

Women in Pre-Islamic Arab Society

İslam Öncesi Arap Toplumunda Kadın

Feyza Betül Köse

Doç. Dr., Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi, İslam Tarihi Ana Bilim Dalı
Assoc. Prof., Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University Faculty of Theology, Department of Islamic
History

Kahramanmaraş / Turkey

feyzabetulkose@yahoo.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3249-4194>

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Abstract

Understanding the nature and novelty of Islam's social regulations requires recognizing the period that preceded them. Knowing the position of women, who make up half of the society, in social life is one of the ways to get to know that society. By historically analyzing issues like the perception of women in the pre-Islamic Arab social structure, whether women existed as an individual, their activity, how they defined themselves, and whether they took their position for granted we can gain a deeper understanding of women's positions in this social context. The areas where we can best observe pre-Islamic Arab women are religious life, family life, the environment of struggle and warfare, which is an integral part of this period, and commercial activities, which are the most significant means of livelihood. Our research, conducted within these frameworks, has revealed that it is not possible to define pre-Islamic Arab women in a single way, that they lived different realities, and that these realities in which each of them lived affected their position and the way they were viewed.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sirah, Women, Medina, Pre-Islamic, Arab, Hijâz.

Öz

İslâm'ın toplumsal alandaki düzenlemelerinin mahiyeti, ne ölçüde yeni olduğu, kendisinden önceki dönemin tanınması ile bilinebilir. Toplumun yarısını oluşturan kadınların, sosyal hayattaki konumlarını bilmek, o toplumu tanımanın yollarından biridir. İslâm öncesi Arap toplum yapısında kadın algısı, kadının bir birey olarak var olup olmadığı, etkinliği, kendisini nasıl tanımladığı, konumunu kanıksayıp kanıksamadığı gibi meseleler tarih usûlü ve perspektifiyle ele alındığında bu toplumsal düzlemde kadının ne olduğuna dair daha derin bir anlayış elde edebiliriz. İslâm öncesinde Arap kadını en iyi izleyebileceğimiz alanlar dinî hayat, aile hayatı, bu dönemin ayrılmaz bir parçası olan mücadele ve savaş ortamı, en önemli geçim aracı olan ticarî faaliyetlerdir. Bu çerçevelerde yürütülen araştırmamız, İslâm öncesindeki Arap kadını tek şekilde tanımlamanın mümkün olmadığını, onların farklı gerçeklikler yaşadığını ve kadınların her birinin içinde bulunduğu gerçekliklerin, kendilerinin konumlarını ve kendilerine bakışı etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur.

Keywords: Siyer, Kadın, Medine, İslâm Öncesi, Arap, Hicâz.

INTRODUCTION

Assuming that Islam is clearly separated from the previous period and that the later is completely different from what came before is a result of the political and social experiences of Muslims over the past two centuries. In the face of this backwardness of Islamic societies, which were constantly going backwards, attempts were made to show that there was a contrast between Islam and its predecessors. This distinction aims emphasize that the problem stemmed not from religion but from practice and to dictate that Islam actually envisioned a perfect order.

This perspective also influences the view of perspective is women in pre-Islamic Arab society. The assumption that women were nothing in this period, that their existence was out of the question, and that they found their value only with Islam is a reflection of the experience of the last two centuries of Islam. The idea that women were nothing in this period, that their existence was out of the question, and that they reached their value only through Islam, is a reflection of the experience of Islam in the last two centuries. What determines whether this idea is an assumption or a historical fact is the studies carried out according to the historical method.

This study, which is based on analysis, aims to analyze the identity and position of women in pre-Islamic Arab society from a historical perspective and to convey the facts as they are. The temporal scope of our study spans from the period close to the emergence of Islam, when Qusayy settled the Quraysh in Mecca, until the acceptance of Islam by the Arabs. Geographically, the study is confined to Hijāz region.

1. THE PERCEPTION OF WOMAN IN THE MENTALITY OF ARAB

The position of women in the pre-Islamic Arab social structure was determined by the conditions of the environment in which the women lived and the mentality of the society rather than their own individual actions. First of all, it should be noted that there is no single social category into which all women can be placed. In addition, it is only a prejudice that women categorically have a lower status than men. Because, as in every society, in the pre-Islamic Arab society, there were strong women and weak men, and in this case, women were not in a lower position than men. Even the fact that free women have a higher status than slave men in a social structure consisting of frees and slaves makes it impossible to discuss about a generalized status of women in this society.

