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ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER'S VIEWS ON
LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND WOMEN'S ISSUES IN ISLAM:
AN ANALYSIS

Muhammad Agus Nuryatno

A Thesis submitted to
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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in Islamic Studies

Institute of Islamic Studies
McGill University
Montreal
Canada
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0-612-64175-9

Canada

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ABSTRACT

Author   : Muhammad Agus Nuryatno

Title   : Asghar Ali Engineer's Views on Liberation Theology and Women's
                  Issues in Islam: An Analysis

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This thesis explores the thought of a prominent Indian Muslim thinker, Asghar Ali Engineer, on liberation theology and the status of women in Islam. In his elaboration of liberation theology, Engineer demonstrates that from its inception, Islam has sided with the oppressed and the weak. If it is interpreted from its theological as well as sociological context, he argues, Islam makes it clear that it promotes justice and equality. The juxtaposition of theological and sociological perspectives is crucial to any understanding of Engineer's thought on liberation theology. Such perspectives also inform Engineer's view of the status of women in Islam. Our discussion is limited to two of the topics addressed by Engineer: polygamy and the veil. The key to understand these issues, Engineer maintains, is by distinguishing between the 'normative' and 'contextual' statements of the Qur'anic text. The point of this distinction is to differentiate between those principles of the Qur'an which are universal in nature, i.e. values, which transcend beyond time and space, and the contextual ones which are only valid in particular situations and circumstances.

In conclusion, Engineer's thought on liberation theology and women's issues are found to be liberal, critical and emancipative, successfully demonstrating that Islam sides with the weak and promotes justice and equality.

RÉSUMÉ

Auteur: Muhammad Agus Nuryatmo

Titre: La pensée d'Asghar Ali Engineer sur la théologie de la libération et la question des femmes: Une Analyse.

Département: Institut des Études Islamiques, Université McGill

Diplôme: Maîtrise ès Arts

Ce mémoire explore le discours d'un important penseur musulman, Asghar Ali Engineer, portant sur la théologie de la libération ainsi que sur le statut des femmes en Islam. Dans son élaboration de la théologie de la libération, Engineer démontre que depuis ses origines, l'Islam s'est rangé du côté des opprimés et des faibles. Selon l'auteur, si cela est interprété à partir de sa théologie, de même que de son contexte social, l'Islam démontre clairement qu'il promeut la justice et l'égalité. La juxtaposition des perspectives théologiques et sociologiques est cruciale dans la compréhension de la pensée d'Engineer concernant la théologie de la libération. De plus, ces perspectives se reflètent dans les vues d'Engineer concernant le statut des femmes en Islam. Notre propos se limite ici qu'à deux thèmes abordés par Engineer: la polygamie et le voile. La clef de la compréhension de ces questions, selon Engineer, réside dans la distinction entre les déclarations 'normatives' et 'contextuelles' du texte qur'anique. Le but de cette distinction est de différencier ces principes du Qur'an qui sont, de nature, universels, c'est-à-dire des valeurs qui transcendent au delà du temps et de l'espace, alors que les principes contextuels sont uniquement valides dans certaines situations et circonstances particulières.

En guise de conclusion, la pensée d'Engineer concernant la théologie de la libération ainsi que la question des femmes, se sont avérées libérales, critiques et libératrices, démontrant ainsi avec succès que l'Islam se range auprès des faibles et qu'il promeut la justice et l'égalité.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

TRANSLITERATION

Concerning the system of transliteration of Arabic words and names applied in this thesis, I follow the system used by the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University.

The Arabic transliterations are as follows:

ب = b   ذ = dh   ط = ṭ   ل = l

ت = t   ر = r   ظ = ẓ   م = m

ث = th   ز = z   ع = '   ن = n

ج = j   س = s   غ = gh   و = w

ح = ḥ   ش = sh   ف = f   ء = '

خ = kh   ص = ṣ   ق = q   ى = y

د = d   ض = ḍ   ك = k

Short: ﹷ = a; ﹻ = i; ﹹ = u.   Long: ﹷ = ā; ﹻ = ī; ﹹ = ū.

Diphthongs: ﹷى = ay; ﹷو = aw.

Long with tashdid: ﹻّى and ﹹّو , instead of iyya and uwwa, we employ iya and ūwa respectively.

INTRODUCTION

A point of interest in the study of modern, critical and emancipative Islamic thought is its contribution to the formation of a historical consciousness of society. Such paradigms are, for the most part, found in developing countries.[1] This is probably due to the fact that most developing countries are still engaged in a struggle to uphold democratic systems which respect plurality, human rights, freedom of expression and justice. In line with this objective, some liberal Muslim scholars have attempted to reformulate Islamic teachings such that they not only uphold democratic systems, but also side with the oppressed and respect human dignity, an objective which, to use Engineer's language is, "the hall mark of Islamic teachings."[2]

Engineer's views on Islamic liberation theology and women's issues can be categorized as liberal and critical. It must be noted that these topics are inter-connected with one another. Engineer's thought on liberation theology influenced his views on women's issues in Islam. Through these topics he strives to show that Islam, from its inception, sides with the marginalized of society and also displays a respect for women's dignity. Engineer's concern with liberation theology is grounded in the attempt to render

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[1] Contemporary Muslim critical and liberal scholars like Ḥassan Ḥanafī and Nasr Abū Zayd (Egypt), Farid Esack (South Africa) and Asghar Ali Engineer (India), to name a few, come from developing countries. The mode of thought of these scholars can generally be categorized as critical, liberal, emancipative and 'leftist'. This mode of thought is different from, for instance, Fazlur Rahman's and Mohammed Arkoun's who much more advocate rationalism and intellectualism rather than praxis. See, Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), pp. 67-68, 71-73.

theology an ideological weapon for liberation of the oppressed because, to use 'Alī Sharīatī's[3] language, "Islam very simply is a philosophy of human liberation. Its first summons, 'Say 'There is no god but God' and prosper,' propounds *tauhid* [oneness of God] as the necessary means to that end."[4] As part of his commitment to side on the weak and uphold equality and justice, Engineer is concerned with proving that in Islam women have an equal position to that of men and enjoy a place of dignity in the Qur'an. Employing a liberal interpretation of the Qur'an, Engineer shows that there is no concept of superior-inferior with respect to gender in the Scripture.

This is the first study of the prominent liberal Muslim scholar, Asghar Ali Engineer. It begins by analyzing Engineer's views on liberation theology and women's issues in Islam. This endeavor is important due to Engineer's prolific contribution to Islamic critical thought, a contribution which is reflected in his writings, speeches and activities. It will be shown that Engineer's thought is reflective of the agendas of both NGOs and human rights' activists who promote justice, freedom and equality. This proclivity has been a consistent feature of his thought from its inception in his early career to its maturity in his later works— that is critical, liberal, and emancipative.

Engineer's own writings are used as a primary source of information. Chapter one, where his biography is presented, employs Engineer's *What I Believe* as its primary source, as well as the substance of his e-mail correspondence with the author. Engineer's

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[2] Asghar Ali Engineer, e-mail correspondence with the writer, February 21, 2000, Montreal.

[3] His liberationist ideas, according to Linda Darwish, influenced contemporary Muslim scholars like Farid Esack and Asghar Ali Engineer. See, Linda Darwish, *Revolutionary Images of Abraham In Islam and Christianity: 'Alī Sharī'ati and Liberation Theology* (Thesis presented to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, McGill University, Montreal, 1999), p. 4.

[4] 'Alī Shar'iati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, translated from the Persian by R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), p. 73.

writing in *What I Believe*, is important for what it provides by way of information on his views regarding various aspects of life. Moreover, his e-mail correspondence, uncovers yet more facets of Engineer's life that are not found in his writings.

The primary sources employed in Chapter two include fives collections of Engineer's writings: (a) *Islam and Revolution*; (b) *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age*; (c) *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam*; (d) *Religion and Liberation*; and (e) *The Origin and Development of Islam.*

Three of the above collections are important sources for tracing the development of Engineer's thought on liberation theology in Islam. He first presented his ideas on Islamic liberation theology in *Islam and Revolution*, published in 1984. He republished this work at *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age* in 1987 with minor revisions. A more complete or mature exposé of his ideas on Islamic liberation theology is found in *Islam and Liberation Theology*, published in 1990. Although these three works are compilations of articles presented in a less than systematic fashion, they provide valuable insight into Engineer's concept of Islamic liberation theology. The fourth text in the collection is also a compilation of articles. The only systematic book of the above five collections produced by Engineer is *The Origin and Development of Islam*. This book is important because it is a rare example of Islamic liberation theology's treatment of the origin of Islam. In this work, Engineer maintains that from its inception Islam conveyed a concern for the weaker segments of society.

Chapter three which discusses the issues of women in Islam uses the following of Engineer's works: (a) *The Rights of Women in Islam*; (b) *Justice, Women and Communal Harmony in Islam*; (c) *Status of Women in Islam*; (d) *The Qur'an, Women and Modern*

Society. The first of these collections is the most important for his thought on women in Islam because it provides an almost complete of Engineer's understanding of the position of women in Islam. The second and third books are important complements to Engineer's thought on this issue, while the latest book, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, provides important information on his view of the status of women in the Qur'an.

The above chapters also incorporate relevant secondary sources on similar topics. Since several Qur'anic verses will be given in this thesis, I rely on Majid Fakhry's translation, *The Qur'an: A Modern English Version*, excepting those verses which are translated by Engineer himself and Abdullah Yusuf Ali and have identified them in the notes.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one provides a brief biography of Asghar Ali Engineer grounded in the socio-religious milieu which led to the formation of his thoughts on religion. Chapter two examines Engineer's thought on Islamic liberation theology. This chapter presents Islamic liberation theology in its entirely, including: (a) the reasons behind the need for its existence; (b) the construction of this theology and its definition and sources; and (c) some key terms that are redefined by this theology. Chapter three analyzes Engineer's thought on women's issues in Islam and examines his methodological approach to the Holy Scripture and its relevance to his understanding of the cases of polygamy and the veil. Engineer's discussion on women in Islam is not, of course, limited to the latter issues, but for the sake of brevity this thesis will only touch on these. In conclusion, a summary of the findings of each chapter will be presented with additional critical remarks.

CHAPTER ONE

Asghar Ali Engineer: A Biographical Note

No biography of Asghar Ali Engineer has ever been written. This chapter uses Engineer's, *What I Believe*,[1] as its main text in providing a sketch of his life. This will be complemented by additional information gleaned through personal correspondence with him.[2]

Engineer was born in Rajasthan, near Udaipur, in 1939 in a Bohra family belonging to the Shi'a Ismā'ilī branch of Islam. His father, Sheikh Qurban Husain, an *'ālim* who served as the religious head of Bohra, was known for his liberal, open-minded and patient demeanor when engaged in discussion with persons of other faiths. Engineer also mentions a Hindu Brahmin who came to discuss and share his religious experiences with his father. That religious overtones permeated the environment in which Engineer was reared is self evident.[3]

Engineer earned a degree in civil Engineering from Vikram University, Ujjain (India), and also studied both the secular and religious sciences. He served the Bombay Municipal Corporation as engineer for 20 years before involving himself in the Bohra

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[1] In this work Engineer tells his personal history, describes religious milieu, family in which he was raised and his experiences challenging the system of the Bohras. Asghar Ali Engineer, *What I Believe* (Mumbai: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1999).

[2] This correspondence took place between October 1999-February 2000.

[3] Asghar Ali Engineer, e-mail correspondence with the writer, December 15, 1999. Montreal.

reform movement. He was also conferred a D.Litt. (Hon) by Calcutta University (West Bengal) in 1993 for his work on communal harmony and inter-faith dialogue. He received his religious education from his father who taught him Arabic, theology, exegesis (*tafsīr*), the sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*) and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).[4] Engineer mastered many languages; English, Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Gujarati, Hindi and Marathi.

The formation of Engineer's views on religion:

Engineer began to rethink religious matters seriously in his youth and during his early adulthood as a direct result of witnessing the exploitation rampant in the Bohra community. This is the context in which Engineer developed critical, liberal and emancipative thoughts.

As mentioned, the Bohras are a Shi'a Ismā'īlī sect of Islam whose members adhere to the Islamic *sharī'ah* and believe in an Islamic concept of leadership (*imāmah*). They differ from the Nizari sect who believe in a suspension of the *sharī'ah* (*ta'ṭīl al-sharī'ah*). In India, the Dawoodi Bohra sect is headed by Sayyidnā Muḥammad Burhānuddin, who is officially known as the absolute preacher (*dā'ī al-muṭlaq*). As the *dā'ī al-muṭlaq*, Burhanuddin enjoyed absolute authority and even assumed the power of the hidden *imām* as derived from the Prophet and Allah. It is in this context that Engineer criticizes him sharply. In his view, the head of the Bohra "has totally disregarded Islamic teachings and established a personality cult" as a result of his "monstrous powers."[5]

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[4] Engineer, e-mail correspondence with the writer, December 15, 1999. Montreal.

[5] _____, e-mail correspondence with the writer, February 25, 2000. Montreal.

Moreover, Engineer charged that the Bohra religious system had degenerated into an institution dedicated to the collection of money from its followers. All adherents had to obey that particular Bohra leader, or face persecution. Much of the Bohras thus lived in fear of the system, a phenomenon which, said Engineer, perfectly demonstrated how religion could be used to legitimate exploitative systems.[6] Engineer officially plunged himself into the Bohra reform movement, leading the reformist movement against what they described as the authoritarianism and rigidity of the head of the Bohra. Additionally, he called for liberal interpretations of Islam which could accommodate individual rights, dignity and humanitarian values. Engineer's challenges to the head of the Bohra earned him several serious attempts on his life, leaving him with many near-fatal physical injuries. He has been assaulted on five separate occasions, the last being committed on February 13, 2000 by agents of the head of Bohra at Mumbai (Bombay) airport. Engineer suffered bruising and bleeding and was brought to a nearby hospital for treatment. The Bohra agents did not stop there, demolishing his home and partially destroying his office. There is no doubt, such attacks constitute terror tactics, and intimidation by those who have fanatical religious sentiments and low level of tolerance for plurality in the interpretation of religion. "It is not easy to fight fundamentalism and religious fanaticism," Engineer said after the attack.[7]

Engineer condemns political authoritarianism because, he argues, it leads to the suppression of freedom of expression. Religious authoritarianism, however, is worse than

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[6] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 2.

[7] Engineer, e-mail correspondence with the writer, February 21, 2000. In this correspondence, he mentions that organizations like the Institute of Islamic Studies and the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism, two institutions for which he served as Director, can do much to reduce religious fanaticism and fundamentalism and engage inter-faith dialogue and liberal understanding of religion.

political authoritarianism because it not only "stunts the growth of spiritual life" and "evokes hatred and contempt for others," but also because it "destroys the true spirit of commitment to higher values."[8] Both political and religious authoritarianism must be fought because they produce arrogance that lead to oppression. As an example, Engineer points to the Qur'an, where Pharaoh is condemned for his arrogance and his power and Moses who received divine support in his struggle to liberate the oppressed from the yoke and oppression of Pharaoh.[9]

The above example inspires Engineer to side with the marginalized of society, regardless of their religion, sect, race, sex or nationality. In his view, Islamic teachings champion the oppressed, the exploited, the weak and the poor. It is therefore, Engineer has a deep empathy and sympathy to these sections of society across the world.[10]

Based on his experiences as a human rights activist and NGO, Engineer argues that "an organized religion can become totally subservient to the powerful vested interests."[11] At that stage, religion no longer functions as a means to the enhancement of spiritual life, but as a tool put to the service of the status quo and its vested interests. Thus, religion as a means to the enrichment and enlightenment of human life is displaced by exploitation in its name. To Engineer, religion must be understood as an instrument

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[8] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 6.

[9] Ibid. The story of Moses and Pharaoh can be read in the following verses: "Pharaoh waxed proud in the land and reduced its inhabitants into factions, subduing a group of them, slaughtering their sons and sparing their women. He was truly a corruption-worker." (The Qur'an, 28:3). In another verse, the Qur'an supports Moses to fight against Pharaoh, "He (Allah) said: "We will strengthen your arm with your brother and We will give you authority; so that they will not touch you. By Our signs, you and those who follow you will be the victors." (The Qur'an, 28:34)

[10] Engineer, e-mail correspondence, February 25, 2000, Montreal.

[11] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 2.

and not as a goal.[12] As an instrument, religion can be used to either help and emancipate the weak and the poor or to serve the status quo and its vested interests.

Exploitation in the name of religion led Engineer to rethink the very meaning of religion. Towards this end, he read avidly on rationalism in Urdu, Arabic and English. He also studied the writings of Niyāz Fatehpurī (a noted Urdu writer and a critic of religious orthodoxy), Bertrand Russel (a rationalist British philosopher), and Karl Marx's *Das Capital*. Engineer acknowledges the influence of these great thinkers on his works. While studying the Qur'an and its exegesis (*tafsīr*), he also read the works of Muslim scholars like Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898) and Maulana Abū al-Kalām Āzād (d. 1958). But it was the Brethren of Purity (*Rasā'il Ikhwānus Safā*)[13], a great synthesis of reason and revelation, which was the source of Engineer's intellectual inspiration.[14]

Engineer holds reason to be important for all aspects of human life. However, he denies that reason alone can sufficiently explain the world, our reality, or the meaning and purpose of life. Therefore, human beings are in need of revelation as a complement to reason, which would guide them to the right path in life. According to Engineer, "revelation can and does go beyond reason but does not contradict it."[15] Revelation and reason are complementary. One is incomplete without the other. Revelation is a tool for understanding the ultimate goal of life and for increasing spirituality; while reason is a

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[12] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 3.

[13] Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa-khullān al-wafā'* (Byrut: Dār Byrut: Dār Sadir, 1957), 4 Vols.

[14] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 2-3.

[15] Ibid., p. 3.

tool for understanding the physical aspects of the universe and for enriching human material life.

Religion, according to Engineer, should not be equated with dogma. "Dogmas are products of the human urge for security rather than that of spiritual quest for inner certitude."[16] There is a difference, of course, between the psychological security engendered by dogmas and faith (*īmān*). Human beings need faith for spiritual health.

