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## WOMEN AND THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

### INTRODUCTION

Defining the role of women in Islamic society has been an issue for debate in post-revolutionary Iran, particularly in light of recent rulings affecting women. This is not merely a theoretical debate but a crisis situation where some women who participated in the revolution alongside men now find themselves in a peculiarly difficult position in relation to society and the current government. Ali Shariati (d. 1977), through his published works and transcribed lectures during the 1960s and 1970s, has had a tremendous impact on the direction of this debate. Completely rejecting the role of women in both western and traditional societies, Shariati offers a third alternative: the figure of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Mohammad and wife of Ali, the first Imam of the Shi'is as the personification of women's role.

After the 1979 revolution in Iran, partly owing to the impact of Shariati's ideas and partly because of women's active participation in the course of the revolution and their resulting politicization, scattered essays were published dealing with questions relating to the position of women in Islamic society. As the revolutionary forces took firm hold of governmental machinery, rulings and decrees directed specifically at women were issued by various government officials, widening even further the scope of the debate on the role of women in the Muslim Iranian society.

### SHARIATI'S APPROACH TO THE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S POSITION IN A MUSLIM SOCIETY

Shariati approaches the understanding of women's role from two angles. From one, he advocates the study of the Qoran along with Islamic history; criticizing the treatment of women in Islamic Iran. From the other, he examines and vehemently rejects western theories and practices concerning the role of women in society.

Basic to his first approach is his belief in human will and his rejection of the concept of predestination. Shariati holds the view that through knowledge one acquires will and becomes responsible for one's actions.<sup>1</sup> Since humans have free will and are responsible for their actions, they must try to understand the norms of the times and places where they live, and must make an effort to improve their lives and the lives of others through the acquisition of knowledge. It is the

responsibility of every Muslim to acquire knowledge through the study of Islam's history and the teachings of the Qoran. To understand Islam, one must understand the Arab social norms and environment at the time of the rise of Islam. One must also be aware of the developments undergone by Islam throughout its history. As changes have occurred in men and society, women must also be allowed to change. They cannot stay in the past but must move forward by making use of contemporary scientific methods to acquire knowledge. The Qoran, as the source of all human knowledge, must be read and understood in all its dimensions, particularly where it deals with one's relation to God and to other people.<sup>2</sup> Shariati's conception of the Qoran as a compendium to be comprehended by all generations in accordance with changing times is followed by his view, echoing earlier Muslim reformers, that the Qoran uses a symbolic/religious language which makes it open to appropriate new interpretations by each generation: "Yesterday must be examined and evaluated in the light of yesterday's environment and circumstances and today must be looked upon from today's perspective."<sup>3</sup> In other words, in the search for guidance from the history and tradition of Islam, one must try to understand them within the context of the time and place where they occurred.

As an illustration, Shariati uses polygamy; a state he regards as both degrading to contemporary women and morally decadent but as acceptable and logical under the circumstances of the time of the Prophet.<sup>4</sup> At the time of the revelation of the Qoran, Arab society regarded female newborns as a cause for shame and disgrace, and at times even buried them alive.<sup>5</sup> Women were bought and sold as slaves, there was an unlimited number of wives available for men to marry, and women were denied all economic and social rights as individuals, he says. Hence, like Muhammad Abduh and other Muslim reformers, Shariati finds the Qoranic permission to marry up to four wives not an encouragement of polygamy but a limit that Islam imposed on the prevalent excessive practice of it. Further, during the early years of Islam, when women's welfare was solely dependent upon the men of the family or tribe, there was continuous warfare and the male population was drastically reduced in proportion to the female. Polygamy provided a legal and ethical means of protection and survival for widows and orphans.

The veil is another practice that Shariati regards as acceptable in the past, given environmental circumstances, but as degrading and unbecoming to women's status in the modern world. He sees veiling as no longer a symbol of social distinction or of respect for women, as was the case in the past. Shariati acknowledges the inevitability of change in Muslim societies like Iran and the effect that currents of change will have on the status of women, and he advocates understanding those currents. He warns men and women to be prepared and have a plan of action so that the changes may be appropriately channeled.

Shariati believes that the challenge of change in the role of women is the responsibility of society's intellectuals (*raushanfekran*). They are the ones who must educate and inform women how to become the "new women." Women themselves must be prepared to adjust to changing conditions, as true Muslim women, and grasp the forces of change: "We must break down the age-old barriers imposed on women in the name of religion."<sup>6</sup>

Shariati distinguishes between Islam as a true religion and Islam as practiced by Iranians and advocated by their religious authorities. He claims that the Islam practiced in Iran has very little similarity to the Qoran's intention and the Prophet's and the imams' legacy. Today's Islam contains a haphazard mixture of pre-Islamic and local customs (*sunnat*) which are confused with Islamic principles. Islam and mere social customs have become synonymous in the modern world. For example, he presents the *chador* (lit.: tent; body veil) as a social custom which has become accepted as an Islamic uniform. This has replaced the concept of *hijab* (modesty in dress) in Islam, which takes different forms in different societies and periods in history. He feels that by equating "chador" and "hijab," both opponents and defenders of the chador are in a fundamental error: those intellectuals who find the chador disgusting mistakenly attack the concept of hijab, while those who defend the chador falsely believe they are defending Islam.

