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Djamila HANAFI
Université d'Alger2

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The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama and women

Djamila HANIFI

Université d'Alger2

Abstract

The Algerian women's situation has witnessed, over decades, great transformations and improvements in many fields; such as education, economy and politics. However women remain in the eyes of the Algerian society as a sex of a secondary position. This wrongheaded view is strongly rooted into the Algerian mind, and undoubtedly the inherited traditions and customs are its essential source. I would like to argue in this essay that this traditional background has been deeply-rooted into people's minds many decades ago by the Association of Algerian Muslim "Ulama", the most distinctive and prominent school in Algeria's intellectual landscape. In fact, it has laid the foundations of the moral, political and social reform in Algeria prior to the end of the French colonisation era. I will begin by Abdelhamid ibn Badis's conception of the education of women and their role in society. This conception was basically founded on religious convictions, but in fact it takes its origin from social traditions. I will introduce the debate about Islam's position towards women between Abdelhamid ibn Badis (1889-1940) and the Tunisian reformer Etahar Elhaddad (1899-1935). Then I will examine the situation of women in Algeria, more than seven decades after the death of Abdelhamid ibn Badis, an emblematic figure in the history of modern Algeria, sketching the measures that the government has realised in order to improve human rights and especially women's rights, ending with a conclusion to assert that it is so urgent to distinguish Islam from customs and social traditions.

Keywords: woman, tradition, education, rights, reform

Before debating the main topic of this paper, I would like to briefly introduce the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, and its fundamental principles. It is a religious institution founded by Abdelhamid Ibn Badis in 1931. It gathered a group of prominent scholars, like Mohamed Elbachir El Ibrahimi, Mohamed Amin El Amoudi, Tayeb El Oqbi, and Moubarek El Mili. Under the influence and inspiration of the religious Salafist movement founded earlier in Egypt by Sheikh Muhamed 'Abduh, and Rashid Ridha,

the scholars of (AAMU) assign to themselves the task of achieving the intellectual, moral, political, and social reformation in Algeria.

Sheikh Abdalhamid Ibn Badis vigorously stands against two opponents:

- The Maraboutic or the local mystic holy men who moved away from the proper teachings of Islam and corrupted religion's principles by spreading myths, heretic superstitions, and delusions chiefly among the communities living in the countryside, making social and religious life dormant and the minds of people rigid, their main concern was confined to living and waiting for death as hermits.
- The educational policy of The French Government that made big efforts to wreck the Algerian identity and to keep people away from their religion, language, and traditional values in order to fuse them into the French culture. It is noticeable that sheikh Ibn Badis openly opposed the Algerian politicians who advocated Algeria's assimilation into France.

He considered that the elimination of this situation requires reformation, and the reform itself requires good education. In other words, at that time, sheikh Ibn Badis believed that the suitable social change cannot be achieved by means of revolution but by means of educational reform. He stressed the educational reform because it will lead to the preservation of the national identity and its main components. At the same time, it will teach people the pure values of Islam and purify their minds from ignorance and superstitions.

The reformist discourse of the Algerian Association of Muslim Ulama was founded on three fundamental grounds, political, moral, and social.

The political grounds were:

- Brotherhood and peace amongst people
- Revival of nationalism's spirit
- Improvement of the mutual bilateral relations between Algeria and France
- Love Algeria our fathers' land, and do the utmost effort to serve it.
- Ask the French government to raise the level of education in respect of its three famous principles: freedom, equality, fraternity
- Provide opportunities for Algerians to be a political and an economic partner.

- Algeria is a weak and an underdeveloped nation, therefore, there is a vital and urgent necessity to be within the confines of a strong nation like France, and to establish with it relations of interest, respect and good will.
- Refusal of the assimilation of Algerians into the French nation, because Algeria has its own religious values, and its proper identity. And he explicitly said: “this Algerian Islamic nation is not France, and it cannot be France, and it could not become France, even if it wishes it” (Ibn Badis’s Writings, 1997, p309).