Engineer regards religious pluralism and diversity as positive and, conversely, religious sectarianism as harmful. Religious fanaticism leads to the pronouncements of "truth claims," whereby certain beliefs are held as the only truth and others are dismissed. This, concludes Engineer, is the root of religious conflict. To avoid religious conflict, one must have an open mind and respect for other beliefs. Anyone who cannot respect other people's beliefs is "not capable of having genuine respect for his own belief."[17] It is within this context that Engineer advocates tolerance for difference, including religious conviction since all such convictions arise from different quests for the same truth. Thus, individuals should have a right to convert to any religion without fear of retribution.[18]

According to Engineer, religious pluralism and diversity enrich spiritual life and enhance human creativity. In his view, an essential unity connects all religions, the differences being more apparent than real. In his words, "all religions are the source of the highest and most exalted values and these values are more fundamental to these religions than their rituals and theological doctrines."[19]

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[16] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 4.

[17] Ibid., p. 6.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

To Engineer, a truly religious person is he who possesses sensitivity and compassion for the sufferings of the weaker sections of society. This sensitivity is a symptom of one's religiosity and humanity. A truly religious person, according to Engineer, is also one who directs his attention and energy towards rectifying the unjust established order. To him, anyone supportive of an unjust social order or passive in its face, is not a religious person. In Engineer's view, person who keeps silent about injustice and exploitation is as an accomplice in the oppression and exploitation of his yellow man. It is therefore, a religious person who must continuously fight against all forms of injustice and exploitation, including of course injustice and exploitation committed in the name of religion. Engineer maintains that the religious establishments can lead to an oppressive religious order, and must, therefore, be fought if we are to avoid a monopoly over the interpretation of religion and to make room for plurality.[20]

As opposed as Engineer is to injustice and exploitation, he espouses non-violence in the struggle against them, vehemently rejecting any form of violence, even for liberative purposes, as it inevitably results in mass killing. Engineer explains that, "once you take up a gun you do not want to lay it down. Gun empowers you and you want to enjoy that power over others."[21] To him, violence should only be used in self-defense, and can never be treated as a license to kill. Engineer's philosophy argument, "if one cannot create life, one has no right to destroy it."[22]

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[20] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 7.

[21] Ibid., p. 8.

[22] Ibid., p. 7.

Moreover, Engineer maintains that the use of violence and its consequences are predictable and well documented in history. French and Russian revolutions, though undoubtedly liberative, resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. The violence in Kashmir has resulted in the death of more than fifty thousand people. In India, the Khalistanis killed a large number of innocent Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab. In Sri Lank, tens of thousands of people were killed in the name of politics.[23] All these conflicts clearly demonstrate that the use of violence is not conducive to the promotion of human rights or human values. It can be said therefore, that Engineer espouses democratic non-violence in social activism.

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[23] Engineer, *What I Believe*, p. 8.

CHAPTER TWO

Islamic Liberation Theology

In his elaboration of Islamic liberation theology, Engineer uses Islamic sources to show that Islam has dynamic elements that can be used as sources to formulate liberation theology. Engineer's interpretation of Islamic teachings is not only limited to its theological context, but to sociological context as well. It is his belief that Islamic teachings must also be interpreted in its sociological context, otherwise it will lose its relevance to social life.

The present chapter focuses on Engineer's Islamic liberation theology and is divided into three sections: (i) critique of classical theology and the need of Islamic liberation theology; (ii) the construction of Islamic liberation theology, its definition and sources; (iii) some key terms redefined by Islamic liberation theology.

A. Classical Theology: A Critique

Engineer begins his criticism by saying that "classical theology in its received form does not imply human liberation" due to "it concerns itself exclusively with liberation in purely metaphysical sense and outside the process of history".[1] The discourse of the classical Islamic theology was essentially a speculative exercise and even

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[1] Asghar Ali Engineer, "On Some Aspects of Liberation Theology in Islam," in *Islam and Liberation Theology* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1990), p. 1.

sometimes resulted in bloodshed.[2] The primary concern was not the world, but the hereafter. It was largely due to the fact that it was allied with the status quo and enjoyed the benefits of state favor.[3] This relationship was formed during the period of the Umayyad (661-750) and the Abbasid (750-1258) rule. The political battle in these periods was also expressed within ideological debate. The inductive and concrete spirit of the Qur'an was challenged by speculative and deductive thought. This new trend was heavily influenced by the intellectual legacy of the Hellenic and Sasanic traditions. This period, according to Engineer, was "the Mahayan period of Islam,"[4] and the Abbasids were its champions.

Originally, the rise of a powerful Islamic state under the Umayyads was a direct challenge to the Byzantine and Sasanid empires. However, soon after the Umayyads established their rule, the Islamic state became oppressive. It was in this period that Islamic orthodoxy began to take shape. There was a debate among theologians regarding

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[2] See, for instance, the debate among classical theologians regarding the position of the sinful Muslim. Murdji'a termed the sinful Muslim as *mu'min*, Kharidjites named him as *kafir*, and Mu'tazila termed him as an "intermediate rank" between that of *mu'min* and *kafir*. This debate shows the discourse of an abstract matter. Another example is dealing with the matter of "justice". The fundamental question regarding this issue is whether God has power to be unjust or to act badly or not. Thus, "justice" here referred to justice of God. This debate also shows the abstract discourse of classical theology. The relation of God's power to human actions was also a matter of debate among classical theologians. See, Daniel Gimaret, "Mu'tazila," EI[2], 7, pp. 783, 789; Marshal G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 442-443. According to Engineer, some debates such as the debate about the createdness or non-createdness of the Qur'an which took place between the Mu'tazila and the orthodox; the whole debate about God, creation of the world or whether God is a physical entity (as maintained by Ash'ariya) or spiritual as maitnained by some radical sects like the Isma'ilis; the debate about whether Allah has attributes or not between Mu'tazila, Shi'a and Ash'ariya and the debate about how Allah created this universe whether by *kun fayakun* or step by step in seven days were speculative and endless by sufferings, death, destruction, accumulation of wealth, conversion of *khilafah* ("Islamic leadership") into monarchy and ignoring the injunction of the Qur'an about consultation. It is no wonder that issues laid by the Qur'an such as taking care of the poor, needy, orphans, widows and other weaker sections of society and condemnation of the accumulation of wealth were totally neglected by the classical theologians. Asghar Ali Engineer, e-mail correspondence with the writer, December 11, 1999, Montreal.

[3] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 1.

[4] Ibid., p. 195.

free choice (*ikhtiyār*) and divine determination (*jabr*). According to al-Mughnī, as quoted by Engineer, the first exponent of pre-determination was Amīr Mu'āwiyah (d. 680), the first Umayyad caliph, who transformed Islamic democracy into glorious monarchy (*mulūkiyah*).[5] There is no doubt that Amīr Mu'āwiyah had a vested interest in the notion of pre-determination. Those who opposed the notion of pre-determination promoted the ideas of progress and change under the banner of free will. This group included the Kharijites, the Shi'is, the Mu'tazilites and the Qaramitah.

The first group that foreshadowed liberation theology is the Khārijites.[6] The followers of this group were usually the non-urbanite Bedouins. They were known-well as the 'internal proletariats' of Islam and lived in desert of Arabia. Their famous slogan was *lā ḥukm illā li-Allāh* ("no government except that of God"). Engineer argues that the Khārijites were not merely a religious sect. Their emergence could not be separated from the controversy over the leadership (*Imāmah*) of the community of Muslims and the economic disparity. This problem led to the emergence of the Khārijite where one of its fundamental doctrines was the concept of collective justice. They were usually described as following a democratic and socialistic religion. Their views on justice and equality were derived from the original socialistic inclination of Islam.[7]

Thus, the Khārajite had two opposing tendencies. On one hand, they were very radical in their love of freedom and justice and consistently fought against oppression and

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[5] Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam and Liberation," in *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age* (Kuala Lumpur: Ikraq, 1987), p. 59. Engineer quotes this view from Qāḍi al-Quḍāt 'Abd al-Jabr bin Ahmad al-Hamdani al-Mughni, *Fī Abwāb al-Tawhid wa al-'Adl*, Vol. 8, Cairo (1965), p. 114.

[6] This sect emerged in 658 A.D.

[7] Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Revolution* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1984), pp. 18-19.

on the other, they were very intolerant of alternative points of view. They were a radical

group and considered Muslims who did not follow to their theology as infidels (*kāfir*),

worthy only of death. Consequently, Engineer has no sympathy for them.[8]

In relation to Umayyad dynasty, the common people, particularly those of non-

Arab origin, disliked them due to their extravagant ways, oppressive policies and

aristocratic arrogance. Consequently, the Abbasids found much support in their revolt

against the Umayyads. In this battle, the Abbasids, according to Engineer, had aroused

the aspirations of the oppressed both of Arab and non-Arab origin.[9] After the Abbasid

victory, there was great interest in classical Greek works on philosophy, mathematics,

astronomy and other sciences. This spawned a massive translation movement. The

emergence and the development of Islamic thought in this period could not escape the

influence of Greek thought. This was especially true of the Mu'tazila school who, in the

words of George F. Hourani, were the followers of "rationalistic objectivism."[10]

Due to the Mu'tazila concentration on metaphysical theology, their doctrines

were much more attractive to the elite than the masses. This lack of popular appeal was

deepened once the Mu'tazila theology became the official doctrine of the state in the

period of 'Abd-Allāh al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833). Like the Umayyads before them, the

Abbasid rule was oppressive.[11] Although the Mu'tazila were concerned with idea of

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[8] Asghar Ali Engineer, e-mail correspondence by the writer, 12 October 1999. Montreal.

[9] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 13. According to Engineer, in fighting against the Umayyad, the Abbasids were also helped by the Persian people, who had a highly developed civilization. See, Engineer, *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age*, p. 57.

[10] George F. Hourani, *Islamic Rationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 3.

[11] The Mu'tazilites, with the agreement of the caliph al-Ma'mūn, demanded all administrators and servants of the state to believe in the dogma that the Qur'an is a creation, otherwise they would face severe

justice and even claimed to be the "party of justice", they were responsible for persecuting the ideological opponents of the state.[12] The paradox of "party of justice" crushing dissent was not lost on the common people. Thus, there was mutual symbiosis between theologians and the rulers. They cooperated with each other to protect their privileged positions within status quo. In the works of Engineer, the idea of free will expounded by the Mu'tazilite is affirmed but their alliance with the Abbasid status quo and their metaphysical discourse of theology are sharply criticized.[13]

Another important theological school to the discussion of Islamic liberation theology was the Ismā'īlī, a branch of the Shi'i. This sect waged a long and bitter war against Abbasid rule. The Ismā'īlis therefore became champions of freedom. Their doctrine was a synthesis of Islamic and Greek thought. In modern terms this progressive theology could be construed as the liberation theology of that period. However, Engineer notes, once this sect established the Fāṭimids (r. 909-1171) in North Africa, its revolutionary doctrine began to die.[14]

A branch of the Ismā'īlis, the Qaramitah, continued the revolutionary program and fought against the Abbasids as well as the Fāṭimid empire. This sect went to political extremes in their struggle for liberation. Notoriously, they removed the sacred black stone (*hajar al-aswad*) from Ka'ba. Due to great public outrage they returned it after about six months. The radicalism of the Qaramitah can be seen from the following statement:

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persecution like what happened with Muhammad bin Nūh and Imām Ahmad bin Hanbal. Engineer, *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age*, p. 58; Richard Martin, Mark R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 1996), pp. 28-29.

[12] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 14.

[13] Asghar Ali Engineer, e-mail correspondence with the writer, 12 October 1999, Montreal.

[14] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 16.

"It was the opinion of the Qaramatians that the Ismāʻili movement should continue to struggle against the Abbasids without yielding or submitting or showing indulgence till evil and anarchy are rooted out and a healthy communistic set-up free of dirt and filth is established."[15]

In sum, Engineer appreciates and concerns himself with the classical theological schools in order to understand the nature of their disagreements with oppressive regimes and their ideas of change, progress and liberation. However, later on some of these ideas were reified and became part of establishment and developed a tendency toward metaphysical concerns. In this context, Engineer formulates an interesting hypothesis "the greater the degree of metaphysical obscurity the more it tends to serve the forces of status quo."[16] It means that the nature of the theological discourse has a significant correlation with the bond to the status quo. Since Engineer believes that theology justifies oppression, he criticizes it sharply. In a sense, it is a position very similar to that of the Marxists. To use Karl Marx's own words, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."[17] The ideas of the ruling class will always be hegemonic and dominant. Likewise in classical theology, the formal theology of the state is hegemonic and dominant, and even intolerant of opposition. This intolerant attitude is the most obvious weakness of classical theology.[18]

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[15] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 17-18. He quotes from Mustafa Ghalib, *al-Ḥarakat al-Baṭiniyah fi'l Islām* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1982), pp. 161-162.

[16] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, pp. 1-2.

[17] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), p. 59.

[18] See, Masdar Farid Mas'udi, "Telaah Kritis atas Teologi Mu'tazilah ("Critical Survey of Mu'tazila Theology")," in *Kontekstualisasi Doktrin Islam dalam Sejarah* ("Contextualization of Islamic Doctrines in the History"), edited by Budhy Munawar-Rachman (Jakarta: Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina, 1994), p. 129.

Seen from the above perspective, it would seem that classical theology has little to offer to the struggle for human liberation. Classical theologians did debate matter of justice only to the justice of God in the hereafter, not matters of justice "here" and "now". The oppression experienced by the masses never entered this discourse. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallah, a proponent of Islamic liberation theology and contemporary Shiʿī 'alim who has been living in Lebanon since 1966, criticizes the medieval belief in predestination and the abstract power of God which he contends served to justify social injustice and oppression of the weak by the rich and power.[19]

Thus, classical theology in its orthodoxy was careful to stay far beyond the real problems of human life. This, according to Engineer, makes religion meaningless to the weak and oppressed people—a position similar to Marx when he criticized religion as social opium. Engineer maintains that Marx did not condemn religion *per se* and his criticism of religion was not in the spiritual content but in its social function. In the sense that instead of changing an oppressive condition, religion was used to perpetuate it.[20] In this context, religion was a tool of tyranny.

According to Engineer, for making religion an instrument of change, it is necessary to reformulate it in the form of liberation theology. He maintains that liberating theology is a necessity in order to develop theology of liberation.[21] In a liberated form, religion can provide a powerful ideological weapon to the oppressed.

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[19] Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, "Toward an Islamic Liberation Theology: Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallah and the Principles of Shiʿī Resurgence," in *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 232.

[20] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 2.

[21] Ibid., *Theology*, p. 21. There is no doubt that Asghar Ali Engineer is the first Muslim scholar who uses the term of Islamic liberation theology. He proposes this kind of theology in "On Developing Liberation

B.   Toward an Islamic Liberation Theology

Theology is not a sacred science but purely human reflection upon existence from a particular religious perspective, and there is no eternal theology which fits every time and space. Theology, therefore, is socially constructed. The emergence of a theology is always an expression of the spirit of its time. According to Ḥassan Ḥanafi, an Egyptian Muslim thinker who promoted revolutionary theology, theology has two spirits.[22] First, it tries to maintain the status quo. It is formulated for the elite and upper class who monopolize opinion in order to prevent any opposition. This can be clearly seen in the medieval period of Islam. Second, the other spirit of theology is dynamic directed toward changing the status quo. It emphasizes the progressive and concrete and gives room for opposition and different opinions. This is the spirit of the masses against the oppressed classes. It is from this spirit that Islamic liberation theology draws its inspiration.

Yet, it must be kept in mind that theology cannot only be transcendental. It must be contextual as well. Theology that is only concerned with transcendental or

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Theology," in *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 13-38. Later on, we can find other Muslim thinkers who use this term. See, among others, Shabbir Akhtar, *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1991); Ḥassan Ḥanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, Vol. II (Cairo: The Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1995), pp. 189-197; Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', "Toward an Islamic Liberation Theology," in *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 220-247; Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 1997), p. 83. However, the spirit of liberation theology has been embodied long before this century. We can find it in the Qur'an, the struggle of all Prophets, the Prophet's Companions, and to some extent, the medieval period of Islam. In the modern age we can find through the Iranian Revolution in 1979. See, Hamid Algar, *The Roots of the Islamic Revolution* (London: the Open Press, 1983); Ḥassan Ḥanafi, *Min al-aqidah ilā al-tawrah* (Cairo: Madbula Publication, 1988); 'Ali Sharī'ati, *On the Sociology of Islam* (Barkeley: Mizan Press, 1979).

[22] Ḥassan Ḥanafi, "Religion and Revolution," in *Religious Dialogue and Revolution* (Cairo: Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1988), p. 202.

metaphysical issues will cut itself adrift from earthly matters. It will lose its relevance to the social context. Theology can be useful in setting human goals only when it relates itself creatively to human conditions. Therefore, the contextualisation of theology is as important as its transcendence. Engineer interprets theology as a means

> "to strive to know about God and His guidance, the real intention behind the guidance. As God is creative, theology also has to be. It grapples with divine intentions, His ever new ways of manifesting His glories and creations of new situations. How then can seekers after His Truth remain stagnant and uncreative? A seeker after truth has to grapple with ever changing situations and understand His new ways of manifestations. Theology is nothing, if not rooted in a particular situation and also transcend it. It is this tension between its rootedness and transcendence that makes it creative."[23]

Islamic liberation theology, according to Engineer, is much more than modernist rational theology. The rational theology expounded by scholars such as Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), and Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), puts too much emphasis on reason and advocates freedom of re-interpretation of the scriptural texts. Its intellectualism has great appeal for the elite. In the backwardness of the masses, a rational and complex interpretation of religion does not enthuse them. What appeals to them is folk religion with its attendant rituals. In this form, religion serves their psychological need to face the hard conditions of life.[24]

Islamic liberation theology, Engineer maintains, does not limit itself to arena of pure and speculative reasoning, but widens its scope to the arena of praxis.[25] What is meant by praxis here refers to the combination of reflection with action, theory with

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[23] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 138.

[24] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 24.

