

GOD, MAN, WOMAN AND THE UNIVERSE

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The Tao of Islam, A Source Book on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought, Sachiko Murata, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, pp.397.

Hardly any aspect of Islam is more grossly misunderstood than its view on gender as book after book appears in the West showing how terribly the poor Muslim woman is "oppressed." The "solution" offered is always drastic reforms on the modern western standard designed to overthrow the patriarchal extended family. The present work is unique in that it is by a Japanese scholar who, by a comparison with traditional Chinese thought in the very words of leading Sufi thinkers, presents the profound spiritual outlook of Islam on male and female from its own view point.

As an undergraduate studying family law at a university near Tokyo, Sachiko Murata grew increasingly fascinated with the family law of the Shar'iat which allows a man four wives while at the same time expected to preserve domestic harmony and peace. Eventually after working in Japan for a year in a law firm, an Iranian friend offered to arrange a scholarship for her at Tehran University to study Islamic law. After learning Arabic and Persian from Professor. Toshihiko Izutsu, she attended regular classes at the Faculty of Theology at Tehran University where, in addition to islamic law, she was, above all, attracted to the study of the Islamic intellectual tradition according to the school of Ibn al 'Arabi. For several years she was a student of Seyyed Hossein Nasr where she met her husband, William Chittick, also an outstanding exponent of traditional Islamic thought. After the Revolution, she fled from Iran to America where, joining the faculty of New York State University, she continued her research on the Islamic intellectual tradition.

In dealing with her students' deep prejudices against Islam and especially its view on women, she realized the advantages of approaching Islam from a Far-Eastern perspective. This book thus approaches gender relationships not so much from the social view of Shar'iat but from the vantage point of - Theology, Cosmology and Sufism with extensive quotations from the works of Sayyidina Ali, al-Ghazzali, Jalalud-din Rumi, Ibn al-Arabi and many other Sufi thinkers extending over a period of more than a thousand years.

"What I am trying to do is to bring out certain salient features of Islamic thought by referring to certain principles drawn from a non-Western tradition. By doing so, I hope to avoid various presumptions about the nature of reality and especially about gender relationships found in most western studies of Islam. My hope has been that a relatively novel point of view might bring out something important in Islamic thought that had been missed by the usual approaches."(p.6)

The *Qudsi Hadith* states "I (Allah) was a Hidden Treasure and I desired to be known: therefore, I created the world."

And Holy' Quran says that "We did not create the Universe in play. If we had wanted amusement, we could have found it among ourselves if ever we did. We created the world in Truth"

The ninety-nine Names or Attributes of Almighty Allah are reflected in all creation-minerals, plants, animals and man. The Holy Quran says everything in the heavens and earth praises Almighty Allah. But man, among all creatures, occupies the central place, all others being peripheral. Man is created in the very form and image of God. The perfect man or Insan al-Kamil reflects the totality of all the Divine attributes while the beasts have only some of them. In this respect, other creatures are partial; only man is total. Other creatures are fixed in the nature of their species; they can never be other than what they are. Man is unique in his free-will and capability to choose voluntarily to submit to Almighty Allah or to disobey and rebel. Man can be saint or psychopath. It is only man who creates sin and evil in the

world. It is only mankind who can upset and despoil the harmony and equilibrium of creation. The Holy Quran has no illusions about the heights and depths of human nature. "Surely we created man in the best of stature and then reduced him to the lowest of the low save those who believe and do good works and theirs is a reward unfailing." The creation of mankind was intended to express all possibilities from the highest beauty and goodness to the depths of the ugliest depravity and wickedness. The Wrathful, the Avenger, and the Chastiser and the Merciful and Compassionate' are inconceivable without the punishment or forgiveness of sin.

Like Yang and Yin of Chinese tradition, so also in Islam everything was created in pairs - active and receptive, masculine and feminine qualities, male and female. In Quran and Hadith, Almihty Allah is both transcendent and immanent, severe and gentle. He is Great, Majestic High, Creator, King, Wrathful, Avenger, Slayer, Depriver, Harmer and Just but also Beutiful, Near, Merciful, Compassionate, Loving, Gentle, Forgiving, Life-Giving, Enricher and Bestower. Islamic jurisprudence and Theology places greater emphasis on the severe Divine attributes and by Sufism on the gentler or more feminine qualities. One can attain spiritual development by the awe and terror of submission to the Divine and then through the close supervision by a recognized spiritual guide achieve freedom from the Nafs or base self in the full light of Divine love. Although women cannot he prophets, 'they can attain sainthood as Islamic history so amply demonstrates.

