

A Cultural Analysis on Women's Issues in Islam

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Abstract: This article gives a general survey of the mainstream spirit of Islamic views on women as well as Western media's misperception of women in Islam, and analyzes the reason, phenomena and essence of their mutual misunderstandings. Academically, the theory of "origin and variation" is introduced as a new methodological tool to study the women's issues in Islam in order to provide an authentic explanation.

Key Words: Discourse of Western Media; Women in Islam; Cultural Analysis; Misperception

"The authenticity of the contents diffused by media is limited because the media themselves are limited by society, government, power, elite culture and traditional culture. The more the media are affected by those factors, the more the contents diffused by them are distorted. The images of the other civilizations with different values would be maliciously calumniated and intentionally vilified in the international communication, especially between hostile countries."¹ Some Western media not only "maliciously ignored" the original thoughts of female care in *the Holy Qur'an*, but also resort to different means to spread their misinterpretation of Islamic women, "intentionally vilifying" the Islamic system of values with respect to women. This article gives a general survey of the main spirit of Islamic views on women and Western media's misperception of women in Islam, and also a critical analysis of the reason, phenomena and essence of their mutual misunderstandings. A new perspective based on the "origin and variation" theory is introduced to study the issue of women in Islam in order to present an authentic image.

I. The Spirit on Female Care in *the Holy Qur'an*

The verses on the issues of women could be found in many chapters in *the Holy Qur'an* such as *Āl-i-'Imrān* (III),² *Maryam* (XIX), *Nūr* (XXIV), *Mumtahana* (LX),

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¹ Song Gengyi, "The Construction of Islamic World's Image by US Media," *Arab World Studies*, Vol. 2, 2004, p.11.

² All the translation of the verses of the Holy Qur'an in this article is according to A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Beirut: Dar Al Arabia, 1968).

and *Talāq* (LXV), especially in the chapter of *Nisāa* (IV), in which the position, rights, and responsibilities of women are discussed, forming the Islamic system of values with respect to women.

The discrimination against women was normal in the Arab nomad tribes in the 7th century, which is denounced by *the Holy Qur'an* (XVI:58-59). The phenomenon of burying female infants is most seriously opposed by *the Holy Qur'an*, and considered as one of the signs of the Last Day (LXXXI:8-9, 12, 14). It was cited by Liu Zhi in his translation of *Hadith* that the Prophet Muhammad once said that the mother whose first child was a girl was lucky, and warned those parents who treated their girls as disgrace by claiming that he (the Prophet) himself would be considered as the father of all girls, because both boy and girl are created by Allah. Islam began to be concerned with the discrimination against women and fought it from its very beginning, and put strong emphasis on the equality between men and women, for *the Holy Qur'an* states "for Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise,—for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward." (XXXIII:35) "Ten types of men and women are mentioned here, and both masculine and feminine plural form of men and women are juxtaposed in each type irrespective of reiteration."³ Moreover, the duty of "guarding chastity" is imposed on men and women equally in this verse, with a sharp comparison to the chastity idea imposed on ancient Chinese women, which forced only women to be ready to die for preserving their chastity and therefore was seriously criticized by Chinese writer Lu Xun. On the basis of equality between men and women, *the Holy Qur'an* gives women different kinds of priorities in such fields as property inheritance, signing loan contracts, reputation and privacy protection, marriage, divorce and remarriage, and child rearing.

As the general regulation of property inheritance in *the Holy Qur'an* reads, "from what is left by parents and those nearest related there is a share for men and a share for women, whether the property be small or large,—a determinate share." (IV: 7) The share of women is less than that of men because "men should support their families and have economic burdens, while women are supported by their husbands after marriage and by their parents and brothers before marriage."⁴ The emphasis of the Islamic regulation on the distribution of heritage is the women's right to have a share of it, although there is a difference in regard to the size. "In the early 7th century, the authoritative decree was declared in *the Holy Qur'an*, and

³ Lin Song, *A Companion to the Holy Qur'an* (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 1995), p.445.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.449.

became one of the most important foundations for the Islamic Sharia. In this regard the Islamic world surpassed Europe which began to pay attention to the protection of women's rights and the improvement of women's status centuries later."⁵ All schools of *Fiqh* stress the importance of women's right in property inheritance irrespective of their difference in property inheritance.

