

Allegorical Gender: The Figure of Eve Revisited

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Introduction

In the last decade, a number of monographs and forays in the field of Muslim women's studies have attempted to examine the place of the Muslim woman in the interpretive heritage of Islamic exegetical texts, particularly the hadith *tafsir* literature from the period of classical Islam.¹ The figure of Eve (*Hawwā'* in Qur'anic terminology) is an inevitable topic of discussion in all of these scholarly studies, primarily due to her definitive role in the evolution of gender categories in the Islamic exegetical texts, and, subsequently, how this role has become an indicator of direction for the Muslim woman's identity. The figure of Eve, in short, as articulated by Muslim classical exegetes, has not only defined the identity of Muslim woman; it has also set the parameters for how that identity has been forged. Yet, the traditional view of Eve portrays woman as both physically and mentally inferior to man, as well as spiritually inept. This classical interpretation of Eve has come to be endowed with sacred authority, more so by virtue of its place in our Islamic past than by any Qur'anic sanction.

This is not to imply that all of the medieval classical writings on Islam constitute a monolithic whole. After all, the sources of the Shari'ah, namely, the Qur'an and the hadith, historically have been highly adaptable texts:

In the case of the Qur'an, its directives are general, broad, and flexible in most cases; therefore they could be translated into the terms of a specific social reality of each generation of interpreters. Concerning the hadith . . . given the inevitable gap between the actual and the idealized . . . it is not surprising that the Hadith contains an abundance of varied and often contradictory traditions,

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from which Muslim interpreters could and can choose various details to substantiate their teachings.²

Potentially, such flexibility in textual analysis allows for diverging theoretical analysis. Yet, ultimately, it has been the restrictive theoretical interpretation of traditionalists that has prevailed in Islamic tradition and writings, for it is this group of Muslims who wrote the bulk of the voluminous literature on the “truly Islamic” status of women.³ When reviewing the commentaries and scriptural references from their literature, specifically concerning the image of Eve, it is no wonder that Muslim women as a gender are viewed by conservatives as intellectually unequal and spiritually inferior.

This analysis does not stray far from either the critical topic or the methodological approach of the gender studies noted above. In addition, it attempts a rereading of Eve’s significance and role in the Qur’anic narrative of creation in order to formulate new gender definitions that are more consonant with the Qur’an’s broader worldview and that provide more appropriate views of gender for contemporary times. A textual analysis of the Qur’anic text present a very different picture of Eve than that presented by classical traditionalists—that of a naturally equal and spiritually cognate being.

The Eve of Muslim Traditionalists

A synopsis of traditionalist views in the twin areas of Eve’s nature and creative purpose as well as her role in “the fall” reveal not only contradictory statements, but also reflect deeply embedded preconceived presuppositions of gender. Some conservative commentaries often refer to Eve’s physical and spiritual nature as stemming from the “crooked bone” of Adam. Quoted from the article of Smith and Haddad is one of the most common hadiths referred to as authoritative on Eve’s nature. Related by Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Mas‘ūd, it states:

When God sent Iblis out of the Garden and placed Adam in it, he dwelt in it alone and had no one to socialize with. *God sent sleep on him and then He took a rib from his left side and placed flesh in its place and created Hawwā’ [Eve] from it.* When he awoke he found a woman seated near his head. He asked her, “Who are you?” She answered, “Woman.” He said, “Why were you created?” *She said, “That you might find rest in me.”* The angels said, “What is her name?” and he said, “Hawwā’.” They said, “Why was she called Hawwā’?” He said, “*Because she was created from a living thing.*”⁴

This particular view of Eve is endorsed by a similar hadith attributed to the Prophet. “Crooked bone” underlines the physical imperfection of women,

and, by implication, their mental and spiritual ineptitude—a conclusion drawn from the chronological order of creation: Eve was created second, thus secondary to Adam who was created first.

Much of the “crooked bone” interpretation found in commentaries, such as al-Zamakhsharī’s, is based on a singular word: *from* (here translated as “out of it”). It is found in the verse describing the creation of the first human couple, as well as all of humanity.

O Mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, Who created you out of one living entity, and *out of it created its mate*, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you! (Qur’an 4:1)

First, because the Qur’an speaks of the primordial pair as “Adam and *zawj*,” rather than Adam and Eve, the majority of Muslims assume that Adam was the first human being created by God and that he was a male, since the Qur’an speaks of “Adam and *zawj*.” If “Adam” were a man, it follows that “Adam’s *zawj*” would be a woman. Hence, the *zawj* mentioned in the Qur’an becomes equated with Eve.⁵ Second, because she was created *min* or “from” Adam, she was naturally inferior, so say traditionalists, since the

meaning of the *min* gives rise to the idea that the first created being (taken to be a male person) was complete, perfect and superior. The second created being (a woman) was not his equal, because she was taken out of the whole, and therefore, derivative and less than it.⁶

Therefore, the order of creation is central to the natural composition and predetermined disposition of female creation.