A relevant point that Shariati notes is the clergy's emphasis on veiling and seclusion of women. He attacks those authorities for emphasizing minor issues such as dress code and appearance rather than dealing with important issues like women's education and enlightenment. The result is that a woman is only allowed to attend *rauzeh khani* (religious recital) where, because of her illiteracy and ignorance of history, she cannot even understand what the molla says. Crying when the sad stories are recited, she is expected to cry her eyes dry: "She is the producer of tears in these religious recitals and the producer of children in the society."<sup>7</sup>

Shariati considers the distorted religious teachings in Iran to be as dangerous as the threat of infiltration of western immorality and materialistic values concerning the role of women. He finds the body of Islamic teachings and practices fanatical and decadent, non-intellectual and misleading. He regards the ulama as the group that propagates these values through their own backward fanaticism. This group is as strong a barrier to the development of true Islam as are the corrupt forces of western moral and social imperialism. He urges Muslims to distinguish religion from social custom, holding that many of the general beliefs about the role and rights of women practiced in Iran are based only on traditional customs and values predating Islam which are imposed on women by the ignorant and irresponsible clergy. He attacks these traditionalists for opposing equal opportunity for women in education and the professions; traditionalists object when a male doctor examines a woman or delivers her baby, never asking why female doctors are not available to offer these services.

Shariati's portrait of the role of women in traditional Iranian society shows the girl-child in her parents' home, secluded and segregated until puberty, when she is sold to a man as his wife. She then becomes his housemaid: cooking, cleaning, and raising children without pay or compensation, the legal maid performing her duty as wife. While in her father's custody, all she hears is "no," "don't go," "don't see," "don't read," "don't want," "don't think." Later, when she is married, she finds herself locked in the kitchen and the bedroom to meet the needs of her husband. Enslaved in the name of religion, she becomes a victim of religion. Like a helpless fly, she is caught in a spider's web of fanaticism,

ignorance, and historic traditions; with paternalism preached by the clergy, she is veiled and segregated in the name of Islam. Her role is limited to the care of husband and children, causing one to question what kind of men and women of the future can be raised when the mother is so handicapped by illiteracy, ignorance, and deprivation of the most basic human rights.<sup>8</sup>

It is only through the acquisition of knowledge and education that a society can face challenges to its cultural values and moral principles. It is only an educated mother who can instill these values in her children. It is only through women's emancipation and equal opportunity for their intellectual growth that Iranian society can halt the invasion of outside values harmful to it. To challenge the threat of demoralizing foreign influences, Shariati suggests that the only avenue open is to grant basic human and Islamic rights to women. With these rights, the Muslim women will become the best tools for defending the system.

Shariati blames Iranian Muslim men for pushing women toward western lifestyles by their enslavement of women. He finds men responsible for the backward, ignorant condition of women: "They [men] paralyze her [by keeping her illiterate] and deny her rights due her."<sup>9</sup> Men have chained, covered, and secluded women in order to block them from adultery, sin, and immoral behavior. Men are responsible for having "treated her as a savage animal which can't be tamed, educated or trained and tried to control her by caging her in the house behind high walls and locked doors."<sup>10</sup>

Saying that every Muslim is responsible for the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of will, Shariati condemns Iranian Muslim women, too, for falling into the trap of submission. He quotes Imam Ali: "Two are responsible for tyranny. The tyrant and the one who submits to tyranny." The women of Iran are at fault for they have capitulated to suppression and have allowed male tyranny. Shariati's greatest regret and concern is that this has been done in the name of Islam. Women in Iran were kept from participating in school, libraries, and the larger society in general, all in the name of Islam, while the Prophet's legacy shows that he greatly emphasized education for both men and women. Apart from a handful of women from wealthy families, educational opportunities were scarcely available to women: "She has been denied, in the name of Islam, even those rights that the Qoran has granted her." Shariati rejects the claim that Iranian society is a Muslim society. Instead, he regards it as a pseudo-Islamic one, where many of the basic human rights granted women by the Qoran are denied her. Her personality has been lowered to such a level that she is not even called by her name but referred to as "the mother of the kids" or "Hasan's mother."<sup>11</sup>