The factors that determined the status of women in pre-Islamic Arab society were whether they were free or not, the position of their families, their lineage and their financial status. There is a difference in status between powerful, noble and rich women and men and women who do not have these. The lists in Islamic sources such as "Women Who Have the Right to Divorce Due to Their Value and Honor"¹ on the one hand, point to the existence of women of higher status, but on the other hand, it also reveals that the number of these women, "in terms of holding the right to divorce", is too small to allow them to be listed.

¹ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Umayya ibn 'Amr Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadida, nd.), 398.

When it is mentioned that free women and free men are equal in terms of their social status, it means that they are compared in terms of social power and position, it is clear that men are much more ahead and have a say and decision-making position in the family and social structures. This position of men can be seen as a result of the conditions of the period that made physical strength the most important condition for survival and a better life. The man who took on the responsibility of providing for the family and fought when necessary was given a higher position than the woman who did not have a vital function for the survival of the family.

Mentioned above the conditions of the life were also the reason why it is desired to have a son instead of a daughter. While the daughters were dysfunctional in protecting the tribe from external attacks and participating in combats when necessary, sons carried these responsibilities. The more sons there were, the more powerful the father would be. Additionally, in case of attack, the girls could fall into the hands of the enemy, be captured, sold or turned into concubines. Although the same situation existed for men, even if they were not freed, the issue did not have an honor dimension. It was possible for girls who were slaves or concubines to have sexual intercourse with their owners, and this added a dimension of honor to the issue. These situations were not acceptable to the girl's father, brothers or guardian. This was why some men felt anger and shame at the birth of their daughters.²

The female infanticide was also the way the problems we mentioned are solved by the male mind. The father preferred to kill her when she was still young rather than having a daughter that he would be ashamed of in the future. The fact that the issue is reflected in Qur'ānic verses does not mean that it is a general practice.³ Research indicates that urban tribes such as the Quraysh resorted to it to a lesser extent, while rural tribes such as the Temīm resorted to it to a much greater extent.⁴ This is a consequence of the fact that rural tribes face more conflicts than urban ones and see their daughters in danger. These issues also point to the Arab understanding of honor. Apart from what we have mentioned, another reflection of the perception of honor is that the capture and enslaving of their women by the enemy was considered an embarrassment and the desire to prevent this was an important source of motivation in the battles.⁵

Another consequence of living conditions was that the mothers who had children, especially sons, were more respected than those who did not have children. In the conditions of that period and geography, the abundance of male children was one of the most significant requirements for survival and a good life. In this environment, women were expected to give birth to as many children as possible. Women who were unable to do so had no contribution to the family other than performing daily chores. Carrying out these tasks did not bring them any respect. It should not be thought that all mothers who give birth to boys have equal dignity. Here too, criteria such as family,

² al-Nahl 16/58-59; al-Zukhrūf 43/17.

³ al-Takwīr 81/8-9.

⁴ Ālūsī, Maḥmūd Shukru al-Baghdādī, *Bulūgh al-Arab fī ma'rifah aḥwāl al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Ilmiyyah, nd.), III, 42.

⁵ 'Amr ibn Kulthūm, *Mu'allaqa* (Abu Dhabi: Dār al-Kutub al-Waṭaniyya, 2012), 63.

nobility and wealth came into play. However, it is also reported that Arabs describe women who have at least three respected sons as “honorable women”.⁶

Another factor contributing to the negative perception of girls is that the predominant means of livelihood involved jobs requiring physical strength. Activities like hunting, marauding and grazing which were more common in rural tribes, were the main means of livelihood in Hıjāz society and could be carried out by men. Likewise, trade, which is the most important occupation of urban dwellers, was also a male occupation due to the conditions of the period, which with some exceptions, as it required travel to distant towns. There were exceptions where women who were unable to go on commercial journeys themselves would send male representatives in their place. Both the frequent conflicts, especially in rural areas, and the fact that important means of livelihood require strength and security had caused women to not be seen as functional as men in the families.⁷ This view of the women was shaped not by ontological factors, but by the real and practical considerations.