Despite Eve’s “inherent” anatomical and mental flaw, conservative interpretations do find a meaningful purpose behind women’s creation—they serve a vital purpose as childbearers and as sexual vestibules for men. Hadith commentators never contrived the expression “to find rest in [women],” for it is an authentic Qur’anic quotation (7:189). They, did, nevertheless, infer its meaning. Because this verse alludes to the sexual act, it is often asserted that the female’s sole purpose is sexually oriented: reproduction attained through fulfillment of male sexual desires and thus the verse’s translation as “that you might find rest in them.”⁷ This leads al-Zamakhsharī (a leading Qur’anic interpreter) and al-‘Aqqād (a noted Muslim contemporary) to conclude that men, by nature, are “preferred” by God over women in terms of “intelligence, physical constitution, determination and physical strength.”⁸

Eve's flawed nature, in turn, necessarily informs her role in the parable of the Garden. While some narratives blame the primordial pair for eating from the "forbidden tree," still others clearly point the finger at Eve for being the temptress of Adam. Al-Ṭabarṣī cited the following hadith:

God asked Adam, "Why did you eat it when I forbade you?" and Adam answered, "O Lord, Eve made me eat it." Then God asked Eve, "Why did you feed it to him?" She said, "The serpent commanded me." So he asked the serpent, "Why did you command her?" whereupon the serpent replied, "Satan commanded me."⁹

Despite the disparity in narratives, commentators leave little doubt that Eve's intentions were ill. Be it explicitly stated or implicitly alluded to, many of the noted commentaries depict Eve as a seductress. Take, for example, al-Ṭabarī, who is often referred to as an evenhanded and objective commentator. In his *Tārīkh* (1:108), God specifically accused Eve of tempting Adam, who succumbed only after being tempted by her.¹⁰ This must not be such a far-fetched portrayal of Eve, since the narratives of al-Rāzī and al-Tha'labī include it in their respective collections as well.¹¹ A true understanding of the Qur'anic text, however, renders a diametrically opposed view of Eve, thus of all women as well.

The Qur'anic Eve

The Qur'anic narrative of Adam and Eve and the first sin of humanity is alluded to throughout the Qur'an, but it is found at length in three surahs (2:30-39; 7:11-27; 20:115-134). In addition to relating the lessons of disobedience, Satan's temptations and deception, God's mercy and guidance, and, finally, personal accountability,¹² a careful rereading of these passages reveals a very different understanding of female spirituality, one that is not found in conservative writings. This understanding can best be illustrated in the nature and creative purpose of Eve and her consignment to and expulsion from the Garden.

Nowhere in the Qur'an is there any explicit reference to the actual creation of Adam's female partner, nor is she ever mentioned by name once her existence is recognized.¹³ This falls in tandem with Adam's creation, which is only mentioned once (3:59), but in a context outside issues of gender. As far as the Qur'an specifying Adam's name, while the term *ādam* occurs twenty-five times in the Qur'an, it functions as a collective noun (as opposed to a personal proper noun), often replacing the generic terms for humanity: *al-insān* or *bashar*.¹⁴

[One] reason why the Qur'an leaves the terms "Adam" and *zawj* deliberately unclear, not only as regards sex but also as regards number, is because its purpose is not to narrate certain events in the

life of a man and a woman (i.e., the Adam and Eve of popular imagination), but to refer to some life experiences of all human beings, men and women together.¹⁵

Clearly, the specific naming and the mode of creation is not the point of emphasis. Instead, the focus of their creation, particularly the creation of Eve, must be viewed within the context of why humanity as a whole was created. The principal purpose of man's existence lies in worshipping the Supreme Creator ("I have only created jinns and men, that they may serve Me"; 51:56).

Worship, then, frames all other functions of humanity, particularly vicegerency.

And lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: "Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it." They said: "Wilt Thou place on it such as will spread corruption thereon and shed blood—whereas it is we who extol Thy limitless glory, and praise Thee, and hallow Thy name?" [God] answered: "Verily, I know that which you do not know." (2:30)

As indicated in this verse, vicegerency was part of God's divine plan before humanity was ever created. Moreover, *khilāfah* was bestowed upon humanity not only as a responsibility (i.e., to establish God's will on Earth), but also as a privilege, since through "inheritance" humanity becomes the supreme possessor of Earth.¹⁶ Incidentally, this explains why human beings are spoken of as *khulafā' al-arḍ* throughout the Qur'an.¹⁷ Earth, then, was the destined dwelling place of humanity long before the first sin was committed, which draws major implications in defining the nature of humanity as well as the way "the fall of humanity" is interpreted.

Although the timing and mode of human creation is ambiguous, the nature of human beings is not.

And lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: "Behold, I am about to create mortal man out of sounding clay, out of dark slime transmuted; and when I have formed him fully and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down before him in prostration! (15:28-29)

Before humanity was ever created, God states clearly that all human beings would be endowed with His spirit (*rūḥ*). When referring to human creation, the Qur'an categorically refers to their common origin as *nafs* *wāḥidatin* (single soul), referring to the first human entity. While *nafs* cannot be translated literally, it can be understood through its primary attributes, traditionally cited as soul, spirit, mind, self, and person.¹⁸ It was the classical commentators who chose "human beings" as its prevalent meaning, just as they asserted that this referred to Adam, who was assumed to be male.¹⁹

However, as Amina Wadud-Muhsin correctly pointed out, the term *nafs*, while solely referring to humanity, is, nonetheless, genderless in nature.

Allah never planned to begin the creation with a male person; nor does it ever refer to the origins of the human race with Adam. It does not even state that Allah began the creation of humankind with the *nafs* of Adam, the man. This omission is noteworthy because the Qur'anic version of the creation of humankind is not expressed in gender terms.²⁰

As the attributes of *nafs* are neutral, and as there is no mention of gender within the context of creation, the only logical conclusion that can follow is that humanity's origin is not gender specific. "That Allah's original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman . . . is implicit in a number of Qur'anic passages, in particular Surah 75:36-39."²¹ Or, in *Sūrah al-Nisā'*, where God tells humanity:

O Mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. (4:1)

The genderlessness of the *nafs*, however, does not imply the sexlessness of Adam. Clearly, the Qur'an acknowledges the anatomical aspect of creation (82:7-8; 95:4). In short, the *nafs* itself did not determine the gender of the first primordial human; it was merely enshrined in Adam's body. Rather, this *fiṭrah* (primordial nature) determined the mental and spiritual outfit that would enable humanity to fulfill its sole purpose of worship and its primary function as *khalīfah* on earth. Taken as such, if Adam was created as a neuter being, then logically speaking, the second primordial being, who was "created from Adam," could only be neuter as well.

The nature and creative purpose of Eve tows the line of the discussion toward *khilāfah* and *nafs*. When analyzing only part of the aforementioned verse "and out of it created its mate" (Qur'an 4:1), glimpses of Eve's nature and purpose come to the fore. "The verse means that humankind was created *in/of the same type* as a single *nafs*, and that the *zawj* of that *nafs* was taken from that *nafs*."²² Simply stated, Eve was of the same nature (*nafs*) as Adam by virtue of being endowed with the same divine soul (*rūḥ*). Eve, then, was created from Adam's *nafs*, not from his physical body. In addition to contradicting the verse "We have created you in the best of molds" (Qur'an 95:4), Eve's "crooked bone" clearly clashes with humanity's anatomical perfection.

Him Who created thee, fashioned thee in due proportion, and gave thee a just bias, in whatever form He wills, does He put thee together. (83:7-8)

By implication, in the absence of a distinction in the anatomical nature of human creation, there is no difference in the spiritual potential of both men and women.

There is no indication that the Qur'an intends for us to understand that there is a primordial distinction between males and females with regard to spiritual potential. Therefore, whatever differences exist between males and females could not indicate an inherent value, or else free will would be meaningless.²³ What is important about humanity's origin lays more in the spiritual outfit than in the physical body itself. To borrow from Sayyid Qutb,

Allah has perfected all His creation; and the special emphasis laid here and elsewhere in the Qur'an on man being endowed with perfect form shows clearly that this creature, man, has enjoyed extra care Allah's care is most clearly apparent in the molding of his highly complicated physical structure and his unique spiritual and mental makeup Moreover, the superiority of man's creation is most clearly apparent in the spiritual qualities. He is made in a way which enables him to attain a sublime standard, superior to that of the highest ranking angels.²⁴

As a result, if the conservatists' argument for Eve's secondary and inferior position is taken to its logical conclusion, would not humanity fare much worse than Eve since it is created from both Adam and Eve and, therefore, would fall in third place in the order of creation? How, then, could humanity be God's appointed trustee on earth having come from a perfect male and imperfect female? As physical and mental equals, on the other hand, the function of Adam and Eve as vicegerents becomes a shared responsibility. "In fact, the compatible mutually supportive functional relationships between men and women can be seen as part of the goal of the Qur'an with regard to society."²⁵

Khilāfah, moreover, does not negate the stated purpose of Eve qua mate (*zawj*); rather, it informs it. As illustrated earlier, because Eve was created second (not to mention Adam's "crooked bone"), she is inferior to Adam, who was humanity's first and perfect creation. Traditionalists try to buttress this view with the Qur'anic verse (4:1) mentioning "Adam and *zawj*." *Zawj*, however, should not be translated as "wife" or "spouse" (or "husband," for that matter), but rather as "mate," since conceptually it is neither masculine nor feminine (it is used in the Qur'an for plants and animals, in addition to humans).²⁶ Furthermore *mate*, as opposed to *wife*, corresponds with the Qur'anic accounts of creation at large, which is based on the contingent pair: everything in creation is paired.²⁷ "Glory be to Him Who created all *azwāj* in whatever the earth produces, and of their own *nafs*, and of that which they know not" (36:36).

