

Women Oppressed & treated as Merchandise



At least among most tribes, women were on an equal par with merchandise, in a very literal sense, for they were passed down through inheritance. If a man died, his wife was passed down to his eldest son – provided, of course, that she was not his actual mother. He then had the right to marry her, or even to prevent her from remarrying. This practice continued until Islam expressly forbade a man from marrying the wife of his father. Allah said:

"And marry not women whom your fathers married, except what has already passed; indeed, it was shameful and most hateful, and an evil way." (Qur'an 4: 22)

Despite their deviant sexual practices, Arabs did forbid at least some forms of incestuous marriage, such as marriage with one's mother, daughter, grandmother, sister, and aunt.

Women were oppressed in other ways as well; for example, women – as well as children – were not allowed to inherit wealth, for the entire estate of the deceased went only to those who could fight and help protect the tribe. It was not a written law that women couldn't inherit wealth, but it was a practice recognized

through established custom, and custom often had more force than legislated law. In this regard, the situation of women changed with the advent of Islam, with the death of Aus ibn Thaabit. Aus left behind two unsightly daughters and one very young son. His two nephews came and seized his entire estate, which they would have had the right to do (according to pre-Islamic customs) had they done so during the pre-Islamic days of ignorance. Aus's wife pleaded with them, suggesting that they marry Aus's two daughters, who could have then benefited at least in some way from their father's wealth. But the two nephews refused, primarily because of the unsightliness of the two daughters. Aus's wife then went to the Messenger of Allah and said, "O Messenger of Allah, Aus has died, and has left behind a young son and two daughters. His two nephews, Suwaid and 'Arfatah, came and seized his entire estate. I said to them, 'Marry his two daughters,' but they refused." The Messenger of Allah commanded the two nephews, saying, "Do not move (or spend or use) anything at all from the estate." And the following Verse was then revealed:

"There is a share for men and a share for women from what is left by parents and those nearest related, whether the property be small or large - a legal share." (Qur'an 4: 7)

Worse than the ill-treatment, adult women received was what some Arabs did to their daughters. In the mind of the average Arab, a daughter was of no use and posed many potential problems. A daughter couldn't fight and defend her clan and tribe; she couldn't earn nearly as much money as men could; and if she was taken captive during war, her captors took her as a slave and used her to satisfy their sexual desires. Some females were even forced to work as prostitutes; like pimps do today, their masters would take from them all of the money they made. Society actually sanctioned such practices. Fearing shame and the above-mentioned eventualities, a man would become very sad and upset if his wife gave birth to a daughter. Describing this reality, Allah said:

"And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonour or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision." (Qur'an 16: 58, 59)

Many fathers would choose to bury their shame, by literally burying their daughters alive. Allah said:

"And when the female (infant) buried alive (as the pagan Arabs used to do) shall be questioned. For what sin she was killed?" (Qur'an 81: 8, 9)

Some parents buried their child alive because they were poor and feared that they didn't have enough wealth to raise a child; others did so not because they were poor, but because they feared becoming poor in the future. Islam of course forbade all of these evil practices. Allah said:

"Say (O Muhammad): "Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited you from: Join not anything in worship with Him; be good and dutiful to your parents; kill not your children because of poverty—We provide sustenance for you and for them; come not near to Al-Fawahish (shameful sins, illegal sexual intercourse, etc.) whether committed openly or secretly, and kill not anyone whom Allah has forbidden, except for a just cause (according to Islamic law). This He has commanded you that you may understand ." (Qur'an 6: 151)

And Allah also said:

﴿وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةً إِمَّا يَنْتَحِنُوا نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُهُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطْئًا كَبِيرًا﴾ (٣١)

"And kill not your children for fear of poverty. We provide for them and for you. Surely, the killing of them is a great sin." (Qur'an 17:31)

To be sure, these practices were not uncommon; but there were some tribes that did not sanction infanticide. Even among the Quraish, there were individuals who despised the practice of burying children alive. Zaid ibn 'Amr ibn Nufail - may Allah have mercy on him - was a noteworthy example; Zaid would even go to fathers who contemplated killing their daughters and offered to raise their daughters for them.

Some Arab tribes honoured women and even consulted with them about marriage. In some regards, women rose above their circumstances; they were brave and would accompany their husbands to the battlefield, and if need arose, would even participate in the fighting. The Bedouin woman would help her husband and take care of their livestock; she would also help out by spinning wool and knitting clothing.