The perception of concubines, slave women, in pre-Islamic Arabs, where the society was legally divided into freemen and slaves, was similar to that of other societies close to their region.⁸ In this understanding, concubines were considered as the property. These women, over whom the owner had full power of disposition, were no different from other goods and properties.⁹ They could be bought and sold, given as gifts, and given in exchange for loans.¹⁰ Acts that were considered crimes if committed against free people were not considered crimes when committed against the concubines. Only, if the act was committed by someone other than the concubine’s owner, the owner could demand compensation because he perceived the act as damage to her own property. While the same situation applies to the slaves, what distinguishes the concubines from the slaves is that their owner can use their sexuality as he wishes. Therefore, the concubine did not have the authority to make decisions on her own body, and as a commodity, as the owner changed, her sexuality was also used by the new owner. This often resulted in the sexuality of a concubine changing owner being used by many men, which was legitimate according to the norms of that society.¹¹ Even though concubinage was seen as legitimate, settling for the concubines instead of free women was considered a sign of weakness. This was also the reason why children born to them had a lower social status than children whose mothers were free.¹²

The fact that most of the idols in the Arab polytheistic belief were imagined as female did not affect the perception of women of society. The identification of women with fertilities due to their fertility was led to the perception of the gods, from whom fertility is hoped for in their acts in worldly

⁶ Ibn Hābib, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar*, 455.

⁷ Also see. Adnan Demircan, *Cahiliye’den İslām’a Kadın ve Aile* (Istanbul: Beyan, 2015), 169-171.

⁸ See. Feyza Betül Köse, *Hız. Peygamber Döneminde Cariye* (İstanbul: Selenge, 2022), 18-26.

⁹ Muḥammad Ibn Sa’d ibn Manī’ al-Hashimī al-Başrī Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanjī, 2001), X, 283.

¹⁰ Köse, *Cariye*, 54-58.

¹¹ Abū Bakr ibn Hammām al-Şan’ānī ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *al-Muşannaḥ* (Beirut: Maktabah al-İslāmī, 1970), VII, 133-134; Köse, *Cariye*, 88-99.

¹² Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr Ṭaberī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭaberī* (Egypt: Dār al-Maārif, 1966), II, 211.

life, as female, which was not a concept unique to the Arabs. In fact, it is contrary to the nature of faith to reason on inherited belief and relate it to lived practice. Therefore, apart from the similarity in fertility, it was not possible for the pre-Islamic Arabs to establish any connection between their idols on the divine plane and the woman with whom they shared the same plane, and the fact that the idols were female did not affect their perception of the value of the female gender. In fact, the verse that says, “*What! For you the male sex, and for Him, the female? Behold, such would be indeed a division most unfair!*”¹³ condemns those who attribute boys to themselves because they provide power and wealth, while attributing girls to Allah who are far from these functions.¹⁴ In a way, perceiving idols as “goddesses” did not mean that they considered the female gender valuable, but on the contrary, they avoided associating them with themselves.

Female oracles had an important place in the perception of prophecy of the pre-Islamic Arab society. In fact, this reputation is not unique to them; throughout history, different societies have seen women as an important authority in divination.¹⁵ The basis for this is the understanding that women have stronger intuition and are more open to the inspiration of the gods.¹⁶ The Arabs also believed that women’s prophecies were more effective and more likely to come true in the future. *Sirah* sources narrate many reports about Arabs resorting to female oracles. They consulted not only female oracles from their own tribes, but also oracles from other tribes, many of whom lived in distant places.¹⁷ Female oracles were consulted for purposes such as obtaining information about the future, finding out the location of lost belongings, asking them to be arbitrators in disputes,¹⁸ and requesting them to solve their problems.¹⁹ The fact that the female oracles were both transmitters of invisible knowledge of the world and arbitrators is not a matter to be evaluated in terms of their status as women. What is valorized here is not gender but confidence in the prophecy.

2. WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

The way pre-Islamic Arab women positioned themselves vis-à-vis the divine power, their religious lives, and their presence in the public religious sphere reflect both their own and the perception of women of the society.

There was no difference between men and women in fulfilling religious requirements. There were no religious practices in which men were responsible and women were not. The only exception

¹³ al-Najm 53/21-22.

¹⁴ Also see: al-Zuhrûf 43/17.

¹⁵ Robert Graves, *Yunan Mitleri –Tanrılar, Kahramanlar, Söylenceler–*, trans. Uğur Akpur (İstanbul: Say Yay., 2010), 19; Felicien Challege, *Dinler Tarihi*, trans. Samih Tiryakioğlu (İstanbul: Varlık Yay., nd.), 143; Julian Baldick, *Hayvan ve Şaman*, trans. Bahadır Vural (İstanbul: Hil Yay., 2000), 145.

