



Between God And The Gaze: The Loud Cry Of A Muslim Woman

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Abstract

This article reflects on the author's journey from feeling that Islamic teachings constrained women to discovering empowering interpretations of the Quran. It challenges traditional male-centric readings that have marginalized women, highlighting examples like Umm Salamah's advice to the Prophet and Quranic role models such as Asiya and Maryam. The author argues that reclaiming women's rights and roles in society is essential for revitalizing the Muslim community, calling for men and women to uphold justice together.

When I was a *Fazila* student at a cloistered women's seminary, the walls weren't just physical—they were theological, metaphysical, and stifling. I carried a litany of complaints against God. Why had He created us women with **naqisaat al-aql wa al-din**¹ – deficient in intellect and faith? That phrase echoed everywhere, not just as doctrine but as destiny etched into our lives.

Then came "**wa qarna fi buyootikunna**"² – stay in your homes. As if life outside those walls was forbidden, a sin. It wasn't advice; it was a life sentence without parole.

What gnawed at me most was **qawwam**.³ Some called it "caretaker," others "guardian" or "ruler." All I heard was power – unquestioned, divinely sanctioned. Every man, no matter how vile, stood taller, ordained to lead. And we? Relegated to the margins, not just by society but by sacred decree.

I carried that ache through those years, convinced the Quran wasn't a guide but a manifesto for male supremacy – a playbook to keep women in their place. Had my journey ended there, I might have believed the world belonged to men, with women forever sentenced to serve, mere footnotes to their triumphs.

During my Ph.D. at Aligarh, when I began peeling back the layers of tradition wrapped around the Muslim woman, I found myself drowning in verses and traditions, each one more perplexing than the last. The same woman who had been labeled **naqisaat al-aql wa al-din** – deficient in intellect and faith – was also exalted by the Quran in the forms of Asiya and Maryam as **qudwah**,⁴ role models for believers, both men and women. If women were truly created lacking, what sense does it make to ask men to follow them?

And here's the kicker – if "**lil rijali alaihin darajah**"⁵ (men have a degree over women) is the blanket statement it's often made out to be, then let me ask those interpreters of scripture: could the most pious man today honestly claim superiority over **Aisha (RA)** or **Umm Salamah (RA)**? Do they really believe Aisha was lacking in intellect just because she was a woman?

And what of the moment at Hudaybiyyah, when the Prophet (PBUH) accepted Umm Salamah's advice, steering history in a new direction? Was he casually dismissing her supposed deficiency in intellect when he chose her wisdom? Or does that interpretation crumble under its own absurdity?

I was pleasantly startled to realize that my doubts about the Quran being a manifesto for male dominance weren't mine alone. Long before me, Umm Salamah (RA), the wife of the Prophet (PBUH), had voiced the same unease. One day, she asked, "O Messenger of God, does Allah only address men?" And in response, the following verse was revealed: **"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women..."**⁶ (Surah Al-Ahzab 33:35).

In that moment, it hit me – Islam wasn't an exclusive club for men; it was ours too. The Quran belonged to us, as much as to them.

Then I stumbled upon the verse: **"For men is a share of what they earn, and for women is a share of what they earn"**⁷ (Surah An-Nisa 4:32). And just like that, all my grievances dissolved. My quarrel with God ended. The Quran, once a book of male supremacy in my eyes, now appeared as a manifesto of human equality and intellectual freedom.

It struck me like a hard truth: the same book that restored a woman's humanity – treating her as a person, not property – was later weaponized through male-centric readings, stripping her of her Islamic rights and even her basic human dignity. Men did this either by twisting interpretations or weaving fabricated traditions. One moment, they placed women alongside horses and homes; the next, they declared them **naqisaat al-aql wa al-din** – deficient in intellect and faith – without a second thought for what that implied for Fatimah, Maryam, Khadijah, Aisha, or Umm Salamah. Worse, it wasn't just these women they diminished – Islam's universal message of justice and equality was dragged down with them.

As Hafiz al-Dhahabi noted in *Mizan al-I'tidal*, men filled the ranks of false narrators, but not a single woman was ever accused of fabricating a hadith.⁸ Perhaps it was divine grace that kept them from deceit – or maybe they were just left behind, unseen and unheard. Either way, male interpretations stole what the Sharia had rightfully granted to women. And so, here we are. Half the population rendered obsolete, their voices drowned, their autonomy erased, reduced to mere shadows trailing behind uninformed men.

In India's tangled pluralism, the erosion of Muslim women's rights isn't just tragic – it's catastrophic. For generations, the debates of traditional scholars have spun in endless circles, adding confusion like a storm cloud that never lifts. Just recently, a fatwa declared it not only impermissible but downright **haram** for women to work outside their homes.