The moral ground was:

- The purification and renewal of Islam’s values.
- Opposition to the corrupted morality and customs, especially the heretics introduced to religion by perverse soufi trends, which led to the intellectual and scientific stagnation of the whole nation.
- The urge to acquire useful knowledge and useful work

The social ground was:

- Criticism the rulers, senators, judges, scientists, and all people who could have the charge of the public concern, and economic, scientific, social and political affairs.

After this brief introduction, I would like to focus on the role that Abdelhamid Ibn Badis assigns to women. But before tackling this subject I would like to express my astonishment once finding that Ibn Badis has given just one lecture about the education of women, more than this the title suggested to that lecture was: “The Algerian Muslim man”! (Ibn Badis’s Writings, 1997, p464).

There is no doubt for Ibn Badis that “women are sisters of men” and their education is the duty of the whole nation. Besides this, he asserts that the parents are the only responsible for the harmful ignorance and suffering which women undergo. Bearing in mind that at that time only boys were schooled, and the girls were taught to be obedient and to attend to the male’s needs and pleasures. However, he is convinced that each sex is called to the kind of occupation which he or she is fitted for, so women are disposed physically and morally to have a specific social function in society, i.e., the good management of their houses, and children rearing. Moreover, he plainly states that the perfection of human being is

accomplished by means of three forces: science, will and work. Then good conduct or good manners are all founded on these three forces. However, of these three forces women get much less than what men need, because they are created for the indoor life, household and the care of children, whereas men are created for the outdoor life. He thinks that man is the only human being able to work more and to be useful for his society. And as true sovereignty is measured by the beneficial and productive work which human beings do, he believes strongly that man is sovereign over woman, he is her Master (Ibn Badis's Writings, 1997, p465).

Besides, he thinks that reflection about women's duties and rights requires first of all reflection about men, whether he is a husband or a father, because the man is the guardian, and "the source of good and evil, he is responsible for the care of the family, he tries to earn a living and provide education for his wife, his sons, and his girls" (Ibn Badis's Writings, 1997, p464). He has a strong power, both mental and physical whereas woman is by nature inferior to him and weak, so man is her protector.

The only purpose of the education of women, in his point of view, is to enable them to do their natural task in a best way. He insists on the necessity of bringing them up on "feminist ethics which are based on the consideration of women as women, not a half man and a half woman" (Ibn Badis's Writings, 1997, p469). Girls should have an education suitable to their traditions. And it should be done strictly in separate sessions, and not mixed with men in any learning, or at least their rank in the class will be behind the ranks of men. Moreover he prefers the illiterate woman who gives birth to loyal men, like the elder mothers to the educated woman who gives birth to sons who do not know their motherland and do not care about its fate (Ibn Badis's Writings, 1997, p470).

Further support for the claims cited above comes from Mohamed Elbachir El Ibrahim, the second distinguished figure of the Algerian Association of Muslim Ulama. Like sheikh Ibn Badis, who confirms that the education of men is based on the education of women; he says "if woman is not educated, man also will not be educated" (El Ibrahim's writings, 1997, p264). Moreover, he distinguishes between two dawns of teaching Muslim women, the false and the true. The first is strange to

traditions of the nation and its soul, because it is done in French language. And even though foreign language is good, El Ibrahimi stands against it because it cannot be better than the native language, which carries the identity's values. And he points out that despite the meagre results, this French teaching has demonstrated that Algerian women are endowed with creative potentialities and dispositions, but social and religious factors still the great obstacle to their education.

The second dawn will have, in his point of view, successful and complete results, because it has appeared with the birth of the association of Algerian Muslim Ulama which stands against colonialism, stresses education, and works on the revival of Arab language and true religion of Islam.

It seems from these considerations that Ibn Badis has made great efforts to purify Islam from heretics in matter of worship and human relationship with God, but he fails to accomplish the same task concerning the situation of women. On the contrary, he has deepened the oppressive custom of gender inequality; by claiming that even though women are sisters of men and their partners, and both of them represent the unity of human being, yet "man is the first, and woman is the second" (Ibn Badis's Writings, 1997, p468), because she is weak in science, volition and work. And because of this weak nature women are completely excluded from full participation in the exercise of universal individual rights; more than that, the issue of the contribution of women in the decision-making is undebatable in Ibn Badis's view, we can say it is a taboo.