¹⁶ Merlin Stone, *Tanrılar Kadıncı*, trans. Nilgün Şarman (İstanbul: Payel, 2000), 24.

¹⁷ Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sirah al-nabawiyah* (Tanta: Dār al-Şahāba li al-Turath, 1995), I, 266.

¹⁸ Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn Yasār Ibn Ishāq, *Sirah ibn Ishāq* (Morocco: Maṭbaā Muḥammad al-Ḥāmis, 1976), 3-4; Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, I, 65; Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allah Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah wa mā jāa fihā min al-āthār* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, nd.), II, 44.

¹⁹ Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, I, 69-70.

is that women during their menstrual period should not have approached or touched idols.²⁰ Apart from this, they would also circumambulate around their idols,²¹ visit idols in relatively distant places with men,²² and perform other acts of worship. Men and women were inseparable during worship. In addition, young girls were also attending the community worships.²³ Women also contributed to the maintenance and service of holy sites, working alongside men on some works such as the reconstruction of the Ka'ba.²⁴ Women who sacrifice to their deities, swear oaths in their name, and fight for their religion did not have a different perception from men in terms of positioning themselves as servants and followers of a religion vis-à-vis their gods. The fact that their offerings were not rejected by their wives reveals that their presence in this area was also recognized by the society. It is not possible to say that this situation in worship was the same in all aspects of religious life. Prohibiting certain sacred things from women was a behavior seen in this society and condemned by the Quran. The prohibition of women from eating certain animal meats that were considered sacred and their allocation to men were condemned in verses 139-140 of the Surah al-An'ām.²⁵

One of the most important worships of the pre-Islamic period was the pilgrimage. The women who came to Mecca from outside for pilgrimage or circumambulation reveals that for some, distance was not seen as an obstacle to their religious life, and it is also noteworthy that women in the conditions of that period risked this journey. This also brings to the agenda the privileged status of the Quraysh and their allied tribes in circumambulating the Ka'ba, ihram and pilgrimage, that is, being *aḥmasī*. If Quraysh women married men who were not *aḥmasīs*, their children would inherit the rights of the people of ḥums.²⁶ Here, there is a situation where tribes other than Quraysh are subject to Quraysh. On the other hand, the obligation of non-*aḥmasī* not to circumambulate with their own clothes, to buy clothes from an *aḥmasī* for circumambulation, or to circumambulate naked if they could not, was also valid for women.²⁷ This practice is an indication that tribal status affects religious life and women were not exempt from this. It is seen that some women are ashamed to show their bodies, so they circumambulate at night, and some cover their private parts with their hands or fringes made of leather, and criticize those who look at them.²⁸

²⁰ Abū al-Mundhir Hishām ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* (Egypt: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 2000), 32.

²¹ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 35.

²² Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, I, 132.

²³ Abū Wahb ibn Ḥujr ibn al-Ḥārith Imru' al-Qays, *Dīwān Imru' al-Qays* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 2004), 16.

²⁴ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrah ibn Ishāq*, 58.

²⁵ "They say: 'What is in the wombs of such and such cattle is specially reserved (for food) for our men and forbidden to our women'; but if it is still-born then all have shares therein. For their (false) attribution (of superstitions to God): He will soon punish them: for He is full of Wisdom and Knowledge. Lost are those who slay their children from folly without knowledge and forbid food which God hath provided for them inventing (lies) against God. They have indeed gone astray and heeded no guidance."

²⁶ Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, I, 194.

²⁷ Abū 'Abd Allah 'Isma'īl ibn Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, *el-Cāmi 'u'ṣ-ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), "Ḥajj", 91 (No. 142).

²⁸ Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, I, 182.

The significance of the religion in the eyes of a person varies from person to person. As such, it is not possible to establish a universal rule on this issue. It is observed that some women in the pre-Islamic period were deeply religious and fought for their faith, while others did not view through a religious perspective. Women who opposed strongly against their husbands, children and close relatives for abandoning their religion put their religion even before their family ties. Women who reacted to the destruction of idols during the spread of Islam can be characterized as sincere about their religion.²⁹

3. WOMEN IN FAMILY LIFE

Pre-Islamic Arab society had a patriarchal structure and the main person in the family was the man. Marriages took place upon the request of the man, however, the woman was subject to the decision of her guardian. Although some narrations indicate that some parents asked the girl for her opinion, this was not common. There was no question of the girls act against the decisions of their parents.