The other angle of Shariati's approach to women's role in society is his criticism and rejection of western theories and practices in this area. Shariati saw Freud as symbolizing the western view of women as primarily a sexual object and a consumer of material goods. Shariati was also appalled by the image of woman promoted and imposed on the women of Iran by the Iranian leaders. He finds the figure they present of the modern housewife to be an ignorant, incompetent, and useless creature, one of what he calls the "null women." She neither works nor contributes anything to society; she is not an equal partner

with her husband; and she has not learned to accept responsibility in the family or in society. She is not even a true housewife since she is not capable of running a household, managing the family budget, or raising educated children. She is an object of consumerism, waste, jealousy, gossip, and lies. True, the modern woman joins clubs and organizations but these functions are the modern version of the traditional weekly visits to the public bath houses where women once gathered to show off, carry on petty rivalries, and waste time. Shariati blames the media for presenting a distorted view of western women, accusing them of using movie stars and sex symbols as models for Iranian women to copy. Through the media's publication of articles on vulgar, immoral lifestyles which inspire adultery, corruption, and promiscuity, they promote the misconception that to be a "modern" or "westernized" woman is to imitate these idols. Shariati criticizes the media for ignoring the life stories of such heroic women as "Angela Davis or freedom fighters, prominent political figures or scientific and intellectual leaders as representing the western women."<sup>12</sup>

Shariati is concerned that the image created by the Iranian media is, in fact, a far cry from the true European woman. In an apparent contradiction, Shariati on the one hand is obsessed with the position of western woman as the slave of commercialism and consumerism, sexually exploited for capitalistic purposes by the large corporations; on the other hand, he decries the misrepresentation of the true European woman by the Iranian media and the distortion of her true role in the family and society. In Europe, he states, the woman is a partner with her husband, a co-producer; educated and free, she is raised equally with men and thus is experienced in meeting the challenges of life. Being a responsible member of society, she participates fully in the decision-making process at all levels. At home, she is "a spouse, a partner, and equal to her husband," because she is educated, aware, and responsible.

The dilemma seems to be his observation of the western woman as both a participant in and an object of exploitation by dominant male standards. Shariati wants Iranian women to be aware, educated, and have a responsible role in society, just like the western woman, but without falling into the trap of immorality, sexuality, and corruption which he believes is the result of unlimited freedom. He says that western women are deprived of many rights that Islam has given women. But, he cautions that freedom and rights "are not meant to be sexual freedom but human freedom and social rights." Unfortunately, he rarely, if ever, defines or explains what he does mean by these social rights or human freedoms. He scorns the French tradition which requires women to adopt their husband's names upon marriage, and he wrongly states that upon divorce they lose the right of custody of their children. Islamic custom, he says, is similar to the French in that custody is the sole right of men; however, Shariati rejects this practice as a false tradition promoted by the clergy rather than an Islamic rule.<sup>13</sup>

Shariati's dilemma becomes more clearly evident when he describes the nature of the changes in the role of women of the West which took place as a result of their economic independence. He states that once women worked outside the home, and became economically self-sufficient and independent of their husbands, economic calculation and logical reasoning replaced love in their relation-

ships with men. They shirked their “family obligations and standards of behavior.” One can assume that by “family obligations” he probably refers to the traditional role of housekeeper and mother, subservient to and secluded by her male family members; a role which he condemns. At the same time, however, he abhors the new woman, independent and free, who “becomes a realist instead of an idealist, using logic instead of emotion and romanticism, calculating economic benefits instead of love, aspiring toward the fulfillment of herself instead of her family.”<sup>14</sup> He concludes that women, by becoming free and independent, also become alone. Shariati finds loneliness to be the most infectious disease invading western society, a disease caused by women’s acquisition of rights and independence as individuals rather than remaining as parts of the family unit.

Shariati sees material calculations and sexual needs as the moving forces in relationships between western men and women. Romantic love and lifetime companionship are no longer the basis for marriage, and as a result the family bonds disappear and divorce becomes more common. He further blames the failure of western family structure on the sexual freedom of women. Through early sexual contacts with men, women’s sexual desires diminish until they are left tired and bored. They then seek men with wealth and position and settle into marriages which are unexciting, devoid of love, and concerned with the pursuit of fulfilling their own selfish ambitions. Hating each other and creating a miserable family environment, they produce children whose only escape is through alcohol and drugs.

Within the social context, western women pursue their material ambitions, becoming mere objects of consumerism. Working in factories, industries, and offices, women are either exploited as objects of productivity or are used as sexual objects for the purpose of advertising products. In either case, women are turned into automated brainless consumers, slaves of materialism and consumerism who buy what big business tells them.<sup>15</sup>

It is this image of “modern” women that Shariati objects to being imposed on Iranian women by both the west and the leaders in Iran. He warns Iranian women to be aware that neither this model nor the model that the traditional fanatical clergy have presented should be accepted. But the fact is, the world is a changing place and women’s roles cannot remain static. Shariati suggests that the answer will not be found in the prevention of change and the imposition of traditional standards of morality. Nor will it be found in the western model of immorality and decadence. The answer will be found in Islamic history, in the form of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Mohammad.