Women's legal status is embodied in their right to act as notaries in important business activities, in which just and selfless notaries are needed to avoid debt disputes and business entanglements. The notary could be either male or female, for *the Holy Qur'an* states "and get two witnesses, out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women."(II: 282) The reason that two women are needed is out of the concern that they might forget the witness because of the long course of time, and also out of the consideration that it would be more convenient and less misapprehension-causing for 2 women to make company in doing business.

According to the Chapter of *Nūr*, "those who slander chaste women, indiscreet but believing, are cursed in this life and in the Hereafter: for them is a grievous Penalty."(XXIV: 23) The penalty in this life is "flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence,"(XXIV: 4) and in the Hereafter is "on the day when their tongues, their hands, and their feet will bear witness against them as to their actions."(XXIV: 24) *The Holy Qur'an* is totally against those that "behold, ye receive it on your tongues, and said out of your mouths things of which ye had no knowledge," (XXIV: 15) and announces that "those who love (to see) scandal published broadcast among the Believers, will have a grievous Penalty in this life and in the Hereafter."(XXIV: 19) The purposes of those regulations could be summarized as protecting women's reputation, rejecting the vulgar ethos, and strengthening women's self-consciousness and self-respect.

Islam encourages marriage and opposes asceticism (XVI: 72), and prescribes the marriage on the basis of Islamic belief, for *the Holy Qur'an* states "do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe."(II: 221) Islam also prescribes respect for women and opposes forcing women to have illegal sex (XXIV: 33); and describes good marriage as "ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts),"(XXX: 21) and prohibits consanguineous marriage, incest, and adultery (IV: 23); and ordains prudent procedure of marriage (IV: 24); and encourages an equal and intimate relationship between husbands and wives (II: 187), and doesn't support "take one wife in place of another"(IV: 20), etc. Islam permits the marriage on the basis of ethics and morality, and shows respect to women's opinion by safeguarding their right of self-determination in marriage. The Prophet Muhammad emphasized that a marriage was invalid without the approval of the woman, at least by means of silence without antipathy.

⁵ Ibid.

Divorce is considered a right of both men and women, on condition that the remarriage should be after three months of divorce at least, because "divorced women should wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what God hath created in their wombs,"(II: 228) and also because "their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period, if they wish for reconciliation."(II: 228) If the divorced women are pregnant, "the mothers shall give suck to their offspring for two whole years, if the father desires to complete the term, but he shall bear the cost of their food and clothing on equitable terms."(II: 233) The husbands should spend their substance on their pregnant divorced wives until they deliver their burden, and if they suckle their offspring, they should give them their recompense.(LXV: 6-7) On condition that the divorced wives are not pregnant, "when ye divorce women, and they fulfil the term of their (*Iddat*), either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them,"(II: 231) and "do not prevent them from marrying their (former) husbands, if they mutually agree on equitable terms. This instruction is for all amongst you, who believe in God and the Last Day. That is (the course making for) most virtue and purity amongst you." (II: 232) The divorced women could remarry, and the widows also could remarry, but on condition that "if any of you die and leave widows behind, they shall wait concerning themselves four months and ten days."(II: 234) They could remarry only after giving birth to the children. The widows and divorced women should be provided with necessary maintenance, and "those of you who die and leave widows should bequeath for their widows a year's maintenance and residence," (II: 240) "for divorced women maintenance (should be provided) on a reasonable (scale). This is a duty on the righteous."(II: 241) All these regulations provide strong material and spiritual guarantee to women and their children, especially in case of the remarriage of widows, which forms an opposite concept to the prohibition of women's divorce and widows' remarriage prescribed by Confucian code of ethics. However, remarriage in Islam is not as easy as a game, "so if a husband divorces his wife (irrevocably), he cannot, after that, re-marry her until after she has married another husband and he has divorced her. In that case there is no blame on either of them if they re-unite, provided they feel that they can keep the limits ordained by God."(II: 230) So the right of husbands to divorce is restricted, and the family could be better protected.

