

# The simultaneous proliferation and subversion of patriarchy in the qur'an



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The Qur'an<sup>1</sup> is reflective of and conducive to the patriarchal social system in which it evolved. Many verses of the text attempt to structure and reaffirm patriarchal order and to reduce any threat to the patriarchal system. While the Qur'an is a text meant for all Muslims regardless of gender to abide by, it is evident that many if not most of the verses are addressed to a male audience. While the text contains many verses outlining the rights of women many of these verses are directed specifically toward men, in other words, the women's rights verses are written in a style that is suggestive of an instruction manual for men – not for women. The patriarchal systems that are reaffirmed in the Qur'an are not merely limited to controlling women's behavior; any substantial threat to patriarchy is condemned as wrong and deserving of punishment. Because of the patriarchal slant of the society into which the Qur'an was revealed, it is very interesting to explore the Qur'anic verses which seem to subvert the patriarchal system. Verses which undermine patriarchy are often more subtle than the ones that confirm it; some verses, depending on how they are interpreted could either support patriarchy or degrade it. There are several distinct ways in which the Qur'an bolsters pre-existing patriarchal ideas: It establishes women and children as property, prohibits activities which might disrupt patriarchal order (such as homosexuality, extra-marital fornication, and adultery), dictates that male relatives always inherit more property than female relatives, and suggests that women are rendered un-pure beings by menstruation and men are rendered un-pure by intercourse with women. These methods of proliferating patriarchy are very clear in some verses, while in other verses they are manifested more subtly. The most prominent reinforcer of patriarchal values is the obvious, often implicit notion that women and children are property.

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While the Qur'an undoubtedly strives to protect the rights and even happiness of women and children, their status as property of men is never substantially challenged. Because of this, it is difficult to ascertain at times whether women and children are protected for their own good as individuals or whether they are protected because they are a valuable commodity to men, though obviously these two reasons for protection are not mutually exclusive. The exchange of a financial compensation or dower in return for a woman's hand in marriage is one of the most obvious signs that a woman is a commodity to be bought. The numerous verses dedicated to mediating when and how the dower should be paid emphasize the importance of this financial transaction and suggest that a marriage contract is almost void until it is validated by both the dower and the consummation. <sup>2</sup> The varying price of the dower according to a woman's social class or position in society<sup>3</sup> is another strong indicator of the property-status of women. If women are the valuable possessions of their husbands or male family members steps must be taken to preserve their value. The control of women's value is the control of their sexuality; this control further sustains the patriarchal system. The Qur'an clearly states that men are the protectors of women, and that in the case of her protector's absence, a woman must guard herself from other men<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the obvious guarding of their sexuality, women are also expected to hide their beauty and behave modestly to prevent men from being tempted by them in the first place. The Qur'an gives a detailed list of the select people to whom a woman is permitted to display her beauty. <sup>5</sup>The importance of the control of a woman's sexuality (and thereby her offspring) to maintaining and affirming patriarchal order can be further demonstrated by the severe consequences delivered to those who disregard the rules. If <https://assignbuster.com/the-simultaneous-proliferation-and-subversion-of-patriarchy-in-the-quran/>

four people can testify that a woman has been acting lewdly she is to be confined to her house until death. 6 If a couple is proven to be committing adultery they are to be flogged one-hundred times each and are banned from marrying anyone other than their partner in adultery. 7 Women's sexuality is not the only threat to patriarchy that is squelched by threats of punishment. Homosexuality, an obvious threat to patriarchal systems because, among other reasons, it abandons the notion of using women as sexual currency, is also strongly condemned and partakers in homosexual acts are threatened with punishment. 8 Another blatant way in which the Qur'an fortifies patriarchy is the manner in which inheritances are dealt out to inheritors. Female descendents receive only half of what their brothers receive. If a man has only daughters and no sons the daughters still only receive two-thirds of the inheritance. If a man's wife dies and he has no children with her he receives one half of her inheritance, but a wife whose husband has died and left her with no children only receives a fourth of his inheritance. If a person dies leaving no husband and children but only brothers and sisters, the brothers get twice the inheritance of the sisters. 9 Such inheritance laws ensure the continuation of patriarchy because it is almost impossible for a woman to inherit more property than her male family members inherit. Perhaps one of the more subtle ways in which the Qur'an proliferates the patriarchal system is articulated by the verses that mention the impurity of women. It is implied that women are unclean during their periods and are therefore not to be touched. 10 In addition, contact with women is considered to be one of the pollutants (along with using the bathroom and being ill) that must be washed away before prayer. 11 As seen in the examples above, the verses of the Qur'an often reinforce the