#### FATIMA AS THE “THIRD ALTERNATIVE”

As noted, Shariati’s criticism is directed against both the traditional religious view and the western view of women’s position in society; seeing these views as objects of materialistic slavery and fanatical suppression. He offers a third model, or alternative, as the only reasonable choice for Iranian women: the legacy of Fatima. Challenging Iranian women to learn about Fatima’s life, personality, and contributions, he exhorts them to strive to emulate her. Viewing

Fatima as the symbol of freedom, equality, and integrity most compatible with Islam, he wishes to present her legacy and traditions to Iranian women so that they may identify with her.

The birth of Fatima to the Prophet, after the death of his two sons, is regarded by Shariati as a heavenly design whereby the responsibility of bestowing dignity and equality to women was put on the Prophet. The Prophet was made responsible, through his relationship with Fatima, for introducing revolutionary changes in women's role and status in a society where it was previously regarded with shame and dishonor to have borne a female child. Shariati's claim of Fatima's status as a free woman is not so much based on the fact that the Prophet treated her with respect and dignity as on his emphasis that Fatima, as the sole surviving child of the Prophet, was to become his successor (as a son would have been) and to carry the honor of the continuation of the Prophet's line. Shariati interprets this as Fatima's equality of rights with men. This view is supported by the Shi'is, who regard Fatima as the only legitimate successor to the line of Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad.<sup>16</sup>

Shariati cites other sources that claim Fatima and Ali were actually the choices of God rather than the Prophet: "If Muhammad had a choice to pick one of his daughters to begin his line of descendants, and his son-in-law to be the father of that family, he would have chosen the same whom God chose for him."<sup>17</sup> The clear message here, of course, is the legitimacy of Ali as the first Imam: "The sole line of succession to the Prophet is in the line of his daughter. Ali, too. Ali is the continuation of Muhammad, and in spirit, his heir."<sup>18</sup> As Shariati presents it, Fatima is the key link in the chain of succession of Abraham to Muhammad to Hosain (the eldest son of Fatima and the third Shi'ci imam), and on to the end of human history. Shariati attributes a mysterious hand of destiny, moved by God's design, to the crossing of Ali's and Fatima's destinies. Not only was Fatima's role as the Prophet's daughter a planned design by God in order to elevate the position of women in pagan Arabian society, but her marriage to Ali was also a calculated design. Destined to become the leader in the Prophet's battles against the pagans, to "guarantee the victory of Islam," to marry Fatima and to inaugurate the prophet's household (*ahl al-bait*), and to continue his line, Ali was brought into the Prophet's home while still a young boy. Shariati devotes considerable writing to Ali's role as a son in the Prophet's eyes. The irony of this exercise is that he elevates Ali's status as "son" while condemning the Arabs for putting emphasis on the role of a son versus that of a daughter.

A great portion of Shariati's writing deals with Fatima's devotion, sense of responsibility, and sacrifice to her father and later to her husband. She is described as a devoted daughter and wife who suffers hardship, deprivation, and extreme poverty throughout most of her life without ever complaining or withdrawing her support from the two men in her life. No amount of sorrow or humiliation sways her from her path of righteousness. Neither her father's death nor her husband's betrayal by the Prophet's Companions in caliphate decision causes her to give up her struggle for justice (Ali's right) or fight against tyranny (that of Ali's enemies). Fatima's role as a devoted, hard-working wife to Ali and

a mother to their children (Hasan, Hosain, and Zainab) is regarded by Shariati as the exemplification of the ideal Muslim woman.

In short, the two roles of Fatima, a devoted self-sacrificing wife and mother attending to her family's needs, and a courageous untiring fighter for social justice, are the roles Shariati presents to Iranian women for imitation and emulation. The greatest emphasis, however, is put on her role as the perpetuator of the Prophet's line and the special role she acquires through her position as the mother of Hasan and Hosain, the two imams who later epitomize martyrdom and heroism in the struggle against evil and tyranny. Fatima is credited with raising sons who gave their lives for the fulfillment of the Prophet's work as well as being defenders of social justice and leaders of the Muslim community. To illustrate Fatima's unique position, Shariati remarks that although Ali did marry other wives after Fatima's death and although he had other sons and daughters from his other wives, he regarded Hasan and Hosain with special favor and treated them differently because they were the carriers of the Prophet's blood and his successors.<sup>19</sup>

#### AYATOLLAH KHOMAINI'S POSITION ON WOMEN IN MUSLIM SOCIETY

An examination of Khomaini's writings, formal statements given during interviews and speeches, and transcribed messages, yields a complex image of his stand on women's issues. One can read his works and find stated a respect for women as well as a belief in their right to equality of opportunity in both social and political matters. One can also stress his strict interpretation of subjects like polygamy, divorce, custody of children, and temporary marriage, as well as his directives to government officials in Iran regarding the wearing of the veil, segregation of men and women in schools and work-places, and the general emphasis on women's primary role as housewives and mothers. A review of Khomaini's works contrasting them with those of Shariati, follows with a look at actual rulings of the Iranian government and official statements affecting women examined as a reflection of Khomaini's basic viewpoint.

