

# A Celebration of Mothering in the Qur'an

*In this article I focus on the rights, responsibilities and the complexity behind the mother in the Qur'an. I show that the Qur'anic mother is not limited to biological function; but, includes the quality of leading humankind, showing exemplary dedication and compassion, and caring for the overall well-being of others. By analyzing the role of the Muslim mother through the text of the Qur'an and by celebrating the key maternal figures within the text, I show the Qur'an as a source of empowerment and strength for Muslim mothers. I hope to contribute to a wider understanding of being a mother and motherhood in Islam, bringing this celebration of mothers full circle, to an appreciation of the dedication, passion and resistance of Muslim mothers in the New World.*

The historical male monopoly over religious meaning in the Qur'an, its interpretation, and in later years its translation has been used to maintain control and concentrate power in Muslim communities. A growing number of women are engaging in a debate of whether the true nature of Islam is fundamentally patriarchal. These women are engaged in a struggle to reclaim the Qur'an as a living and vibrant text. Asma Barlas (2002) argues:

Islam does not sanction a clergy, or invest anyone with the right to monopolize religious meaning. To accept the authority of any group and then to resign oneself to its misreadings of Islam not only makes one complicit in the continued abuse of Islam and the abuse of women in the name of Islam, but it also means losing the battle over meaning without even fighting it. (xi)

In this article I begin by discussing diversity among Muslims and the

Qur'an as the necessary starting point of reference. I then analyze the Qur'anic mother by uncovering her attributes from within the Qur'an and in the context of her family and her community. I will then look at some famous examples of mothers from the Qur'an who received direct revelation, including the mother of Mary, Mary herself, Hagar, and the mother of Moses. I will further illustrate the ideal Qur'anic mother, and particularly her complexity, by drawing upon historical examples of Muslim women. By focusing on her rights, responsibilities and the complexity of her character, I will show that the Qur'anic mother cannot be limited to biological function; but, includes the quality of leading humankind, showing exemplary dedication and compassion, and caring for the overall well-being of others. It is my goal that by focusing on the key maternal figures in the Qur'an I will contribute to a wider understanding of being a mother and motherhood in Islam. By tracing these steps, I hope to bring this celebration of mothers full circle, to an appreciation of the dedication, passion and resistance of mothers in the New World.

### **Qur'anic exegesis and the Muslim woman**

In order "to complicate the term Muslim" (Khan, 2000) beyond the misrepresentations and stereotypical images found in the media and popular culture, Muslims need to be understood at a global level. As the worldwide population of Muslims stretches above one billion, it becomes more obvious that Muslims have a vast array of ethnic backgrounds, skin tones, languages, social classes, education levels, and sects. As these factors vary so do their fundamental conceptions of what it means to be Muslim. Leila Ahmed argues this is because "Qur'anic precepts consist mainly of broad, general prepositions chiefly of an ethical nature ... [making] the specific content of the laws derivable from the Qur'an depend[ant] on the interpretation that legists chose to bring to it" (1992: 88). This allows for the diversity among Muslims to be matched by a diversity of conceptions about the Qur'an.

However, the purpose of this article is not to provide general information about women in Islam that is limited to particular case studies, or a report that is looking for a trend in the Muslim world. (Wadud, 1999). Instead, like Amina Wadud in *Qur'an and Woman* I am seeking to expand an intellectual legacy by analyzing the role of the Muslim mother through the text of the Qur'an and by celebrating the mother within the text, to show the Qur'an as a source of empowerment and strength for Muslim mothers. Where I do refer to the *sunnah* (the oral traditions of Muhammad) it is to further illustrate ideas that are already established in the Qur'an.

### **The *rahm* and *Ar-Rahmaan*: Attributes of the Creator and the mother**

In the Qur'an the mother has a strong presence, which is linked to her relationship with God. In the Qur'an, God is defined by different gender neutral "names" or attributes that branch from four principle attributes: Lord

of all the Worlds (*Rabbul-'Alameen*), the Gracious (*Ar-Rahmaan*), the Merciful (*Ar-Raheem*) and Master of the Day of Judgement (*Maaliki-yaumiddeen*). Asma Barlas (2002, quoting Yusuf Abdullah Ali) translates Chapter 4, Verse 1 in the Qur'an:

O humankind! Your [God] who created you from a single person, created of like nature, its mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women: – [show awe for] God, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and [show awe for] the wombs (that bore you): for God ever watches over you. (177-178)

The theme of creation connects God's attribute as the Creator of humankind with the wombs that are the site for the creation of human life. The direct order to be in awe of the "wombs that bore you" becomes second to the awe we are required to feel toward God.