Islam startles many Christians because of its positive view of sex. The marriage act is considered the highest good, not only for procreation but also for the mutual pleasure it gives both to husband and wife. The role of male and female is, above all, complimentary - not competitive. The part yearns for the whole which is acheived in the union of the sexual act-provided it is within the marital bondall sexual deviations and pre-marital or extra-marital relationships regarded by Islam as the worst sin and social crime deserving of the harshest punishments according to Shar'iat. The restrictions of Hijab or Purdha upon the Muslim woman can be viewed, not so much in terms of

'female Oppression', but an expression of the supreme values of marriage, home and family. According to Ibn al-'Arabi, the highest love for women as the Holy Prophet loved his wives, reflects the direct radiance of God. But he is also quick to point out that very few people are able to experience this.

Although legally and socially, Islam is male-dominated, it recognizes the spiritual superiority of some women to most men. Women have rights over men to be supported, protected and treated with kindness; and husbands expect loyalty, respect and obedience from their wives. Since Eve was created from Adam, men have a degree above women although male superiority is always qualified and never absolute. Femininity reached its highest spiritual perfection in Islam in the Holy Virgin Mary. Pain, hardship, illness, suffering and impending death can have a positive value in the expiation of sins and turning men towards God. In times of dire calamity; men's thoughts naturally turn to God. In our weakness and utter helplessness, we turn to the One source of strength: Unlike the westerner, the traditional Muslim never seeks to banish poverty, disease and death for that is impossible - but rise above them. Yet it is quite common for people in the contemporary West and westernized East to lose faith in God for having made them suffer, especially in the early and sudden death of a loved-one. Recently the reviewer saw a letter to the Editor of a prominent daily by an American who confessed that after the tragic death of his beloved young wife, he never again prayed or attended church. In a similar manner, a well-known Palestinian writer and activist who adhered to Marxism wrote about his suffering the fate of a homeless refugee during the Palestine war of 1948 as follows:

I. myself a child educated in a strict religious school, doubted whether this God really wanted to make men happy. I also doubted whether this God could hear and see everything. ... I was sure that the God we had known in Palestine had left it too and was a refugee in some place I did not know, unable to find a solution to his problem.The colored pictures which we rehanded out to us in the school chapel showing the Lord having compassion on children and smiling in their faces, seemed like another of the

lies made up by people who open strict schools just in order to get higher fees....⁶⁰

Thus do such moderns reveal their total ignorance about the nature and attributes of God described so vividly in the work under review.

It would have been inconceivable for too traditional Islamic sciences to study creation without any reference to the Creator. Rather, nature and the natural phenomena were contemplated as reflection of the signs of God and not for their own sake or as ends in themselves.

Sachito Murata presents masculinity and femininity according to the Islamic thinkers she quotes as having both positive and negative aspects. She regards negative masculinity expressed today by the insatiable craving for dominion over the earth and heavens without submission or accountability to God as the most dangerous trend of our times. The result in the form of spectacular scientific and technological 'progress' since the European Renaissance is directly responsible for the present environmental crisis and the rape of the earth. Tragically, the militant activist fundamentalists groups in Muslim lands now uncritically endorse technological progress and "development" and oppose the Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions almost as bitterly as westerners themselves.

In conclusion, the author of this work regards the aim of the Muslim is to fully realize his or, her spiritual potential as male or female in the noblest sense. Islam asks of us nothing but to really know ourselves and to be human. The feminist conception of a unisex society is diametrically opposed to everything Islam stands for. As Murata concludes, the question of the equality of women with men is entirely irrelevant here. What matters is only that men be truly male and women truly female in order to conform to the

⁶⁰ Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in . the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories*, Three Continents Press, Washington D.C., 1978, pp.58-59.

nature and purpose for which Almighty Allah created the two basic kinds of human being.