[25] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 6.

practice, and faith with deed.[26] Faith and praxis in the liberation theology are two sides of

the same coin. According to Engineer, through praxis, liberation theology wants to

become the "most powerful instrument for emancipating the masses from the clutches of

their masters and exploiters and inspires them to act with a revolutionary zeal to fight

against tyranny, exploitation and persecution."[27] Thus, the theology of liberation is a

product of reflection which follows on praxis for liberation. It tries to transform the

oppressed into independent and active beings. Only as active beings, the oppressed are

able to emancipate themselves from the oppression. To use Paulo Freire's words, "it is

only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors."[28]

It is important to note that the basic philosophical assumption of Islamic liberation

theology is that humans are free. Human nature will always fight against all forms of

oppression. A human being is also essentially a creature of reason predisposed to equity

and justice. That is why human nature always revolts against all kinds of inequality and

injustice.[29] Thus, calling for the oppressed to rebel against oppressors is a basic

affirmation of human nature. Oppression must also be fought because it is "a process of

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[26] The concept of praxis is the fundamental basis for and main characteristic of the Islamic liberation theology because it wants to avoid speculative and deductive modes of thought that are beyond the illiterate masses. Initially, praxis philosophy developed by Marxist as "the totality of activities by which human beings transform nature into a human world, that is a world of meanings and consciousness." See, John Brenkman, *Culture and Domination* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 18. Later on this concept was adopted and popularized by some activist scholars. See, among others, Ebrahim Moosa, *Tarbiyyah:* Working Paper One, *Proceedings of General Assembly*, Kimberley (Gatesville: Muslim Youth Movement, 1987), p. 4; Hassan Hanafi, *Religious Dialogue and Revolution*, p. 211; Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 1997), p. 85; Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 137; Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and edit. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, 9th edition (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 5-12.

[27] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 24.

[28] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 38.

[29] Hanafi, *Religious Dialogue and Revolution*, p. 203.

dehumanization that negates the freedom given to humans by the Qur'an."[30] Islamic liberation theology therefore pays great attention to all forms of oppression and injustice. Its agenda is the realisation of the humane and just world.

The main purpose of liberation theology is to make religion meaningful to the oppressed and weak of society. Engineer maintains that religion can either be an opium or a revolutionary force depending on how it is interpreted and used. Religion becomes an opium when it allies with status quo. In this context, religion only becomes, to use Marx's term, "the sigh of the oppressed creature."[31] In this sense, religion is not meaningful to the oppressed because instead of challenging inhuman conditions, it perpetuates them. Yet, religion can become an instrument of change when it is formulated as liberation theology. It then becomes a powerful ideological weapon. Thus, according to Engineer, Islamic liberation theology is a theology of struggle not of solace. In such a form, religion can become a sword in the hands of the oppressed to fight against their oppressors. Engineer maintains that religions like Budhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, have the potential to be revolutionary. He gives the examples of Islam in Iran and Christianity in Philippines both of which were instrumental in ending long standing dictatorships.[32]

Thus, the emergence of liberation theology cannot be separated from the existence of injustice, exploitation and oppression.[33] Conditions of injustice are not inert

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[30] Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*, p. 228.

[31] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 175.

[32] Ibid., p. 20. However, Engineer also notes that after successful overthrow of the hated regime of the Shah, Khomeini's regime turned out to be equally tyrannical. Ibid., p. 177.

[33] This context is similar to that of liberation theology in Latin America. This theology emerged in a situation where people lack emancipation and are subjected to oppressive forces. The emergence of this

metaphysical 'givens' but rather humanly constructed through social forces of oppression. According to 'Alī Sharī'atī and Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallah, human history is a summation and battleground of two opposing forces: justice and injustice, the powerful and the weak, and the arrogant and the oppressed.[34] Since the great majority of the weak and oppressed are in the third world, it is understandable if liberation theology is applied and appreciated mostly in developing countries. It is a Third World theology.[35]

Thus, Islamic liberation theology emerged in the context of unjust social systems and systematic oppression. This context helps us in understanding what theology of liberation is. Farid Esack defines liberation theology as "one that works towards freeing religion from social, political and religious structures and ideas based on uncritical obedience and the freedom of all people from all forms of injustice and exploitation including those of race, gender, class and religion."[36] The key here is freeing religion from anything that is based on uncritical obedience. It is an instrument against all forms of injustice.

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theology then is how to emancipate these people so they are able to make their own future and destiny. To them, God is liberator. See, Thomas Kochuthara, *Theology of Liberation and Ideology Critique* (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1993), p. 233; John R. Pottenger, *The Political Theory of Liberation Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 10-32.

[34] Algar, *The Roots of the Islamic Revolution*, p. 79; Abu -Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*, p. 230.

[35] Latin America is the first place that proposed this type theology. It is of course based on Christian tradition. In South Africa, Farid Esack has formulated liberation theology based on the Islamic tradition. In India, it is Asghar Ali Engineer. In Iran, 'Alī Sharī'atī argues according to a liberation theology. In other developing countries, this kind of theology is very much appreciated by those who are active in NGOs. In Indonesia different terms such as *Theology untuk Kaum Tertindas* ("Theology of the Oppressed") proposed by Mansour Fakih; *Teologi Populis* ("Populist Theology") proposed by Madar F. Mas'ud, and *Teologi Transformatif* ("Transformative Theology") proposed by Moslem Abdurrahman are used. See, among others, Deane William Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987); Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997); Mansour Fakih, "Teologi Kaum Tertindas" ("Theology of the Oppressed") in *Agama dan Aspirasi Rakyat* ("Religion and People Aspiration") (Yogyakarta: Dian Interfidie, 1994), p. 203.

[36] Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, p. 83.

Asghar Ali Engineer's definition of liberation theology is very similar to above definition. He defines Islamic liberation theology as a "theology which puts great emphasis on freedom, equality and distributive justice and strongly condemns exploitation of man by man, oppression and persecution."[37] Since his concern is for social justice and the oppressed, liberation theology could also be seen as being "all about sympathy with the oppressed and downtrodden and making space for their uplift in theological formulations."[38] Thus, besides its concern for social justice, freedom and equality, liberation theology also tries to emancipate the oppressed by giving them a critical consciousness of the situation surrounding them through theological formulations. Moreover, liberation theology also emphasizes on the restructuring of the present order in favor of a non-exploitative, just and egalitarian one. The aim is to improve life conditions.

Some characteristics of Islamic liberation theology proposed by Engineer are as follows:

(i) "It concerns itself primarily with the here and now of human life and only then with the hereafter."[39] The spirit of liberation theology is the life of people in this world. The concern of liberation theology is how to solve the problems of this world like social injustice, oppression and economic exploitation. These problems are not only a violation of human dignity, but also against fundamental principles of Islam.

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[37] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 19.

[38] Asghar Ali Engineer, e-mail correspondence with the writer, 12 October 1999. Montreal.

[39] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 1.

(ii) It is against all those who support status quo,[40] because people who support the status quo usually do so due to social or economic reasons. Liberation theology is antithetical to the establishment order, whether religious or political. The status quo is reflected through the hegemony of the regime towards civil society.

(iii) It plays partisan role in favor of the oppressed and dispossessed and tries to emancipate these sections of society by providing them a powerful ideological weapon.[41] Thus, the position of liberation theology is clear: it takes the side of the oppressed and wants to liberate them from any form of injustice through participatory and liberatory action.

(iv) It does not merely emphasize metaphysical destiny beyond the historical process, but also emphasizes the human capacity to release a temporal destiny.[42]

(v) It puts greater emphasis on praxis rather than metaphysical discourse.[43] The emphasis on praxis refers to how Islam should operate in real life. In other words, liberation theology concerns with the dialectical relation between what "is" and what "ought" to be.

The above noted characteristics are the principle components of Islamic liberation theology. It is in favor of the oppressed, against injustice and oppressive socio-economic structures. It is anti status quo and therefore puts greater emphasis on praxis over theory. Islamic liberation theology is dynamic and change-oriented. Thus it is an antithesis of the static medieval Islamic theology.

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[40] Engineer, Islam and Liberation Theology, p. 1.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., p. 6.

The characteristics of liberation theology outlined by Engineer are similar to those of Hassan Ḥanafi's. According to Ḥanafi, liberation theology has the following characteristics. First of all, it gives absolute priority to praxis over theory because its major concern is social transformation. It is a theology for the emancipation of the weak from the oppression. The next characteristic is that it is a part of a wider socio-political struggle. Liberation theology is constructed not for religion, but for human beings. The last characteristic of liberation theology according to Ḥanafi is that it tries to liberate itself at first from orthodox theology and only then can social liberation through theology occur.[44]

There is no doubt that praxis philosophy becomes a basic postulate of Islamic liberation theology proposed by Engineer and Ḥanafi above. This is because only through praxis could social transformation be accomplished. Regarding this issue, Mansour Fakih's views are interesting. An Indonesian Muslim NGO activist, Fakih, advocates three steps of what he calls "Theology of the Oppressed".[45] The first step is formulating and constructing theology in an academic form and then interjecting it into public discourse. He calls this the dissemination step. After being debated by public, it then moves into the second step: finding the appropriate form of praxis in society. At this step,

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[44] Hassan Ḥanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, Vol. II (Cairo: The Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1995), pp. 195-196.

[45] Fakih's formulation of "Theology of the Oppressed", to some extent, was similar to that of "Islamic Liberation Theology" proposed by Engineer. Both emphasized on praxis, in favor of the oppressed, and tried to reconstruct the discourse of theology in Islam. See, Mansour Fakih, "Teologi Kaum Tertindas," ("Theology of the Oppressed") in *Spiritualitas Baru: Agama dan Aspirasi Rakyat* ("New Spirituality: Religion and People Aspiration") (Yogyakarta: Dian Interfidie, 1994), pp. 203-242.

theology is translated into social action in many projects such as popular education, advocacy, empowerment, etc. In this regard, the discussion is not on theology, but on praxis. The last step is reconstructing it into a system of theology. At this step a grand project is formulated, designed and implemented. This project would incorporate writings on other subjects such as gender analysis, globalization, capitalism, and so on.

Seen from the above perspective, it seems that the spirit of Islamic liberation theology is similar to that of liberation theology in Latin America.[46] Both tried to make theology a critical reflection on historical praxis. Their concern was not simply interpreting the world, they sought to become part of the struggle for a more humane, just and egalitarian order. However, they are of course not identical. The most fundamental difference between them is the source of inspiration. The moral foundation of Islamic liberation theology is composed from Islamic traditional sources such as the Qur'an, the ḥadīth, and example set by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. While liberation theology in Latin America finds its inspiration from the many sources of the Christian tradition.

B.1. Sources of Islamic Liberation Theology

Since the Islamic liberation theology which is formulated by Engineer finds its inspiration in the Qur'an and the struggle of all prophets, particularly the Prophet

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[46] See, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and edit. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, 9th edition (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 12.

Muhammad, he constantly refers to these sources.[47] He believes that the Quran teaches its

adherents to emancipate the oppressed and to uphold socio-economic justice. This

teaching is most clearly shown by the Prophet Muhammad in early Islam.

Many historians have written about the origins of Islam. Different perspectives

have created wide ranging points of view.[48] In his own interpretation of the origin of

Islam, Engineer uses social and economic approaches.[49] It is his belief that these factors

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[47] It must be noted that in dealing with the sources of Islamic liberation theology, there is a little bit of a shift in the sources proposed by Asghar Ali Engineer. When he wrote for the first time about Islamic liberation theology in 1984, he took liberation theology in Latin America and some progressive ideas of classical Islamic theology as samples to formulate liberation theology. Thus, his idea of Islamic liberation theology, to some extent, was inspired by them. He, for instance, noted, "In the light of the main characteristics of the liberation theology discussed above, I propose to throw light on developing liberation theology in Islam." What he meant by main characteristics of liberation theology was liberation theology in the third world, mainly in Latin America, and classical theology in Islam. See, Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Revolution* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1984), pp. 19-24. He published again this article entitled *Islam and Liberation* in 1987. Interestingly, he omitted the second chapter that discussed about liberation theology in the third world. See, Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam and Liberation," in *Islam and its Relevance to Our Age* (Kuala Lumpur: Ikraq, 1987), pp. 57-80. In 1990, he developed the discourse of Islamic liberation theology through his book entitled *Islam and Liberation Theology*. This book is designed to give the whole picture of Islamic liberation theology and Engineer did not talk at all about liberation theology in Latin America. He tried to formulate liberation theology through Islamic sources such as the Qur'an, the Prophet's tradition, the *hadith* and the Prophet companions. He wanted to show that Islam very much supports liberation of the oppressed and emphasizes on justice and equality.

[48] To compare the historians' interpretations of the origin of Islam, see, among others, Marshal G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); W. Mongomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner Book Edition, 1992); Charles Le Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Albany: State University of New York Pers, 1985), pp. 112-129; Akbar S. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), pp. 15-29; Sayed Ali Asgher Razwy, *A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims* (United Kingdom: The World Federation of KSI Muslim Communities, 1997).

[49] In this regard, Engineer used Marxist methodology. According to him, Marxist methodology is the most effective and helpful in understanding socio-economic growth of Islam. Through this method, one can understand how Islam faced economic and political hegemony in its origin which was the big challenge faced by Islam in its early stage. However, he underlined that using historical materialism of Marxism did not necessarily mean to compromise one's faith and belief. Rather it is intended to see Islam through its historical context. Thus, to Engineer, the Marxist methodological approach is more important than its dogmas or beliefs. See, Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam* (London: Sangam Book, 1987). The approach taken by Asghar Ali Engineeer, is somewhat similar to that of Bandali Saliba Jawzi (1872-1942). Jawzi also used socio-economic factors contributing to the birth of Islam. This approach is taken by him due his admiration of the doctrine of social justice in Islam. See, Tamara Sonn, *Interpreting Islam: Bandali Jawzi's Islamic Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 45.

very much contributed to the birth of Islam. This perspective, however, does not necessarily mean that these were the only determining factors. Religious, spiritual and psychological factors remain important.

Mecca, the cradle of Islam, according to Engineer, is divided into two parts, the urban and the nomadic.[50] The Bedouins who lived as nomads in desert did not have any formal religion. This situation however was different for the Bedouins in the urban area of Mecca. This was the center of pagan Arab religion. It was also one of the most important urban center because of its international trade.[51] The importance of this cultural divide is emphasized by Fazlur Rahman who states that "Muhammad's monotheism and his movement had *nothing* to do with the desert life of the Bedouins but presupposes a city environment with a long commercial and religious tradition."[52]

It was in that setting that the Prophet Muhammad was born and began to preach Islam. Mecca was the center of financial and commercial town due to its location on the international trade route from the south to the north. The fast growth of Mecca as a trading center probably was due to the existence of a *haram* or sanctuary area in which people could come without any fear of molestation. The original people who inhabited that city were nomadic stock. When they came to Mecca, they brought their tribal loyalty. That tribal loyalty became source of tension because each tried to dominate the other. According to Engineer, the struggle for domination was not because of political factors, but due to commercial and trade reasons.[53] However, economic wealth, undoubtedly,

[50] Engineer, *The origin and Development of Islam*, p. 27.

[51] Ibid., p. 28.

[52] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 12.

[53] Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam*, p. 38.

affected one's position in politics. Abū Sufyān, for instance, dominated Meccan policy due to the importance and wealth of his clan ('Abd Shams). He did not hold any official office of authority.[54] Thus, the Prophet lived in a world where financial and political struggle were inextricably mixed up.

According to Engineer, one of the tribes, the Quraysh, dominated Mecca during the sixth century.[55] The members of this tribe, the aristocrats of Mecca, were successful in establishing commercial hegemony. Montgomery Watt describes the Quraysh as "skilful in manipulations of credit, shrewd in their speculations, and interested in any potentialities of lucrative investment from Aden to Gaza or Damascus."[56] The Quraysh continued to dominate the commerce in Mecca when Islam came into existence.

Engineer argues that economic factors had a very significant role in the early struggle of Islam. The reason why the Prophet Muhammad faced so much resistance from the great majority of Quraysh when he started preaching was because of economic factors rather than religious ones. Moreover, he explains that the pagan idols worshipped in and around Mecca were originally imported from the Syrian agricultural society by the Bedouins and thus, they were not an integral part of the society of Mecca. The merchant capitalists of Mecca actually had no deep spiritual connection with these idols.[57] To strengthen his own opinion, Engineer quotes Dr. Taha Husayn:

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[54] W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 9. Abū Sufyān (d. 653) was a Meccan chief who opposed the Prophet Muḥammad and in the battle of Uhud, his wife, Hind, tore the liver from the body of Ḥamzah, a Muḥammad's uncle, and bit it because he had killed her father in the battle of Badr. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, p. 190.

[55] Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam*, p. 38.

[56] Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, p. 3.

[57] Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam*, p. 42.

"I can say with my conviction that if he (the Prophet) had preached simply unity of God without attacking the social and economic system, leaving differences between weak and strong, rich and poor, slave and master intact, and had not banned usury (this is a little doubtful, as usury, some scholars maintain, was banned by the Prophet after his immigration to Medina) and had not exhorted the rich to distribute part of their wealth to the needy and indigent, the great majority of the tribe of Quraysh would have accepted his religion, for most of the Quraysh did not have sincere regards for their idols and were not emotionally devoted to them. They were skeptical towards them and worshipped them for fun. In fact they were using idols to keep their hold over the Arab masses and to exploit them."[58]

Before the rise of Islam, tribal collectivism and solidarity were the life of style of Arabs. However, according to Engineer, when Muhammad started preaching Islam, this tribal collectivism was being undermined due to the fast growth of commerce in Mecca.[59] Commercial individualism was gaining force. This individualism threatened long cherished notions of loyalty and equity. There was a wide gap between the rich and the poor due to the development of personal commercial ventures. Even some merchants from one tribe formed inter-tribal business corporations and established a monopoly over certain areas. The rich merchants of Mecca who monopolized trade and accumulated profits did not want to share and distribute their wealth to the poor. They considered wealth and material comforts as the ultimate end of life. Undoubtedly, it was a hedonistic view of life. As a result, Engineer reiterates, the orphans, the widows, the needy, and the

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[58] Ibid. He quotes from Tāha Husyan, *Al-Fitnat al-Kubrā*, translated into Urdu by 'Abdal Hamīd No'mini, Vol. 1, p.11. H.A.R. Gibb supports Husayn's opinion. According to him, Meccans resistance to Muhammad was much more due to political and economic factors than religious ones. The doctrine of Muhammad to uphold justice, to fight against discrimination and to oppose the concentration of wealth, undoubtedly, threatened Qurayshi economic hegemony and prosperity. Also, his pure monotheism threatened the economic assets of their sanctuaries. Thus, the reason why the Prophet's preaching evoked strong opposition from the Quraysh was because they felt that their commercially vested interests were being threatened. See, H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammadanism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 18. Also see, Akbar S. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam*, p. 19.