Probably one of the most revealing pieces of Khomaini's writing on women's role is a few pages of his critique of the shah's well-known Family Protection Act of 1967 whereby women were granted legal access to divorce and courts were set up (many times staffed by women judges) to determine the cases and the terms of child custody, alimony, and other such familial matters. This Act also imposed restrictions on polygamy and temporary marriage.

Khomaini condemns the Act as being contrary to Islam, not only because of its content but because it was passed by an illegitimate, anti-Islamic legislative body. He declares the Act null and void and calls for its violation by the people. More interesting, he warns the enforcers of the Act that they are sinners and will be punished according to the shariah. He proclaims that all women who had been granted divorce under the Family Act are legally still married to their former husbands (under the shariah). If they have knowingly remarried, they have, in fact, committed adultery and if any children have been born from these marriages, those children are illegitimate and as such have no inheritance



rights.<sup>20</sup> His proclamation was carried out on February 26, 1979, when Khomeini instructed the ministry of justice to strike all those provisions of the Act which he believed contravened Islam. This ruling was put into effect by the ministry of justice on August 9, 1979.

In his chapter dealing with inheritance rights, Khomeini strictly adheres to the Qoran's rulings and the standard Shi'a law (*fiqh*). There is one decree on inheritance which is particularly worthy of note; that where one of the spouses dies before a marriage has been sexually consummated. If the husband is the surviving partner, he has the usual inheritance rights to his wife's property; however, if the wife survives the husband, she does not have any inheritance rights to his property and, further, she is not entitled to any alimony rights.

Islam is credited with having elevated women to a high status from their pre-Islamic positions of slavery and dependence. Economic independence, the right to own and dispose of property, the right of support and protection, the rights to a kind of alimony, inheritance and education, and choice in marriage, even the right to divorce<sup>21</sup> are all cited by Khomeini as proofs of the above position. These are, of course, supported by most Muslim scholars and philosophers. Khomeini asks women to recognize and accept that it is necessary that there be limitations on women's individual freedoms; that although women may vote, be elected, and choose professions, those things must be done within the framework of Islam. Although Shariati seems to agree with this view, his interpretation of the Islamic framework differs somewhat from that of Khomeini. Shariati, like Khomeini, refers with pride to the provision of women's rights to property ownership as an indication of their economic independence while at the same time, in his criticism of the western women's lifestyle, he pinpoints their economic independence as the major cause for the downfall and deterioration of the family institution, the absence of love, and prevalence of immorality in the society. Also he, like Khomeini, upholds the man's position as the primary provider for the family, thus indirectly minimizing or dismissing the women's need or desire to hold jobs and be financially independent. Thus the fear of an independent woman as the disrupter of the normal family is shared by the two men.

Khomeini and Shariati both express their fear of women's sexuality, although in different ways. Shariati is very careful about the sense of the term "freedom" that he advocates for women. He promotes freedom for women but is very adamant in saying that it does not include sexual freedom. To him, sexual freedom for women is tantamount to immorality, promiscuity, and the collapse of the family institution. His basic belief, one may deduce, is that, since women are naturally sexual animals, they will tempt and corrupt men and lead them into passion and lust, which will in turn lead to adultery, promiscuity, and moral corruption. This line of thought is identical with that of the traditional religious leaders like Khomeini, Mutahhari, Na'ini and others. The solution seems to be the control and regulation of women's behavior; the same old story of blaming Eve for the fall of Adam. They both agree also that women must understand that these limitations are for the benefit of the society and that Islam's restrictions on them are in their interest. On one occasion Khomeini praises Fatima's personality

and qualities of self-discipline, concluding that: "she was such a person that if she had been a man, she would have become a Prophet, in place of Prophet Muhammad,"<sup>22</sup> a view very similar to that of Shariati.

Ayatollah Khomeini demonstrated a disdain for those women who participated in demonstrations on March 8, 1979, against his directives to various government agencies on the adoption of an "Islamic dress." He discredited them, stating they were not "proper young women" and that they opposed the hijab because they had been educated and brainwashed under the shah's system of education. He blamed their moral corruption on their ignorance and deprivation of Islamic education. Although Khomeini supports education for women, he clearly defines the content of that education in limited terms (as that which would prepare women to be mothers, housekeepers, and devout Muslims), while Shariati aspires to the goal of women's education in all areas of the arts and the sciences that are open to men. Shariati's views run counter to Khomeini's dictum of the segregation of the sexes in schools, professions, and in the society in general.

Both Shariati and Khomeini attack the intellectuals and condemn them as causing social disintegration and immorality. Khomeini's accusation is for their promotion of western cultural and social ideas and lifestyles while Shariati, in addition, sees the clergy-dominated, distorted version of Islam also as the ideology supported and promoted by the pseudo-intellectuals of Iran and challenges them to help restore the true religion and replace the fanatical clergy as the leaders of education.

