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### **Book Review**

This is a book review of the book '*The Liberation of Women*' which is authored by Qasim Amin. The book was written in Arabic language and published in Egypt in 1899.

The book was translated into English by Samiha Sidhom Perterson and published in Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 2001.

### **Overview**

Qasim Amin (1863-1908) was an Egyptian lawyer. He is viewed as one of the first feminists in the Arab world. His book *The Liberation of Women* was written in 1899. At the time, Muslim women suffered under the cruelty of men.

In the first chapter, Amin believes that the status of women, which is lower than men, has contributed to the backwardness of civil society and the country to be undeveloped. Therefore, he assessed the status of women in Egyptian society through deep analysis; he connected many subjects together as having a role in decreasing the level of women, such as a lack of education, misunderstandings of religion, and family issues. Despite this he provides a solution for every single issue. Yet, he still believes that changes to society take time, so he described his book as a seed that can be planted into children's minds. He meant by this that one day the revolution will rise to liberate Egyptian from backwardness. In his view, the liberation of women is the first step to liberate the society of Egypt.

In his book (p.4), Amin bravely stands and challenges the scholars; he knew that one day they would accuse him of publishing heresy. He stated to them in advance: 'Yes, I have come up with a heresy, but is not against Islam. It is against our traditions and social dealing, where the demand for perfection is extolled'.

Amin always distinguishes between two matters: one is the Islamic faith; the second is the individuality of Muslims. As we can see he blames the individual Muslims and questioned them as to why they believed that their custom must never change. He blames them too when they believe their traditions are perfect in any historic time or place, while they are unaware of the instruction of content of Qur'an.

Amin (p.11-2) had great power and eloquence in defining a woman. Then he states that there is equality between men and women that both genders have the same rights in religion but the society of Egypt adopted other traditions that make women ignorant. Amin initiated the first step of liberating women, stating they must be educated as men are educated; therefore, all

mythological issues will be rid from the women's minds. Women without proper education cannot adequately to carry out her role in society or in the family.

The education of women will have a big impact on conjugal life. If the women are not educated then men will see them at a lower level; understanding between them would be impossible and their life leads into the hell rather than to be a happy life. He points out that the happiness and an understanding will come from education. It might a married couple are very kind but the way of not understand each other, thus their conjugal life leads to hell. Also the family problems make men uncomfortable and lose all his energy for work, because the knowledge cannot achieve unless the mind enjoys peace and quiet atmosphere.

In addition, Amin believes society will develop through educating women, because the children will also be educated as they are under their mother's influence. Indeed, the children spend their time with their mothers rather than their fathers who work for a long time. They are only with them for a few hours. Also, the education will make women stronger and less ignorant. Indeed, if women become educated then they will be less likely to use tricks with their husbands.

In the second chapter (p.35), 'Women and the Veil', there is a solo debate with many scholars commenting on the veil. Amin pointed out his own understanding of the veil in Egyptian society, stating it is not related to the Qur'an but it has been adopted by other cultures. Amin gives a new interpretation of the verse of the veil 'Hijab', which is different to the explanations of other scholars.

Amin (p.43) made a great point that the veil does not ignite the tribulations; in fact it hides a woman's identity by saying that she can do what she desires under the protection of her veil and nobody recognises her. In this way, the veil is not indicative of her attitude and character. Then Amin asks: "for a veiled business woman how does administer her affairs in the midst of men? How can a veiled peasant woman cultivate her land or reap her crop?"

In the third chapter, 'Women and the Nation' (p.62), he explains how the role of women in society has influenced men. Behind any successful man there is a woman. Also, he goes back to history at the period of the Prophet Muhammad, with historical evidence that women had a great role. He pointed out that two women, one the wife of the Prophet Muhammad and the second women from Medina, both participated in war. The first woman was Aisha who led the army against one caliph. She had a poetic quality when she spoke to her army. The second woman was Umm Atiyya who participated with the Prophet Muhammad in seven military expeditions and her duties were nursing the wounded, attending the sick and cooking for the warriors.

In the fourth and last chapter, 'The Family', Amin (p.79) refers to the Verse of the Qur'an and Hadith that encourages men to be kind with women and that they must both have similar rights. The man and woman should know each other before engaging in the marriage. He asks how it would be possible for a man and a woman to submit themselves to a contract that

will completely merge their two lives without having had a chance to become acquainted. He carefully assesses that marriage should be based on love and living in harmony between personalities, manners, and minds. This kind of harmony cannot be achieved if there is no chance for interacting with one other.

After that, Amin assessed two important elements in marriage: polygamy and divorce. His way of his thinking is different to the jurists who lived in the past or are living in the present. He pointed out all the reasons behind polygamy; the man should have certain reasons to marry more than one, it should not due to man's lust.

With regard divorce, he believes that the process of divorce should not be a man verbally saying 'Talaq' to his wife, or saying 'I divorced you'. Then he gave his own opinion that divorce should be an agreement between a man and a woman, with witnesses in a court. Amin wisely suggests a system for divorce that is in five stages; at one of these stages the judge has the time to ask both of them to rethink and reconcile. If the arbitrators are not successful in reconciling then the officials will permit the husband to divorce his wife. With regard, the rights of women, when she wants to be divorced from her husband, he gave a very wise solution. He stated that in the Hanafi doctrine every woman when she marries should stipulate her right to initiate divorce whenever she wishes to, or under certain specified conditions which are accepted by all the theological schools.

Although Amin is a very talented writer on history, society and the Shari'a, he has wrongly addressed two issues regarding the comparison of the West and East societies. He referred to ancient Greeks and Romans where the status of women was less than men, and the women were under the guardianship of a father rather than a husband, and after him his eldest son. This historical event is not accurate. It is obvious, in Athens the status of women were less and her guardian was the father and later was her husband, but not to eldest son when her husband died. Also, in Sparta, women had rights and a high level in society.

In Rome, the level of women in some places was lower than men and they could not vote, but the women could not be under her eldest son's guardianship when her husband died. I believe that Amin mixed this event up with the Bedouin's custom before they embraced Islam. He also (p.7) mentioned that the Egyptian tradition was inherited from the countries in which Islam spread. However, he did not refer to any of those countries.

## **Conclusion**

When you read the book you feel that you are reading multiple books in one; it is not an exaggeration to say that each paragraph of this book can be rewritten in a bigger volume. It is noted that this book is concise in comparison to many books that discuss philosophy, sociology, laws, Shari'a, history and the scholars of Mazahib; this might be a weak point for some readers as it shifts across many different subjects.

Finally, it should be noted that Amin was a reformist of the society, and he was truly right by not producing any heresies on Islam, he relied on evidence from the Qur'an for any debuts on Islamic societies. He also, made a great effort to draw attention of the wise men, writers and members of the government in Egypt to turn their attention to the condition of Egyptian women.

The book offers much food for thought for those who want to know the rights of women in, the Qur'an, Ahadith, scholars, and in the society of Egypt in the late nineteenth century.