The word for "womb" in Arabic is *rahm*, which can be derived from *Ar-Rahmaan*, one of the four principle attributes of God. *Ar-Rahmaan* is translated as the Gracious and describes God as the One who gives without being asked. Muslims believe humans can understand and conceptualize God through the different attributes. Here, the divine attribute of Grace is embodied in the wombs of our mothers, who possess some of, albeit a tiny fragment, of God's creative energy. The significance of the womb is that as the site for creation it is where Muslims believe souls are developed, characters fashioned, and life is decreed.

In the *sunnah* any woman that is not the biological mother and who nurses another's child is considered their foster mother. The relationship of the foster mother is such that no two children nursed by the same woman are allowed to wed. On whether it is required for the mother to nurse her child the Qur'an states,

If they both (mother and father) decide upon weaning the child by mutual consent and consultation, there shall be no blame on them. And if you desire to engage a wet nurse for your children, there shall be no blame on you, provided you pay what you have agreed to pay in a fair manner. (2:234)

The Qur'an also specifically identifies mothers as those who gave us birth (58:3), protecting the specificity of motherhood by forbidding an Arabic custom of divorce where men would symbolically collapse their wives with their mothers. (Barlas, 2002)

### **Equalizing biology: Interdependency and societal obligation**

The mother in the Qur'an cannot be understood in isolation, she is part of a web of interdependent relationships that need to be understood as well. It

seems an obvious biological fact that women carry more of the reproductive responsibilities than men. The Qur'an acknowledges these extra responsibilities in two ways. Firstly by demanding a high degree of respect for parents, a debt that children owe to those who cared for them. Secondly, the structure of the Qur'anic social system is developed in such a way to ensure that no mother suffers on account of having children.

In the first case, behind the debt one owes their parents, are the physical hardships of child carrying, bearing and nursing. The Qur'an states:

And we have enjoined upon humans concerning their parents- your mother bears you in strain upon strain and your weaning takes two years. Give thanks to me and thy parents. Unto me is the final return. (31:15)

And also,

We have enjoined on humans to be good to their parents. Your mother bears you with pain and brings you forth with pain. And the bearing of him and his weaning takes thirty months. (46:16)

This verse continues to demand thanks to both parents and to God, an injunction that is repeated on eight different occasions in the Qur'an (2:84, 2:216, 4:37, 6:152, 17:24, 29:9, 31:15, 46:16). The focus on the mother's physical reality is a significant recognition of her reproductive work. It renders her work visible and emphasizes its necessity and importance. The responsibility of motherhood as work, involving physical, emotional and mental strain is described as a benefit to the whole of society (as well as the individual child).

The acknowledgement of the mothers extra responsibilities provide the reasoning for the organization of the Qur'anic social system. It is a system that addresses the issue of equalizing biological responsibilities, enabling women to be full members of society. In order to achieve a balance in the responsibilities between men and women, it is enjoined on the father to provide for the mother and child.

And the man to whom the child belongs shall be responsible for their (the mothers' and child's) food and clothing. According to usage. No soul is burdened beyond its capacity. The mother shall not make the father suffer on account of her child, nor shall he to whom the child belongs make the mother suffer on account of his child.... (2:234)

Chapter 4 verse 35 generalizes this financial responsibility onto all men for all women. The following translation is by Maysam al-Faruqi (2000), whose focus on the syntax and the Arabic word *bima* is the key to understanding the passage. This verse is considered controversial because male exegesis tends to

credit some form of favoritism, to explain why men are required to provide for women. The traditional inferences being that men have been provided with more intelligence or piety than women and therefore, men are superior to women. Despite the fact this has no basis within the Qur'an and it directly clashes with the Qur'anic principles of equality before God, it continues to prevail in the traditional interpretations of the Qur'an.

Men are responsible for women using that which [literally the word *bima* here means with what] God has provided some [men] over [what he has provided] others [women] and that which [with what] they spend from their own means. (al-Faruqi, 2000: 86)

Traditional exegesis often relies on this passage to explain the unequal power structure between men and women. However, al-Faruqi (2000) focuses on the Arabic word *bima* to illustrate how it is not a "natural excellence" that man has been provided, but something else in the material sense. She analyzes the word *bima* as it has been used within the Qur'anic text, using the definition from within its own usage. Interestingly, it is only in this verse that the inference of being provided with something more from God is assumed to be a "natural excellence." When *bima* is used to describe the people of Israel, it refers to the original covenant and religion they had been provided with. It refers to something God had given in a material sense. The Israelites were not morally superior to other tribes and peoples, but they had received guidance from God. Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002) also argue that the language in this verse in no way gives the class of men superiority over women as a class.