The most important reason for the marriage among Arabs was to have children. For this reason, virgins were especially preferred as wives. It is seen that women who were within the reproductive age, even if they are widows, are much more preferred than those who are not. This was also reflected in the mihr amount determined for women; virgins and underage girls' dowries were kept higher. This was also reflected in the dowry (mahr) amount determined for women; virgins and underage girls' dowries were kept higher.³⁰

In this period, the general practice was that a request for marriage was made to the girl, and if the guardian accepted, the marriage would take place by paying the dowry. In addition, there were other types of marriage that were not considered acceptable in the society, but there were examples of them. With these marriages, it was possible for a woman to have sex with more than one man and attribute the child to one of them, and for the man to send his wife to a noble person to get pregnant from him.³¹ It is more accurate to see all of these as the legitimization of a temporary union in the eyes of society, rather than the establishment of married life.

Some men marrying orphan girls or widows under their protection without giving them a dowry, marrying them to someone they want, or never allowing them to marry but inheriting their property were common practices in this society.³² In this situation, women were also being abused in this way by the only man they could turn to. The same was true for stepmothers. The man has the right to marry his stepmother, who was under his father's marriage when he died, without her consent.³³

²⁹ See for a detailed information Emine Peköz, *H. Peygamber Döneminde Kadının Dinî Hayatı* (İstanbul: Kuramer, 2023), 37-43.

³⁰ Jawād 'Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-'Arab qabl al-Islām* (Intishārāt Sharif al-Raḍī, 1961), I, 635-636.

³¹ Bukhārī, "Nikāh", 36 (No. 60).

³² al-Nisā' 4/19.

³³ al-Nisā' 4/22.

All these types of marriage show that in the pre-Islamic Arab society, the women were passive and did not have the decision-making authority during the establishment of the family. The passive status of the women continued throughout family life. It was normal in this society that women were not considered “individuals” by their husbands and did not have the right to have a say in family decisions. As a clear example of passivity, a woman cannot claim any rights and cannot end her marriage when her husband imposes a sexual boycott called “*ḡihār*”.³⁴ We see that domestic violence against women was also intense and that women were exposed to economic, psychological, sexual and physical violence. We must say that this situation is taken for granted by the society, including some of the women who are subjected to domestic violence.³⁵

However, it should be noted that there were also dominant women who have influence over their husbands.³⁶ This might be due to the character of the husband, or the fact that the wife comes from a rich and powerful family. In addition, the fact that the family’s means of income was male-dominated activities, such as trade, or jobs in which women were involved, such as agriculture, affected the woman’s relationship with her husband to a certain extent. This difference can be observed in the families of Mecca and Medina. In Mecca, where men controlled the means of subsistence, women were silent toward their husbands. On the other hand, the situation of women in the families there was relatively better because the agriculture-based economic structure of Medina included women in the process.³⁷ However, this should not be considered valid for inheritance and divorce rights.

When the marriages ended in divorce or due to the death of a spouse, women generally reverted to a passive role. The divorce decision was made by the man. Regardless of the extent to which a woman may have suffered in her marriage, it was not possible for her to initiate a divorce. The woman had to stay married as long as her husband wanted the marriage to continue. A man could divorce his wife without any justification. There was no limit to the number of divorces. In addition, having the right to divorce was also turned into a means of oppressing women by some men. These men were divorcing their wives, but returning to them during the waiting period (*iddah*) and divorcing them again.³⁸ In this case, she was neither married to him nor separated from him. It is also seen that some noble women, especially in Mecca, had the right to divorce.³⁹ It should be noted that this is not a general, but rather a limited practice. Rare examples among the Arabs in Medina show that a woman accepts a marriage proposal on the condition that she has the right to divorce before marriage.⁴⁰ However, we should also point out that the woman’s possession of this right does not invalidate the man’s right to divorce.

³⁴ Jawād ‘Alī, *Mufaṣṣal*, V, 551.

³⁵ See for a detailed information Feyza Betül Köse, “Cahiliye’den İslâm’a Kadına Yönelik Şiddet”, *Çukurova Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi (ÇÜİFD)* 18/1 (2018), 73-94.