Four women are taken respectively as examples in *the Holy Qur'an* to show two different types of women. Maryam (Mary), the mother of Prophet 'Īsā (Jesus), and Āsiya (Bithiah), the foster mother of Prophet Mūsā (Moses), set a good example for Muslim women. Maryam is mentioned 34 times in 12 chapters in *the Holy Qur'an*, and Chapter XIX is even named after her name, and the story of her and her son is narrated in Verse 16-40 in this chapter. As contrasted to them, the wife of Nūḥ (Noah) and the wife of Lūṭ set a bad example, because "God sets forth ,

for an example to the unbelievers, the wife of Noah and the wife of Lūṭ: they were (respectively) under two of our righteous servants, but they were false to their (husbands), and they profited nothing before God on their account, but were told: Enter ye the Fire along with (others) that enter!" (LXVI:10)

The Holy Qur'an tries to protect the various rights of women and at the same time requests women to adhere to the ethics. The Prophet Muhammad has warned: Consider a woman's property, reputation, beauty, and good belief if you want to marry her. You should marry a coreligionist of you, so Allah will make you rich in ethics.⁶ In all the good qualities of Muslim women, good belief is the fundamental one, so a pious Muslim woman herself is the most precious treasure. *The Holy Qur'an* gives different examples to explain this point, such as Ḥawwā' (Eve), the wife of Ādam (Adam), the wives of Prophet Nūḥ and Lūṭ respectively, the mother and sister of Prophet Mūsā, and Mayram, the mother of Prophet 'Īsā. As for Maryam, "Mary the daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her chastity; and we breathed into (her body) of our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of his Revelations, and was one of the devout (servants)." (LXVI: 12) "And God sets forth as an example to those who believe, the wife of Pharaoh" (LXVI: 11), i.e., Āsiya, for she fostered Prophet Mūsā. Maryam is a pious believer, while Āsiya is a kindly mother. *The Holy Qur'an* gives high credit to this maternity, and opposes considering women only as symbols of lust. Through the disasters that befell Ḥawwā', the wife of Nūḥ, the wife of Lūṭ, and the mistress of Yūsuf (Joseph), *the Holy Qur'an* teaches a common lesson that retributions would be imposed as the result of evil desires, and that the core values of Muslim women should focus on senses, self-restriction, belittlement of desires and greed, all of which are demonstrated by their speech, deed, and clothing. Moreover, *the Holy Qur'an* warns the women should be obedient, for it states "men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient." (IV: 34) According to Professor Ma Jian, the reason that "men are the protectors and maintainers of women" lies in women's weaker physical power in contrast with men's, as well as women's special physical features such as menstruation, pregnancy and suckling, so protection and maintenance from men are necessary to them.⁷ Men are suitable to protect women not only because of their stronger physique, but also because of their capability of providing them with dowries and maintenance after marriage. Though women's righteousness is not considered equal to obedience, "the righteous women are devoutly obedient."

The basic ethical rules of women are piety, maternity, and virtuous obedience.

⁶ Mustafā Muhammad, *Ammārah, Jawāhir al-bukhārī wa sharḥ al-Qastallānī*, translated into Chinese by Memet Selle and Bao Wenan (Beijing: CASS Press, 2004), p.205.

⁷ Lin Song, *A Companion to the Holy Qur'an*, p.483.

In the trinity of women's roles, being a believer is precondition, being a mother is primordial, and being a wife is shaped. *The Holy Qur'an* emphasizes them from three particular angles: the basic creed of *tauhid* is strengthened by the equality of men and women as Muslims and Believers, the virtue of obedience is clearly explained by the comparison between virtuous obedient wives and wicked disobedient women, and the maternity is strongly emphasized through setting forth Maryam and Āsiya as good examples. The Arabs in the era of *Jahiliyah* called their wives mothers when they wanted to divorce them, and such deed is called *zihār* in Arabic. However, those who did this should be punished severely because mother is a holy title. "But those who divorce their wives by *Zihār*, then wish to go back on the words they uttered, –(it is ordained that such a one) should free a slave before they touch each other," (LVIII: 3) "and if any has not (the wherewithal), he should fast for two months consecutively before they touch each other. But if any is unable to do so, he should feed sixty indigent ones." (LVIII: 4) "This are ye admonished" because "if any men among you divorce their wives by *Zihār* (calling them mothers), they cannot be their mothers: none can be their mothers except those who gave them birth. And in fact they use words (both) iniquitous and false." (LVIII: 2)

To sum up, *the Holy Qur'an* recognizes the natural differences between men and women, considering men as the principal part in both family and society, a fact that exists in nearly all countries and all nations and has not completely changed and been removed till now. Meanwhile, *the Holy Qur'an* gives special care to women in all phases and all fields such as being born, being brought up, getting married, being pregnant, fostering children, being divorced or becoming widow, losing relatives, being supported when they are old, and even in giving testimony and protecting their privacy. So even American Middle East experts and experts in feminine issues have to admit that some rights provided by Islamic Sharia are more liberationist than what is ordained by Western legal texts.⁸

II. Misinterpretation of Women's Issues in Islam

The spirit of female care in *the Holy Qur'an* has been ignored by some Western feminists and even distorted by some Western media for various reasons, and some imprudent conclusions were drawn only according to some scattered expressions. All these issues would be carefully discussed according to *the Holy Qur'an* in the coming paragraphs.