In this usage, a pair is made of two co-existing forms of a single reality, with some distinctions in nature, characteristics and functions, but two congruent parts formed to fit together as a whole.

“Each member of the pair presupposes the other semantically and stands on the very basis of this correlation.”²⁸

The Qur’anic account of the creation does not emphasize who was created first and who was created second and then assign certain subjective values to that chronological order. Instead, the Qur’an reinforces the equality and shared nature of the first primordial pair. The stated creative purpose of Eve as “mate” is in tune with this necessary dualism.

It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order *that he might dwell with her in love*. When they are united, she bears a light burden and carries it about (unnoticed). When she grows heavy, they both pray to God their Lord, (saying): If Thou givest us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful. (7:189)

As a pair, both Adam and Eve were meant for one other, not Eve as the sexual vessel of Adam, as traditionalists aver. However, the term for *rest* (here translated as “dwell”), *sakana*, denotes calmness and tranquillity in the Qur’an. This is amply attested to in other verses in contexts outside of gender.²⁹ Nowhere in this verse is there a necessary link between *sakana* and the sexual act itself. If anything, the verse alludes to *the feelings* inherent within sexuality (i.e., love). And even if the sexual dimension is implied, nowhere is it stated that sexual satisfaction is exclusively a male right. Nor is it alluded to that such peace—whether emotional or physical—is designated solely for the man and *derived from the woman*. Rather, “the Qur’an clearly depicts a *necessary link* between the functional members of each gender, like an echo of the contingency between the essential pairs of all created things.”³⁰ Hence, the verse,

and among His Signs is this, and He created for you mates among yourself, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Verily in that are Signs for those who reflect. (30:21)

A careful reading of this verse shows no explicit indication of whose *nafs* (here translated as “yourselves”) is being addressed. It is its relativity that makes it neutral and thus applicable to either sex.

Moreover, at this point in the creative stage, humanity’s primordial parents had no gender. This is not to suggest that Adam and Eve were not anatomically distinct, for the Qur’an does acknowledge the anatomical distinction between males and females.³¹ Rather, the couple was unaware of any preestablished sex roles that could differentiate them since they were humanity’s first couple. It can even be presumed that males and females were created as emotional supporters, which, through love, could lead them to become sexual partners, rather than vice versa, as verified in “[women] are your garments and [men] are their garments” (2:187). “Just as nothing

intervenes between a person's body and his clothes, so nothing intervenes between a man and his wife; it is a relationship of inalienable intimacy."³² The alternate interpretation to Eve's creative purpose, then, would read as "to dwell with her in love," rather than "to find rest in her." This view is endorsed by the often-cited Qur'anic verse: "Believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another" (9:71). Women here are not only given the position of "protector" but of "protectors of men," suggesting that women are worthy of being equal partners and loving "friends" to men, as a mercy from Allah designed to support both in their trials as *khulafā'*.

Concerning the assumption of women's primary function as child-bearers,

although the Qur'an illustrates explicitly the correlation between the female and bearing children, all other functions connected with child care and rearing, if mentioned at all in the Qur'an, are never described as essential created characteristics of the female Femininity and masculinity are not created characteristics imprinted into the very primordial nature of female and male persons, neither are they concepts the Qur'an discusses or alludes to.³³

Due to the fact that assigned sex roles are cultural products, and because perceptions of femininity and masculinity would conflict with the universal aspect of Qur'anic principles, women cannot be *Qur'anically ordained* to an eternal function so different from that of men, unless it is spiritual in nature. Worship, after all, is the *sine qua non* of human existence in Islam. Accordingly, the invaluable function of both childbirth and child rearing should be subsumed within this larger divine purpose, thereby allowing women to cultivate their spiritual faculty before their reproductive capacity.

In sum, Eve is of the same spiritual makeup as Adam and was created so that both could find a mutually shared emotional and physical comfort in the other during their earthly trials as God's appointed trustees. While corresponding to the larger contingent-pair system of God's creation, the male-female pair of Adam and Eve has the seeds of both the model Muslim unit and the ideal Islamic social order. Much of this argument, however, has been based on the genderlessness of the primordial couple, which, ideally, could lend credence to traditional exegesis on Eve. Yet even when identifying the point at which their gender is recognized, particularly in the story of the "forbidden tree," the argument of Eve's equality and spiritual competence still holds true.