³⁶ Abu Lahab’s wife Ummu Jamil and Abu Sufyan’s wife Hind can be given as examples of dominant women.

³⁷ Abū al-Ḥusain al-Ḥajjāj Muslim, *el-Cāmi‘u’s-ṣaḥīḥ* (İstanbul: Çağrı, 1992), “Ṭalāq”, 34; Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā ibn Sawra al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan* (İstanbul: Çağrı, 1992), “Tafsir”, 65 (No. 3318).

³⁸ Mālik ibn Anas (İstanbul: Çağrı, 1992), “Ṭalāq”, 80; Tirmidhī, “Ṭalāq”, 16 (No. 1192).

³⁹ Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar*, 398.

⁴⁰ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah*, I, 184.

Pre-Islamic Arab women could not inherit from their deceased husband, father or male relative, and her husband's male relatives could marry her against her will. This indicates that it is accepted as an inheritance in a way. In the event of the death of a father who had no sons, no matter how many daughters and wives he had, none of them were considered heirs, and the father's male relatives received the entire inheritance. A reflection of this on social life was that widows and orphans who lacked financial means made new marriages in order to overcome economic difficulties. In many of these marriages, there were conditions that were unfavorable to women, such as low mahr and equivalence problems. The narrations show that, as an exceptional case, some men also divided their inheritance to their daughters and divided the inheritance in the ratio of two for sons and one for daughters.⁴¹

Women had no authority to appeal to if they were victimized by their husbands or male relatives. Tribal chiefs or elders also did not take the initiative in this regard. The strong families of women in this situation could protect them from their husbands to some extent. However, women were generally subject to the mercy of their husbands.⁴² The fact that there were women who complained to the Prophet about the victimization inflicted on them by their husbands or relatives suggests that Arab women considered themselves victimized even before Islam, but their lack of recourse prevented them from voicing their grievances.

While a man whose wife dies does not mourn, which involves various restrictions and rituals, the fact that women whose husband dies remains in such a state of mourning for a year is important in terms of women's social positioning and society's view of women. These deprivations of the woman, who should not do anything related to personal care and adornment during the mourning process and should not go out unless she had to,⁴³ show that she carried the responsibilities of this marriage for a long time even after the marriage ends with death.

4. WOMEN IN SOCIAL LIFE

In pre-Islamic Arab society, the social status and presence of the woman in social life differed. The fact that a woman is free, urbanized, belongs to a noble and powerful family, and that her husband is well-off in terms of lineage and material wealth are factors that elevate her social strata. Therefore, generalizations about women in this society could be wrong.

The command to Prophet's wives to be chaste, and not to be as uncovered as the women of the Jāhiliyya,⁴⁴ indicates that some of the pre-Islamic Arab women were in an undesirable situation in terms of chastity and respectability. However, not all Jāhiliyya women are meant here, but a certain group. Because the narrations show the existence of respectable, chaste women who protected themselves from immorality in this period. We should even say that this is the general situation of free women. In addition to the fact that the phrase "to be uncovered" in the verse does not apply to all women, another point that should be kept in mind is that the limits of veiling prescribed by Islam are not the same as the veiling phenomenon in the pre-Islamic period. The narrations show that free

⁴¹ Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar*, 236.

⁴² See. Demircan, *Cahiliye'den İslâm'a Kadın ve Aile*, 57.

⁴³ Ālūsī, Maḥmūd Shukru al-Baghdādī, *Bulūgh al-Arab*, II, 50-51.

⁴⁴ al-Aḥzāb 33/33.

women in the pre-Islamic period wore a shawl-like covering on their heads, although it was not a strict requirement, but they generally did not cover the upper part of their neck and breasts with it, and that the covering was a traditional phenomenon and there was no rule other than custom regarding the parts that should be covered. Some women are also seen covering their faces with veils.⁴⁵ It is known that concubines did not wear veils. The relevance of veiling to social life is, of course, that women cover themselves when they go out into the social sphere.

