2-3)

Khaula supports again that Westerners and Western-oriented people think that woman's salvation will come through a woman's liberation movement or some other type of socio-economic uplift that will give her independence, awaken her mind, and release her from the bonds of tradition and hijab. "This naïve point of view is commonly shared by those who have little knowledge about Islam"(Khaula 3). Quoting El Saadawi, Uko supports that the veil is a tool for oppression of women (31) and an aspect of patriarchy (42). Khaula argues that her vision of the veil became clear after she became a Muslim in 1991, and that wearing veil made her feel purified, protected and closer to God (5). She adds that since then, wearing veil has become "a spontaneous and voluntary act which no one forced upon me" (5-6). If "Many veils fell from" Saadawi's mind, as she grew up (quoted in Uko 41), it does not make the veil a punishment or a burden on all the Muslim women in the world. "Allah's orders are without fault...It is only man's understanding that is faulty" (Khaula 6). According to Khaula, the hijab prompts her to be careful and to conduct herself with dignity. It strengthens her identity as Muslim (7), and with that, she was able to fulfill her Islamic duties without any feeling of being compelled (6).

While non-Muslims and those (Muslims) weak in faith look upon Islamic dress as some harsh restriction, the majority of Muslim women see wisdom behind it, in that it is a protection from Allah. "It is also a mark of respect and dignity for the woman" (Watson 32). The Muslim woman

who insists on removing this part of her clothing “is removing the protection of Allah from her” (Watson 31). According to Watson,

Many of us who embrace Islam and have been born, raised and lived our lives in the West, experiencing the sleaziness of the so-called ‘freedom and women’s liberation’ cherish and value the modesty and protection that Islam offers us by wearing our hijabs...proudly. (33)

Watson adds that in the United States of America, the women who embrace Islam have more degrees than the men that do same (36). In essence, their choice of Islam and all its constraints is a free and conscious choice. So whom is Uko fighting for? Whom is she speaking for? Her picture of the Muslim woman is faulted by testimonies from other Muslim women, who accuse the so-called ‘victims’ of being weak in faith. Uko may be echoing the Western feminist agitation on women’s rights that has rather made her an object for Eros than a liberated entity. “Western women, far from being liberated, are only led to believe so” (Rukaiyah ii). The Muslim woman dresses this way because it is a command from her creator. By properly covering her body, she is viewed with dignity and respect and is not seen as an object to be preyed upon” (Rukaiyah 1). Can a human being freely choose to be subservient to the other? Can women freely surrender their rights to men on account of gender and religion? What is the position of Islam on women’s rights?

Woman’s rights in islam

According to Uko, Islam places relations between sexes on a strange pedestal, and sets the stage for the subsequent trends, which are “women’s exclusion from social activities” (41). There is no Quranic evidence for this assertion. Prophet Muhammad’s first wife, Khadija, was his employer before their marriage. Because of his good behavior and honesty, she offered to marry him. After their marriage, she remained a successful business woman until her death, managing both her business and her family. This is in contradiction with the view that “Islam subscribes to the abuse of women”, more so “in the marriage situation” (Uko 41).

When Uko contends that “Contemporary women must strive to be in employment or trade”, her message is not necessarily for Muslim women, because “Islam granted women equal status with men more than fourteen hundred years ago” (Rukaiyah 2). In an address at the Oxford Center of Islamic studies in 1993, Prince Charles of England had this to say:

Another obvious Western prejudice is to judge the position of women in Islamic society by the extreme cases. The rights of Muslim women to property and inheritance, to some protection if divorced, and to the conducting of business were rights prescribed by the Quran 1400 years ago. In Britain, at least, some of these rights were novel even to my grandmother’s generation (Quoted in Rukaiyah (42)

The Quran stipulates equal rights for men and women, with more responsibilities on men. Allah says that He has “enjoined on man kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give birth to him” (Quran 31:14; 46:15). In Surah 2, verse 228, the Quran states that “...women shall have rights similar to the rights against them”; to men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn (4:32), but “men are the protectors and maintainers of women (4:34), which means that a Muslim woman is not compelled to strive for her family up keep.