Eve in the Garden

Eve's role in the consignment and expulsion from the Garden reads very differently in the Qur'an than in many traditional Muslim writings. Although *most* writings do not explicitly present the image of Eve as the

temptress and seductress of Adam that are often found in Judeo-Christian scriptures, they do nonetheless flirt with such notions. Yet analysis of the Qur'anic quotations yields a diverging portrayal of Eve. The Qur'anic narrative of the Garden's events are chronicled in five *surahs*.³⁴ While nameless, Adam's mate is mentioned in three of these passages.³⁵ As Adam has traditionally been viewed as the main actor in these accounts, it is through his role that an analysis of Eve's role can best be circumscribed.

The Qur'an prefaces the accounts in the Garden with a warning to both Adam and Eve against Satan, who earlier had refused to obey God's command to bow down to Adam upon creation.

Then We said: "O Adam! Verily, this is an enemy to thee and thy mate; so let him not get you both out of the Garden so that thou are landed in misery." (20:117)

Failure to remain cognizant of this divine warning caused both of them to forget God's admonition, and both ate from the forbidden tree upon Satan's temptation.

But Satan whispered evil to him: he said, "O Adam! Shall I lead thee to the Tree of Eternity and to a kingdom that never decays?" In the result, they both ate of the tree, and *so their nakedness appeared to them*; they began to sew together, for their covering leaves from the Garden; thus did Adam disobey his Lord, and allow himself to be seduced. (20:120-21)

While pregnant with meaning, this verse underlines two specific points central to this discussion of Eve: Adam's accountability and gender recognition. First, although both Adam and Eve ate from the "forbidden tree," only Adam is addressed. Clearly, both he and Eve are blamed for their weakness and both feel the subsequent shame and guilt of their sin, as evidenced in the linguistic use of the dual throughout this and other similar verses (Qur'an 7:22-23). The reason why Adam alone is tempted by Satan and later reproached by God lies in his prophetic function.

Indeed, Adam was given special favor as the first primordial being as well as the first God-appointed trustee. This explains why the angels were instructed by God to bow down to Adam (2:34; 7:11; 20:116). Moreover, it was Adam who was given divine knowledge.

And Allah taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before them before the angels, and said: "Tell Me the names of these if ye are right." They said: "Glory to Thee: of knowledge we have none, save what Thou hast taught us: in truth it is Thou Who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom." He said: "O Adam! tell them their names." When he had told them, Allah said: "Did I

not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what ye reveal and what ye conceal?" (2:31-33)

Evidently, Adam held a certain privileged position *qua* prophet. Therefore, when it came to blaming the couple for their sins, God reprimanded both but also singled out Adam because of his seniority as well as his failure to carry out the prophetic responsibility of rightly guiding his followers (i.e., Eve). By no means does this absolve Eve of her share of the blame. She clearly partook in the sin, just as she equally shared in the blame. Her accountability, however, was accounted for in her own individual guilt (as well as her own individual repentance). Adam's accountability, on the other hand, was considered more seriously because of his prophetic responsibility.

The second central point highlighted in the verse on the temptation of Satan (20:120-121) is that gender becomes identified and recognized. After eating from the "forbidden tree" and consequently feeling the guilt of disobedience, "their nakedness appeared to them" and so they covered themselves with leaves in order to cover their "nakedness." To assert that it was through a sinful act that sexuality is negatively defined ignores a vital aspect—"nakedness" here does not necessarily imply exposure of the physical body; rather, it refers to a state of mind. This is highlighted in another verse following the passages treating events in the Garden.

O ye Children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. *But the raiment of righteousness—That is best.* Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition! (7:26)

If God created the human body "in the best of molds," it would be erroneous to state that the body is, in and of itself, shameful. Instead, it is the consciousness of being able to use the body sinfully. Since they had never previously sinned, Adam and Eve were clearly conscious of God (*libās al-taqwā*, or God-consciousness) and also unconscious of the existence of satanic forces. They were blind to the idea of misusing their nakedness, which, ideally, could be a source of temptation. After they discovered their potential toward evil impulses, covering became the preventive shield for further sin and *taqwā* (God-consciousness) became the weapon against evil. Better put,

there is a double philosophy of clothes here, to correspond with the double signification . . . Spiritually, Allah created man "bare and alone" (6:94): the soul in its naked purity and beauty knew no shame because it knew no guilt: after it was touched by guilt and soiled by evil, its thoughts and deeds became its clothing and adornments, good or bad . . . according to the inner motives which gave them colour. So in the case of the body: it is pure and beauti-

ful, as long as it is not defiled by misuse; its clothing and ornaments may be good or meretricious, according to the motives in the mind and spirit.³⁶

Furthermore, the divine warning against Satan is extended from Adam and Eve to all humanity in Qur'an 7:27, which underscores the real culprit of evil:

O Children of Adam! Do not allow Satan to seduce you in the same way as he caused your ancestors to be driven out of the garden: he deprived them of their garment [of God-consciousness] in order to make them aware of their nakedness. Verily, he and his tribe are lying in wait for you where you cannot perceive them!