Rather, the verse is embedded in the context of inheritance, where sons have twice the inheritance of their sisters. Because the Qur'an does not expect the women to be the breadwinner, the greater share of inheritance is necessarily tied to the rule that men are to be financially responsible for women. This does not mean that women cannot be financially independent, but only that they have a right to access a support system for when a time of need (i.e. pregnancy and childbirth) may arise.

Al-Faruqi (2000) continues to contend that the intention is not to limit what a woman can/should do (although the reality of Muslim women may suggest otherwise), but only to obligate the man to be always financially responsible for his female relatives. And "because such a time for such need cannot be foretold, it becomes a necessary and general law for men to always provide for women whether these are in immediate need or not. For behind every woman is the possibility of a child whose rights are absolute and must be met without question" (80).

If the father is unable to provide for the mother, then the financial responsibility should be on her extended family, and then onto society. One of the most repeated phrases in the Qur'an is "No soul is burdened beyond their capacity" (2:234). Under this banner the rights of the individual are protected

and each individual is given trials that they should be able to overcome, and use to come closer to their Creator. "And know that your possessions and your children are but a trial and it is Allah with whom is a great reward" (8:29). The philosophy being that no woman should be burdened about survival while discharging her duties as a mother.

## **Mothering as reality in the Qur'an**

### *The Qur'anic Mary*

The Qur'an acknowledges the differences between the sexes while reinforcing the fact that women have reached the level of spirituality to receive direct revelation and maintain ongoing dialogues with God, just as Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

Verily for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto God and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves before God and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly: for all of them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward. (33:36)

This passage identifies equality between the sexes in their ability to reach spiritual heights, and guarantees the same basis for judgment in terms of punishment and reward.

Perhaps the most famous mother in the Qur'an is Maryam or Mary, mother of Jesus. The story of Mary begins in Chapter 3 with her birth. Mary's mother pledges the child in her womb to the service of God. God accepts this gift and when her child is born, the mother proclaims surprise.

My Lord, I am delivered of a female—and Allah knew best of what she was delivered and the male she desired to have was not like the female she was delivered of—and I have named her Mary and I commit her and her offspring to Thy protection from Satan the rejected. (3:37)

The assumption that only a male could be dedicated to the service of God is consistent with the thinking of her time period, as well as of now. The lesson that "Allah knew best of what she was delivered" shows her desire for a male was erroneous. From the time in her mother's womb, Mary was raised to have an "excellent growth" (3:38). Her connection with God was transparent and she inspired her guardian Zachariah to pray for offspring like her.

The direct and personal way Mary's story is related, where she is the central

character, is comparable to the life-stories of Moses and Abraham. Chapter 19 in the Qur'an is entitled "Maryam" and the focus is Mary's perspective of the events around her. Her revelation begins with a messenger angel who says, "I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may give thee glad tidings of a righteous son" (19:20). It is important to note that all prophets in the Qur'an receive guidance from God through angels. Mary is surprised, like her own mother was, and replies, "How can I have a son when no man has touched me, neither have I been unchaste?" (19:21).

In the Qur'an Mary is recognized for her piety first and foremost. The miracle of Jesus' conception is secondary and is likened to other miracles, including the birth of Abraham's son Isaac and Zachariah's son Yahya. Her importance as a human being is in her independent character, her love and faith. The birth of Jesus is a beautiful passage that shows the pains of childbirth from a very personal perspective. As a woman who reached the point of communion with God, we are at once reminded that she is only human.

And the pains of childbirth drove her unto the trunk of a palm-tree.  
She said, "O, would that I had died before this and had become a thing quite forgotten!" (19:24)

Mary's birthing experience, "O, would that I had died before this and had become a thing quite forgotten!" emphasizes the burdens of motherhood on an entirely personal level. Her experience is validated, and for mothers reading this passage, the pains of childbirth become a reality that cannot be pushed from center. Her pain is emphasized as part of the creative process of life and she embodies Grace, something that the Qur'an seeks to force men and women alike to appreciate.