After the revolution, a series of articles appeared in Tehran newspapers, and various religious personalities were interviewed on television regarding the issue of the veil and the Qoran's directives on it. There is a striking uniformity of approach present in these comments that is compatible with Khomeini's own statements regarding the protesters against veiling: "Those women are the remnants of the Pahlavi regime. To wear the hijab does not imply suppression or seclusion."<sup>23</sup> Here Shariati differs. He does not agree that the veiling of women has anything to do with Islam. He regards it as an Iranian (presumably pre-Islamic) custom which the Muslim religious leaders have adopted and imposed on women through their misrepresentation of religion in order to subjugate them to men. This is perhaps the one wholly opposite view regarding women that Shariati holds from that of Khomeini and his cohorts. Although condemning the extravagance in western dress-styles as immoral and vulgar, he in no uncertain terms opposes any form of forced veiling for women and accuses the clergy for the promotion of this non-Islamic practice.

It was widely reported that a bill for compulsory veiling of all women and the criteria of its implementation was passed in the *Majlis* (parliament), where a woman legislator (Azam Taleqani, the late Ayatollah Taleqani's daughter) had earlier opposed it by saying "I don't believe women should wear the chador by force of the bayonet. They must decide themselves how to dress properly and modestly."<sup>24</sup> General public harassment of unveiled women and a few extreme cases of slashes with poisoned razor blades and acid thrown on women have been reported in the press, which led to Khomeini's warning and condemnation of such acts. For all those opposed to the veil, there were many more women

who marched in support of it, shouting "Death to foreign dolls!" One anti-hijab woman stated pointedly that "they [supporters of the veiling] are 30 million and we are only 5 million."<sup>25</sup> It was not surprising that thousands of chador-clad women poured into the streets of Tehran against their uncovered sisters. It was not unusual when veiled women marched in another town demanding a more severe punishment for the flogged brothel madam or when they forced a man to marry a prostitute he had visited the night before. These women represented the vast majority of Iranian women who, by their sheer numbers, could drown the voices of their "modern" sisters, who were reported to number around 20 thousand middle and upper-middle class, educated, either pro-western or Marxist women. Some of the women who initially protested these moves later seemed to go along with temporary compliance as a fair price for future freedom. They advocated cooperation with the regime in order to prevent widespread dissension and crisis and to forestall foreign intervention, which they viewed as a greater threat to their freedom than the hijab. There are, however, other groups of women who warn that wearing the scarf cannot change a woman from "doll" to "person." They express the fear that by submitting to the clerical ruling on the scarf, women will be submitting to eventual seclusion and isolation, and losing the newly obtained freedoms and rights for which they, equally with men, fought.<sup>26</sup>

#### POST-REVOLUTIONARY WRITINGS ON THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Since the revolution, proponents and opponents of change in the status of women have presented their arguments in the media, basing their positions on Islam and the Islamic traditions. When viewed together, the dialogues, Khomeini's pronouncements and decrees, and official government rules and regulations which followed these pronouncements, yield a composite of the trends in the area of women's roles and position in the new Islamic Republic.

In a series of articles that appeared immediately after the revolution, refreshingly new approaches to the role of women in Iran were introduced, advocating a return to the Qoran and a re-interpretation of some of its verses, particularly those dealing with women's rights. The ideas expressed in the articles seemed to follow rather closely those expressed by Shariati, with the emphasis on a return to Islam as the best way to achieve equality for women. These writers describe the true Islam of the Qoran, not the misguided interpretations of the clergy and others in the name of Islam. The different writers present their material in simple language, easily comprehensible to the readers in the west and Iran. Some of the articles were written by a western-educated Iranian woman also known for having officially represented the Iranian women in international women's conferences during 1980.

The concept of equality of rights is dealt with by the claim that by returning to the Qoran, one finds harmony between Islam and nature. True, women are created equally with men, in the eyes of God, their deeds and devotion to Islam judged equally rather than based on sex. Obviously, however, men and women are created biologically, physically, and emotionally different, but that is so that

they complete and complement each other. Because of the differences in nature between the two sexes, each is given a particular set of responsibilities in the family and society. They state that while Islamic women and men have equal rights, this does not and should not be interpreted to mean they have the same rights, the latter being advocated in the west by those engaged in the struggle for women's rights. To support the proposition that Islam has granted equality to women, several verses dealing with women are quoted. *Sura 33, ayah 36* reads: [It is not fitting for a believer, man or woman, when a matter has been] "decided by God, and His Apostle, to have any option about their decision: If any one disobeys God and His Apostle, he is indeed on a clearly wrong path." Since this verse is in the chapter dealing with parties (*al-Ahzab*), and since it addresses both men and women, it is interpreted in two ways: first, that no distinction in judgement is made between men and women, thus proving women's equal status before God; second, it is women's duty (like men's) to become actively engaged in political and social matters and that neither sex has the option to choose inactivity in those matters.