Satan, in his many guises (e.g., "sincere advisor" [7:22]) lured the naive couple into forgetting God, hence making each one aware of his/her own ability to disobey God. Otherwise, would not a literal interpretation of this mean that committing a sin exposes a person's physical body, since the verse is allegorical of human destiny? Thus, it was the discovery of consciousness—not the actual physical nakedness—that delineated gender, which was inspired—not determined—through the test of the forbidden tree. Yet, consciousness of gender was part of the stages of vicegerency for which God was preparing both Adam and Eve before their eventual descent to earth.

Humanity's Descent

The descent of humanity's first parents from the Garden to Earth has often been dubbed "the fall" by many writers, Muslim and otherwise. The Qur'an, however, says differently. As mentioned earlier, Earth was destined for humanity long before the creation of any being. This begs the question of why Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden after they sinned. The answer lies in one major concept central to this entire discussion, namely, vicegerency.

Events in the Garden regarding Satan and the first sin are often cited as the first divine test of Adam *and* Eve, but it was not the first test of humanity. Previous to the sin of disobedience, Adam alone was given another test—to cite the "names of things" to the angels, after having received "special knowledge" from God (2:30-31). As Yusuf Ali pointed out,

The "names of things," according to commentators means the inner nature and qualities of things, and things here would include feelings. The particular qualities or feelings which were outside the nature of angels were put by Allah into the nature of man. Man was thus able to love and understand love, and thus plan and initiate, it becomes the office of vicegerents.³⁷

Vicegerency was not meant to be an immediate appointment bestowed upon Adam in his capacity as prophet. He was to go through various stages of learning in order to become a fully responsible and justifiably accountable vicegerent of God. If endowment of the *rūh* was the first stage, knowledge was the second. Testing, then, is the only way of demonstrating how that knowledge is used. Based on the fact that Adam was obedient and chose to act rightly, he not only successfully passed the test, but evolved as a potential *khalīfah*.

When it came to the second test, however, Adam chose a different path. This pinpoints a crucial locus in the narrative, which, in essence, delineates the quintessential aspect of vicegerency: the right to choose between right and wrong. When Adam remained true to the right path, he gained God's favor but remained ignorant of what Abdelwahab El-Affendi called "the right to sin."³⁸ Had he descended in this state of ignorance, how could he, and by extension humanity, be held accountable to God for their choice, without realization of the ever-present faculty of choice? Adam's innocence

was only a condition of his existence and not a virtue, it gave to his life a static quality and thus precluded him from moral and intellectual development. The growth of his consciousness—symbolized by the wilful act of disobedience to God's command—changed all this. It transformed him from a purely instinctive being into a full-fledged human entity as we know it—a human being capable of discerning between right and wrong and thus of *choosing* his way of life. In this deeper sense, the allegory of the Fall does not describe a retrogressive happening but, rather, a new stage of human development: an opening of doors to moral consideration.³⁹

Although this episode with Satan proved to be disastrous insofar as the couple's feelings of guilt and shame, it was, nonetheless, a necessary stepping stone in their training as evolving vicegerents.

Another vital lesson learned through the act of sinning is that, via repentance, sins are absolved. Truly, both Adam and Eve were forgiven for their transgression. More importantly, however, they sought forgiveness.

They said: "Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: If Thou forgive us not and bestow not upon us Thy Mercy, we shall certainly be lost." (7:23)

Not to underestimate the significance of repentance, a contrast is drawn to Satan's refusal to seek God's forgiveness, thereby earning eternal damnation (4:118-120). Sincere repentance, then, acts as a guaranteed way of obtaining God's forgiveness and mercy, forthcoming to all who repent with sincerity and with intentions to amend such conduct.

Say: "O my Servants who have transgressed against their own souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives all sins for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (39:53)

Eve was no more the cause of Adam's weakness than the couple's transgression of disobedience was the cause of their descent to earth, since God absolved them of their sin. Instead, having come into full awareness of all the needed faculties and having actually exercised the right of choice, as well as "the right to sin," both Adam and Eve were mentally equipped to establish God's will on Earth. Besides, by virtue of being God's heavenly domain, the Garden was no place for any form of evil. How could Adam and Eve remain in such perfection after proving themselves imperfect through choice? They lost some of their former innocence and bliss.⁴⁰ Satan, too, proved unsuitable for heaven, which explains the expulsion of all three from the Garden:

Allah said: "Get ye down, *both of you—all together*, which from the Garden, with enmity one to another; but if, as is sure, there comes to you guidance from Me, whosoever follows My guidance, will not lose his way, nor fall into misery. (20:123)

It was not because of sin that Adam and Eve descended to Earth; it was in spite of it. In the end, it can safely be concluded that the sin, albeit evil in nature, was positive in implication.

