



Motherhood and the Ideal of Filial Piety

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Who deserves my love and care most in the World ? - A man asked the Prophet Muhammad [upon him blessings and peace]. "Your mother," the Prophet replied on the spot. "And who else ?" "Your mother," the Prophet repeated. "And then who ?" insisted the man. "Your mother," the Prophet said a third time "And then ?" "Then your father" [Al-Bukhari and Muslim narrated it].

The Quran in several places commands filial piety but its focus is on the mother: "We have enjoined goodness upon man concerning his parents. His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness ..." [Surah Luqman, verse 14], "We have commended unto man kindness toward parents. His mother bears him with reluctance ..." [Surah al-Ahqaf, 46]. The Quranic archetype of the pious son has no father but only a most distinguished mother the Prophet 'Isa [Jesus] , upon him peace, who describes himself as "dutiful toward her who bore me and not arrogant, unblessed" [Surah Maryam, verse 32].

In the hadith, the archetype of the pious son is the Yemeni herdsman Uways al-Qarani, who sought permission from his mother before visiting Madinah to see the Prophet Muhammad, only to find the latter away on a trip, whereupon Uways, broken-hearted but bound to filial duty with hoops of steel, returned without further delay to Yemen and resumed caring for his mother. Later, the Prophet told his Companions of Uways' superlative rank among the Just and told them he would be a major intercessor on the Day of Judgment. Indeed, filial piety comes before even Jihad in importance, as shown in the many hadiths translated and listed by Aliah Schleifer in her 1986 book *Motherhood in Islam*.

The Prophet himself never got to enjoy the company of his parents, having lost his father just before birth and his mother a few months after. One of the most touching scenes of the Sira or Prophetic Biography shows him standing wordless at her grave, weeping profusely, surrounded by a large group of hushed riding-companions, all of them weeping at his sight.

Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi – the most un-Taliban Afghan imaginable – coined the rich conceit of worldly loss and change as the pains of mutually unaware, multiple motherhoods in all things created: *"Everything in this world is a mother, each unaware of the birthpangs of the other."* It is a measure of the Prophet's consciousness that when he saw by the wayside, in one of his military campaigns, a mother of pups with its new litter, he stopped and posted a guard by its side to make sure none of the troops marching in his wake harmed it. I have no knowledge of any other civilisation in which its key figure stops his marching army and reassigns troops to ensure a dog is protected from harm.

Another time, pointing to a woman cradling her child near a bonfire, the Prophet told his Companions: "Can any of you imagine this woman throwing her baby into this fire ? Yet your Creator has more mercy and compassion for His creatures." Compare these two paradigms to the fascist Spartan and bloodthirsty Easterners of yesterday and today; then wonder how far we Muslims and the rest of the world still have to go to absorb the motherly model of the Prophet, who possessed the most virile soul of any who ever walked the earth.

On the contrary, we seem to be going the other way fast. From the Subcontinent to Iran and the Arab world, the matrix of reverence, gentleness, good humour, balance, patient wisdom, and basic human justice with which the Prophet had single-handedly superseded brute patriarchy, has just about disappeared. Worse yet, these regions now witness a descent into sexist violence of such unprecedented repugnance as even the pre-Islamic pagans – make that the Cro-Magnons – would find blood-curdling. Goya's horrific *‘Saturn devouring his sons’* has become true of our brethren devouring our mothers and sisters. How "arrogant, unblest" !

Yet a more memorable passage of the Mathnavi is Rumi's quip about the mother: "What did you call her ? Your sweetheart ? She is a creator ! Almost uncreated !" Cambridge's imam and one of the foremost living writers on Islam in English, Abdul Hakim Murad [Timothy J Winter] , began his essay on feminism, "Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender" with the line "Can men any longer write about women ?" But he epigraphed it with Rumi's verses:

*The Prophet said that women totally dominate men of intellect and possessors of hearts.
But ignorant men dominate women, for they are shackled by an animal ferocity.
They have no kindness, gentleness or love, since animality dominates their nature.
Love and kindness are human attributes; anger and sensuality belong to the animals.
She is the radiance of God, she is not 'your beloved'. She is a creator - you could say that she is not created.*

Another Persian poet – "Iradj Mirza" - [date: 1926] wrote this moving poetic verse about his mother: "Staying awake, she taught me even how to sleep". So the mother is at the heart of Islam on several levels: *literally and legally, but also poetically and mystically* as a reminder of Allah Most High

She is also there historically and symbolically in the persons of the Prophet's wives, as the Quran says: "...The Prophet is closer to the believers than their selves, and his wives are as their mothers..." [Surah al-Ahzab 6]. Of all the Mothers of the Believers, it is Lady Khadija, the Prophet's first wife and 15 years his senior, whom he loved and revered the most, and who gave him several daughters, among them Lady Fatimah al-Zahra, the *woman* through whom his noble bloodline survives from East to West to this day.

All of our mothers, and Fatimah with them, were scholars or craftsmen or merchants as well. The early Muslims describe Lady Ayesha in glowing terms as the most knowledgeable woman in the history of mankind and this is true, because she was not only the longest [with Sawdah] but also the youngest *and most intellectually gifted spouse of the Prophet during his post-Prophethood years.*

Etymologically also, the mother is central to Islam in many important ways. The Arabic word for mother, "*umm*", is the root of the Prophetic attribute of "*ummi*", all-too-hastily translated "unlettered" ; it is also at the root of the substantive which denotes Muslimdom through the ages, *ummah* – a word also used for religion and, indeed, any living community including birds and bees. It is also homonymic with "*amma*" , "to guide and lead" , from which comes the word imam.

Annemarie Schimmel in her 1995 book - *Meine Seele ist eine Frau* – [My Soul is a Woman] cites Rumi's representation of the mother of the Prophet Musa [Moses] , raised in Pharaoh's pagan court far from the Temple, as the archetype of human perfection giving birth to the Man of God, not unlike Meister Eckhart's quasi-Islamic [but, to Christians, unorthodox] interpretation of the conception of the fatherless but Synagogue-imbued Christ in Mary.

However, it is the Prophet Muhammad, upon him and all the Prophets peace, who is the jewel in the crown of such filial God-dependency, being the most completely deprived of the two normal means of human upbringing – parents and schooling.

An unschooled orphan, the Prophet was raised by God Himself. Like a baby latching on to none other than his mother who is his whole world, ummi stands for Muhammad's utter dependency on Allah as an incarnate proof of his God-given Prophethood. The Ummah's own relationship to its Prophet is in every way identical. So is, at a third remove, the congregation's relationship to its imam: "Al-Shafi'i is like the sun giving light and warmth to the people," Ahmad ibn Hanbal would say. "Our teachers are our spiritual parents, they give us birth in the hereafter," wrote al-Nawawi. So we can say, in Rumi's fashion, that our Prophet is our mother, our religion is our mother, our community is our mother, and our teachers are our mothers.

As you treat your parents, so do expect to be treated in your old age. Each knows exactly how they would like their own children to treat them when they become old. This is why any time is good to pause and ponder not how to repay our mothers and fathers, for that would be impossible, but how to meet at least some of our obligations toward them. Perhaps, past experience of Divine generosity gives us hope we shall not be labelled Stone-Hearted in the Book of Life. As a certain man was circumambulating the resplendent Kaabah in pilgrimage *carrying his mother on his back* he met his teacher and asked: "*Teacher ! Have I repaid my debt to her ?*" The teacher only replied: "*I hope.*"