Our scholars seem allergic to reading verses in full context. Take **"wa qarna fi buyootikunna"** – stay in your homes. It was meant specifically for the Prophet's wives because their house was where divine revelation descended, where knowledge flowed like water. Honestly, if revelation were still descending somewhere, with the Prophet (PBUH) sitting in that home, I'd say not just women, but men too, should glue themselves to the floor. What better place to be?

But what about homes where women are banished from learning and chained to the kitchen, with nothing but soap operas to kill the hours? Tell me – where's the piety in staying trapped inside walls built to keep wisdom out?

Honestly, we're tangled in contradictions so deep they could drown us. On the one hand, we banish women from public life, waving **"wa qarna fi buyootikunna"** like a banner, demanding they stay out of sight. But then, those same devout men insist that their wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law only see female doctors. So tell me – if every Muslim woman followed that interpretation, where would those female doctors, teachers, and writers come from?

And how would I be standing here today, presenting the case for the daughters of the Ummah? How could I argue for them, for us, if we had all been silenced before we even began?

God asked for a **jilbab**,⁹ and we gave women the **burqa**¹⁰ – an invention so complete that it buried not just their faces but their very identities. It's not that the face or hands are inherently **awrah**,¹¹ but the crushing weight of social pressure has stolen that freedom from women. Many cover their faces, not from religious conviction, but out of fear – fear of men, fear of a society that demands submission. And yet, these women know: even at **Hajj**, surrounded by millions, keeping the face uncovered is a religious necessity.

There was a time when women, with their faces visible, held the power to speak truth to authority. **Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA)** – the towering, no-nonsense caliph – was corrected mid-sermon by a woman whose only distinguishing feature the narrator felt compelled to mention was her “flat nose.”¹² And then there was **Sakina bint Husayn**, known for her unparalleled beauty. But back then, no one dared to objectify her, no one shouted obscenities from the shadows.

If we deny women their right to public participation – like the consultations Umar (RA) held with them – or their right to contribute in battle, we are erasing our own history. Stripping women of their rights isn't just a betrayal of them – it's a betrayal of our legacy, a rejection of everything that once made our civilization great.

In *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Imam Ghazali claimed that anyone who follows a woman's counsel will be tossed headfirst into hell. He even pinned a quote on **Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA)**: "Consult women, but do the opposite of what they suggest, for therein lies blessing."

If only they had known. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) listened to **Umm Salamah (RA)** when the counsel of the greatest men fell short, and her advice saved the day. And it was by following the wisdom of **Bilqis**, the Queen of Sheba – as told in the Quran – that an entire nation abandoned idolatry and embraced belief in the One God.¹³ But still, after all these stories, women are expected to stay away from critical decisions, their counsel disregarded as if history hasn't already proven the folly in ignoring them.

Traditional piety serves up a woman so docile it's hard to tell if she's devoted or just erased. **Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi** tells the story of a woman from Lucknow, whose husband spent his nights indulging in courtesans' performances. She didn't protest, didn't confront him – no, she cooked meals and sent them right to the courtesan's house. And the world celebrated her, calling her obedience and good nature the stuff of legend.¹⁴

As long as these perfect, silent women remain our role models, there's no hope of reforming men. The truth is, we have to start whispering the truth in their ears: when the Quran speaks of **Qanitat** – devout women – it means obedience to God, not blind submission to husbands.

If Muslim women want to protect their rights, they'll have to take matters into their own hands. It's time to stop listening to endless sermons from men – enough with the lectures about covering our faces. Now, it's about action. If we want to revive the Muslim community as a united, thriving force, it's not just the women who need to align with God through piety – men need to step up too.

A just society will only come when both men and women reconnect with God, side by side. And only then can we say, with unshakable confidence: “**The believing men and believing women are allies of one another.**” (Surah At-Tawbah 9:71)

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¹ *Sahih Muslim*, 147

² Quran, 33:33

³ Quran, 4:34

⁴ Model, Example

⁵ Quran, 2:228

⁶ Quran, 33:35

⁷ Quran, 4:32

⁸ Al-Dhahabi, (Hafiz Shamsuddin) *Mizan-al-I'tidal* 4/604

⁹ Jilbab: a full-length outer garment, traditionally covering the head and hands, worn in public by some Muslim women.

¹⁰ Burqa: a long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by some Muslim women.

¹¹ Awrah: "In Islamic law, the intimate parts of the body that must be covered for modesty, varying by gender and context." (Encyclopaedia of Islam)

¹² Qurtabi (abu Abdullah Mohammad bin Ahmad al Ansari), *al-Jame-le-Ihkamil-Quran*, 1/197

¹³ Quran, 27:15-44

¹⁴ Molana Ashraf Ali Thanvi, *Bahishti Zewar*, 5/237