By advocating these statements sheikh Ibn Badis does not go beyond the social reality of that time and its spirit, he rather remains faithfully adherent to them. Furthermore, he does not think about women for the sake of women's improvement, but for the sake of men's improvement. This means he has not freed himself from the traditions and inherited customs, which consider women of less value than men, and debase their situation in the name of religion, whereas Islam is innocent of this.

It should be noted that within similar political and social contexts, and at the same colonisation period, the Tunisian reformist Etahar El Haddad discusses in his famous book, *Woman in law and society* (1930), the negative conditions imposed on Tunisian women by custom and tradition, and he

reflects on the suitable ways to change them for the betterment of the whole society.

It is worth mentioning here, that Ibn Badis expresses earnestly his disagreement with the purpose of El Haddad's book, claiming that its content is in total contradiction with Islam teachings. He explicitly shows that he does not expect hearing about such writing that invites women to follow the western civilization, apart from the limits of Islam, and apart from their feminine function.(Ibn Badis's Writings, 1997, p475).

Etahar El Haddad oversteps his time in his conception of the role of women in society. In this case, let us sketch the main ideas of his book. He distinguishes between two opponent views, on the first hand the advocators of woman who stress the vital necessity of her education and her learning of all sciences of life, because it is the sole means to reform her life, and enable her to carry out her feminine duties. At the same time they believe that woman has a legal and natural right to practice her civil freedom. On the other hand the opponents who believe that woman should only acquire an amount of knowledge which she needs in household and child care. Besides this, they think that the advancement of the whole nation is man's role, so women do not need social freedom.

Surely El Haddad chooses the advocacy of woman, stating that she is the mother, the wife, and the half of the nation, and if we despise her and we do not care about the humiliating conditions which she undergoes, this means that we contempt ourselves. But, if we love her, respect her, and do the best to help her accomplish herself, this would be a feature of our love, our respect for ourselves, and also a feature of our self-realization (Etahar El Haddad, p2).

According to him woman is a human being exactly like man; she is not different from him, neither in mind nor in feelings. And he stresses the point that Islam is innocent from those harmful illusions and deadly customs which consider woman separately from man, living under the veil of ignorance and male oppression. In fact, El Haddad reviews all the precepts that Islam ordains in order to change women's situation and to improve it, such as;

- Woman is worth of self-respect,
- She has civil rights like testimony and magistracy,

- No verse in Quran prevents her from carrying out any work in government or in society in general,
- Her right to have her own property,
- Her ability to manage her money,
- Her freedom of life,
- Her right of inheritance

In addition, he considers the prevention of women from the means that enable their innate talents to emerge as an act of ignorance and stupidity and brutal injustice. Men always claim their right to determine women's destiny according to their own will. But the will of men, as he stresses, is no more than their predominant lust and malicious selfishness (Etahar El Haddad, p133). Besides, he drafts a list of the sciences that women should know and learn. Such as her religion, history of her country, natural sciences, medicine, reading novels and plays which are full of moral and social values, household, and crafts.

It is very important to notice here that Etahar El Haddad was may be deeply inspired by the Egyptian thinker Kassim Amin (1863-1908); the first Arab reformer who initiated a discussion on the role of woman in society, and paved the way to their liberation from the slavery of the traditions and customs. In his famous book *The New Woman*, he stands against the scholars of Al Azhar institution, and accuses them of ignorance and distortion of Islam. He praises Islam of being the only religion that makes of the emancipation of women its most precious task. Indeed, Islam urges the education of women, it does not prevent them from work, but it asserts their self-sufficiency in the management of their wealth.

But Arab traditions do not consider woman as a complete human being, rather than that she is the servant of man. Kassim Amin says "I have seen many times that while the husband sits down to eat, his wife stands to expel flies from him"(Kassim Amin, p31). And he describes the daily life of women saying that "from her birth to her death woman is a slave because she does not live on her own and for herself, but she lives for man and she needs him in all her affairs. She does not go out except under his guard, she travels under his protection, she thinks with his mind, she sees with his eyes, she hears with his ears, she likes with his will, she works by his means. Thus she is not an independent human being, but an object attached to man" (Kassim Amin, p35), and what is unbearable is that men

are proud to deny women their freedom, and to keep them prisoners under the veil of ignorance which “denies woman her innate freedom and prevents her from achieving her education, and hinders her from earning her livelihood and deprives spouses from the pleasure of mental and moral life”(Kassim Amin, p63-64), and all this will lead to a nation half paralyzed.