Regarding inheritance, the Quran stipulates that “From what is left by parents and nearest related, there is a share for men and a share for women...a determined share” (4:7). Allah says that He turns in Mercy to the believers, men and women alike (Quran 33:73), and that he who works evil, whether man or woman, will be requited but by the like thereof (Quran 40:40). Woman in Islam is basically an equal partner sharing rights and obligations with her husband (Bilal, Jameelah 19), and she has full right to pursue goals outside the home either for personal development or for economic necessity, but in strict adherence to Islamic principles. Divine prohibitions are not meant to curtail human freedom; rather, they define and dignify human freedom (Rukaiyah 56). Rukaiyah adds that “Contrary to what has been said by some, Islam allows women to work outside the home. In fact, Prophet Muhammad’s wife, Khadija, was herself an accomplished business woman (Rukaiyah 111). According to Rukaiyah, Islamic guidance is the surest way to human dignity and the preservation of life (111). However, she also insists that Muslim women do not feel they must prove their worth by doing additional work outside the home (127), as if faulting Uko’s assertion, that “It is retrograding to be a house wife” (88).

A companion of Prophet Muhammad once asked him whom he should obey and serve, after Allah. The Prophet answered, “Your mother” (Dif 47). And it is only serving her three times that he should turn to his father. In essence, if something is to be given to parents, only one quarter of it should be given to the father, the mother takes the rest. In the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), a woman was appointed the manager of an entire market (Dif 47), and in one of his Hadiths, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) asks parents to seek to please girls before boys, among their children (Dif 27). In yet another hadith, he states that he who has a daughter and does not maltreat her on account of her sex, and does not favour his son over her, such a person will surely enter Paradise (Dif 27).

Another issue closely related to woman’s rights is marriage and divorce. According to Uko, cultural and religious imperatives have become defective with regards to women’s rights (13). She laments the fact that “women are kept under servitude by men, especially in marriage” (38), where they expect little fulfillment, because “marriage...has become an enervating war front with the wife treated as an intimate outsider or the enemy within” (81). If this is not mere rhetoric, is it obtained in Christianity, in Islam or in African tradition? What is the percentage of women facing such a trial in Africa? Besides, if we go by Uko’s logic, can the family remain strong and united if man and woman desert their home and compete for material wealth in the name of self-assertion? (Rukaiyah 10), moreso if they do it in disagreement? If a couple construct their relationship on dutiful togetherness instead of outright commitment towards

finding God's way, they must depend upon their own limited knowledge to decide what they will define as right and wrong (Rukaiyah 55).

In Islam, it is absolutely forbidden to marry a girl against her wish. Such a marriage is void as long as she has not surrendered herself to the husband, and she has the right to get it annulled (Dif 65, Watson 95)). For a marriage to be valid and legal in Islam, "...the bride and the groom must both give their consent at all stages...A Muslim woman cannot be forced to marry without her consent"(Rukaiyah 130). It is of interest to note here that in Islam, the dowry is paid to the bride, not to her family, and that she is the one to fix it. Contrary to Uko's opinion that women are kept under servitude in Islam, "No mother shall be treated unfairly on account of her child" (Quran 2:233). The Quran enjoins on men to speak to women "in terms honorable" (2:235), and to "live with them on the footing of kindness and equity" (Quran 4:19).

If a man marries a woman, and then for some reasons, divorces her before touching her, "...give them a present, and release them in a handsome manner (Quran 33:49). The divorced women should be treated with equity, "...part with them on equitable terms" (Quran 65:2). Even in this condition of divorce, before they finally part ways, "Let the women live in the same style as you live, according to your means: annoy them not, so as to restrict them" (Quran 65:6). The divorced women should be given a suitable gift, "this is a duty on the righteous" (2:241). Besides, Allah forbids men to inherit widows against their will, nor to treat them with harshness (Quran 4:19). Who is to blame, if such a law is transgressed: human beings, or the sacred texts?