The Implications of Eve's Interpretation

The nature and role of Eve in the Qur'an coalesce around pertinent themes of *khilāfah*, the nature of humanity, the couple's encounter with Satan, and the relationship developed between God and His human creation. These very points define Eve, and by extension women, while they also reflect an inherent and necessary interconnectedness of the larger Qur'anic principles. Yet, most of the materials produced on Muslim women, like that put out by traditionalists, yield a restrictive and skewed perspective toward women, which seems to perpetuate itself historically through the uncritical acceptance of the entire body of hadith literature. This is not to suggest that the power of the Sunnah as the normative principle in a Muslim's life is misplaced. However, it is noticeable that the endeavor to raise the Sunnah to a position of equality with the sacred book in establishing the law comes more and more into evidence.⁴¹ Have the *fiqhī* sources (Islamic jurisprudence) and the hadith literature, which are both human products, been consecrated to such an extent that the Qur'an is no longer the judge of the Sunnah—a necessary criteria for an authentic hadith?

Moreover,

in the course of time, many *aḥādīth* became “invisible,” the later commentators referring not to them but to the authority of earlier commentators who had cited them, to support their views. This made it very hard to curtail their influence since they became diffused throughout the body of Muslim culture.⁴²

Many of these “invisible” *aḥādīth* are the “weaker” ones that, despite their small number, are very influential on gender values. The problem arises when the sexist gender roles underlying some of these *aḥādīth* are asserted as immutable “Islamic” values. These values figure strongly in Qur’anic interpretations and hadith commentaries, even though “they are without explicit Qur’anic substantiation of their implications.”⁴³ In essence, these ossified values that reflect a certain cultural norm of femininity have been transmuted into an eternal and idealized model for all women, for all times.⁴⁴ It is this transmutation of such cultural declarations of women that forms the “protected dependent” rather than the “liberated equal.”⁴⁵

Take, for example, women’s spirituality in Muslim history. Men have placed such an emphasis on their own spiritual growth, since the impression is that “women are somehow less devout, less regular, less concerned, less knowledgeable, in their religious duties, than are men,”⁴⁶ that women no longer have a visible presence in public worship. Much of this impression may stem from Eve’s creation myth.

Hawwa is further connected with the taboos surrounding women’s menstrual cycle and their ritual purification. In Mecca, it is said that she menstruated, whereupon Adam stamped his foot on the ground and the well, Zamzam, sprang forth. In its waters Hawwa could purify herself. This provides logical grounds for many of the restrictions on women and their participation in prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage.⁴⁷

Indeed, there has been such an emphasis on male spirituality that women themselves have accepted this situation as the “Islamic” norm.

Furthermore, the restricted analyses of traditionalists hark back to Judeo-Christian inclinations toward gender praxis.

The end result of this writing down of the interpretation process—as embodied in the tafsir works . . . was that it was never necessary for Muslims to consult the Bible itself nor write commentaries upon it, for the necessary material had early on been incorporated into the Muslim exegetical literature. Another aspect of this is reflected in the way in which Muslim elaborations have then reentered Jewish and Christian circles, especially in the exegetical material of those two religions, but also, according to some, into translations . . . of the *Life of Adam and Eve*.⁴⁸

Such an influence on Muslim interpreters and commentators needs to be reexamined in order to purge the traditionalist interpretations and commentaries of male-biased views. Whether they sought these references because of the Qur'an's scarcity of detail or its complete silence on certain issues of gender is not a justification for the un-Islamic outcome. These views should not negate what the Qur'an explicitly states: Both men and women are made in the same manner and of the same substance. In fact, it is because of the Qur'an's ambiguity that it becomes incumbent upon all Muslims—males and females alike—to reexamine and review the driving presuppositions of and influences on such exegetes in order to abstract *only* those values that can help redefine gender categories to be more in tune with a particular time period, while bolstering the larger Qur'anic *weltanschauung*.

Conclusion

This analysis, for all intents and purposes, limited itself to the role of Eve in the narrative of creation and the parable of the Garden. Despite its restricted topic, in no way was it meant to narrate all the details of gender highlighted in either the writings of traditionalists or in the divine verses treating the allegory of creation. That would require a longer and more focused analysis than what is proffered here. It is, nonetheless, representative of what needs to be done with other critical issues in Islam. It will only be through a rereading of the Qur'anic text and a review of the hadith literature that Muslim, in general, and Muslim women, in particular, can begin to expand and reform traditionalist views of what is "truly Islamic." This is not to simplify the call for *ijtihad*, for a critical reexamination of any major Islamic issue, such as the status of the Muslim woman, "would attack the immutable nature of information that has been granted sacred stature."⁴⁹ Rather, it is an appeal to forge a more contemporary Islamic methodology that critically combines its Islamic exegetical heritage with the demands and concerns of modern-day society, a methodology that does not have as its locus a sacrosanct interpretation that is immutable or eternally ordained.