In another case, it is argued that because women as well as men have an obligation to pay *zakat* (tax) on income, Islam recognizes the right of women to engage in business and economic activity outside the home. Several other women's issues (e.g., polygamy, adultery, fornication), as well as the well-known verse 34, *Sura 4*, "Men have authority over women because Allah has made one superior to the other," are discussed in the light of new meaning given to these verses in the Qoran. Until now, at least in Iran, there has been a gross misinterpretation of the Qoran's verses by the mostly uneducated and ignorant clergy. Their renditions, based in part on the prevailing cultural traditions of Iran, have led to a distorted set of beliefs and attitudes toward women, carried out in the name of Islam.<sup>27</sup> Women's reaction to these unequal and unjust treatments by Islamic society has been to look for a way to escape; a search for freedom. In their search, they find western women who appear to be free and enjoying a sense of equality. Upon closer examination of the role and position of women in western society, these writers make the horrible discovery that women are not only discriminated against socially and economically but are also enslaved and exploited by capitalist forces. Further, women are treated as sex symbols and commercial commodities. Woman has become an overworked, underpaid, immoral and immoralized creature whose talent, intellect, and sexuality are exploited in the interests of materialism and consumerism. Her femininity is held against her.<sup>28</sup>

The impact of the basic philosophical and logical method used by Shariati is very clear in these writings, in which the authors have elaborated on and supported his analyses through direct application of the Qoran. In addition, Shariati's line of argument is followed in offering the true alternative as the model for the new revolutionary Iranian woman to identify with and find fulfillment in Islam. The model is presented in the ideologies of Ayatollah Taleqani, Mehdi Bazargan, and Ali Shariati. The new woman is characterized as free, independent, and aware of her rights through her knowledge of the Qoran and all those rights that the Qoran has bestowed upon her. Realizing that the

social, religious, and intellectual revolution is only just beginning for Iranian women, they foresee the road to achievement as a long and arduous one, filled with many obstacles and struggles. Among the major obstacles, one which will admittedly require a long time to change, is women's own perception of themselves as inferior, second-class citizens. Similarly, changes in men's attitudes and beliefs regarding women also will be required; a purging of the oppressive traditional practices toward women that are detrimental to a well-balanced, tolerant society. What this view leads to, then, is the great need for education, in fact re-education, of both men and women in Islamic law and the Qoran. A subject such as Qoranic permission of polygamy on the one hand and the impracticality of the practice because of the conditions imposed on it on the other is an example of the need to educate the public.

The veiling of women is a controversial topic, and Shariati's condemnation of the practice contradicts the position taken by some of his ideological pupils. An example is the reasoning for the adoption of the new Islamic dress code: "because we want society clean and pure from desires and lust." A woman's dress may cause excitement and sexual desire in men and hence is regarded as unacceptable. Perhaps the most revealing point in this explanation is the view of sex itself as a means of procreation—its sole purpose being continuation of the race—with sexual pleasure or enjoyment merely an accidental side-effect for the woman rather than a goal.<sup>29</sup> This explanation of veiling of women to prevent lustful thoughts is also reflected in writings by all of the leading Iranian female Islamic representatives in the post-revolutionary period. An Iranian delegate (Akram Hariri) to the United Nations Conference on Women held in Copenhagen, said of the veil, "it eliminates the need to go to the hairdresser. This saves money for the society and also one can hide a gun under it."<sup>30</sup>

There is a recurrence of the theme that in order to keep men from being aroused sexually and thus committing sinful acts, women must be secluded and separated from them. This demonstrates the extent to which the traditional beliefs have taken root despite the popularity of other revolutionary ideas of Shariati. Those women who have become his disciples have accommodated themselves to these traditionalist values and have become the defenders and advocates of these practices. One may speculate on whether these women have truly adopted the traditional view or merely found it expedient to adopt it so as to protect themselves against accusations of being anti-revolutionary or anti-Islamic. Some women may wish to work within the present system, accepting the way things are and working quietly to change them by bringing education to uninformed, illiterate people. By the same token, these women may only be adapting themselves to the system for their own self-interest and ambition, hoping to occupy important positions in the new society. Either way, they are in a dangerous and uncertain position.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Shariati's writing on the position and role of women in society shows the reader a dual image of the man. On the one hand he opposes the

traditionalist clerical interpretations of the Qoran, presenting a logical approach to his enlightened conclusion that the only way the true meaning of the Qoran and the intention of Islam will be understood is by educating men and women to the Qoran as well as to the history of Islam. As long as women are kept illiterate and ignorant they will be enslaved, exploited, and deprived of their human rights. Only through the acquisition of knowledge will women be set free. Shariati also insists that the Qoran must be interpreted in the context of the present day rather than by the literal application of 1,400 year-old Qoranic rules.