Then the angel called from beneath her saying, "Grieve not. Thy Lord has placed a rivulet below thee: And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm tree: it will drop upon thee fresh ripe dates; So eat and drink and cool thine eye. And if thou seest any man, say "I have vowed a fast to the Gracious God: I will therefore not speak this day to any human being" (19:25-27).

### **Imitating Hagar: Maternal strength in Islam**

Another pivotal mother in Islam is Hagar; however, unlike Mary, there is no information directly about Hagar in the Qur'an. Yet she is pivotal because of her importance for the Arabic people, and the first Muslims generally. She is the mother of Ishmael and Abraham's second wife. Muhammad's lineage is traced through Hagar and Ishmael, as is the promise of a covenant given to Ishmael by God. As Abraham's first son, Ishmael was blessed by God to have many descendents and he was given a prophethood (19:55). In the Qur'an Abraham says "I have settled some of my progeny in an uncultivable barren

valley near Thy sacred House" (14:38). This valley is where Mecca now stands. One of the major responsibilities of every able Muslim is to pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their life. One of the major rites of this pilgrimage is the running between two foothills seven times, back and forth. This is called the *Sa'y* or the Running, described as:

The story of Hagar and this rite express the effort required in a person's search for salvation. The sudden appearance of a well in this desert landscape is the core of a miracle that Muslims believe saved Hagar and saved a branch of Abraham's family in Mecca. Not accidentally, this rite places a mother's story at the heart of the Hajj. (PBS, 2002)

All Muslim pilgrims imitate Hagar's search and struggle to find water for her and her child. The story of Hagar can be found in the sunnah. Hagar agrees to be left in the desert because her faith assures her that her and her son would be looked after. When she is alone and she sees her child dying of thirst she does not give up. She is remembered and admired for her strength and perseverance, as she physically runs in search of water and help, and the angel Gabriel eventually guides her to a spring.

### **Limiting love: Sacrificing the child**

There is a consistent theme in the Qur'an that tests the hearts of parents in regards to their children. The common mythological figure of the sacrificial mother, who does anything for her child, is circumvented. The Qur'an denies the priority of children above all else to ensure the primacy of one's relationship with God over all earthly relations. In the Qur'an children are seen as "trial" for this life and secondary to one's submission to God. The revelation given to the mother of Moses illustrates this point.

And We directed the mother of Moses by revelation, "Suckle him; and when thou fearest for him, then cast him into the river and fear not, nor grieve; for We shall restore him to thee, and shall make him one of the Messengers." (28:8) And "When We revealed to thy mother what was an important revelation, to wit: Put him in the ark, and place in into the river, then the river will cast it on to the shore." (20:39-41)

While it is apparent that her maternal instinct told her not to leave him, her motivations to do what God demanded made her bypass these feelings.

And the heart of the mother of Moses became free from anxiety.... We had strengthened her heart so that she might be of the firm believers. And We had already decreed that he shall refuse the wet-nurse; ... Thus We restored him to his mother that her eye might be

gladdened and that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of Allah is true. But most of people know not. (28:11, 13-14)

### **Who is *Ummah*? Beyond biological definitions**

The Qur'an states that "The Prophet is nearer to the believers than their own selves, and his wives are as mothers to them" (33:7). All of Muhammad's wives are still referred to as the "Mothers of the Faithful" [*Ummah abtul Mumineen*] although not all of them bore children. Muhammad's youngest wife Aiyshah never bore any children but as a Mother of the Faithful she is remembered as a great teacher, a scholar of religion and law. Men and women from far and wide would come to listen to her speak. She contributed over two thousand of the oral traditions and she led a very active life. She lived for forty years after Muhammad and in this time she spent learning and acquiring knowledge and was actively involved in politics. She was also among the many women who were involved in wartime battles before and after the death of Muhammad and at one point led an army herself.

The qualities of Muhammad's wives are varied. His first wife was a widow named Khadija. As a wealthy independent businesswoman she proposed to Muhammad when she was forty and he twenty-five. When the revelations started to come she would be the first to stand by him. She would spend most of her wealth in order to help him, after which during a period of intense persecution and sanctions she would pass away. It is only through her youngest daughter Fatima that Muhammad's lineage can be traced.

The mothers in the life of Muhammad include a long list of women who raised and affected him throughout his life. He applied *ummah* or mother to a diverse group of women. He himself was raised at the hands of Halimah, a desert woman who raised him until five years, his biological mother Amina, and her servant Barakah. His use of the title of *ummah* was an honor that represented a close relationship. He didn't limit who was a mother by any particular biological function. Rather he honored a variety of women who mentally, emotionally and spiritually cared for others. Above all else, he applied this term to women who (regardless of having borne children or not) were exemplary spiritual leaders in society and set examples for both men and women to follow.