1. "Polygyny " "If you fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing

⁸ Ibid, p.449.

injustice.”(IV: 3)

First, this verse was revealed after the battle of Uḥud, in which many Muslims were killed in fighting and many women became widows and many children orphans. The life in the Arabian Peninsula in the pre-Islamic era was extremely difficult for widows and orphans, and to get supported by men was the only choice for them. So this verse was revealed “to solve the serious social problems created by war, arrange the life of those widows and orphans, and avoid the turbulence of the social and familial order. So the polygyny was permitted as a positive measure considering the social and historical background.”⁹ Second, to “marry women of your choice” is necessary both for “being able to deal justly with the orphans” and fulfilling the basic Islamic marital rule, i.e., taking love as the elementary base, even in remarriage. Third, the precondition of polygyny rules that all the wives should be treated justly in both material and emotional senses, otherwise only one wife is acceptable. It seems nearly impossible for any man to fulfill this precondition. Finally, to accept slave girls as legal wives represents Islam’s attitude to slave liberation(XXIV: 32-33). “So the polygyny in Islam is totally different from the traditional polygyny in feudal society in China. The precondition of polygyny, i.e., to treat all the wives justly, is actually a limit to polygyny and a way to promote monogamy.”¹⁰ And nowadays monogamy is widely accepted in most Muslim countries.

2. “*Considering wives as garments*” “Permitted to you, on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and you are their garments. God knoweth what ye used to do secretly among yourselves; but He turned to you and forgave you; so now associate with them, and seek what God hath ordained for you, and eat and drink, until the white thread of dawn appear to you distinct from its black thread.”(II: 187)

A conclusion is drawn by some people from this verse that the relationship between husbands and wives in Islam is not equal and marriage in Islam is not stable, because a husband considers his wife merely as a piece of garment which could be put on or taken off whenever he desires. In fact this verse was revealed for the sake of fasting. According to Islam, during the fasting period eating, drinking, and sexual contact are all prohibited from sunrise to sunset. In an early phase the sexual contact was prohibited in the whole Ramadan, but was modified to be permitted in the nights (for the reason that the Muslims “used to do secretly” among themselves). So in the nights of Ramadan, the Muslims could enjoy the pleasure of eating and drinking as well as sexual contact and the women could be pregnant as a result. So *the Holy Qur’an* describes the relations between husbands and wives as “garments,” and states that they are garments mutually. The relation

⁹ Yang Hua, “Transformation of Islamic Marriage to Monogamy Is Inevitable,” *Arab World Studies*, Vol. 3, 2004, p.34.

¹⁰ Ibid.

of husbands to wives is prescribed as a kind of equality, interdependence and intimacy as *the Holy Qur'an* states "O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single Person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women;—reverence God, through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (the bore you): for God ever watches over you."(IV: 1) In this verse it is emphasized that the primordial man and his mate came from one common body and they created their offspring. Respect to parents is ordained by Islam on the precondition of reverencing Allah. Islam shows great respect to consanguinity and its core link, namely, the conjugal relationship.

3. "Regarding wives as tilth" "Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand; and fear God, and know that ye are to meet Him (in the Hereafter), and give (these) good tidings to those who believe."(II: 223)

Farmers and their tilth are metaphors used in *the Holy Qur'an* to give emphasis to the importance of conjugal relationship, but the first two sentences are utilized sometimes to criticize men's absolute dominance in Islam by claiming that husbands could treat their wives as farmers treat their tilth arbitrarily. Professor Ma Jian refuted this opinion by arguing that the wives give birth to babies as the soil produce corns, so to call the wives tilth is only a kind of metaphor symbolizing the continuity of mankind instead of satisfaction of lust. Farmers would select fertile tilth for cultivation, while husbands would select virtuous wives for better offspring. Although farmers could approach to their tilth "when or how" they will, they are restricted to "do good for their souls beforehand." Husbands should do their best to take care of their wives as farmers take care of their tilth. So "the metaphor of tilth aims at encouraging husbands to take on their responsibilities and appealing to the husbands and wives to cultivate the crops (i.e., offspring) together."¹¹