[59] Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam*, p. 49.

slaves greatly suffered. Most of these slaves existed on the periphery of the society and they had no human dignity.[60] As reaction to this social inequity some of those left behind in the economic competition established an association called *Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl* (League of the Virtuous). Muḥammad was present and was actively involved in the meeting at which the League was formed.[61]

The wide gap between the two sections of society, according to Engineer, created tensions among them. Muhammad was disturbed greatly by this situation. He realized that if nothing were done, the society would soon be broken to pieces. Muḥammad tried to reduce and mitigate tensions by calling for the rich to take greater care of the poor, the indigent, needy, orphans and widows. The Prophet also reminded the rich Meccan merchants that they had a divinely ordained moral responsibility "to be concerned with the welfare of the weaker sections of society."[62] Engineer quotes the following Qur'anic verse which condemn the concentration of wealth:

> "Woe unto every backbiter and slanderer, Who amasses wealth and counts it diligently. He thinks that his wealth will make him immortal! Not at all; he shall be cast into the Smasher. And if only you knew what is the Smasher. It is Allah's kindled Fire, Which attains even the hearts. Upon them it is closing in; On pillars stretched out." (The Qur'an, 104:1-9).[63]

One of the efforts of Muhammad to mitigate social tensions, according to Engineer, was by introducing the concept of *zakāt* which means a "purification of one's

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[60] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 29.

[61] Engineer, *Islam and its Relevance to Our Age*, p. 3.

[62] Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam*, p. 54.

[63] *The Qur'an— A Modern English Translation*, translated by Majid Fakhry (UK: Garnet Publishing, 1997), p. 425.

wealth by giving away a part of its charity."[64] The social purpose of *zakāt* was to uphold

social justice for the orphans, the poor, the needy, slaves, the indebted, as well as

providing facilities for traders on trade routes. Initially, the *zakāt* was not obligatory.

However, later on, the *zakāt* was transformed into an obligation once the Muslims

established themselves in the city of Yathrib, also called Madina.

Thus, it is clear that the origin of Islam was very much concerned with the weaker

sections of society. Islam came, Engineer confirms, "to change the status quo in favor of

the oppressed and exploited."[65] Moreover, the reason why the weaker sections of society

were attracted to Islam was because they believed that Muḥammad's mission could

liberate them from unjust social system.[66]

The Prophet was deeply concerned with the weaker section of society. For

example, he liberated Bilal, a black slave of foreign origin and appointed him as a caller

(*muezzin*).[67]

The emphasis of liberation theology towards the weaker sections of society is not

without reason. Engineer confirms that there will be no social justice without liberating

and "giving leadership to the weaker and marginalised sections of the society."[68] This is

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[64] Engineer, *The Development and Origin of Islam*, p. 56.

[65] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 5.

[66] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 27. Similarly, 'Alī Sharī'atī argued that from the beginning, Islam sided with the poor and the powerless. It liberated this section of society from their subjugation to the powerful and the rich. See, Kamal Abdel-Malek, *Towards an Islamic Liberation Theology: 'Alī Sharī'atī and His Thought* (Montreal: Centre for Developing Area Studies, McGill, 1989), Discussion Paper No. 55, p. 9. Even Sharī'atī calls the God of Islam as the "God of the oppressed, of those who are fighting for their freedom, of the martyrs for the cause of truth and justice." See, 'Alī Sharī'atī, *What Is to Be Done?: The Enlightened Thinkers and an Islamic Renaissance*, ed. Farhang Rajaee (Houston: IRIS, 1986) pp. 1, 71.

[67] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 3.

[68] Ibid., p. 22.

because the Qur'an states clearly that those are the leaders and the inheritors of the earth.[69] Keeping this in mind, let us understand why the Prophet tried to make a radical social change in favor of the oppressed. There is no doubt his mission was a powerful magnet for those who suffered from unjust and oppressive structures. Conversely, the Meccan merchant capitalists opposed strongly the Prophet's mission because it attacked their privileged position. The concept of equality made their social position equal to that of the slaves. The powerful challenge of the Prophet to the rich traders of Mecca clearly demonstrates that the whole ideological character of Islam is inspired by the quest for justice and liberty.

Thus, Islam from its origin, according to Engineer, placed much more emphasis on historical praxis rather than abstract philosophical doctrines.[70] It is not only a spiritual awakening but also social activism. Islam calls, in Bandali Jawzi's words, "for an end to oppression and injustice, both of which result from socio-economic conditions."[71]

In Engineer's view, the Prophet pointed the way to a society free of exploitation, oppression, domination and injustice in all forms. He struggled to restructure social order into a more egalitarian and just one. The Prophet was not only revolutionary in his thought, but also in his deed. Through praxis, he worked for radical changes in the social structure of his time. The Prophet worked for the liberation of the oppressed, the weak and needy, and he was "not only a teacher and a philosopher, but also an activist, a

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[69] Qur'an, 4: 75.

[70] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 195.

[71] Tamara Sonn, *Interpreting Islam*, p. 45.

participant and a fighter."[72] Thus, there is no doubt that the Prophet Muhammad was born and emerged as the voice of social reform.

In addition to the Qur'an and the actions of the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic liberation theology is also inspired by the actions of other Prophets. According to this theology, all the Prophets struggled for the change and social justice. The Prophet Abraham, for example, struggled against idolatry and Moses liberated his community from the oppression of the Pharaoh. The Qur'an calls the Pharaoh as oppressor ($\underline{z}$ālim) and arrogant (mustakbir). Moses was appointed by Allah as the leader of the oppressed to fight against the Pharaoh and to liberate them from his oppression. Jesus sought to liberate the Jews from the formalism of the Law.[73] All the Prophets brought emancipatory and liberatory missions.

The Prophet's companions like 'Umār (d. 644) and 'Alī (d. 661) also struggled for establishing social justice after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632. They fought intensely for a just distribution of wealth in the society. 'Umar, for instance, did not allow private property in land to avoid domination of wealth. 'Alī enforced the equal distribution of state treasury (bait at-māl). For them, Islam did not only mean a manner of worship such as prayer and fasting, but also a dynamic social and cultural force that is inseparable from the daily concerns and problems of people. According to Engineer, both of them believed that "Islam is a serious project to establish social justice."[74]

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[72] Engineer, Islam and Liberation Theology, p. 30.

[73] Engineer, Islam and Liberation Theology, p. 23. See also, Ḥanafi, Islam in the Modern World, p. 171; Esack, Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism, pp. 194-200; 'Ali Sharī'atī, Martyrdom, translated by Laleh Bakhtiar and Husayn Saleh (Tehran: Abu Dharr Foundation, 1981), p. 19.

[74] Engineer, Islam and Liberation Theology, p. 205.

Islamic liberation theology also puts the tragedy of Karbala as moment of struggle between the good (Imām Ḥusayn, d. 680) and evil (the Umayyad ruler, Yazīd bin Mu'āwiyah). The battle (which took place in 680 at Karbala, Iraq) was essentially pitted the status quo against revolutionary forces.[75] It was not only a struggle for power, but a fight for the basic principles of Islam. The tragedy of Karbala should not be seen in the theological and spiritual aspects only, but also must be seen in sociological perspective for preaching the concept of equality and social justice.

C. Key Terms of Islamic Liberation Theology

In this section, we examine some of the Islamic terms that are redefined by Islamic liberation theology. These terms are very significant in understanding this theology because these are redefined from a socio-economic perspective.

C.1. *Tawḥīd* (The Unity of God)

The word *tawḥīd* is derived from the root *w-h-d*, meaning "to be alone, singular, without equal, incomparable."[76] In the Qur'an, it is synonymous with the unity of God.[77]

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[75] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, pp. 224-233.

[76] J.M. Cowan, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, 1976), p. 1054.

[77] The Qur'an, 112:1-4.

The doctrine of *tawḥīd* constitutes the core of Islam. It is the foundation, the center and the heart of Islam. This doctrine is reflected in the statement of *lā ilāha illa-Allāh* ("there is no god except God"). This doctrine, according to Engineer, not only has religious consequence, but socio-economic consequence as well. "Muhammad by preaching *lā ilāha illa-Allāh*, was not only negating the idols installed in the Ka'aba, but also refusing to acknowledge the authority of the powerful vested interests of his own time and the social structure under their thumb."[78] Thus, the above statement has two dimensions: a spiritual or religious aspect and a socio-political aspect. The religious aspect deals with negation of the idols worshiped by Meccan society, while the socio-political aspect deals with the resistance of Muḥammad toward the domination and hegemony of certain groups within the economy. In this regard, Engineer views *lā ilāha illa-Allah* not only in theological sense, but also in sociological sense. This is because Islam does not separate the social life from the spiritual life.

As far as traditional theology is concerned, *tawḥīd* means the unity of God only. In this sense, *tawḥīd* means strict monotheism, Allāh is One, to Whom all depend. This interpretation is based on theological perspective only. However, according to Engineer, this concept has also sociological dimension. *Tawḥīd* is not merely as the unity of God, "but also the unity of mankind which cannot be achieved in its truest sense without creating a classless society."[79] Thus, *tawḥīd* also means oneness of humankind, or in other words, *tawḥīd* is a reflection of the undivided God for undivided humanity. This

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[78] Engineer, *Islam and its Relevance to Our Age*, p. 6.

[79] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 8. See also, Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam - The Ultimate Vision*, Part Two (Internet), 12 October 1999.

oneness means all human beings are equal before Allāh.[80] This equality is not only in respect to color, race, nationality and ethnicity, but extends to differences of faith. The unity of human beings should not be reduced to the unity of faithful only. "The real unity of humankind," says Engineer, "is across the lines of faith."[81] In this context, pluralism is respected and unity in diversity is pleaded. A pluralism of true faiths is confirmed by the Qur'an, 5:48. Engineer translates this verse as follows:

> "Unto everyone of you We have appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if Allah had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has given you."[82]

'Alī Sharia'tī's view of *tawḥīd* is similar to that of Engineer. For Sharī'atī, *tawḥīd* "represents a particular view of the world that demonstrates a universal unity in existence, a unity between three separate elements—God, nature and man—because the origin of the three is the same."[83] What Sharī'atī means by unity is not in the sense of substantial unity in essence, rather to confirm that God, nature and humans, are not remote from each other, not alien to each other and not opposed to each other. This means that reality is one, in the sense that the spiritual and the material, the world and the hereafter, constitute a single continuum for the Muslims.[84]

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[80] This doctrine of equality also reflected in the *salāt* ("prayer"). Philosophically, prayer teaches the faithful about equality and dignity of human beings. This is because all Muslims, regardless their ethnic, race, and social status, have to stand in one line in prayer. This means that there is no discrimination and distinction among them. Asghar Ali Engineer, *Reconstruction of Islamic Thought* (Internet, October 12, 1999), p. 2.

[81] Engineer, *Islam-The Ultimate Vision, Part Two* (Internet), 12 October, 1999.

[82] Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Pluralism* (Mumbay: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1999), p. 2.

[83] 'Alī Sharī'atī, *On the Sociology of Islam* (Barkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), p. 83.

[84] Algar, *The Roots of the Islamic Revolution*, p. 78.

The consequence of above view of *tawḥīd* is that all forms of contradiction between the world and the hereafter, spirit and body, life and eternity, landlord and peasant, ruler and ruled, black and white, capitalist and proletarian, oppressors and oppressed, elite and masses, and learned and illiterate, have existence only with the world-view of polytheism (*shirk*), not *tawḥīd*. This spirit is similar to the society based on *tawḥīd*. In Engineer's view, an Islamic society (*jāmi'i tawḥīd*) does not approve of discrimination in any form whether based on race, religion, caste, or class. A true *tawḥīd* society must emphasize complete unity of society and, therefore, it must have no division in it, not even class division.[85] This is because the existence of divisions in society, i.e. class division, implies domination contrary to God's will. Such domination creates tension and unjust social life and that is why it must be abolished and denied. "Only a society free of ethnic, national, linguistic and class divisions can be an ideal *tawḥīd* society," says Engineer.[86] He also adds that an Islamic society is not only free of tyranny and exploitation, but also must be free from every form of mental slavery.[87]

Thus, *tawḥīd* can be achieved only by creating a just social structure that is free of exploitation and by having a true belief in the unity of God. According to Engineer, if there is still exploitation and oppression in society, it cannot be labeled as Islamic society.[88] An Islamic society is an egalitarian society that puts all members on the same level. The egalitarian society is "a society without classes. It is society without rich and

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[85] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 33.

[86] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 88.

[87] Engineer, *Islam – The Ultimate Vision* (Part Two), p. 1.

[88] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 5.

power, satiety and hunger."[89] A society which is based on class structures is against *tawḥīd*. It is in this sense that Islamic liberation theology continuously strives to achieve the unity of mankind by eliminating all differences.

Sharī'atī views *tawḥīd* from theological as well as sociological perspectives. He gives the principle of *tawḥīd* a sociological content. Seen *tawḥīd* from this perspective is important to avoid interpreting *tawḥīd* merely as religio-philosophical theory. It is important to note that *tawḥīd* cannot be separated from social responsibility. Hamid Algar says, "*Tawḥīd* is inseparable from the social and historical responsibility and commitments of those who profess it, so that the society that believes in *tawḥīd* is also a society that must practice *jihād*."[90] To use Hassan Hanafi's words, *tawḥīd* "had a practical function to produce sound behaviour, and faith aimed at changing people's daily life and social system."[91]

Thus, establishing social justice and liberating humankind from all kinds of bondage are the implementation of *tawḥīd*. In other words, fighting inequality and injustice in the world is religious duty. This is because the affirmation of one God corresponds a unified society of equality and justice. In the same language, Toshio Kuroda, a Japanese scholar of comparative religion, interprets *tawḥīd* in the sense of the unity of creation of God. According to him, *tawḥīd* is contrary to all forms of discrimination, whether based on race, color, class, lineage, wealth or power. Because of

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[89] Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, p. 165.

[90] Hamid Algar, "Introduction," in *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 29.

[91] Hassan Hanafi, "Mādhā Ya'ni al-Yasār al-Islāmī? ("What Does the Islamic Left Mean?")," in *al-Yasār al-Islāmī* (Cairo:—, 1981), p. 38.

tawhid, the relations of humankind must be based on equality and justice.[92] Undoubtedly, this interpretation is close to the Qur'anic spirit of justice and benevolence.

Scholars such as Shari'atī, Algar and Hanafi concur with Engineer's views. It is interesting to analyze how Engineer interprets the fundamental word of *tawhid*, *Allāho-Akbar* ("God is greatest"). According to him, this phrase should not be seen only in the context of theological doctrine of supremacy of God, but also as a revolutionary concept that no human beings can claim supremacy over other human beings. No human beings can dominate over or bow before other human beings. All of them are equal before Allāh. Engineer maintains, since Allāh Himself is just ('*adil*), the term *Allāho-Akbar* calls out to the faithful to be just to each other. Allāh, through the Prophet, also proclaimed a *jihād* against injustice and oppression. Therefore, according to Engineer, *Allāho-Akbar* is a call for the faithful to stand up and fight against all forms of oppression.[93]

C.2.   'Adl ("Justice")

Justice is central to Islamic doctrine. It is therefore a core concept within Islamic liberation theology. Justice is emphasized by the Qur'an and in the actions of the Prophet Muḥammad. However, as mentioned early, after the death of the Prophet, dynastic rules were established and the matter of justice was thereafter neglected.

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[92] See, Kazuo Shimogaki, *Between Modernity and Post-Modernity* (Japan: The Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 1988), p. 22.

[93] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, pp. 224-226.

The Qur'an used the terms *'adl* and *qist* to explain the matter of justice.[94] The meaning of *'adl* in Arabic is not merely justice, but it also carries the sense of being equal (*sawiyyat*). The term of *'adl* has the sense of equalizing and leveling. It is often used as the opposite of *zulm* ("oppression") and *jaur* ("wrong doing"). Meanwhile, the term of *qist* carries with it the sense of "equal distribution, equal installment, equal spacing, as well as justice, fairness and equity."[95] The word *taqassa*, a derivation of *qist*, means equal distribution. The word *qistas*, also a derivation of *qist*, means weighing balance. Thus, according to Engineer, both the words of *'adl* and *qist* used by the Qur'an for justice carry the sense of equal distribution, including the equal distribution of material resources, and confirm that the accumulation of capital is permitted as long as it is socially necessary.[96] There is no doubt, Engineer views justice from socio-economic perspective.

Engineer appreciates Abū'l Ḥasan Banī-Ṣadr's[97] views on Islamic system of economics based upon the concept of *tawhīd* and justice. According to Engineer, Banī-Ṣadr's views are far more revolutionary than other Muslim thinkers in the Middle East,

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[94] The Qur'an uses both the word *'adl* and *qist* altogether to associate the matter of justice: "…if it reverts, then bring them together in justice and be just, for Allah loves the just people." (49:9).