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patriarchal values of the society in which the text was revealed. It is therefore fascinating and important to recognize the large number of verses which seem to check the power of patriarchy, affording women, children, orphans, and other would-be second-class citizens equal or nearly equal rights with adult males. The marriage and divorce rights afforded to women and the importance of charity for orphans stressed by Allah are two examples of Qur'anic themes that weaken the patriarchal strength of the society. Perhaps the biggest subversion to the patriarchy, however, is not manifested in the rights of women and children but rather in Allah. As the all-knowing, ever-present patriarch who judges all individuals fairly regardless of their place in the temporal patriarchal system, Allah warns men that he knows all of their actions and will punish them if they abuse their patriarchal power. If a man obtains a marriage contract with a woman and then changes his mind before a dower is set and consummation has taken place he is still obligated to give a small gift to the woman, a gesture which seems to have no substantial purpose other than performing a good deed. Even though the dower is a reinforcement of the ideal of women as property the Qur'an clearly states that it is a gift given by the husband which the wife does not have to relinquish unless it is her will to do so. <sup>12</sup> This gives women at least some financial security should a consummated marriage end in divorce. The Qur'an also expressly forbids men to force women who they have inherited into marriage or treat them with harshness<sup>13</sup> and encourages men to let their wives leave them if they fear harsh treatment. <sup>14</sup> In addition, polygamy, an obvious extension of patriarchy, is encouraged only when a man is sure he can treat all of his wives and children with equity<sup>15</sup>. Men are also forbidden to force their servants into prostitution. <sup>16</sup> And finally, women

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are protected from false accusations by the provision that anyone who bears false witness against a woman should be flogged. 17 All of these stipulations control and suppress the urges of absolute patriarchy and prevent women from being denied basic rights. The Qur'an acknowledges that men have the advantage in matters of divorce<sup>18</sup> but makes many allowances that are advantageous to women. The three-month separation period or 'Iddat that is designed so that couples may reconcile and women have time to know if they are pregnant is very reminiscent of modern standard divorce practice in America. One interesting specification regarding divorce is the that a woman who has divorced the same husband twice must marry another man should she ever want to return to her original husband. In addition, ex-husbands are specifically forbidden to prevent their ex-wives from re-marrying. 19 And finally, it is instructed that men should pay a fair maintenance fee to all of their ex-wives. 20 All of these laws counter the power of the patriarchal system in order to protect women from men who might otherwise marry and divorce women with reckless abandon. Another way in which the might of patriarchy is kept in balance is the considerable mention of the rights of orphans in the Qur'an. Since orphans have no fathers to represent them in the patriarchal hierarchy, the copious Qur'anic verses meant to protect orphans are a direct confrontation with the patriarchal system. Men are forbidden to marry widows if they feel they cannot deal fairly with the woman's children. 21 If they do inherit orphans by marriage men are expected to guard the property of orphans and give it back to them when the orphans reach adulthood. The ill-treatment of orphans is considered to be a grave offence as can be seen in the line " Those who devour the possessions of orphans devour only fire, and will surely burn in hell." 22

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These admonitions of the mal-treatment of orphans protect those who, in an absolute patriarchy, would most likely be abused or forgotten. Perhaps the single largest affront in the Qur'an to a patriarchal social system is not the rights of women and orphans but the ever-presence of Allah. If Allah sees all of humanities deeds and judges according to what is fair regardless of who the person is, then men of power must act and feel kindly toward those who have a lower status on the patriarchal ladder. The surah Al-Nisa (The Women), which contains many of the laws pertaining to how men should treat women, begins with a serious caveat: " O men, fear your Lord" implying that any unrighteousness done to women or inferiors will be meticulously recorded by Allah. Allah is the ultimate patriarch, and though it might be obvious, it is worth stating that if men truly fear him they will also fear punishment for going against his will. In many ways Allah protects men the way men are expected to protect women. An interesting example of this is the following : " Tell the believing men to lower their eyes and guard their private parts. There is for them goodness in this. God is aware of what they do." 23 Thus, women are protected from patriarchy via the fear men have of punishment from Allah. It is also valuable to note that the creation of man and woman described by Allah in the beginning of An-Nisa is somewhat more simultaneous and equitable than the creation found in the Old Testament of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Allah states that from a single cell he produced both men and women, which is somewhat more equitable than the notion of creating man and then creating a woman from man. Allah tells men about this creation so that men " fear God in whose name you ask of one another the bond of relationships" and adds " God surely keeps watch over you." 24 In conclusion, it is evident that the Qur'an reasserts the patriarchal

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values of the social system in which it was revealed, yet at the same time makes many attempts to protect women and children from an overbearing patriarchal system. Since many of the verses are aimed toward a male audience the Qur'an inherently promotes patriarchy. The presence of a God who sees everything and punishes men for their misdeeds toward those who have less power, however, simultaneously subverts this patriarchy and makes men accountable for upholding the rights of women and children.