4. "Divorcing wives" It is conceived by some people that Muslim husbands could divorce their wives at will because of polygyny, but actually Islam doesn't support cursory separation or divorce, especially against husbands' unilateral divorce at will, unless there is firm proof of adultery or difficulty to maintain the marriage. *The Holy Qur'an* ordains that the divorce is granted only if wives "have been guilty of open lewdness" (IV: 19) and "if any of your women are guilty of lewdness, take the evidence of four (reliable) witnesses from among you against them."(IV: 15) "And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegations),—flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence ever after."(XXIV: 4) As for the property in case of divorce, "if ye decide to take on wife in place of another, even if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, take not the least bit of it back: would ye take

¹¹ Lin Song, *A Companion to the Holy Qur'an*, p.481.

it by slander and a manifest wrong?" (IV: 20) And "there is no blame on you if ye divorce women before consummation or the fixation of their dower; but bestow on them (a suitable gift), the wealthy according to their means, and the poor according to his means;—a gift of a reasonable amount is due from those who wish to do the right thing." (II: 236) "And if ye divorce them before consummation but after the fixation of a dower for them, then the half of the dower (is due to them)." (II: 237) Even the husbands after divorce want to marry other women, they shouldn't "resolve on the tie of marriage till the term prescribed is fulfilled." (II: 235) *The Holy Qur'an* also ordains that "if a husband divorces his wife (irrevocably), he cannot, after that, re-marry her until after she has married another husband and he has divorced her," in order to restrict husbands' cursory unilateral divorce. All these verses show that Islam forbids husbands' cursory unilateral divorce for the sake of a stable marriage, the rights of women, and a healthy and happy life of children.

5. "Veil" The restrained and shy beautiful eyes under the veils inspire curiosity and doubt. To uncover the secret under the veils could help to understand the unique custom of Muslim women's dressing, which is considered to be a door leading to their hearts. Indeed dressing has both practical and aesthetical functions, as defined by *the Holy Qur'an*: "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 the best." (VII: 26) Shame, adornment and righteousness are descriptions of the practical, aesthetical and spiritual functions of dressing respectively in a gradual upgraded sequence. *The Holy Qur'an* ordains the regulations of men and women's dressing respectively:

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and God is well acquainted with all that they do." (XXIV: 30) "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn ye all together towards God, that ye may attain Bliss." (XXIV: 31)

The Holy Qur'an prescribes good behaviors for Muslims: not to peek, and to be dignified in dressing in order to keep a harmony between good dressing and good bearing. The regulations regarding women's dressing are more concrete and strict: ornaments are permitted but flaunting them is forbidden, so the bosoms of women should be covered by veils for fear of displaying their jewelries or beauty to men, except to their husbands, fathers, sons, nephews, slaves, male servants free of

physical needs, and children. So *the Holy Qur'an* opposes not only men's libertinism, but also women's carnality, so as to pay great attention to the protection of women's dignity and self-respect, and preventing women from becoming playthings of men's lust by setting an ethical limit. So the Muslim men and women are equal on the basis of rational dialogue and spiritual harmony between them. Muslim writers are determined to evade the depiction of debauchery and lust, differentiating themselves from those writers of body-writing, which could be explained by the decoding of the true considerations under the veil. Leila Hessini noticed that although "from a Western standpoint, the *hijab* may seem confining and restricting," "for most of the women I interviewed, however, it provides physical and emotional security as well as a sense of group identity and self-worth," and "when women wear *hijab*, they obtain respect and freedom."¹² So it is obviously wrong to claim that the veils are used to cover Muslim women's "impurity" as a sign of women's inferior status.

6. "Abundant offspring" The Prophet Muhammad said, "Marry the loving and fertile, for I will compete with the other prophets with the number of my followers (on the day of Resurrection)." So somebody drew the conclusion that Islam advocates abundance of offspring.