[95] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 51.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Abū'l Ḥasan Banī-Ṣadr, an Iranian Muslim scholar who earned his doctorate in economics from Sorbonne. He was involved in anti-Shah movement outside Iran and close to the Ayatullāh Khumaynī in Paris. After the Islamic movement defeated the Shah of Iran, he, together with Ayatullāh Khumaynī returned to Iran. However, he was ousted by the fundamentalist-dominated Parliament in June 1981 with the approval of the Ayatullāh Khumaynī. Banī-Ṣadr appreciated Marxist works though he was critical toward communism in certain aspects. See, Abū'l Ḥasan Banī-Sadr, "Islamic Economics: Ownership and Tawhid," in *Islam in Transition*, ed. John J Donohue and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 230-260; Abūl Ḥasan Banī-Sadr, "Tauhidi Economics," in *Tell the American People*, ed. David H. Albert (Philadelphia: Movement for a New Society, 1980), pp. 157-163; Engineer, "Islamic Economics: A Close Look at Bani Sadr's Theory," in *Islam and Liberation Theology*, pp. 116-126.

both Sunni or Shi'a.[98] Engineer points out that according to Banī-Sadr, one kind of ownership is disallowed by Islam, namely, ownership based on force (*malkiyat-i-zor*), which is common to capitalist society. In such society, people have no real freedom, but are alienated from their environment and cannot develop themselves fully. Banī-Sadr calls such society as un-Islamic society (*jami'i shirk*).[99]

Two kinds of ownership are allowed in Islam: ownership based on work (*malkiyat-i-khuṣūṣī*) and national property (*malkiyat-i-'umūmī*). Banī-Sadr maintains that the liberation of human beings can take place only if the ownership of property is based on work, not on force. Moreover, he confirms, in Engineer's view, that national property should not be treated as state capitalism, but a kind of "collective property which would be shared by all, including non-Muslims."[100]

Indeed, Banī-Sadr confirms that neither type of ownership is absolute, because there is no absolute right of ownership.[101] According to him, the right to property in Islam is not absolute because any absolute is against the concept of *tawhīd*. Absolute ownership belongs to God alone. Human ownership is contingent. Banī-Sadr conceived of interesting relations among individual, society and God regarding the ownership of property[102]:

God ⟶ society ⟶ individual

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[98] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 117.

[99] Ibid., p. 118.

[100] Ibid., pp. 118-119.

[101] Ibid., 119.

[102] Banī-Sadr, "Islamic Economics," in *Islam in Transition*, p. 231.

In this conception, God has absolute ownership of property, and society has ultimate worldly responsibility. Due to the virtue of labour, an individual can claim ownership in accordance with the general good of society. Every movement and activity should move from relativity to absoluteness, or from the personal to God. Therefore, the distribution of the fruits of labor within the community is subject to the relationship between God, society and individual. In this sense, social interest must take precedence over the individual. The accumulation of property in few hands must be avoided if social justice is to flourish.

In his interpretation of Banī-Ṣadr's ideas, Engineer argued that "the meaning of God's ownership of resources is that they must be justly distributed among all (including future generations) so that they are utilized according to the capacity to work."[103] Seen from this perspective, according to Engineer, Banī-Ṣadr's concept is close to Marxist economics. Both of them emphasized collective property. However, Engineer argues, there is a slight, though not essential, difference between them. In Marxist's concept, collective property, in an absolute sense, belongs to "people". Whereas to Banī-Ṣadr, it belongs to God. It is important to note that both Banī-Ṣadr and Marx have the same ultimate goal: creating a just, egalitarian and un-exploitative society.[104]

Moreover, Engineer maintains that the Qur'an considers justice an integral part of righteousness.[105] Justice, therefore, as far as the Qur'an is concerned, is not merely a matter of ritual concept but also socio-economic praxis as well: "It (wealth) may not

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[103] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 122.

[104] Ibid., p. 119.

[105] Ibid., p. 5. See also, The Qur'an 5:9.

circulate only among those of you who are rich."[106] This verse shows clearly how the

Qur'an is against the practice of monopoly of capital. All must take part in the abundance

of creation. According to the Qur'an, in the wealth of the rich, the needy and the deprived

have due share.[107] The Qur'an indeed suggests not to retain more wealth than what is

necessary. "And they asked you what they ought to spend. Say: That which is

superfluous."[108] In another verse, Allah condemns the riches for their ostentatious living

and such living lead to their destruction.[109]

From the above verses, it is clear that the Qur'an condemns the accumulation of

capital without spending part of it on the poor and needy. According to Engineer, the

concentration of wealth not only strengthens oppressive and exploitative structures in

society, but also distorts the entire value-system. Life is deprived of any transcendental

meaning. If there is still one who accumulates wealth for one's own benefit, there can be

no just and egalitarian society.[110]

In order to show the importance the matter of justice, Engineer quotes Ibn

Taymiyya:

> "The affairs of men in this world can be kept in order with justice and certain
> connivance in sin, better than with pious tyranny. This is why it has been said that
> God upholds the just state even if it is unbelieving (ma'al kufr), but does not
> uphold the unjust state even if it is Muslim. It is also said that the world can be
> endured with justice and unbelief, but not with injustice and Islam. The Prophet,
> on him be peace, said: "No sin is more swiftly punished than oppression and the

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[106] The Qur'an, 59:7.

[107] Ibid., 51:19.

[108] Ibid., 2:219.

[109] Ibid., 17:16.

[110] Engineer, *Islam – The Ultimate Vision* (Part One), Internet, 12 October, 1999.

breaking of family ties." For the oppressor is struck down in this world, even if he may be forgiven and receive mercy in the Hereafter."[111]

C.3. *Imān* ("Faith") and *Kufr* ("Disbelief")

The Qur'an explains the word *imān* and its noun *mu'min*:

"Indeed, the *mu'minun* are those whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned; and whose *imān* is strengthened whenever His *āyāt* (signs) are conveyed unto them; and who place their trust in their Sustainer. Those who are constant in prayer and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance. It is they who are truly the *mu'minūn.*"[112]

According to Farid Esack, there are three interconnected themes that can be discerned from above verses: the dynamic nature of *imān*, the interrelatedness of *imān* and righteous deeds and *imān* as a personal response to God.[113] This verse implies that *imān* is dynamic and mutable. It can increase or decrease. There are many verses in the Qur'an which show that *imān* can increase.[114]

Imān in the Qur'an is usually followed by a righteous deeds. Izutsu thus explains: *ṣāliḥ* ("righteous") and faith is almost an inseparable unit. *Ṣāliḥ* always follows faith like a shadow follows the form. Wherever there is *imān*, there is righteous deed. The consequence of it is that person who has *imān* must avoid himself from injustice and

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[111] Enginer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 58.

[112] The Qur'an, 8:2-4.

[113] Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, p. 118.

[114] The Qur'an, 3:173; 8:2; 9:124; 33:22; 48:04; 74:31.

wrongdoing.[115] To use Rahman's language, "The separation of faith from action is, for the Qur'an, a totally untenable and absurd situation."[116]

In traditional scholarship, the connection between faith and deed usually refers to ritual. There is reason for this. It must be noted that connecting *imān* with rituals is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an 8:2-4, and this is not the only the case. There are other examples which show the relationship between *imān* and righteous conduct in general and unspecific sense such as in 3:56; 4:57; 5:9; 7:42; 11:23, etc. In liberation theology, the notion of righteousness is greatly expanded.

The discourse of *imān* in Islamic liberation theology therefore raises a fundamental question: what actually is *imān*? Esack notes three separate interpretations of it.[117] Firstly, it is used to affirm the existence of God, the Day of Judgement, and the prophethood of Muhammad. Secondly, it is used to show membership within the religious community of Islam. Thirdly, it is an ongoing struggle to concretize faith in God into righteous conduct.

Engineer views faith as a basic element of life that can sustain the struggle for ushering in a just society. It is faith that makes people trustworthy, reliable and peace loving. Any ideas and words not based on faith can become power into themselves and over others. Based on faith, words and thought usher in the good. Engineer elaborates his point by quoting Eric Fromm,"....words and thought systems are dangerous because they

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[115] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), p. 204. See, The Qur'an, 6:82 and 49:9. These two verses show how *imān* cannot be mixed with injustice and how the faithful should avoid wrongdoing and must act justly. This is because Allah love people who uphold justice and act justly.

[116] Fazlur Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'an," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, II (1983): 171.

[117] Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, p. 123.

easily turn into authorities whom we worship. Life itself must be grasped and experienced as it flows, and in this lies virtue."[118]

One thing should be noted when considering faith is that it is neither irrational nor blind because the Qur'an lays a great emphasis on the use of reason, and the intellect. According to Engineer, the Qur'an uses the terms *uli'l-albāb* (those who possessed reasoning) or *uli'l-abṣār* (those who possessed insight) to address people who use their reason and intellect to understand the universe.[119]

Faith has significant role in human life. According to Engineer, people who lack it lose all meaning, vitality and desire to struggle for the betterment of life. These people easily fall into pessimism. For all struggle-oriented theologies, pessimism and despair are sins because they discourage rebellion.[120] The Qur'an itself instructs the believers, "Do not lose courage, nor grieve, for you will be elevated, if you are believers."[121] Then the Qur'an gives example of how the Prophets and their adherents did not lose their courage for what befell them in the way of Allah.[122] From this explanation, it is clear that the Qur'an requires its believers to keep the faith in struggling against what is unjust.

The opposite of *imān* is *kufr* ("disbelief"). In this regard, Engineer reinterprets and redefines the meaning of *kāfir* in the light of socio-economic connotations. He insists that besides the religious significance, these terms also have socio-economic connotations. That is why *kāfir*, in terms of liberation theology, is "one who does not

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[118] Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, p. 9.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid., p. 10.

[121] The Qur'an, 3:139.

[122] Ibid., 3:146.

believe in God and actively opposes with all his might an honest attempt to restructure a society in order to eliminate concentration of wealth, exploitation and other forms of injustice."[123] Thus, anyone, whatever his/her verbal professions of faith, who seeks to dominate and oppress the weak could be categorized as *kāfir*. The meaning of *kāfir* includes any person who grows rich through exploitation and lives in luxury while others starve. A true Muslim has to prove himself by creating a just and egalitarian society. The Qur'an, 107:1-7 says:

> "Seest thou one who denies the Judgment (to come)? Then such is the (man) who repulses the orphan (with harshness), and encourages not the feeding of the indigent. So woe to the worshippers, who are neglectful of their prayers, those who (want but) to be seen (of men), but refuse (to supply) (even) neighbourly needs."[124]

C.4. *Jihād* ("Struggle")

The matter of *jihād* in Islam is often misunderstood. *Jihād* is often simply regarded as holy war and equated with religious violence. Such interpretation gives the impression that Islam justifies violence. According to Engineer, to have a better understanding of *jihād*, one has to look at the origin of Islam.[125] In the beginning, Muslims were small in number and were greatly persecuted. In such situation, it was impossible to wage an armed struggle against the powerful establishment of rich Meccan

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[123] Engineer, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 29.

[124] *The Holy Qur'an—Text, Translation and Commentary* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Saudi Arabia: Dar El-Liwaa Publishing, 1983), p. 1796.

[125] Engineer, *Islam and its Relevance to Our Age*, p. 9.

traders. The Muslims in the face of severe persecution, therefore, migrated to more hospitable city of Yathrib and countries like Ethiopia.

According to Engineer, one must differentiate between the war to spread religion and the war to defend ones life. As far as Islam is concerned, it does not allow for the former, but allows for the latter. It is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an that "there is no compulsion in religion."[126] However, if one is persecuted or attacked by someone else, he has to fight. The early community was under attack, so it fought back and due to God's mercy won. From this context, it is clear that originally *jihād* is a matter of self-defense.[127] All the fighting injunctions in the Qur'an are only in self-defense, and none of them has any reference to aggressive war.[128] The Qur'an also mentions that Muslims have to protect the weak.[129] Thus, protection toward the weak and fighting against tyranny are matters of faith for Muslims.

Jihād in terms of Islamic liberation theology is *jihād* for liberation, not for aggression. It means to struggle against and to end exploitation, persecution and wrong doing in all its forms. This struggling must not cease until inhuman practices are completely eliminated from the earth. This command, according Engineer, is in the

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[126] The Qur'an, 2:256.

[127] Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), an Indian Muslim liberal thinker and reformer, argues that the original *jihad* in the first Islamic century was a matter of self-defense. He confirms that *jihād* was not incumbent on Muslims when the ruler under which they lived allowed them to practise their religion and guaranteed religious liberty. Thus, according to him, fighting during 1857 Revolt against the British could not be labeled as *jihād* because he did not consider the Indian Muslims had a religious reason to fight against the British. In a more strict fashion, Mawdudi interprets *jihād* as the struggle to implement the truth and it is applied to all those efforts that are made to degrade the world of *kufr* and to exalt the Word of Allah. Sheila McDonough, *Muslims Ethics and Modernity* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), pp. 39-40, 69-70

[128] S. Abdullah Schleifer, "Jihad: Modernist Apologists, Modern Apologetics," *The Islamic Quarterly,* 1, XXVIII (1984): 30.

[129] The Qur'an, 4:75.

Qur'an: "And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is all for Allah. But if they cease, then lo! Allah is Seer of what they do."[130] In another verse, the Qur'an condemns people who sit idly while other people are being persecuted.[131] In this verse, Allah questions the believers why they do not fight against the oppressors and protect the weak. This verse also reminds the faithful that doing *jihād* is not for one's own interest, but for the virtue of society. According to the Prophetic's tradition, "the best form of *jihād* is telling the truth to the face of tyrants."[132]

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[130] Ibid., 8:39.

[131] Ibid., 4:75.

[132] Engineer, *Islam and its Relevance in Our Age*, p. 76.

CHAPTER THREE

Women's Issues in Islam

In this chapter we deal with Engineer's views on women in Islam. There is no doubt that his thoughts on this issue are liberal and that they cannot be separated from the spirit of Islamic liberation theology that was discussed in the previous chapter. The commitment of liberation theology to the weak is reflected in Engineer's interpretation of the status of women in Islam.[1] Undoubtedly, women are counted among the weaker

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[1] Engineer's commitment toward the protection of women can be seen in his response to the Shah Bano case that took place in India in 1985. The case was about the decision of the Supreme Court to uphold Muslim Personal High Court's decision to oblige Mohammad Ahmed Khan to give maintenance to Shah Bano, whom he had divorced. This decision was based on the Cr. P.C. 125, which makes obligatory to husbands to give maintenance to their divorced wives if they have no means of sustenance until they remarry or die. This decision was taken after consulting to the Muslim Personal Law and the text of the Holy Qur'an. However, the Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB) objected to the Supreme Court judgment and viewed it as a kind of intervention to MPLB. According to MPLB, the Supreme Court had no right to interpret the Qur'an. The decision of Supreme Court met a strong reaction, not only from MPLB, but also from Muslim leaders. They launched agitation against the judgment and demanded Cr. P.C. 125 not to be applied to Muslims. According to Engineer, during this agitation by Muslim leaders, the Islamic *shari'at* became divine and immutable. These Muslim leaders propagated that in Islam, divorced wives only had the right to have maintenance for the period of *iddat* (a three-month waiting period before she can marry). Some of them, in Engineer's view, considered it to be a 'sin' to give beyond this period. These conservative Muslim leaders called for Muslims to fight against the Supreme Court. As a result, thousands of Muslim men and women joined the protest against the Supreme Court, which made the Rajiv Gandhi government undo the Supreme Court judgment by introducing a bill in Parliament to exempt Muslims from the purview of section 125 of the Cr. P.C. In this respect, Engineer sharply criticized the conservative Muslim leaders who propagated against the Supreme Court. In his view, it is far from just that the divorced wife has to be looked after by her parents or relatives after the period of *iddat*, as claimed by fundamentalists as an Islamic law. According to Engineer, the Qur'an does not mention implicitly or explicitly, that the divorced wife had to be looked after by her parents or relatives after the period of *iddat*. Conversely, it is the obligation of husbands to look after them. Therefore, Engineer challenged the "The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill" passed by the Lok Sabha on 5 May 1986 and viewed it as against justice and took away the rights of the divorced wives, as stated by the Qur'an. Asghar Ali Engineer, "Introduction," in *The Shah Bano Controversy*, edited by Asghar Ali Engineer (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1987), pp. 1-19.

segments of society. Thus, Engineer's attitude towards women in Islam is proof of his commitment to the ideas of liberation theology.

In line with the spirit of Islamic liberation theology, which upholds the principles of equality and justice, Engineer reinterprets Qur'anic verses in a manner which is compatible with women's dignity. His interpretation of the Qur'an not only deals with its literal meaning, but also pays close heed to the socio-historical context in which the verses were revealed. He also makes some references to classical jurists in support of his ideas, but not without providing his own critique of them as well.

A.   The Status of Women in the Qur'an

A.1.   The Methodology of Understanding the Scripture

The Qur'an, according to Engineer, was the first scripture that gives women their dignity as human beings at a time when they were denied by major civilizations like the Byzantine and the Sassanid. This scripture gives many rights to women in marriage, divorce, property and inheritance.[2] At a later date, however, some Islamic jurists (*fuqaha*) restricted and limited these rights, rendering women subordinate to men in practice.[3]

There are three important items noted by Engineer regarding the Qur'an and its relationship to women:

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[2] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (Lahore: Vanguard Books (PVT) LTD., 1992), pp. 12-13.

[3] Ibid., p. 13.

Firstly, the Qur'an has two ingredients: normative and contextual.[4] The distinction between normative and contextual is important for Engineer's understanding of the scripture. What is meant by normative refers to the fundamental values and principles of the Qur'an, like equality and justice. These principles are eternal and can be applied in various social contexts, whereas contextual revelations in the Qur'an deal with verses that were tailored to socio-historical problems of the time. In line with the changes in context and time, Engineer maintains, these verses can be abrogated.[5] In Engineer's view, the normative feature is more akin to the divine, while the contextual is more akin to the human.[6] Seen from the normative perspective, the Qur'an favors equality between men and women.[7] In other words, it advocates gender equality. But seen from the contextual perspective, the Qur'an frequently favors men a slight degree over women.[8] The distinction between these two characteristics can, according to Engineer, help in promoting women's rights today.

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[4] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 42.

[5] An example of this kind of abrogation is the case of slavery. In responding to this practice, which was common in Arabian society before Islam, the Qur'an does not abolish it immediately, because this was impossible. The Qur'an tries to abolish it gradually, but until the end of revelation such custom still existed and was written in scripture. In line with change, today slavery is not allowed because it is against, not only universal values of the Scripture, but also against human rights. Asghar Ali Engineer, *Justice, Women, and Communal Harmony in Islam* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Social Science Research, 1989), p. viii.

[6] Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1999), p. 52.

