

## Translator's Preface

Despite increasing awareness of Islam in the West and attempts to rectify the inaccurate notions common among Westerners concerning who Muslims are, what they believe, what they do, and what they have contributed to the progress and well-being of Western civilization, there continues to be a prevailing belief among Westerners that Islam relegates women to the status of little more than "chattels" with few, if any, genuine rights. The alarming situations in Afghanistan and elsewhere and the misuse of power by various and sundry "Islamic" regimes, particularly as it affects the dignity and well-being of women, has contributed further to this distressing misconception. It is within this context that the present work finds its significance. In a well-documented, lucid manner, Dr. al-Būṭī offers readers in Western countries -- be they converts to Islam who seek a better grasp of the teachings of their new faith, students of Arabic language, literature and culture, or inquirers into Islam and its tenets -- a more accurate, comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings as they pertain to women.

Western readers and/or those who have lived in close contact with the West might find themselves reacting defensively to certain criticisms which Dr. al-Būṭī levels against "Western" ways of life and thinking. However, such reproach need not be taken as a denial of the positive aspects of Western culture, whether with respect to society as a whole or with respect to women's rights as such. One notes, for example, the positive contribution made by the West toward encouraging women's education, which is itself fully consonant with the teachings of Islam. There is, admittedly, what might be termed an "extreme" in the West whereby

women have been expected increasingly to fulfill the roles of both men and women simultaneously, for example, by working outside the home out of real or perceived financial necessity while still being required to fulfill their domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers. However, it is important to bear in mind that pressures such as these have become more prevalent in Middle Eastern societies as well due to sheer economic necessity. As a consequence, actual practice in relation to women and their rights in Middle Eastern societies has often strayed from the Islamic ideal of giving the woman a choice between practicing a profession outside the home or not doing so.

The author's primary intention is thus not to point out the failings of "the West" -- as if to suggest that Western societies represent a monolithic entity which admits of no individual or regional variations in practice, or that there is no gap in Eastern societies between the Islamic ideal on one hand, and actual practice on the other. Rather, the writer's primary aim here is to provide an accurate presentation of the teachings of Islam as they pertain to the woman and her rights. In so doing, he seeks to provide a needed corrective to prevailing notions in Western societies to the effect that injustices against women in Eastern, Islamic societies are simply outgrowths of Islam's teachings when they are, in actual fact, a tragic violation of these very teachings. For in point of fact, the teachings of the Qur'an present us with a remarkable recognition of male-female equality. In her book entitled, *Women and Gender in Islam*, Professor Leila Ahmed speaks of "Islam's ethical vision" as being

"stubbornly egalitarian."<sup>1</sup> Ahmed goes on to observe that "this egalitarianism is a consistent element of the ethical utterances of the Qur'an. Among the remarkable features of the Qur'an, particularly in comparison with the scriptural texts of other monotheistic traditions, is that women are explicitly addressed . . .", a phenomenon which affirms "the absolute moral and spiritual equality of men and women."<sup>2</sup>

We are witnessing a time when abuses of women in the name of Islam threaten to exacerbate already existing misunderstandings of what this noble religion actually teaches about women, their rights, and their role in society. Hence, it is my hope that by presenting this work for the first time to an English readership, I can offer both men and women -- be they of Western origin or Eastern, and be they Muslims or of other religious persuasions -- a reference which will provide a more accurate understanding of the active, influential place occupied by Muslim women in the world when the teachings of Islam are properly understood and applied.

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<sup>1</sup> *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.