

مراجعة كتاب
BOOK REVIEWS

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Abdur Raheem Kidwai. *Women in Islam—What the Quran and Sunnah Say* (Markfield, Leicestershire, UK: Kube Publishing Ltd., 2020) Pages: 190; ISBN: 9781847741400; Hardbound

Reviewed by:

Tauseef Ahmad Parray

Assistant Professor, Islamic Studies,
Government Degree College Sogam (Kupwara),
Higher Education Department, Jammu & Kashmir, India
tauseef.parray21@gmail.com

مراجعة كتاب

المرأة في الإسلام في ضوء القرآن والسنة

تأليف: عبد الرحيم قدوائي

مراجعة: توصيف أحمد برے

أستاذ مساعد في العلوم الإسلامية، الكلية الحكومية بسوغام كبوراة

إدارة التعليم العالي، جامو وكشمير، الهند

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In the current academic discourses on Islam, one of the most fiercely debated and discussed topics is ‘women in Islam’. There are numerous ‘misconceptions’ and ‘misinterpretations’ related to their status or place, role, and contribution. Numerous works, written from different perspectives, deliberate on this topic, which appears as a ‘never-ending’ debate. A latest addition to the literature on portraying women in Islam in its real perspective is the book under review. Written by Abdur Raheem Kidwai (Professor of English and Director, K.A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies, *Aligarh Muslim University*, India), it is a succinct, slim, and simple volume which highlights the rights, status, role, and contribution of Muslim women in its real context as well as demystifies and deconstructs the main misconceptions and misconstructions on this vital but sensitive issue.

Divided into three main sections, preceded by a ‘Preface’ (vii-x) and ending with Index (pp. 170-80), “*Women in Islam—What the Quran and Sunnah Say*” attempts to provide the readers with an “opportunity to consider some of the references to women in authentic Islamic sources in order to shape an informed view” as well as “let readers appreciate the high status that women enjoy in Islam” (p. vii). A simple compilation of those passages from the Quran, hadith collections, and classical Islamic sources which ‘refer to or address women specifically’, it engages the readers in a ‘moment of reflection’ on the “Islamic stance on womanhood: her existence as a creation of Allah, her purpose of life as a slave of Allah, her capacity for attaining self-development and proximity with Allah and her accomplishments,” and brings into sharper light the fact that in the Quran “men and women are both accorded the same respect, dignity and honor as human beings,” and both are repeatedly addressed and urged “to be active, positive stakeholders in the construction of a God-conscious society and for attaining salvation as pious individuals” (pp. viii, ix).

In Preface, the author mentions that “certain Islamic practices ... [and] aspects of the faith such as polygamy, divorce, patriarchy, segregation of the sexes etc.” have been increasingly taken out of context and “in isolation”, resulting in showing as if Islam is “imposing degradation and suffering upon women”; while as, the primary Texts of Islam demonstrate that women in Islam—in the capacity of a mother, daughter, and wife—are bestowed “dignity and exalted status” (p. vii). However, over the centuries, some “socio-cultural practices in Muslim societies, in the past and present” along with prevalent ‘patriarchal’ supremacy and mind-set pushed women to the corner and snatched high status from them. This has resulted in giving space to various ‘misconceptions’ regarding their status, rights, role and responsibilities (p. vii).

In Section-I, ‘Quranic Verses and Ahadith Addressing and Referring to Women’ (pp. 3-136), the author first presents a collection of 76 verses from the Quran, which either address men and women collectively or mention women specifically, followed by a brief explanation of many of these verses contextualizing and demonstrating ‘gender parity’. For instance, in the explanation of Q. 4: 32, ‘*Do not be jealous over what God has given more to some [men and women] than others,*’ he writes: “The Qur’an is clear in pointing out that men and women will be recompensed alike; there is no distinction between men and women” (p. 6); in the explanation of Q. 55: 60, ‘*Can the reward for good be anything except good?*’, the author stresses that this “divine promise of reward is for everyone, irrespective of gender, caste, color, nationality or any other label” (p. 21). Similarly, in the explanation of Q. 4: 34, ‘*Men are the protectors and maintainers of women ... and (last) beat them (lightly)...*’—one of the highly contested and debated, extremely (*mis*)

interpreted, misconstrued and misunderstood verse—Kidwai’s explanation provides many clarifications: “Since Islam does not lay any financial burden on women, it charges men with the responsibility to support their wife and family and hence his role as the protector. The Quran urges women to be faithful to their husband. It prescribes graded corrective measures for tackling those women who are guilty of serious moral wrongdoings. Hadiths [*Ahadith*] clarify that beating, suggested as a last resort, should be nominal and not cause any injury. Wife-beating or any other form of domestic violence is completely ruled out in Islam and is a serious offence in itself” (p. 43).

This is followed by a collection of 102 (numbering 178 in total) *Ahadith*/ Prophetic Traditions from various authentic Hadith books and some classical Islamic sources (like *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, *Tabqat Ibn Sad*, etc.) related to different aspects of women in different contexts. However, no footnotes are added in the explanation/ contextualization of these *Ahadith* within the purview of ‘gender parity/ equity’.