On the other hand, Shariati's presentation of the position of women in western society shows his superficial understanding of western social and cultural norms of behavior. He paints a confused picture of western women, rejecting them as models for Muslim Iranian women to follow, choosing instead Fatima as the only suitable model. Here also, problems develop because the portrait drawn of Fatima's life emerges as almost identical to that supported and advocated by the traditionalist clerics. Little or nothing is said of Fatima's contribution to knowledge, nor of the intellectual and personal enrichment which she brought to her community. Shariati implies a great deal in his characterization of Fatima's life but it is mostly unsubstantiated and vague. In fact, nothing is offered to back up his claim that Fatima was a woman with her own individual rights and freedoms. He throws little light on her revolutionary role as an untiring hero struggling for justice, unless one interprets justice narrowly as the usurped right of her husband to become the first caliph of Islam and her sons' rights to inherit the position.

Shariati raises the issue of women's role but does not really address it. His "third alternative" is not very different in substance from that of the traditional ulama. At the same time, quite unsubstantiated myths and fictions about Fatima's life are reproduced from Shi'ci traditions in his book (e.g., a magical, superhuman hand being at work behind the scenes and determining Fatima's destiny from the time of her conception: a "fact" of which Fatima herself is maintained to have been aware).

Despite the above-mentioned shortcomings of Shariati's study, one must emphasize that his ideas have had and still are having tremendous impact on the minds of both the youth and the intellectuals in Iran. Whether the promotion and propagation of Shariati's ideas will help lead to a liberated and emancipated women's role in Iran cannot yet be predicted. At this time, the post-revolutionary direction of Iran is in the hands of the clerical groups who do not agree with Shariati's views of the role of women. This disagreement is not so much on the basis of what he says about women's rights and position as with his general ideas on the interpretation of the Qoran, the role of the individual versus the clergy in its interpretation, and his total condemnation of the traditional fundamentalist clergy in their propagation of a fanatic, corrupt, and distorted version of Islam in Iran. Because of these positions, they reject Shariati out of hand.

More important, perhaps, is that no clear view of women's role exists among women. Clarification of the concept of a liberated and emancipated women's role probably rests on two conditions. On the one hand, a broader involvement of women in the process of political discussion would be necessary, going beyond

the small number of the primarily western-educated, middle or upper class women presently concerned with the subject. On the other hand, any such clarification within the context of Islamic thinking would need much more substantiation of women's individual rights and freedoms than is offered in the writings of Shariati. His contention that "yesterday must be examined and evaluated in the light of yesterday's environment and circumstances and today must be looked upon from today's perspective" is true for any relevant and socially applicable concept of "Fatima."

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ali Shariati, *The Islamic View of Man*, trans. A. A. Rasti (Bedford, Ohio: Free Islamic Literatures, 1978), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, trans. H. Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Ali Shariati, *Islam Shenasi (Knowing Islam)*, vol. 7 (Solon, Ohio: Muslim Students Association, 1979), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>Ali Shariati, *Zan dar cheshm va del-e mohammad (Woman in the eye and heart of Mohammad)* (Tehran: Hoseinieh Ershad, n.d.), pp. 23–24.

<sup>5</sup>M. M. Pickthall, *Cultural Side of Islam* (Lahore: S. M. Ashraf, 1979), p. 156.

<sup>6</sup>Ali Shariati, *Fatemeh Fatemeh Ast (Fatima is Fatima)* (Tehran: Hoseinieh Ershad, 1971), p. 90.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 91–101.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 140 where he quotes a Dr. A'ishah Abdul Rahman Bint al-Shati, a professor at Ain Shams University for supportive hadith without further information on either the author or her work.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup>Rouhallah M. Khomani, Ayatollah, *Tauzih al-Masa'il (Explanation of Problems)* (Tehran: Piruz, 1979), pp. 463–64.

<sup>21</sup>In Shi'ci Islam, a woman may, at the time of marriage, ask for and receive the right to divorce by her husband's delegating his right to divorce her as his representative. This is to be inserted in the marriage contract. However, this right may not be delegated absolutely and must be subject to a condition, such as immorality.

<sup>22</sup>*Keyhan*, 17 May 1979.

<sup>23</sup>Mujtahid Shabastari, "Islamic *hijab* is not equal to oppression," interview on Tehran television as reported in *Keyhan*, 11 March 1979.

<sup>24</sup>*Iran Times*, 4 July 1980.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 11 July 1980.

<sup>26</sup>See series of articles by Qodsi Qazi-Nuri, Soraya Danesh, and Homa Nateq in *Keyhan* issues of March and May 1970.

<sup>27</sup>For a more detailed discussion see my essay "The Position of Women in Ithna 'Ashari Shi'ci Islam," in Asghar Fathi, ed., *Women and the Family in Iran*, (Calgary: International Sociological Association, forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup>Shahin E. Tabataba'ci, "Women in Islam," *Islamic Revolution*, 1, (1979), 14–17.

<sup>29</sup>Pamela Haines, "Women in Today's Iran," in David Albert, ed., *Tell the American People*, (Philadelphia: Movement for a New Society, 1980), p. 104.

<sup>30</sup>*New York Times*, 15 July 1980.