Actually it should be considered as a wish expressed by the Prophet Muhammad in certain given circumstances, such as dominant superiority of non-Islamic forces, catastrophe resulting in huge losses of Muslims, etc., so it couldn't be deducted that Islam encourages an abundance of offspring. In the discourse of Orientalism, "most of the time, however, the belittlement of Arab society and its reduction of platitudes inconceivable for any except the racially inferior are carried on over an undercurrent of sexual exaggeration: the Arab produces himself, endlessly, sexually, and little else."¹³ "Which is to say that the only way in which Arabs count is as mere biological beings; institutionally, politically, culturally they are nil, or next to nil. Numerically and as the producers of families, Arabs are actual."¹⁴ The claim that Islam advocates an abundance of offspring was forged by those so-called Orientalists, and consolidated by the images of Muslim women surrounded by a group of children propagated by some Western media. On the contrary, Islam opposed those Arabs of *Jahiliyah* who were competing each other for more wealth and offspring. Although Islam calls for people's welfare in this life and the afterlife, it does not call for insatiable material enjoyments and lechery, as *the Holy Qur'an* says "Fair in the eyes of men is the love of things they covet: women and sons; heaped-up hoards of gold and silver; horses branded (for blood and excellence); and (wealth of) cattle and well-tilled land.

¹² Leila Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco: Choice and Identity," in Fatma Müge Göçek & Shiva Balaghi (ed.), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.54.

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1994), pp.311-312.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.312.

Such are the possessions of this world's life; but in nearness to God is the best of the goals (to return to)." (III: 14) Islam encourages marriage and opposes asceticism, but it stresses that marriage should be based on love. All the marriage and divorce regulations aim at protecting the material and spiritual rights and interests of women and children instead of those irresponsible husbands who utilize their abundant offspring only as a way to flaunt their power.

The above survey clarifies the misunderstandings and distortions spread by some Western media in regard to women in Islam, and illuminates the real and authentic Islamic views on women. Such a survey is considered to be a necessary precondition and a firm base for the scientific and objective approach to the issue of Muslim women in the region of the Middle East.

III. How the Issue of Muslim Women Is Misinterpreted

Though the feminine material and spiritual rights are fully stressed by the Islamic woman values, the misperception of Islamic women is still widely spread in some Western countries. The reasons could be enumerated as follows to explain the misperceptions between the ideology of female care originally permeated in the Islamic canon and the so-called "Islamic anti-womanism" suggested in the context of some Western media. A clear example could be found in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's film, *Submission*, which first appeared on television in August, 2004, and offended Muslims worldwide. In this CBS 60 minutes story, an "image showed Koranic verses about female obedience scrawled on the back of a woman beaten by her husband, while a female voice accused Allah of condoning the violence."¹⁵

1. *The corrupt customs of Arabs in the pre-Islamic era are confused with the Qur'anic verses by some Western media intentionally or unconsciously.*

D. L. Carmody points out that "Muslim apologists take the understandable position that the overall treatment of women in *the Qur'an* and Muslim traditions is concerned with their welfare and grants them many rights."¹⁶ This is what did happen in the history. The main criticism of Western media on the status of women in Islam is focused on polygyny and men's unilateral divorce, while polygyny is neither an invention of Islam nor a unique phenomenon existing in Islam exclusively. Baal, in which the husband had the absolute authority over his wife, was the most common type of marriage in pre-Islamic Arabia, and concubines were widely accepted in pre-modern China as well. In the 7th century, among Arabs "women obviously were under the control of men, who arranged their marriages.... Further, we note that multiple marriages—polygamy—apparently

¹⁵ Yasmeen Maxamuud, *Ayan Hirsi Ali, The Stray Bullet!* See http://www.wardheernews.com/articles/March_05/14_Yasmeen_AyaanHirsi.htm.

¹⁶ Denise Lardner Carmody, *Women and World Religions* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2nd Edition, 1989), p.193.

was the Arab custom.”¹⁷ So *the Holy Qur'an* is against patriarchy and unlimited polygyny, and against wife-buying and arranged marriage without the approval of the women themselves, but the Prophet Muhammad had to make a concession to the polygyny custom because “we find the widowed or unmarried woman marginal to mainstream society and so a cause of concern. Polygamy allows a people to care for these women and give them the chance to bear children.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, Carmody reminds us that “we shall see that *the Qur'an* allows a man up to four wives, as long as he can provide for them, and that both *the Qur'an* and later Muslim custom prefer monogamy.”¹⁹

In pre-Islamic Arabia, unwanted female children could be buried alive, and women could be bought and sold as property, and were always transferred from their fathers to husbands and then to sons. *The Holy Qur'an* not only confirms the punishment to those who buried their female children alive in the Day of Resurrection, but also calls for marriage approved by women themselves and remarriage of widows. This is a change of the fate of those women under male oppression.