We can say that women present in nearly all aspects of social life. However, it is also a fact that women were absent from decision-making centers such as the Dār al-Nadwa. However, noble and respected women from some prominent families were known to express their opinions and shape the decisions in important decision-making processes. Moreover, there were no restrictions on women's participation in social gatherings, entertainments, or bazaars. Presence of women in these settings was determined by their personal preferences. In such environments, it was considered shameful by society for men to stare at women.⁴⁶ It is seen that this perception of shame is a deterrent for women from their own tribe, and when it comes to people from other tribes, especially unfamiliar people, some people may resort to actions such as harassing, kidnapping, and forcibly detaining women. It was not uncommon in this society to harass women who were not aḥmasīs and who came for pilgrimage with their gaze,⁴⁷ to kidnap free women from tribes residing in distant lands and take them into their possession,⁴⁸ and to take women who visited Makkah on various occasions to their homes and forcibly detain them.⁴⁹

Periods of struggle such as conflict and war are processes in which women participate in various ways. In the Arab geography, where inter-tribal conflicts frequently occur, the important thing was for men to hold weapons and fight, just like in other regions. However, women also took part in the fighting alongside them, taking care of treatment and logistics. What should be emphasized is the presence of women in the troops to encourage them to fight. This encouragement could be in the form of singing poems and stirring up the men, or in the form of condemning and dissuading those who tried to escape in the battlefield.⁵⁰ In addition, it is also seen that women were brought to the battlefield with the army in some wars so that men could fight better and give their full strength to the struggle.⁵¹ Because ensuring that the women there did not fall into the hands of the enemy and were not captured or concubined was a factor that increased the motivation of the men for the war.⁵²

In these processes, women have also been at the forefront of expressing joy in case of victory and anger and sadness in case of defeat, and have influenced the men and the society with their reactions. It is understood that the reactions of the women after being defeated, who shave their

⁴⁵ Abū al-Ḥasan 'Izzah al-Dīn 'Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fi'l-tārīkh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1987), I, 467.

⁴⁶ Jawād 'Alī, *Mufaṣṣal*, IV, 617.

⁴⁷ Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, I, 182.

⁴⁸ Abū al-Abbās Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Jābir Baladhūrī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), I, 489.

⁴⁹ Baladhūrī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*, II, 281.

⁵⁰ Muḥammad ibn 'Umar ibn Vāqid Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* (Beirut: Ālam al-Kutub, 1983), I, 201-203.

⁵¹ Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, III, 886.

⁵² Ṭaberī, *Tārīkh al-Ṭaberī*, III, 288; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fi'l-tārīkh*, II, 220.

heads,⁵³ sing elegies to provoke revenge, or humiliate men, far from being ignored, have a significant impact on the society.⁵⁴ At the same time, such a woman would not cry because it would be seen as a sign of weakness, and this was also a psychological pressure. It is also seen that poetry is a weapon used by women in attacks on their tribes, and in this way they affect not only the men of their own tribe but also the enemy.⁵⁵

Pre-Islamic Arab women, who did not hesitate to show their reactions not only in the war but also in daily life, in the situations where they were not satisfied, argued with men and criticized them when they deemed it necessary. This was not an unusual situation in the society. Their reactions to the Prophet during the preaching of Islam are clear examples of this.

In pre-Islamic Mecca, where trade was the main source of livelihood, there were also women who were part of these activities. The fact that Khadijah was active in the foreign trade of Mecca and that this was not an find odd situation by the society indicates that it is possible that other women were also involved in this business. However, due to the conditions of the period, the fact that Khadijah carried out the caravan trade outside Mecca through her male representatives, rather than herself, shows that women were more of a financier in foreign trade. We should point out that there were women who did small-scale business with their own efforts or earned money by manual labor,⁵⁶ although their numbers were quite low.

Despite the scarcity of merchant women, there were many women who participated in this field as a commercial commodity. These were concubines who were deprived of their freedom. These women were an important part of this activity as they were bought and sold. In addition to changing hands in domestic trade, concubines were also brought from other regions and countries and sold in these regions. It is known that there were sections devoted to the trade of concubines in fairs and permanent markets. The youth, health, beauty and white race of these women were the factors that increased their prices.⁵⁷

Another way in which concubines were involved in commercial life was as employees who earned money for their masters. Since concubines were the property of their owner, it is seen that some masters used them to earn money. Most of the concubines employed for this purpose brought money from the prostitution sector. Although this was a common situation in society, it was not considered a moral behavior. This is shown by the fact that al-Walīd b. Mughīra, while requesting financial aid from the Meccans during the reconstruction of the Ka'ba, asked that the income from the earnings of prostitutes not be mixed into this sacred work.⁵⁸ We could not find any narration indicating whether the concubines employed in this job felt uncomfortable with their situation. However, the fact that the concubines employed by 'Abd Allah ibn Ubayy for this purpose in

⁵³ Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'il ibn 'Umar al-Qurashī Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1990), III, 308.