In Section-II, ‘Women Specifically Mentioned in the Quran’ (pp. 137-158), it provides an account of those women who are portrayed as “role models” by the Qur’an in the light of “the Qur’an and other authentic Islamic sources” (p. 139). It is broadly divided into two sub-sections: ‘Believing’ and ‘Disbelieving’ Women in the Qur’an (pp. 139-155, 155-158). In the former, it refers to the “pious women” who are praised for their various virtues: Maryam (Mary), who is presented as an example of a “saintly woman” and is praised in high terms “for her piety, her chastity and her devotion to Allah” (pp. 139, 40); Queen of Sheba, “a sagacious, intelligent woman, adept at diplomacy and political strategies” and a “pious, mature and discerning female, wedded essentially to the cause of truth (p. 149); Pharaoh’s Believing Wife (Asiya), who “stands out for her enviable commitment to truth” and is a “role model in recognition of her commitment, courage and strong faith even in face of adverse and hostile surroundings” (p. 150); Prophet Moses’s Mother, who is “applauded for her self-restraint and perseverance” (p. 151); Prophet Shuayb’s Daughters, who are “intelligent, modest and resourceful young women” and “dutiful daughters” (p. 153); and Allah’s Response to Some Women’s Pleas, wherein examples of the wives of the Prophets Zakariyya/Zechariah and Ibrahim/Abraham (AS) and of Khawlah bint Thalabah (RA) of Prophet’s (pbuh) time are presented as three examples depicting “Allah responding positively to the[ir] pleas” (p. 154). Among these, the longest account (pp. 139-147) is dedicated to Mary/Maryam (AS), because of certain noticeable reasons; viz., she takes “pride of place among all the women mentioned in the Qur’an”; she is portrayed with “enviable appellations” like a “saintly woman” (as in Q. 5: 75) or being preferred to “all the women in the world” (as in Q. 3: 42); a whole Surah (Q. 19) is named after her; and she is “prominent not only for being mother” of Prophet ‘Isa/Jesus (AS), but the “Qur’an heaps praise on her for her piety, her chastity, and her devotion to Allah” (pp. 139, 140).

Among the ‘Disbelieving’ or “wicked women” (p. 155), the author refers to the account of the wives of Prophets Nuh/Noah and Lut/Lot (AS), who are “censured for their lack of faith” and thus are examples of “treachery”, as in Q. 66: 10 (p. 155); Egyptian Potiphar’s Wife, known as Zulaykhah in popular lore, who “appears as a temptress” in the context of Prophet Yusuf/Joseph’s (AS) account as presented in many verses of Surah Yusuf, Q. 12 (p. 156); and Abu Lahab’s Wife (as in Q. 111: 1-5), who, along with her husband—an uncle of the Prophet (pbuh)—were “die-hard unbelievers and [Prophet’s] inveterate enemies”, and are

“among those few unbelievers whom the Qur’an reproaches by name” (p. 158).

This is followed by Section-III, ‘Women Hadith Narrators and Teachers’ (pp. 159-169), which, as the title clearly reveals, provides a list of some “prominent Hadith scholars from early Muslim history” with a view “to exemplify the dynamic contribution that Muslim women have made to Islamic history” (p. ix). These names and data (presented in this Section) are entirely based on Dr M. Akram Nadvi’s *al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford, 2007)—a ‘Prolegomena’ to his multi-volume work on this subject. For example, in this section, it mentions names of the Companions who have narrated hadith on the authority of Aishah, Umm Salmah, Hafsa (RA), and other ‘Lady Companions’, (see pp. 160-62) as well as enlists leading women scholars among the Successors and from 2nd century *hijri* era (p. 169). The author writes that as many as “2764 Hadith feature in the six standard collections of Hadith [known as *Sihah al-Sitta* or *Kutb-e-Sitta*] on the authority of lady Companions.” Most interesting and remarkable point about these *Ahadith* is that they are not “restricted to the personal hygiene and purification of women,” but “embrace a wide range of topics including prayer, fasting, Zakah, Hajj, food, clothing, business, jihad, marriage and divorce, death, the Hereafter, supplication, morals and manner and the Prophet’s illustrious life”; and many of these *Ahadith* “have served as the basis of legal rulings inferred from them” (pp. 163, 64). He also refers to some lady teachers who taught *Sahih Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim* and *Jami Tirmidhi*—including Karimah al-Marwaziyah (d. 461 AH), Aisha bint Muhammad al-Maqdisiyyah, Umm al-Khayr Fatimah (d. 532 AH), Zaynab bint Umar ibn Kindi (d. 699 AH), and Khadijah bint ‘Abd al-Hamid (d. 734 AH)—who have served as teachers to many great (male) scholars of their times. All this reveals, in clear terms, the active role played, and the academic contribution made, by women in early Islamic history.

Thus, highlighting a collection of passages related to women, and women role models, in the Quran and hadith, providing a list of women Hadith narrators, and describing a succinct overview of the Islamic stance on womanhood, Kidwai’s *Women in Islam* justifies, fairly, both its title and aim.

There are few typos and technical errors and loopholes in this book: e.g., names of all the Prophets are anglicized followed by the Islamic appellation (*Alayhi Salam*) in Arabic, which is an odd combination; the number of verses in *Surah al-Lahab* (Q. 111) on page 158 is mentioned wrongly as 15 instead of five (5); full references/bibliographical details for the quotations taken from works like *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Ibn Sad’s *Tabaqat*, Ibn al-Athir’s *Usad al-Ghaba*, Ibn Hazm’s *al-Mahalla*, Ibn Taiyimiyyah’s *Majmua al-Fatawa*, etc. are not provided—neither in the reference nor is there any bibliography; Hadith numbering is not provided at all places, but random; and in the case of Nadvi’s *al-Muhaddithat*, no page numbering for specific names or statements is given.

Keeping aside these minor failings, there is no exaggeration in asserting that *Women in Islam* portrays the place, rights, role, responsibilities and contribution of women in its real context and defies the misconceptions about Muslim women. Written lucidly, presented beautifully, and based on authentic Islamic sources, Kidwai’s *Women in Islam* is a valuable and welcome addition to the literature on depicting women in Islam in their real perspective and right context.