Another important issue raised by Uko in her lecture is that of polygamy, especially in Islam. Quoting Leila, she supports that "marriages in Islam are polygynous" (41), and that "Islam encourages men to have more than one wife and to have concubines" (41). We would have been satisfied if Uko had quoted the Quran or the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, which are the only two legal sources of Islam. Polygamy in Islam is an option, not an obligation (Watson 76), and keeping concubines is a grievous sin in Islam. Moreover, neither the Quran nor the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) encourage man to marry four wives, as it is commonly believed. The Quran even restricts the number to only one if the man does not have the means to treat his wives equally. The Quran says:

If you fear that you shall not be just with orphans, marry women of your choice, two, three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one (4:3)

As such, the Quran warns the believers against the difficulties of practicing polygamy (4:3; 4:129). Polygamy is an institution that requires more responsibilities and justice; it is not a forum for more sexual gratification or a game of pleasure. It is a practice that should be engaged in out of necessity. Besides, polygamy is not an invention of Islam. It existed before the advent of Prophet Muhammad. Far from encouraging polygamy, the Quran regulates its practice to the

point of even preferring monogamy to it (Dif 96). In any case, marriage is preferable to fornication (Watson 43). Lebon contends that the legal polygamy as practiced by Muslims is better than the illicit and hidden one of the West (quoted in Dif 96). To a non-Muslim, "Islam looks like a prison with no liberty or freedom. But living within Islam, we feel peace, freedom and joy which is known in no other way" (Khaula 18). Khaula says again:

I am a convert. I abandoned the so-called freedom and pleasure of modern life and chose Islam. If it is true that Islam is a religion which oppresses women, why are so many women in Europe, America, Japan and elsewhere embracing Islam today? If only people would reflect upon this (18).

So what does Uko find so pathetic in Islam as to call for "feminine adjustment"(28)? Her lecture ends with another sad note on the behaviour of men vis-à-vis their families with regard to food. According to her, in many societies, tradition dictates that men eat first and receive the best food. When food is scarce, this often means that women and children go without (90-Uko cites here an FAO source).

In Islam, at least, it is a grievous sin on a man to eat and leave his family hungry. The opposite is preferable for him. According to Prophet Muhammad (SAW), everyone is a shepherd, and every shepherd is responsible for his/her flock. A man is a shepherd over the members of his family and shall be questioned about them (Bilal, Jameelah 12-13). Prophet Muhammad (SAW) further said that "the best of you in character is he who is best to his family. He also enjoined on men to fear Allah "in dealing with your women, because you have taken them in your trust by Allah's permission" (Bilal, Jameelah 17-18). In yet another Hadith, he said that he who neglects the feeding of any one under his responsibility incurs a grievous sin (Dif 77). In Islam, the woman is under the responsibility of the man, not the reverse. Prophet Muhammad also said that the best charity a man could do is the one he does to his family (Dif 78). In another Hadith, he adds that "the best men of my community are those who are best with their wives, and the best wives of my community are those who are best with their husbands"(Dif 82). Islamically, it is a grievous sin to chain animals and deprive them of food. How much more human beings? On the other hand, even giving water to straying animals is counted as a good deed.

Conclusion

The basic assignment of a critic is to fully investigate the text before appreciating its content. A beautiful rhetoric cannot replace or overshadow facts. Moreover, no meta-text or secondary source can replace the text when it is available and readable. In discussing Islam and its principles, the only valid primary sources are the Holy Quran and the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). In Islam, there is no room for competition between sexes and abuse

practices are not tolerated. Contrary to what Uko's paper presents, woman has a voice in Islam, and she is entitled to her opinion. Even in learning the religious knowledge, which is of utmost importance, Muslim (men and women) were taught by the wives of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and some other prominent female teachers. There is no provision in Islam that gives the man the right to look down on his wife or to feel superior to her. On the contrary, man is a 'slave' at the service of the woman, in Islam, though a free 'slave'. Islam came to abolish the abuse of women and children and restore dignity to women, married or not. Even though individual opinions are not to be neglected, the critic should read the text to avoid statements that can easily be faulted. It is a known fact that man has always tried to bend the law (divine or societal) to suit his feelings or desires. Manmade laws are different from divine laws, and human behaviour may be contrary to divine injunctions. In today's West, homosexuality is legalized in many countries, yet forbidden by God, and millions of men and women go about around the world claiming it as their (human) right. Both Christianity and Islam recognize that man was placed in the Garden of Eden where he had everything to be happy, yet he chose to satisfy his flesh to the detriment of his soul, thus disobeying God, his benefactor. The majority can be wrong, if they choose to do the wrong thing. Besides, how can God die by the Nile, when He is eternal?

Note:

1-SAW: Salallahu Alaihi Wa Salam: may the peace and blessing of Allah be upon him. A prayer which a Muslim should make on Prophet Muhammad, when his name is mentioned.

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