Introduction

As a Muslim woman born to a family which was Muslim in name but

secular in practice, I never thought for a moment what Islam meant to me. It

was not until fate decided to turn savagely against me, by depriving me first

of my sweet sister – with whom I shared all my hopes and dreams, especially

at university when we were very close – then my dear loving father,

who had defied all the pressures such as honour, shame and family pride to

allow me to leave Baghdad and come to Britain to pursue my dream of

gaining a higher education, and then my caring brother, who stood beside

me when I was on the brink of giving in to social pressure. All three

departed so quickly – within the space of a few years – that I did not have

enough time to grieve for them properly as individuals in their own right.

The tragedy was so overwhelming that it shook me to my very foundations;

my dreams in life were shattered, my hopes and ambitions vanished. I felt

that I had lost my direction and began to become aware that I was going

astray. It was at this particular point that I started seriously thinking about

Islam. I needed refuge, peace and tranquillity, and it was Islam, especially

spiritual Islam, that finally restored my faith and equilibrium.

But that conviction and equilibrium started to be disturbed by two

conflicting messages: first, the attack on Islam launched by secular feminists

who declared that the Islamic system is a curse on the status of women

under its law, thus portraying Islam as an oppressor rather than as a liberator,

and urging women to release themselves from the shackles and constraints

of their religion by adopting Western secular alternatives. Second,

the message conveyed by fundamentalists, who although emphasising the

importance of Islam and using Islamic rhetoric, nonetheless depicted

Muslim women in images totally unappealing to my inquisitive mind.

Troubled by the conflict between these views and convinced by neither,

I set myself the task of embarking on a journey which would eventually

lead me to discover what Islam has in store for me and my fellow Muslim

women. Hence the book is in reality no more than a personal enquiry to

satisfy my spiritual and theological needs: a soul-searching attempt to

understand my faith (as a woman) and preserve it in a more humane form

in the face of increasing secularisation and westernisation. This personal

drive was then further accentuated by the realisation, especially during my

years of teaching, of the widespread ignorance – on the part of both

Muslim and non-Muslim women – of the proper understanding of the

position of women from the Islamic perspective. Hence my urge to meet

this demand.

The book aims primarily to investigate some of the issues currently

affecting the situation of Muslim women. It is therefore not an exhaustive

study of all issues that are of interest to Muslim women: that is certainly

beyond the scope of the present study. Rather it is a personal endeavour to

examine matters most immediate and sensitive to them.

The book singles out neither a particular group of women nor a specific

band of countries in the Muslim region. Indeed, it deals with common

issues that are of utmost concern to all Muslim women irrespective of their

geographical and cultural backgrounds. The rationale behind this approach

is that despite the huge diversity among Muslim countries, Islam has continued

to serve as a unifying factor between them, especially when it

comes to women’s issues, where little has changed regarding the laws and

regulations that are affecting their lives.

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