[7] See, for instance, the Qur'an, chapter 33:35. The translation of this verse is as follows: "Men and women who have submitted, believed, obeyed, are truthful, steadfast, reverent, giving in charity, fasting, guarding their private parts and remembering Allah often, Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward." Fakhry, *The Qur'an*, p. 264.

[8] See, for instance, the Qur'an, chapter 4:34. The translation of this verse is as follows: "Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made some of them excel the others, and because they spend some of their wealth. Hence righteous women are obedient, guarding the unseen which Allah has guarded. And those of them that you fear might rebel, admonish them and abandon them in their bed and beat them. Should they obey you, do not seek a way of harming them; for Allah is Sublime and Great!" Ibid., p. 54.

Furthermore, the purpose of the above distinction is to highlight the difference between that which is desired by Allah and that which is shaped by empirical reality of society. Both are properties of the Qur'an, a text which is not only concerned with the ideal society as it "ought" to be, but also takes into account the empirical reality, or what "is". The dialectic between "ought" and "is" makes the scripture acceptable to people in the particular social context in which the verses were revealed, and also allows them to serve as blueprints for universal norms and principles that can be applied in the future conducive social reality.[9] Engineer calls this approach *"pragmatic-ideological* course."[10]

Secondly, the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses is very dependent on one's own perceptions, world-view, experiences and the socio-cultural background in which he/she lives.[11] To use Engineer's words, "interpretation of empirical facts or the text of a scripture always depends on one's *a priori* position. Everyone has some kind of *Weltanschauung.*"[12] Thus, a 'pure' interpretation of the Scripture is not possible. It is always influenced by sociological circumstances; no one can be free of such influences. It is no wonder then that one verse can inspire a plethora of interpretations, especially as people of different socio-historical backgrounds approach the text.

Thirdly, "the meaning of the Qur'anic verses unfolds with time,"[13] therefore, the interpretations of classical scholars can be radically different from the interpretation of modern scholars. This is because Qur'anic verses often use symbolic or metaphorical

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[9] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, pp. 10-11.

[10] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 87.

[11] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 42.

[12] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 10.

[13] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 42.

language that is ambiguous in meaning. This ambiguity serves, of course, to promote flexibility and creative change. Engineer calls for interpreting the symbolic language of the Qur'an in the light of our own historical circumstances and experiences.[14]

The three points mentioned must be taken into account when studying the Qur'an, insists Engineer. Interpreters of the Qur'an, he continues, must take more note of normative verses, rather than contextual ones, as they contain values or principles which amount to the basic postulates of the Qur'an. Context-specific verses must be strictly interpreted in light of the socio-historical context in which they were revealed and in view of the status of women in that society. Such sociological considerations are important if we are to understand the scripture or to fathom its hidden meaning. Without following this methodology, Engineer maintains, one cannot draw a proper conclusion.[15]

Most Qur'anic commentators would agree with Engineer, emphasizing the context of the revelation. Fatima Memissi, a contemporary Muslim feminist, for instance, also argues that analyzing the Qur'anic verses in light of the causes of revelations (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) is a must. She quotes Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (d. 1505), "it is impossible to understand a verse without knowing the *qissa* (the story) and the causes that led to its

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[14] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 42.

[15] Ibid., p. 17. In comparison with Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud-Muhsin, Engineer's methodology is simpler and less comprehensive. However, his categoric distinction between normative and contextual verses of the Qur'an is important in understanding the scripture. Through this distinction, one can differentiate between fundamental values that become the spirit of the Qur'an and contextual values that are bonded with a particular context. Rahman proposed a methodology of understanding the Qur'an which was well known as "double movement": 'from the present situation to Qur'anic times, then back to the present'. See, Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 5-7. Meanwhile, Amina Wadud-Muhsin proposed a method to understand the verses by analyzing them through : "1. its context; 2. in the context of discussions on similar topics in the Qur'an; 3. in the light of similar language and syntactical structures used elsewhere in the Qur'an; 4. in the light of overriding Qur'anic principles; and 5. within the context of the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*, or world-view." See, Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Women* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti SDN. BHD., 1992), p. 5. Overall, Engineer, Rahman and Amina Wadud-Muhsin agree on interpreting the Qur'an by taking its whole world-view into consideration.

revelation."[16] According to Memissi, there are many causes of revelation given for the same verse, making it necessary to synthesize and integrate them through in chronological order. In her view, none of Qur'anic commentators, even Ṭabari, a respected traditionalist commentator, and al-Suyūṭi, have accomplished such a synthesis. Without such synthesis, Memissi maintains, "we today cannot understand all the complexities of the event."[17]

A.2. Samples of Engineer's Interpretation

Using the above methodology, Engineer argues that the Qur'an gives equal status to men and women because both are created from one living entity. He quotes two Qur'anic verses:

> "O people, fear your Lord who created you from a single soul, and from it He created its mate, and from both He scattered abroad many men and women; and fear Allah in whose name you appeal to one another, and invoke family relationships. Surely Allah is a watcher over you."[18]
> "And surely We have honored the children of Adam...."[19]

These verses, Engineer maintains, show clearly that men and women are created from one *nafs* (living entity) or a single being which meant there is no superiority of one gender over the other. There is no doubt, in Engineer's view, that this verse represented a

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[16] Fatima Memissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesly Publishing Company, Inc., 1991), p. 93. She quoted from al-Suyūṭi, *Lubāb al-'uqūl fi asbāb al-nuzūl*, 4th edition (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-'Ilm, 1984), p. 13.

[17] Memissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p. 93.

[18] The Qur'an, 4:1.

[19] Ibid., 17:70.

great revolution in an egalitarian thought and that it symbolized the declaration of "the unity of human race and the equality of male and female."[20] The doctrine of equality, as emphasized by Islamic liberation theology, is a basic principle of the Qur'an.

Since men and women are created from a single essence, Engineer argues, the view that the Eve was born from the crooked rib of Adam, as usually interpreted from verse 4:1, must be refuted because such interpretation implies the inferiority of women.[21] Likewise, Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, an Iranian noted scholar, also maintains that Eve was not created from the left-side of Adam's body, but created from the same essence as he. Human beings are not endowed with two essences, but with one.[22]

Thus, there is general thrust in the Qur'an supportive of gender equality. Engineer provides two pieces of evidence in support of his argument. First, the Qur'an honors the whole of humanity, including of course both women and men. Second, its normative verses confirm the principle of the equality of the sexes. Additionally, references to gender distinctions do not necessarily imply gender inequality.[23]

Engineer concedes, however, that the Qur'an contains verses which appear to give men a slight degree of superiority over women. Undoubtedly, such verses are often used to argue the superiority of men over women. In Engineer's view, such verses should be

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[20] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 182.

[21] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 43. According to Abul A'lā Maudūdī, there is no definite knowledge about how Adam's mate was created of him because the Qur'an does not give a further explanation about it and the Tradition of the Holy Prophet has different meaning. But, he maintains that the Commentators generally interpret Eve as created from the crooked rib of Adam, in accordance with biblical narrative. In Maududi's view, the best thing to do is to leave it undefined. Abu'l A'lā Maudūdī, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, Vol. II (Lahore: Islamic Publications LTD, 1983), p. 94.

[22] Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, translated from *Niẓām-e ḥuqūq-e zan dar Islām* by WOFIS, (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Service, 1981), p. 119. Amina Wadud-Muhsin also has a similar interpretation. *Qur'an and Women*, pp. 17-23.

[23] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 44.

seen as contextual statements, not as normative ones. Following his chosen methodology, these verses must be analyzed in reference to their proper social context rather than merely as the expression of theological views.[24]

Engineer translates one of the most controversial verses in Islamic juridical discourse:

> "Men are maintainers of women as Allah has made some to excel others and as they spend out of their wealth (on women). So, the good women are obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded. And (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in bed and chastise them. So, if they obey you, seek not away against them. Surely, Allah is ever Exalted, Great."[25] (The Qur'an, 4:34).

There are three key words that are important to be discussed in this verse: (a) *qawwām*, usually translated as "maintainers"; (b) *qānitāt*, usually translated as "obedient"; and (c) *wadhribūhunna*, usually translated as "wife-beating". Before analyzing these key words, we must shed light on the social context in which this verse was revealed. Engineer adopts a socio-theological view to this verse.[26]

To understand the context of revelation, Engineer quotes Abū al-Qasim Mahmud ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsarī (d. 1144), a noted commentator of the Qur'an from the Mu'tazila school. According him, this verse dealt with the case of an Ansar leader, Sa'ad bin Rabi', who slapped his wife Habībah bint Zaid because she disobeyed him. Habībah then complained to her father who took the case to the Prophet. The Prophet advised

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[24] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 46.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., p. 45.

Habībah to retaliate.[27] However, many men in Medina objected to the Prophet and opposed his advice. The Prophet understood that their opposition was motivated by a social structure which promoted male dominance. Consequently, a verse was revealed to limit the scope for violence which men could perpetrate against women.[28]

The first key word, *qawwām*, Engineer argues, was often used to designate the superiority of men over women. However, he maintains, the superiority given to men over women does not imply the weakness of the female sex, but rather designates men as providers or earner of wealth. Men acquire a superior function since they spend of their wealth on women. Thus, the superiority of men is derived from their social function, not their sexual excellence. Feminists today, says Engineer, have challenged this view, arguing that women's domestic work must also be counted as economic productivity. It is unjust not to place a monetary value on domestic duty, as women's work inside the house complements men's work outside the house.[29] Moreover, Engineer points out, one must demand full recognition of whatever he/she does,[30] as the Qur'an states, "a person gets what he/she strives for."[31]

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[27] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 47. He quotes from Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an haqā'iq al-tanzīl* (Beirut:—, 1977), Vol. 1, p. 254.

[28] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 47.

[29] Ibid., p. 25. In respect to the relationship between men and women, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian contemporary Muslim thinker, argues that such a relationship must be seen as more complementary and co-operative rather than competitive and hierarchical because both exist interdependently. See, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 212. Moreover, according to Iwai, there is no verse in the Qur'an which allows a husband to dominate his wife (chapter 2:183, 30:20, 42:9). To him, these verses clearly indicate that husband and wife exist interdependently. Thus, the relation between husband and wife is not a superior or subordinate position, but equal position. See, Hideko Iwai, *Islamic Society and Women in Islam* (Japan: The Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, International University of Japan, 1985), Working Papers Series, No. 5, pp. 34-35.

[30] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 46.

[31] The Qur'an, 53:39.

One must ask why, however, the Qur'an refers to this slight superiority of men over women on the basis of earnings. Once again, Engineer maintains that it must be seen in its proper context. When this verse was revealed, feminine consciousness was very low and domestic work was considered the duty of women. Little wonder then that men felt superior to women in this capacity. This verse is, therefore, a reflection of the social conditions of the time. Engineer confirms that men were *qawwām* (maintainers) in that context, but the Qur'an does not say they must remain *qawwām*.. As such, this word is a contextual statement, not a normative one. Had the Qur'an conceded that men should be *qawwam*, it would constitute a normative statement and consequently, would bind all women for all time and place. In fact, "Allah did not will it in that way," says Engineer.[32]

Unlike al-Fāruqī, who contends that a social structure in which men are in charge as maintainers (*qawwām*) is the ideal social structure,[33] Engineer does not find the Qur'anic verse to glorify the social structure in which it was revealed. For this reason, the verse must be counted as contextual, not normative. When the social structure is changed and reformed such that women become maintainers, or co-partners with men, they can be superior or equal to men and can play a dominant or equal role in the family.[34]

The second key word in chapter 4:34 is *qānitāt*. According to Engineer, classical and modern commentators have interpreted this word differently. Classical theologians

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[32] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 46.

[33] To al-Faruqi, patriarchal society in which men have responsibility to provide for the family is a Qur'anic ideal society. Besides the patriarchal family, there are other four characteristics of Qur'anic society mentioned by al-Faruqi; (a) equal status and worth of the sexes; (b) a dual sex rather than unisex society; (c) interdependence of members of society; and (d) the extended family. See, Lamya al-Faruqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* (Indiana: American Trust Publications, 1994), pp. 35-46.

[34] Engineer, *Justice, Women, and Communal Harmony in Islam*, p. 25.

like Zamakhsharī translated this word as "obedience to husband."[35] Another classical

theologian, Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī (d. 1209), insisted that this word implies two meaning:

"obedience to God" and "obedience to husband."[36] Meanwhile, modern commentators

have different translations yet. Ahmed Ali, for instance, translates the word qānitāt as

"obedient to God". Furthermore, he explains that "the Arabic word qānitāt means

devoted or obedient to God, and does not lend itself to any other meaning."[37] Similarly,

Parvez, a commentator on the Qur'an from Pakistan, maintains that the word qānitāt does

not imply a woman's obedience to her husband, as the relation between husband and wife

is of an equal partnership, not superior or subordinated.[38]

A contemporary Muslim feminist, Amina Wadud-Muhsin, forwards another

explanation for the word qānitāt. According to her, the word is often incorrectly

translated as "obedient to husband", when in fact the word is used to describe "good

women". Throughout the Qur'an, she argues, the word qānitāt refers to both males

(2:238, 3:17, 33:35) and females (4:34, 33:34, 66:5, 66:12) and describes "a characteristic

or personality trait of believers towards Allah" and implies "being co-operative to one

another and subservient before God."[39]

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[35] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 49. He quotes from Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, p. 524.

[36] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 49. He quotes from Fakhr al-Din b. 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsir al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1978), Vol. V, p. 91.

[37] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 49. He quotes from Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an—A Contemporary Translation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 78.

[38] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 50. He quotes from from Parvez, *Matālib al-Furqān* (Lahore:—, 1979), Vol. III, p. 364.

[39] Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Women*, p. 74.

The third key word in the verse 4:34 is *wadhribuhunna*. According to Engineer, there is also a different translation among classical and modern commentators for this word. Ahmed Ali, a liberal commentator of the Qur'an, translates it as "and go to bed with them (when they are willing)." His translation, according to Engineer, makes use of the Raghib's *al-Mufridat fi Gharib al-Qur'an* to argue that *daraba* metaphorically means "to have intercourse." With this translation, Ali argues that "the Qur'an has never permitted wife-beating"[40] and adopts an interpretative tone which is typical of those who struggle to uphold gender equality.

The above translation is, of course, different from that of other Muslim scholars like Zamakhshari and Al-Razi who translate *wadhribuhunna* as "and beat them," a more common translation. However, Zamakhshari and Azad maintain that such beatings should not cause injury.[41]

As mentioned, this verse was revealed in response to the wife-beating custom of Arabia. The story of Habibah given above (p. 61) leads Engineer to ask: why did the Prophet suggest that she retaliate while Allah's revelation willed otherwise? To answer this question, one has to understand that wife-beating was a common custom in the Prophet's time due to the male-dominated social structure. In such a social context, it was impossible to abolish the custom of wife-beating all at once. In other words, it needed to

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[40] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 49. Unlike other commentators, Ahmed Ali translated *wadhribuhunna* as "and go to bed with them" instead of "and beat them." He says, "Raghib [d. 1108] points out that *daraba* metaphorically means to have intercourse, and quotes the expression *darab al-fahl an-naqah*, 'the stud camel covered the she-camel,' which is also quoted by *Lisan al-'Arab*. It cannot be taken here to mean 'to strike them (women).' This view is strengthened by the Prophet's authentic *hadith* found in number of authorities, including Bukhari and Muslim: "Could any of you beat your wife as he would a slave, and then lie with her in the evening?" There are other traditions in Abu Da'ud, Nasa'i, Ibn Majah, Ahmad bin Hanbal and others, to the effect that he forbade the beating of *any* women, saying: "Never beat God's handmaidens." *Al-Qur'an—A Contemporary Translation*, note ***, pp. 78-79.

[41] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 49.

be eliminated gradually. Thus, in Engineer's view, this verse was revealed "not to encourage beating of wives, but to discourage it and gradually abolish it."[42]

After discussing the key words above, Engineer comes to the conclusion that if we put the verse 4:34 in its proper context, we can see that this verse does not advocate male superiority. The words "maintainers" and "wife-beating" should, as such, be read as contextual statements, not normative and must be reinterpreted in the light of today's context.[43]

Engineer acknowledges that some classical jurists used this verse to argue the superiority of men over women. They neglected to see it in the sociological context in which it was revealed,[44] distorting the spirit of the Qur'an and infusing its interpretation with male biases.

There is another verse which is often used by some conservative jurists to prove the inferiority of women and the superiority of men. The complete translation of this verse is as follows:

> "Divorced women should keep away from men for three menstrual periods. And it is not lawful for them to conceal that which Allah has created in their wombs, if they truly believe in Allah and the Last Day. Their husband have the right in the

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[42] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 47.

[43] Ibid., p. 52.

[44] Ibid., p. 47. While tracing the development of the exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the verse 4:34, Stowasser, a noted commentator on women in Islam, provides a good explanation of how interpretation of this verse led to the ever-increasing seclusion of women from all public spheres. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), a classical commentator of the Qur'an, interpreted this verse to simply mean that men had authority over women in a family setting and an obligation to provide maintenance. Some 350 years later, Abdullah ibn Umar al-Bayḍāwi (d. 1286) interpreted it differently and more restrictedly. He interpreted it to mean that men were in charge of women as rulers are in charge of their subjects. This is because men have qualities which women do not have, like complete mental ability, good counsel and complete power in the performance of duties. Men, according to this verse, are superior to women. Bayḍāwi's interpretation, according to Stowasser, was later on not only accepted by a later generation of commentators, but was also hardened by them. Barbara Freyer Stowasser, "The Status of Women in Early Islam," in *Muslim Women*, edited by Freda Hussain (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 25-27.

meantime to take them back, should they seek reconciliation; and women have rights equal to what is incumbent upon them according to what is just, although men are one degree above them. Allah is Mighty, Wise."[45]

The phrase *lirrijāle 'alayhinna darajatun* (men are a degree above them) was most useful to those who used it to argue the superiority of men without reference to their proper context. In Engineer's view, they ignored the preceding part of the verse "and women have rights equal to what is incumbent upon them according to what is just," which clearly talks about the equal rights and obligations of women.[46]

Furthermore the above two statements, seem to contradict one another. But, if they are put in the proper context, the contradiction reflects the social reality in which this verse was revealed. He reiterates that the verse was revealed in patriarchal Arabian society, where women did not enjoy complete equality. In this particular case the Qur'an gave women a lower status to men to appease the male-ego. In Engineer's view, this is a kind of Allah's wisdom, as mentioned in the phrase of the verse 'Allah is Mighty, Wise'. To use his words, "Though Allah's intention was to accord equal status to women, the social context did not admit of it right away, and in His wisdom, He allowed men slight superiority over women"[47] because "if the Qur'an had not accepted the social reality of a patriarchal society and conceded slight superiority to men, the Prophet would have had to face a very difficult situation."[48]

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[45] The Qur'an, 2:228.