For Kassim Amin, it is not a matter of debate that Islam is a religion of progress and public-spiritedness, and it is a big mistake to think that Islam, which urges the use of reason and encourage people to work, is the cause of the Muslim’s backwardness. However, the crucial problem is that “the true Islamic religion has been corrupted today from its origins and it has been hidden under the cover of heretics” (Kassim Amin, p135).

The difference between the two scholars is laid in their vision of Islam; both of them have a different interpretation of religion. Ibn Badis, from a salafiya or conservative position considers religion as a whole which is never affected by the stream of time. Whereas Etahar El Haddad makes a clear distinction “between what Islam brings and comes for, it means its essence and meaning, that are eternal like monotheism, good morals, justice, and equality and the Djahiliya’s convictions deeply-rooted in Arabs souls before Islam, but they are not among its purposes” (Etahar El Haddad, p6), it means we can interpret them in many ways depending on time and space.

Now let us focus on the impact of Ibn Badis ideas on Algerian women’s situation today. The general social and mental view have a little bit changed over decades and generations because the role of women has been extended in the society especially in the economic field, where women have emerged as an economic force; for instance, they contribute more than men to the household income, the welfare of the family and the development of society. It means they become economically independent of men. Furthermore, the government has taken effectively appropriate measures and carries out strategies to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure equal rights with men in field of education. Indeed they have more opportunities to further developing their skills and pursue graduate and post-graduate studies.

In addition to this, the Algerian government sees the most significant challenge and struggle for improving the situation of human rights in

general and women's rights in particular. Indeed the political life is essentially masculinised and the proportion of women's representation in Algerian parliament is small. And even though this year, the government proposed to raise women's representation rate to 30%, debates in the parliament reduced it to 20%. Of course this percentage is still far from real representation of women population in society.

For many conservative views women are better fitted to do their natural function, and their participation in political affairs and decision making could only divert them from essential feminine duties, which are educating children and household cares. So the governance of women is certainly a real miracle if it would happen one day.

At present, women still undergo emotional pressures and moral harm, because society does not consider them complete until they get married and bring up children, so the success in the career is not sufficient to be a successful woman in Algerian society. This explains girls' eagerness to get married early, and unconsciously they grow up replicating their mother's behaviour and attitudes. Indeed, girls who have chosen to continue their high education are forced later to accept men below their levels just to get married, and this is in fact another kind of forced marriage and moral injury. For instance, man has all his time to get married whenever he wants, but when he takes the decision of marriage, he searches for a woman younger than him, for example if he is forty or fifty years old, he will look for a woman who does not exceed twenty years of age. And it is unbelievable how most part of our society accepts this phenomenon; this indeed proves that people are not aware of the dangers of imbalance that society could undergo.

Besides, we should pay attention to the great gap between the city life and the rural areas where there are some realities which obstruct the improvement of women's lives because the stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women is still a most influential force there, and it is always being reinforced through socialization and justified by the conservative interpretation of religion.

The following points must be checked seriously for a good improvement of Algerian women in rural areas:

- Literacy is slowly progressing because women are not strongly motivated to attend literacy classes because shyness obstructs them to overcome tradition.
- Girls are deprived from continuing their education and are forced to drop out before completing their secondary level, mainly in areas which are very remote from the cities.
- Forced marriage, honour killing, forced veiling, physical and verbal assaults, deprivation from the right of heritage, and the social turmoil of the divorced are deplorable features which we still hear about in some regions of Algeria.

To conclude, we notice that even though many advances have been achieved on the ground there is a great deal which needs to be done in order to enhance the role of women in politics. It is an urgent necessity to reform traditional customs, and to be aware of the difference between Islam and Arab-Berber traditions. In a word, everyday life of Muslim people reveals how far they are from proper Islamic values and its humanism, love, respect of the other, friendship, solidarity, strong sense of responsibility, brotherhood, and environment preservation.

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