In contemporary Arab-Islamic countries, female education is making great progress, which allows more and more Muslim women to launch challenges against polygyny and unilateral divorce.

According to certain data in 1983, even in the relatively conservative Saudi Arabia, “44 percent of surveyed women gave the priority to profession and education, and marriage fell to the third place, and 73% of them regarded marriage as a kind of partnership between men and women.”²⁰ This new view on marriage has influenced the view on bearing children, and has resulted in a lower birth rate in some Islamic countries. The annual population growth rates of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates were 4.6% and 6.9% respectively from 1975 to 1998, and became 2.9% and 1.5% respectively from 1998 to 2015.²¹ And the cases of divorce filed by women also have increased in these years. So the reality in these Arab-Islamic countries is totally different from the image of abundant offspring, polygyny and men's unilateral divorce propagated by some Western media.

2. *Muslim women encountered the embarrassment of being dually shaped by both patriarchal society and some Western media.*

Headscarf or veil has been shown by some Western media as an implication of “female oppression.”²² “Hijab is the most characteristic part of Muslim women's traditional raiment, and has specific cultural meanings. It means veil or black

¹⁷ Ibid, p.189.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp.189-190.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.189.

²⁰ Wang Tiezheng, *State and Politics in Saudi Arabia* (Xi'an: Sanqin Publishing House, 1997), p.265.

²¹ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2000*, pp.223-224, in http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_2000_en.pdf.

²² Malise Ruthven, “Islam in the Media,” in Hastings Donnan, ed., *Interpreting Islam* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2002), pp. 66-67.

abaya.”²³ The entanglement of a particular piece of conventional dress, namely *hijab*, with the status of women could be traced back to the special customs and ethos in Arabia Peninsula during the revelation of *the Holy Qur’an*, and also finds bearing both in the unjust exegesis tradition controlled by males and in the tradition of considering women as symbols of lust. Verse 31 in Chapter XXIV is always cited to prove that woman’s body should be covered because it allures man’s lust. It is said that a Muslim who closes his eyes when facing a beautiful woman would be awarded by Allah. If turning away from women becomes a virtue of Muslim men, it is natural that *hijab* exerts the function of ethical restriction as well as a cultural symbol, which could be testified by the fact that many Egyptian female undergraduates show their rejection of the Western life style through dressing *hijab*. Such a phenomenon is sometimes misused by the Western media to explain the low status of women in Muslim societies, which illustrates vividly how the image of Muslim women can be molded and even distorted by Western media.

Muslim women are allegedly confined indoors in some countries, as defined by a saying “a Muslim woman is permitted to step out of the door only three times in her life: in case of marriage she can get out of her parents’ house to her husband’s house, in case of her parents’ death she could go out to mourn for them, and in case of her own death she would be taken out to the tomb.”²⁴ As a result, some Muslim women have been marginalized and deprived from the basic rights of education and employment. The employment of a woman has been taken as a proof to show that her husband’s inability to support her, and therefore, has been considered a shame for her husband. “The control of women, by veiling, chaperoning, and other means, has continued to be a major factor in Islamic society to the present day. Women generally have been thought dangerous – both liable to draw improper attentions from men and prone to succumb.”²⁵ Some women were even denied to enter the mosque freely sometimes because “they were unclean and so unfit for the mosque.”²⁶ This phenomenon that certain Muslim women are socially and culturally marginalized has been publicized by some Western media, which, in turn, became the best adverse material used by Western feminists.

However, in present Muslim societies, a new trend is emerging. The rate of women employment increases as a result of the higher rate and level of women’s education, shortage of labor force caused by frequent wars in the Arab-Islamic countries, and economic depression. In Oman, women not only are employed in educational institutes and public sectors, but also can be found in the armed forces, police and broadcasting and television stations. Nearly all sectors are open for

²³ Wu Qingling, *Women in Contemporary Middle East* (Kunming: Yunnan University Press, 2004), p.139.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.49.

²⁵ Denise Lardner Carmody, *Women and World Religions*, p.196.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.227.

women. In Morocco, some female undergraduates are employed in such sectors as consulting, professional training, information technology and accounting. Some 5,000 female entrepreneurs can be found in present Morocco, composing about 0.5% of total employed population, 80% of whom have established their own companies in the last 20 years.²⁷ Such a reality is quite different from what has long been reported by Western media, and provides a sound refutation against the Western media's report of low status of Muslim women.