⁵⁴ Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, I, 122.

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 35.

⁵⁶ Labīd b. Rabīa, *Dīvānu Labīd b. Rabīa* (Beyrut: Dāru'l-Ma'rife, 2004), 108.

⁵⁷ See for a detailed information Köse, *Cariye*, 54-56.

⁵⁸ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīrah ibn Ishāq*, 84.

Medina complained about their situation to The Prophet after Islam⁵⁹ suggests that at least some of them were not satisfied with their situation before Islam, but the fact that such a complaint had no response in society silenced them.

It is necessary to focus on meetings and ceremonies because they reflect the perception and positioning of the society. Women's participation in entertainment, weddings and funerals sheds light on pre-Islamic Arab society in this respect. The participation of women in entertainments differed depending on whether they were free or concubine. It was not possible for free women to sing or dance in front of the public in entertainment assemblies. These jobs were specific to concubines, and concubines who were skilled in singing and playing musical instruments were sometimes brought from other towns.⁶⁰ The reason why free people did not engage in this work was that these acts and their perpetrators were not considered respectable, there was harassment against those who performed music, and free women wanted to be protected from them. Concubinage and respectability were two concepts that were not brought together in this society. Free women could attend these meetings as spectators if they wished.

Funerals were ceremonies in which everyone, both men and women could participate. There were no restrictions on women following the corpse to the grave. In these ceremonies, women's crying, lamenting, and showing their sadness by tearing their headscarves were identified with them.⁶¹ The perception that "the more respected the deceased person was, the higher the level of grief was shown for him/her" was dominant in this society.⁶² Narrations indicate that women often showed this sadness in a way that harms them to a certain extent. Some of these women were women who cried and screamed at funerals for a fee.⁶³ Such rituals have been identified with this period to the extent that they were described as the work of ignorance by Islam.⁶⁴

"Mourning", which extends for a long time after the burial, was not only a period of personal sadness, but also a process that had its counterpart in pre-Islamic Arab social life and was considered important.⁶⁵ In this society, where boasting, being proud and having a reputation were extremely important, mourning was an indicator of the social prestige of the person for whom it was mourned. Mourning, on the other hand, was a responsibility assigned to women and expected of them. Therefore, mourning for a dead person also had reflections on the position and importance of women in society. The elegy sung by the mourning the woman should not only be appropriate for the dead, but should also reveal skill and power of the woman in this regard.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

⁵⁹ Muslim, "Tafsir", 26; Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Naisābūrī Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1991), 336-337.

⁶⁰ See. Köse, *Cariye*, 103-111.

⁶¹ Ṭarafah ibn 'Abd, *Dīwān Ṭarafah ibn 'Abd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002), 29.

⁶² Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyyah*, I, 187.

⁶³ Jawād 'Alī, *Mufaṣṣal*, I, 156.

⁶⁴ Muslim, "Janāiz", 38; Tirmīdhī, "Janāiz", 12 (No. 984).

⁶⁵ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyyah*, I, 188.

⁶⁶ See. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyyah*, I, 221 ff.

The emphasis on “individuality” brought by modernity seems to have brought the anachronistic perspective to the center of interpretation when examining women in the past. Judging the social status of the women in the past with value judgments of the present makes it difficult to reach the truth. It is more reasonable to evaluate a society within the framework of its own criteria and conditions. The position of pre-Islamic women can only be determined by taking into account the conditions of that period. The criteria of the modern world are far from decisive in this regard.

The generalizing approach in the historical research is one of the factors that causes misinterpretation of facts and events. It does not seem possible to evaluate single examples of the situation of women as the phenomenon of the entire Arab society. Narrations on the subject do not allow for such generalizations. As in every society, different realities and different lifestyles existed in the pre-Islamic Arab society. Individual, familial, material and social differences differentiated women’s realities from each other then, as they do today.

The financial situation and social position of women’s families, whether women are mothers or not, and their age determine to what extent their existence and opinions are respected. Therefore, it is a reality of pre-Islamic Arab society that women from rich and prestigious families were respected more than women from poor and ordinary families; those who were mothers and those who were not; those who gave birth to sons and those who did not; that older people were respected more than young people. When men and women shared equal individual, familial, social, and material statuses, it is certain that men were more respected in this society.

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