### **Completing the circle: The significance of reinterpreting the Qur'an**

It is important to bring this celebration of mothers' back to the present. I am focusing on the mother whose everyday struggle is within her community and family. In North America the third wave of feminism has been coined the introduction of women of color into the mainstream feminist movement. Creating this assumption that before now, women of color have been silent and politically inactive. Enakshi Dua (1999) discusses the historic struggles of women of color beginning with the First Nations women and including slave

women, women laborers and immigrants in recent times. These women have been involved in challenging racial, gender and class oppression with issues such as negotiating treaties, leading rebellions against colonialism, challenging immigration, settlement and citizenship laws, fighting for universal suffrage, organizing unions and so forth (11-12).

As activists and resisters Muslim women are leading a return to understanding the Qur'an from the perspective of women and from within the context of modernity. Lois al-Faruqi (n.d.) states:

The history and heritage of Muslim people has been radically different from that of Western Europe and America, [therefore] the feminism which would appeal to Muslim women and the society generally must be correspondingly different ... it must be an indigenous form of feminism ... which does not work chauvinistically for women's interest alone ... [but] in tandem with the wider struggle to benefit all members of society.

The first protest I ever attended was with my mother. We still have the newspaper clipping with a photo of my mother in full *burquaa*. She was wearing a long black baggy coat, a black scarf covering all of her hair and large dark sunglasses. In front of her in a stroller was my brother sleeping with his head to one side. In her hand was a large sign that said "Zia real bad guy." She was protesting against the military coup in Pakistan at the time, a military regime that strongly persecuted our community and was the reason for our own immigration to Canada.

Maysam al-Faruqi (2000) explains that the proclaimed Muslim woman sees her relationship with God as the ultimate point of reference and not an "additional" ideological superstructure. This is in direct contrast to traditional feminist approaches that define women first by their sexual identity. As an individual first, "no race (racism) or nation (nationalism) or gender (feminism) can constitute the starting point of the Muslim's source of identity" (74). It is the system of beliefs that is rationally chosen (i.e. Islam) that comes before any gendered reality.

In traditional schools of theology Mohja Kahf (2000) found that

women's words are woven into a whole range of ... text ... [but] instead of [a] multiplicitous presence, we have inherited an erased page of women's discourses in the early Islamic era. (147-148)

Although women were active participators in all aspects of public life, including contributing to the early exegesis of the Qur'an and fighting in battles, their stories were rarely central, and never the point of reference in understanding the Qur'an. This erasure of women's presence has contributed to a false understanding of what the role of women is and can be in Muslim societies. Because

her stories were woven into other (male) discourses, this original marginalization has created a hostile atmosphere where any attempt to reclaim center is seen as subversive and non-Islamic (read westernized).

### Conclusion

Although I originally stated that I was not talking *about* women in Islam and my analysis was limited to mothers in the Qur'an, there is a real connection between what is in the Qur'an and the reality facing Muslim mothers. There is a potential for feminine interpretations of the Qur'an to have a significant impact on the lives of women. While I have not attempted to cover the problems facing Muslim mothers in their respective societies, I do believe the solutions may be in resisting male interpretations of the Qur'an and seeking to understand for ourselves, what it is that controls our lives.

In this article I have reread the passages of the Qur'an pertaining to mothers. The mother in the Qur'an is a complex character, she is defined by her relationship with God and is judged not only in respect to the children she has borne but to her whole community. She carries with her divine attributes of Grace and creativity. The mother is a leader and at the same time an interdependent part of her community. Within the family her rights are protected and the extra reproductive responsibilities she has are compensated by a social system that provides for her needs. Through the examples of Mary and the other mothers in the Qur'an we see her as an active and full member of society. Her reproductive work is visible and valuable and she is an example for her entire community. By celebrating mothering in the Qur'an I am taking those erased pages that Muslim women have inherited and filling them. While my interpretation of the mother in the Qur'an may seem a far cry from the reality some Muslim women actually face, this only lends support to the importance of rereading the text from a feminine perspective. Believing mothers, and all Muslim women whose lives are controlled by the Qur'an, have the ability to join in the battle over meaning by breathing new life into the sacred text and inciting positive change.

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