[46] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 60.

[47] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 32.

[48] Ibid., p. 53.

Thus, this verse contains of both normative and contextual statements. The normative ingredient is found in the statement "equality of rights", while the contextual ingredient is found in the statement "men are a degree above women." According to Engineer, these two statements belong to the verse for the express purpose of making it relevant both to the context of society in which it was revealed and to the future when the social situation is more conducive.[49]

However, Engineer confirms, the Qur'an, through its *Weltanschauung* (world-view) and universal teachings, upholds an equal status between male and female and refrains from pronouncing gender inequalities in absolutist terms.[50]

Another interpretation of this verse given by Engineer is that the slight edge men enjoy over women refers to biological matters, and lacks a social criterion. For example, men are free to marry immediately after divorce, without having any biological restrictions, while women must wait until three periods of menstruation have lapsed to determine pregnancy prior to her re-marriage.[51] Thus, the verse should not be read as confirmation of male superiority over women in the social sphere.

From the above interpretation, Engineer argues that "the Qur'an greatly improved the status of women" until "they no longer be treated as mere chattels to be traded or subjects of sexual lust."[52]

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[49] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, pp. 10-11.

[50] Asghar Ali Engineer, "Social Dynamics and Status of Women in Islam," in *Status of Women in Islam*, edited by Asghar Ali Engineer (New Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1987), p. 84.

[51] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 53.

[52] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 31.

To prove his argument, Engineer compares the position of women during the pre-Islamic period *jāhiliya* (ignorance) to the post-Islamic period. Engineer argues that women during the ignorance period had no rights and were treated as mere commodities or property. Their status was very close to that of slaves because they had no liberties. What was worst was the way in which they could be inherited like property.[53]

Another inhumane custom practised by the Arabs in pre-Islamic period was that of female infanticide. This harsh custom prevailed for two reasons. First, the fear that a female brought economic burdens on to a family. Second, the fear of humiliation brought on to a family by the capture of girls by hostile tribes.[54]

Engineer also maintains that in the pre-Islamic era, men were free to marry as many women as they liked without restriction. Tribal chiefs and leaders commonly married many women to cement their ties with other tribes. In the absence of conventions or laws to limit the number of wives that men could have simultaneously these customs persisted.[55] It is important to mention this practice as it highlights the socio-cultural context in which the verse on polygamy was revealed. The issue of polygamy is discussed in the next pages. In the matter of divorce, Engineer maintains, the rights were again reserved for the men and denied to women.[56]

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[53] This practice was prohibited by the Qur'an, "O believers, it is not lawful for you to inherit the women (of deceased kinsmen) against their will; nor restrain them in order to take away part of what you had given them, unless they commit flagrant adultery. Associate with them kindly; and if you feel aversion towards them, it may well be that you will be averse to something, from which Allah brings out a lot of good." (4:19).

[54] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 21. The Qur'an condemns this practice in chapter 81:8-9.

[55] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 21.

[56] Ibid., p. 26. Divorce in the *Jāhiliya* period was a matter entirely up to the will of the husband who "having purchased his wife, could discharge his total obligation to her by payment of any portion of the

From the above, it is clear to Engineer that the majority of women in pre-Islamic societies lived in a male-dominated culture which accorded them low status and treated them as property. The rights of women at that time were absolutely neglected. In general, the position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia was certainly unfavorable.[57]

B.   Controversial Issues

In this section we discuss only the two controversial issues of polygamy and the veil (*purdah*), which highlight Engineer's method of interpretation of relevant Qur'anic verses to be normative or contextual.

B.1.   Polygamy

The Qur'anic verse dealing with the issue of polygamy is as follows:

"If you fear that you cannot deal justly with the orphans, then marry such of the women as appeal to you, two, three or four; but if you fear that you cannot be equitable, then only one, or what your right hands own. That is more likely to enable you to avoid unfairness."[58]

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mahr that might remain due to her father or guardian, and be rid of her by pronouncement of the formula of dismissal." Rebean Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge: University Press, 1979), p. 121.

[57] There are many scholars who have similar interpretation that, in general, women in pre-Islamic Arabia had no rights in the male dominated society. See, among others, al-Fārūqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, p. 5; Stowasser, "The Status of Women in Islam," in *Muslim Women*, pp. 15-18; Freda Hussain, "Introduction: The Ideal and Realities of Muslim Women," in *Muslim Women*, p. 4.

[58] The Qur'an, 4:3.

According to Engineer, for understanding the essence of this verse of chapter 4 one has to take into account two preceding verses of the same chapter as well as the historical context in which such a verse was revealed.[59]

The first verse discusses the creation of human beings from a single entity; this indicates that both men and women enjoy equal status.[60] The second verse deals with the obligation of Muslims to give orphans their property and not to switch their property with less valuable property.[61] In other words, believers have to act justly towards orphans. And the third verse deals with polygamy alongside of the requirement to do justice among orphans and if the guardians feel they cannot do justice to them, then they must take only one wife. Thus, according to Engineer, the whole spirit of this verse is on performing acts of justice, and not to marry more than one woman. This verse does not give a general license or privilege to men to practise polygamy, but in fact, emphasizes that what is more essential is to act justly towards orphan girls and widows.[62]

Another important aspect in understanding this verse is to see it in its historical context. According to al-Ṭabarī, one of the context relates to a man who married ten or more wives and used the properties of the orphans who were in his charge to maintain his

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[59] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 101.

[60] The complete translation of this verse is as follows: "O people, fear your Lord who created you from a single soul, and from it He created its mate, and from both He scattered abroad many men and women; and fear Allah in whose name you appeal to one another, and invoke family relationships. Surely Allah is a watcher over you." The Qur'an, 4:1. The story of the creation of human beings, in view of Khan, not only indicates that they are created from a single entity (*nafs*) which meant both men and women enjoyed equal status, but also informs us that God created a human race from one Adam and one Eve, and not from one Adam and several Eves. This initial creation of human beings implies that monogamy is the basic law of the Qur'an. See, Qamaruddin Khan, *Status of Women in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1990), p. 16.

[61] The translation of this verse is "Render unto the orphans their property and do not devour their property together with your property. That indeed is a great sin!" The Qur'an, 4:2.

[62] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 101.

wives. The Qur'an thus prohibited this man from marrying more than four women to protect the orphans' property from misuse by that man and if he could not do justice among his wives, then he should marry only one.[63]

The other classical scholar, Imām al-Rāzī, based on a *hadīth* narrated by 'Akramah, maintained that the context of this verse was concerned to a man who had several wives and some orphan girls. He took money from the orphans' properties to spend on himself and his wives. It is in this context that Allah revealed the third verse that says that if you fear you cannot do justice to the orphans, marry one, two, three or four of them. But if you cannot do justice to your four wives, marry one.[64]

Maulana Muḥammad 'Ali, a modern commentator, as quoted by Engineer, has a different explanation. According to him, the context of this verse is the battle of Uḥud which took place in 625. In this battle, 70 out of 700 Muslims were killed. The number of males, who were the main "bread-winners" in the community thus decreased. As a result, there were many orphans and widows who greatly suffered due to the difficulties in meeting their daily needs. It is therefore, the first thing mentioned in this verse is about human relationships. The second item discussed is about taking care of orphans. The last part talks about marrying widows in case of one's inability to do justice among orphans. By marrying widows, these orphans would become their own children. Since the number of females were greater than males, males were permitted to marry more than one. Thus,

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[63] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, pp. 88-89. He quotes from Muḥammad Jarīr Ṭabarī, *Jami'al Bayan 'an Ta'wil Aya'i al-Qur'an*, Vol. III (Beirut: Dār Ma'rifah, 1988), pp. 231-236.

[64] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 89. He quotes from Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsir al-Kabīr*, Vol. V (Beirut: Dār Ihyā al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1980), pp. 178-184.

it was clear that the permission to have more than one wife was contingent upon certain circumstances.[65]

From different sources mentioned above, according to Engineer, it is clear that the context of verse 4:3 is about; (a) the battle of Uhud in which 70 Muslims were killed, it created, as an immediate solution to an emergency, the adoption of polygamy in order to help orphans and widows; (b) orphan girls and their properties and how to avoid injustice towards them. This is because many of the guardians used the orphans' properties in their own interests. Therefore, the Qur'an allowed these guardians to marry up to four orphan girls or widows in order to avoid such unfortunate incidents.

At this stage, Engineer poses a question as to: why did God allow men to marry four wives to avoid the misappropriation of the orphan girls' properties? Does it not mean replacing one evil with another? To answer these questions one has to see it in the context of the male-dominated Arabian society of the seventh century, and not in the modern context. There is no doubt that both contexts are absolutely different. In Arabian society of the seventh century, there was absolutely no equality of the sexes.[66]

In such a context, the Qur'an permitted the guardians to practise polygamy by marrying the orphan girls who were in their charge, or their mothers. According to Engineer, the aim was to give the orphan girls or widows legal protection and a moral claim upon their guardians. By such a strategy the orphan girls' properties would be

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[65] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 156. He quotes from Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an* (Lahore, 1973), f.n. no. 535, p. 187.

[66] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 193. One example of this case can be read in the Qur'an, 2:228.

secure. If their properties were secure, they could fight against injustice and possibly gain their conjugal and other rights.[67] Seen from this perspective, it is clear that polygamy was the only possible solution for the problem of the orphans at that time.

Thus, justice for women in general, and justice for orphans and widows, in particular, is the primary consideration of polygamy and this is the essence of verse 4:3. In this verse, the matter of polygamy is not an independent statement separated from that of taking care of orphans. Indeed, the spirit of the Qur'an allowing polygamy is to help the weak (widows and orphans), and not to satisfy men's sexual needs. Engineer maintains that "if one does not have any such problem of looking after orphans, the question of taking more than one wife does not arise at all."[68]

Moreover, when certain conditions are fulfilled and males are allowed to have more than one wife, equitable treatment of all wives cannot be ignored. Unlike Hinchcliffe, who argues that equitable treatment is a matter of men's own conscience and not a condition of polygamous marriage,[69] Engineer argues that equitable treatment is a requisite condition for polygamy. Since man cannot do justice among his wives in the form of equal treatment, the Qur'an does not really allow him to take more than one

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[67] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 195. See also, Asghar Ali Engineer, "Women Under the Authority of Islam," in *The Authority of Religions and the Status of Women*, edited by Jyotsna Chatterji (New Delhi: A Joint Women's Programme Publication, 1989), p. 33; Qamaruddin Khan, *Status of Women in Islam*, p. 20.

[68] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 40. In 'Usmani's view, as quoted by Engineer, marrying of four women is only permitted in a situation where there were a great number of orphan girls and widows who were not taken care of and had no one to look after them. Since this condition does not exist in today's society, marrying more than one woman is not valid. Moreover, it is important to note that the women whom man can marry must be orphans or widows, not other women. Ibid., p. 161.

[69] Doreen Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," in *Islam and Modern Age* (1970), 1, No. 3 (November), p. 13.

wife.[70] What is meant by equitable treatment here is not only the physical aspect, but also a non-physical aspect, such as love and affection.[71] In Engineer's view, the condition of equitable treatment has three levels; "by ensuring proper use of properties of the orphans and widows, by ensuring justice to all the wives at the material level and also by dispensing equal love and attachment to all the wives."[72]

In fact, the Qur'an itself in chapter 4:129, confirms that believers cannot treat their wives justly, though they might wish to do so.

"You will never be able to treat wives equitably, even if you are bent on doing that. So do not turn away altogether (from any of them) leaving her, like one in suspense; and if you do justice (to her) and guard against evil, He is surely All-Forgiving, Merciful!."[73]

Thus, Engineer argues that the condition to treat wives equally is "an almost impossible condition to meet."[74] That is why men should refrain from marrying more than one woman. Moreover, the situations or circumstances allowing polygamy must be

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[70] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 156. This view is almost similar to that of Maududi's. To him, man who practises polygamy without fulfilling the condition of justice is trying to deceive Allah. However, he maintains that by mentioning the condition of justice, this verse was not really meant to abolish polygamy and recommend monogamy. Abul A'lā al-Mawdūdī, *The Meaning of the Qur'an* (Lahore: Islamic Publications LTD., 1983), Vol. II, pp. 94-95.

[71] See, al-Faruqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, p. 39. In Doi's view, equitable treatment meant by this verse includes food, residence, clothing and sexual relations. See, Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Shari'ah: the Islamic Law* (London: Ta Ha Publishers, 1984), p. 147.

[72] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 95.

[73] The Qur'an, 4:129.

[74] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 39. This view is similar to that of Maulana 'Umar Ahmad 'Usmani's. 'Usmani maintains that Qur'an 4:3 only allows one to marry one woman at a time, except under special conditions in which man has permission to marry more than one. But under such conditions, man has to marry widows and orphans. Thus, in normal conditions one can only be permitted to marry one woman. Quoted by Engineer, Ibid., p. 94. Likewise, Pearl and Menski consider that based on chapter 4:129, it is possible to argue that "polygamy was never really allowed in Islam and should consequently be prohibited by modern Muslim law." David Pearl and Werner Menski, *Muslim Family Law*, 3rd edition (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1998), p. 239.

treated as an exception, not as a rule. Therefore, polygamy is contextual whereas monogamy is normative. As normative, monogamy is the rule, while contextual polygamy is an exception.[75] This cannot be reversed, polygamy as a rule and monogamy as an exception, because it is against Qur'anic principles that are concerned with gender equality.[76]

Furthermore, Engineer uses *hadith* to support his argument that the Qur'an encourages men to marry widows or orphan girls as the Prophet did. As is known, most of the Prophet's wives were widows.[77] According to one *hadith* narrated by Bukhari, the Prophet said that "one who works hard for the sustenance of widows is like one who wages war in the way of Allah or one who prays at night or fasts during the day."[78] According to Engineer, seeing this *hadith* in the context of verse 4:3, the emphasis on marrying widows or orphan girls is much clearer. The aim of marrying more than one wife is to help widows or orphans, and not to satisfy one's lust.[79] Thus, protection toward the weak and upholding justice towards orphans and widows are the essence of the verse

[75] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 156. This view is similar to that of Bharatiya who also maintains that in Islam monogamy is a norm and a general rule, while polygamy is only an exception. See, V. P. Bharatiya, *Syed Khalid Rashid's Law* (Lucknow: Eastern Book Company, 1996), 3rd rev. and enl. Ed., p. 74.

[76] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 158. To support his view, Engineer quotes the Egyptian reformer, Muhammad 'Abduh, a great theologian of the nineteenth century who argued that the Qur'an permitted polygamy with great reluctance. Only those who are able to treat and to take care of their wives equally and give them their rights justly and impartiality are allowed to practise polygamy. The words "if you fear that you cannot be equitable and just with all then (marry) only one" clearly indicate that in practice polygamy is ineffective. Monogamy, therefore, is the ideal form of marriage in Islam because the Qur'an has a big concern with gender justice. Ibid., p. 157.

[77] Ibid., p. 102.

[78] Ibid., p. 104. Engineer quotes from *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol. III (Lahore:—, 1980), p. 165.

[79] Ibid. Engineer's concern about the protection of the weak in interpreting the verse 4:3 cannot be separated from the spirit of Islamic liberation theology which upholds equality and justice.

4:3. The idea of polygamy, therefore, must be seen from this context in order to have a proper understanding of it.

B.2.   The Veil (*Purdah*)

The veil, another important issue for women in Islam, has become a controversial issue over the past few decades. In English, the word 'veil' is "loosely used to refer to a wide variety of head and face coverings."[80] There are three verses in the Qur'an that are usually used to refer to the legitimization for wearing of the veil (*hijāb*). It is therefore important to throw some lights on these verses. In Engineer's view, these verses must be seen in proper context in order to have a better understanding about the veil. Let us look at these verses one by one.

The first verse is:

"O believers, do not enter the houses of the Prophet, unless you are invited to a meal, without awaiting the hour; but if you are invited, then enter; but when you have eaten, disperse, without lingering for idle talk. That is vexing to the Prophet who might be wary of you, but Allah is not wary of the truth. If you ask them [the wives of the Prophet] for an object, ask them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and theirs. You should never hurt the Apostle of Allah, nor take his wives in marriage after him. That is truly abominable in the sight of Allah." (33:53).

According to Engineer, there are many instructions in this verse dealing with how to enter the Prophet's house. The believers were required not to spend more time than necessary with the Prophet or his wives. The believers were also required not to marry the Prophet's wives after his death. If they wanted to talk to the Prophet's wives, they had

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[80] Nadia Hijab, *Womanpower: The Arab debate on women at work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 51.

to do so from behind the curtain. The phrase, "if you ask them for an object, ask them from behind a curtain," is the source of legitimization for wearing the veil, or *hijāb*. However, according to Engineer's interpretation, the requirement to speak behind the curtain to the Prophet's wives cannot be applied to other Muslim women. This is because it deals with specific situations and references. Thus, the requirement to talk to the Prophet's wives behind the curtain is not a general category, but a specific one.[81]

Engineer maintains that there is another verse in the Qur'anic text which is often used to legitimate wearing the veil. In fact, in his view, this verse only contains the instruction for women to cover their private parts. The complete translation of this verse is as follows:

> "And tell believing women to cast down their eyes and guard their private parts and not show their finery, except the outward part of it. And let them drape their bosoms with their veils and not show their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, the sons of their sisters, their women, their maid-servants, the men-followers who have no sexual desire, or infants who have no knowledge of women's sexual parts yet. Let them, also, not stamp their feet, so that what they have concealed of their finery might be known. Repent to Allah, all of you, O believers, that perchance you may prosper."[82]

To understand this verse, Engineer calls for looking at it from its socio-historical context. It must be understood that before the coming of Islam, a transformation of the Arabian society in Mecca from tribal-oriented society to commercial-oriented society was

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[81] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, pp. 85-86. Unlike Engineer, Mawdudi has a different interpretation regarding this verse. According to him, although the conjunction of this verse is addressed to the Prophet's wives, it also applied to all Muslim females. See, Abū al-A'lā al-Mawdūdi, *Purdah and The Status of Women in Islam*, translated by al-Ash'ari (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1972), p. 149. Moreover, Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, maintains that the word *hijāb* in the above verse has three-dimensions which are often mixed together. "The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* means "to hide." The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. The third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden." Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p. 93.