It is far too soon to develop an overall and coherent theoretical framework that can explain the role of Muslim women in all its historical, regional, and sociological aspects, for the position of women in any society is a construct that cannot be measured in terms of one or two characteristics. Rather, it is measured by the levels of a multitude of variables, Islam being only one. While theories of Muslim women's condition range from the ultraconservative to the radical feminist, the guiding principle of change will have to be a reconciliation of these two extremes through a re-reading of the Islamic scriptures themselves—not of the literature treating these sources. Until then, the question of changing Muslim women's roles lies at the base of an intricate system of problems that the Muslim world at large has yet to solve. Having started out in second place, Muslim

women have further to go to catch up, but have fewer opportunities to do so. Although Muslim societies are coming to terms with the changing role of Muslim women, anomie pervades Muslim society, offering no real solution to the schizophrenia that has come about from the battle between traditionalism and modernity.

Endnotes

1. For some examples, see Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, "Eve: Islamic Image of Woman," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, no. 2 (1987); D. A. Spellberg, "Writing the Unwritten Life of the Islamic Eve: Menstruation and the Demonization of Motherhood," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 29 (1996): 305-24; D. A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of Aisha bint Abi Bakir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1992).

2. Barbara F. Stowasser, "Liberated Equal or Protected Dependent? Contemporary Religious Paradigms on Women's Status in Islam," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1987): 262.

3. Barbara F. Stowasser, "Women's Issues in Modern Islamic Thought," in *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, ed. Judith E. Tucker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 5.

4. Ismā'il ibn 'Umar ibn Kathīr, *al-Nihāyah wa al-Nihāyah fī al-Tārīkh* (Cairo:), 1:74. See also al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 3.2; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāyah*, 1:30; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān*, 1:116.

5. Riffat Hassan, "The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition," in *Women's and Men's Liberation Testimonies of Spirit*, eds. Leonard Grob, Riffat Hassan, and Haim Gordon (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 72.

6. Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., 1992), 18. Wadud-Muhsin bases this argument on al-Zamakhsharī's commentary, which uses the biblical version of *zawj* (mate). What she is suggesting here is that instead of using *min* as "of the same nature as" (i.e., woman is of the same nature of man), al-Zamakhsharī opted for the meaning "from" (i.e., woman was created from man) to substantiate the "crooked bone" theory.

7. There are a number of differing translations for this portion of the verse. The translation that this analysis is questioning reads as follows: "It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, *in order to find rest in them*. When they are united, she bears a light burden and carries it about (unnoticed). When she grows heavy, they both pray to God their Lord (saying): If Thou givest us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful" (7:189).

8. Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Haddad, "Eve: Islamic Image of Woman," *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, no. 2 (1987): 136. Also, see Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 22.

9. al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: 1961), 1:192.

10. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī* (Cairo: 1960), 1:108.

11. Smith and Haddad, "Eve," 138-39.

12. Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 23.

13. Smith and Haddad, "Eve," 136.

14. Hassan, "Woman-Man Equality," 71.

15. *Ibid.*, 72-73.

16. Muḥammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1980), 8.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Ibid., 100.
20. Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 19-20 (emphasis added).
21. Hassan, "Woman-Man Equality," 74.
22. Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 18.
23. Ibid., 35.
24. Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, trans. Adil Salahi and Ashur A. Shamis (London: MWH London Publishers, 1979), 30:213.
25. Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 8.
26. Ibid., 20.
27. Ibid., 20-21.
28. Ibid., 21.
29. Smith and Haddad, "Eve," 136.
30. Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 22 (emphasis added).
31. Ibid., 8.
32. Sayyid Abu A'la al-Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1988), 1:146.
33. Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 22.
34. Smith and Haddad, "Eve," 136.
35. See Qur'an 2:30-39; 7:11-27; 20:115-23.
36. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corp., 1989), 350.
37. Ibid., 24.
38. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?* (London: Grey Seal Books, 1991).
39. Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*, 205.
40. Ali, *Holy Qur'an*, 349.
41. Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, ed. M. S. Stern (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 2:31.
42. Hassan, "Woman-Man Equality," 72.
43. Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*, 22.
44. Sherifa Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 12.
45. Stowasser, "Liberated Equal."
46. Robert A. Fernea and Elizabeth W. Fernea, "Variations in Religious Observance among Islamic Women," in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 387.
47. Zuhur, *Revealing*, 31.
48. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 271.
49. Andrew Rippin, "Interpreting the Bible through the Qur'an," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, eds. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (New York: Routledge, 1993), 253.