3. *Muslim women's issues are reported with ulterior motives by some Western media.*

Some Western media are focusing more on wars and terrorist actions than a peaceful life and women in their reports on the Islamic world, and more on the negative sides than positive ones in their reports on Muslim women. Such a bias could be clearly detected in such programs as a British 1980 drama-documentary, *Death of Princess* and the like.²⁸

Actually the situation of women in the Islamic world is facing changes as great as in other parts of the world, because of the development of the women's liberation movement and the spread of feminism, and also because of the original spirit of female care taught in *the Holy Qur'an* and the natural demands of Muslim women. In Iran, women have made a big success, for "they have won 14 seats in the parliament consisting of 270 seats, and such a number has surpassed that of female senators in the U.S."²⁹ It was declared on Oct. 10th, 2003 that Iranian human rights activist Shirin Ebadi won the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts for democracy and human rights and her struggle for the rights of women and children, which was the first Nobel Prize for Iranians. She provides an opposite to the common image of Iranian women in people's minds, which is immediately linked with the black robe and veil. She believes that a society without respect to the rights of women and children couldn't be called a civilized society, and as a pious Muslim, she insists that there is no contradiction between Islam and fundamental human rights, and calls for dialogue among civilizations as well as the abandonment of violence.³⁰ Shirin Ebadi's winning of the Nobel Prize symbolizes the world's attention to women in the Islamic world and the close relationship between Muslim women and world peace. Both as a pious Muslim and a modern intellectual, Shirin Ebad offers an authoritative proof to show Muslim women's real life and their spiritual struggle. So her insisting on the non-contradiction between Islam and fundamental human rights reflects the real meaning and essence of Islamic culture to the most extent. Such an important point has been overwhelmed by some Western media's excessive reports on wars and terrorist actions.

²⁷ Chen Jing, "Women in the Gulf: Past, Present and Future," *West Asia and Africa*, Vol. 3, 2002, p.53.

²⁸ Malise Ruthven, "Islam in the Media," in Hastings Donnan, ed., *Interpreting Islam* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2002), p.52.

²⁹ *Qingdao Evening News*, Oct. 18, 2003.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

4. *Western feminism has been utilized by some Western media to pass hypercriticism upon Muslim women irrespective of their unique situations.*

The clash between the U.S. and the Islamic world has been continuous since the Gulf War, while Western feminism has been spreading and the Western media have gained the dominant position in the same period of time. Since September 9.11 the Islamic civilization has been demonized by many Western hegemonists, who tend to take heterogeneous cultures as terrorist ones.

Some U.S. politicians view Islam as the main obstacle to the success of Western modern democracy, and democratization of Islamic societies as the ultimate method to uproot the terrorism. The Western styled democracy and liberty imposed by the U.S. on some Islamic countries also bring in sexual freedom, hedonism and other negative modern Western values, which are undermining the traditional Islamic ethics on women's behaviors. Muslim women, struggling in the dilemma between the traditional culture of modesty and self-restriction and the imported Western culture of liberation and seeking publicity, suffered from the tremendous impact in the abnormal communication of cultures. A very few Muslims, intending to extricate themselves from the dual pressures of poverty and absolutism by drawing support from Western liberalist lifestyle, take women as their ready preys, who therefore fall into the most innocent victims of Western hegemonism. Muslim women, who are suffering from losing their relatives in the lengthy wars and afflicted by extreme poverty, are misjudged by some Western media by the standard of Western feminist theories.

"The fact is that patriarchy—ruled by men—has been the main pattern throughout history and that in both its genesis and its maintenance the sexes have managed a complex causality. Still, this does not deny the perhaps more pertinent fact that women have been the more overt victims, let alone justify blaming such victims for the abuses they have suffered."³¹ So women in Islam are not only the victims of patriarchy, but also victims of some Western media. A critical study of women in Islam is necessary to reveal the complexity of women's issues in the world, to understand the multiculturalism in the world, and to uncover the hegemonic orientation of some Western media. It is a hard goal to achieve just and objective reports and description in media in a complex and plural world, perhaps especially hard for Muslim women. In this case, an in-depth investigation on the women issue in Islam is extremely significant.

³¹ Denise Lardner Carmody, *Women and World Religions*, p.226.