[82] The Qur'an, 24:31.

under way. This was due to the fast growth of Mecca as a financial and international centre of trade. There is no doubt that such conditions influenced the lives of women in that society. The women from the upper class dressed in new fashions, which exposed their bodies through their adornments and charms. Such a liberal way in dressing was, of course, against the moral and ethical demands of Islam. However, in Engineer's view, in response to such conditions Islam imposed some restrictions. Both men and women were asked to lower the gaze, or to use the Qur'anic term, *ghaḍḍ al-baṣār.* Engineer interprets this word through its metaphorical meaning as "not indulging in sexual encounters outside marital bond."[83]

This verse also describes some restrictions toward women, but according to Engineer, they are not meant to force women to stay at home or to wear a veil that covers their faces.[84] The main restriction, according to Engineer, is that Muslim women should not display their adornments and sexual charms except to those who they cannot marry. Conversely, they are required to dress in a proper manner.[85] The main intention of this restriction, according to Engineer, is to avoid women becoming sexual objects and to save their dignity as human beings. This moral value is much more important to be taken

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[83] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 73.

[84] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 86. In contrast to Engineer, Mawdudi interpreted this verse as a requirement of Muslim women to wear veil (covering their face) and also gloves. In Mawdudi's view, though the Qur'an does not specify the veil, it is Qur'anic spirit and was practised by Muslim women in the Prophet's time. See, Mawdudi, *Purdah and The Status of Women in Islam*, pp. 198-202.

[85] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, pp. 86-87. Similarly, Jan Hjarpe opines that what is required from this verse is a proper dress, and it does not imply veiling the face. Jan Hjarpe, "The Attitude of Islamic Fundamentalism Towards the Question of Women in Islam," in *Women in Islamic Societies*, edited by Bo Utas (London and Malmo: Curzon Press Ltd., 1983), p. 20.

into account than the restriction of women from going outside the home or compelling them to wear veil.[86]

What is allowed to be exposed, according to this verse, is parts of women's bodies that are naturally open, or to use the Qur'anic terms, *illā mā zahara minhā*. There is no doubt that the word "what appears thereof," is a controversial one due to the fact that the Qur'an does not proscribe limitations as to what extent Muslim women are permitted to show part of their bodies. Therefore, this verse is ambiguous. In Engineer's view, to determine what parts of the body a woman could expose depends on one's own socio-cultural context.[87] This is because the interpretation of texts cannot escape from context. Therefore, some classical scholars held different views regarding the word "what appears thereof".

Ṭabarī, for instance, listed eight different interpretations of the words *illā mā zahara minhā*; (a), it refers only to the external clothes of women, and therefore, all the entire body of women, including face and hands, must be covered; (b), women can expose their rings, bracelets, and face; (c), it refers to collyrium and cheeks; (d) it refers to the face and two open palms; (e) *khizab* (mehendi), collyrium and clothes; (f), woman must hide her hair, ear rings, neck and bracelets; (g), woman permits to expose he bracelets, necklace, but should hide her anklets, hair and shoulders.[88]

According to al-Rāzī, another scholar often cited by Engineer, a Muslim woman can expose her face and her two hands because these parts of body are necessary for such

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[86] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, pp. 86-87.

[87] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 73.

[88] Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āyā al-Qur'an*, p. 88, quoted by Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 67.

acts as buying, selling, payment and other common tasks. Besides this, the covering of all parts of the body except face and two hands is aimed to differentiate between a free woman and a slave girl. [89]

Another scholar quoted by Engineer is Muḥammad Asad. Unlike traditional 'ulama who restrict the words "what may be apparent thereof" to women's face, hands and feet, Asad interprets such words in a wider sense. To him, the vagueness of this phrase meant that it is open to be reinterpreted in line with the change of times and social situations.[90] Meanwhile, according to Maulana Muhammad Ali, women could expose their face and hands because when praying, they need not to cover their faces and hands, yet the rest of them must remain covered.[91]

Seen from the above sources, it is clear that there are different interpretations regarding the word "except what appears thereof". Therefore, no one can say that this or that particular interpretation must be accepted in our social context. However, Engineer maintains that almost all classical scholars have a similar opinion concerning the phrase, "except what appears thereof," that it refers to face and hands, and thus, keeping these parts of the body uncovered was considered permissible. The Prophet is also reported to allow the face and hands to be uncovered.[92] Thus, accordir.g to tradition, women in the

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[89] Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsir al-Fakh al-Rāzī*, Vol. XXII (Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr, 1981), quoted by Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 68.

[90] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 70.

[91] Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 685, quoted by Engineer, Ibid., p. 72.

[92] See, Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 88. According to this *hadith*, the Prophet is reported to have told Asma, his wife, 'Aisha's sister, when she appeared before him in thin clothes, through which parts of her body could be seen: "O Asma, when a women attains her puberty, it is not proper that any part of her body should be seen except this, and he pointed to his face and hands." Engineer quotes this *hadith* from Hafiz Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Urdu tr., notes etc. by Maulana Anzar Shah Kashmiri (Deoband, n.d), Vol. II, section 19, p. 61. However, this *hadith*, according to Engineer, is a *mursal hadith*, meaninthat

Prophet's time kept their faces and hands uncovered for praying and consulting the Prophet when they had problems. Moreover, what is required by the Qur'an is how women are to protect their dignity as human beings and avoid becoming sexual objects. The form of protection, of course, varied from one place to another. In a very particular situation, wearing the veil is an alternative way to protect women's dignity, but in normal condition, it does not.[93]

Since most Qur'anic commentators agree that face and hands may remain exposed, what about keeping the hair and bosom to be exposed? According to Engineer, in the past keeping the hair uncovered was still considered as sexually inviting and therefore, prohibited. This of course based on a classical context. But, he maintains, that the Qur'an does not state this explicitly. It is therefore, in line with the dynamics of socio-cultural change and based on a specific cultural context, keeping hair uncovered may not be considered as sexually inviting, and thus, is permissible. Meanwhile, keeping the bosom uncovered is universally—at least in non-tribal societies—considered as sexually inviting, and therefore it is prohibited in Islam. The Qur'an states clearly that women should cover their bosom with what is called as *khimar*, "a piece of cloth generally worn by women and slung across their shoulders."[94]

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not all the narrators' versions are available. This is because there is no proof that Khalid bin Darik who narrated it from 'Aisha had met her. Thus, this *hadith* is a doubtful one. But, if it is true then Muslim women who have attained puberty are not allowed to wear thin clothes that expose their bodily charms.

[93] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 89. al-Fārūqi also supports Engineer's position. In al-Fārūqi's view, the word "what (must ordinarily) appear thereof" indicates conformity to prevailing customs of a region or a period. There is no indication from this word the necessity of wearing veil or *purdah* which cut women off from social and public affairs, the world that was dominated by men. Al-Faruqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, p. 9.

[94] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 74.

Thus, according to Engineer, one of the intentions of the Qur'an in verse 24:31 is to show how Muslim women can protect themselves and their dignity through wearing dignified dress. The Qur'an requires women to cover their bodies properly and to avoid displaying their sexual charms because it can lead them to become sexual objects. Engineer maintains that this kind of interpretation is an appropriate interpretation, if seen from our social context and "nothing more should be read into this verse."[95]

Engineer traces the factors leading to covering women's faces and its becoming a tradition in Islamic societies. In his view, the tradition of wearing the veil developed in line with the emergence of feudalism due to the conquest by the Arabs of the feudalised societies of the Byzantine and the Sassanid empires. Thus, the custom of wearing the veil and the seclusion of women in their houses was not originally an Islamic tradition. It was of Persian and Byzantine origin and only then was legitimized by Qur'anic commentators (*mufassirīn*) who extrapolated it from the vague and general statements of the Qur'an.[96] The custom of wearing the veil (*purdah*) began during the Umayyad period.

Women in those societies were kept in socially subordinated positions and when the Arabs conquered the Byzantine and Sassanid held territories, Muslim women were also subjugated. Although in some places women in pre-Islamic period enjoyed liberty and independence, on the whole their position was less than equal to that of men. In line with the feudalization of Islamic society, the status of women "relapsed into a voiceless and powerless being."[97] Their roles were limited only to that of keeper of the household

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[95] Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 88.

[96] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 74. Stowasser, *Muslim Women*, p. 25; al-Faruqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, p. 13.

[97] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 74.

and bearer of the children. Such a social structure was glorified over the centuries. In this society, veiling women was part of social norms, justified by the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition. In fact, the Qur'an does not glorify such a social structure. This scripture does not require women to be veiled or stay at home. They are free to participate in social activities and free to take part in whatever they desire. The only limitation, according to Engineer, is women have to dress in a proper manner based on their socio-cultural context so they do not become sexual objects for men.[98]

There is another verse in the Qur'an which where Muslim women are asked to wear the veil. The complete translation of this verse is as follows:

" O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the wives of the believers, to draw their outer garments closer. That is more conducive to their being known, and not being injured. Allah is All-Forgiving, Merciful."[99]

According to Engineer, many 'ulama interpret this verse as a requirement for Muslim women to cover their faces. However, he maintains that this verse must be seen in its social context because it was revealed in a particular situation. The context of this verse is about Muslim women in Medina who were often harassed. As part of their daily routine, these women used to go out during the early hours. There were idle youth who would always wait and disturb them. When the harassers caught the Muslim women, they said that they did not know that they were Muslim women or free women (hurrah), they thought that they were slave girls. To avoid such a thing happening and to differentiate between Muslim women and slave girls, the Qur'an required Muslim women to cover

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[98] Engineer, The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society, p. 74.

[99] The Qur'an, 33:59.

their faces with *jalbab*. Thus, the main intention of the verse above is to show how Muslim women could be recognized as free women and thus avoid being disturbed. Seen from this perspective, it is clear that veiling of the face is very conditional and not an obligation for all time. "If the context changes, the reason adduced disappears; it would no longer be binding," says Engineer.[100]

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[100] Engineer, *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*, p. 69. To support his argument, Engineer quotes Muhammad Asad, "The specific, time-bond formulation of the above verse (evident in the reference to the wives and daughters of the Prophet), as well as the deliberate vagueness of the recommendation that women should draw upon themselves some of their garments (*min jalābibihinna*) when in public, makes it clear that this verse was not meant to be an injunction (*hukm*) in general, timeless sense of this term, but rather, a moral guideline to be observed against the ever-changing background of time and social environment. This finding is reinforced by the concluding reference to God's forgiveness and grace." Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), p. 651, quoted by Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 89. Moreover, Engineer explains that the Qur'an also requires men to lower their sight towards women. This is mentioned in chapter 24:30. The next verse, chapter 24:31, is telling women to do as men do. Thus, both men and women are required to keep their individuals dignity and even that men are the first subject of this matter. Engineer is of the view that since most interpreters of the Qur'an are men, they put more restrictions on women rather than to men. See, Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, p. 91.

CONCLUSION

The Islamic liberation theology proposed by Asghar Ali Engineer is a dynamic theology of Islam. It is the antithesis of classical theology since it avoids purely speculative modes of thought. It is true that some Islamic sects in the past advocated dynamic and revolutionary ideas concerning freedom, justice and equality. However, over time they accepted the status quo and their dynamic ideas lost their hold.

Islamic liberation theology has emerged to retrieve the lost dynamic elements of Islam. It is the intellectual voice of the oppressed and dispossessed, which seeks to emancipate these people through liberatory and participatory action, not simply through words. There is a difference between a speech on oppression and changing the state of oppression. This theology therefore stresses praxis which is the combination of reflection with action and faith with deed.

The main sources of Islamic liberation theology, however, remain the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet's struggle. Indeed, some leftist thinkers such as Ṭaha Ḥusayn, Karl Marx, Engels, and Thomas Munzer--to name a few--to some extent, also influence Engineer's thought.

Yet there are a number of unique characteristics easily detectable in Engineer's thought. Engineer's Islamic thought on liberation theology may be referred to as a 'textualist-liberal'. Amalodoss contends that Engineer is more textual in his approach

than other Muslim scholars such as 'Alī Sharī'atī and Abu'l A'lā Mawdūdī. Engineer tries to show from the Qur'an itself that Islam promotes justice and liberation.[1]

Engineer uses a 'religio-sociological' approach in interpreting and formulating Islamic liberation theology. He always interprets Islamic teachings not only from theological perspective, but in a sociological context as well. He interprets *tawḥīd*, for instance, not only in the theological sense as the unity of God, but also as oneness of humankind. This oneness means that all human beings are equal before Allah. This equality is meant not only in terms of race, nationality and ethnicity, but in faith as well. In this sense, Engineer gives the meaning of *tawḥīd* a completely new sociological content. Likewise, he views the origin of Islam, not only from a strictly religious perspective but from a socio-economic perspective as well. Thus he contends that the resistance of the capitalist merchants of Mecca to Islam was not based on a religious factor, but was essentially an expression of the class struggle. For Engineer, there is no doubt that the Islamic doctrine of social justice and equality threatened their socio-economic position in society. Another example of his 'religio-sociological' approach is evident in his definition of *kāfir*. According to Engineer, this word does not mean only one who does not believe in God, but also all those who actively oppose the creation of a just and egalitarian society which aims to end oppression and exploitation.

The next characteristic of Engineer's thought is apparent in his use of critical thinking. He, for instance, criticized sharply the classical theologians who allied themselves with the establishment in order to defend the status quo and did not tolerate opposing viewpoints. Such behavior, of course, cannot be reconciled with the Islamic

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[1] See, Michael Amaladoss, S.J., *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 116.

principles of justice and the freedom of expression. But at the same time, Engineer appreciates some of classical theologians who supported free will and struggled against oppression and injustice.

The critical and emancipative thoughts of Engineer which are apparent in his formulation of Islamic liberation theology influenced his thinking on women in Islam. There is no wonder, Engineer's views on this topic are also based on the principles of equality and justice. His thoughts on the position of women in Islam is typical of a scholar who advocates gender equality. He substantiates his powerful argument on the equality of genders in Islam by citing frequently from Qur'anic text. To do so, he formulates a methodology for understanding the Qur'an.

Engineer's methodology can be simplified as follows. The first step to understand the Qur'an is by analyzing whether a verse is a normative or a contextual statement. This step is important in order to differentiate whether the statement is a principle or a norm that has universal values beyond time and space, or it is contextual statement that is only valid in particular situations and circumstances. If it is a contextual verse, it should be understood against the backdrop of the social context in which it was revealed. Besides interpreting its social context, it is also important to analyze what was the status of women in the society in which the verse was revealed. Another important thing to do is to examine how classical and modern commentators interpreted such a verse in their respective social and political context.

With the above methodology, Engineer argues that the Qur'an upholds and sides with gender equality. Seen from the historical context of the creation of human beings, it is clear that both men and women are created from the same essence or single entity

(*nafs*). There is no doubt that this is a kind of declaration of equality of the human race, including of course equality of the sexes.

Engineer argues that if one follows the above methodology, he/she will find that the superiority of men over women, like mentioned in chapter 4:34 and 2:228, is very conditional and only valid in certain circumstances, not beyond time and space. These verses do not advocate male superiority. Seen from the whole view of Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*, it is clear that this scripture respects gender equality and justice.

Regarding the matters of polygamy and the veil, Engineer argues that they have to be seen in their proper context. The verses on polygamy deal with the unjust treatment experienced by orphan girls from their guardians. The main reason why Qur'an allowed polygamy was to help the weak, orphan girls and widows. Through the institution of marriage, they had legal protection and a moral claim upon their guardians. Moreover, by such a strategy the orphan girls' properties would be secure. If their properties were secure, they could fight against injustice and possibly gain their conjugal as well as other rights. Thus, justice and helping orphan girls and widows are the main issues of verse 4:3, and not polygamy. Therefore, Engineer argues that polygamy is contextual statement, whereas monogamy is normative.

Regarding the matter of the veil (covering the face), Engineer argues that verse 33:59, as the source justifying the wearing of the veil, is a contextual statement. The main reason why the Qur'an required Muslim women to wear the veil was to differentiate them from slave girls and to keep them from being disturbed by harassers. Seen from this perspective, it is clear that wearing the veil is very conditional and not as an obligatory for all time. What is emphasized by the Qur'an, as can be read from the verse 24:31, is

that Muslim women should not display their adornments and sexual charms except to those whom they cannot marry. In other words, they are required to dress in proper manner. The main intention of this restriction is to keep women from becoming sexual objects and to save their dignity as human beings.

According to Engineer, to determine what parts of the body a women could expose depends on one's own socio-cultural context. This is because the interpretation of texts cannot be taken out of context. The use of the veil might have been the best solution in certain circumstances in the past, but in normal conditions, it would not be appropriate solution because conditions have changed.

However, while Engineer's methodology emphasizes the distinction between normative and contextual statements, it lacks an explicit explanation of how to differentiate between these two ingredients. In other words, he does not explain how to decide whether this is a normative or a contextual statement and what criteria are used to decide it?

Furthermore, Engineer also pays a lot of attention to the causes of revelation in order to understand the Qur'an. However, since there are many viewpoints on the causes of revelation of a given verse, Engineer does not offer a specific guideline for how to judge the validity of the causes of revelation. In fact, to use Mernissi's argument, without understanding the complexities of events, we cannot draw a proper conclusion.[2] It is necessary, therefore, to construct a kind of synthesis of the causes of revelation which Engineer does not provide.

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[2] Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, p. 93.

A similar criticism can be made on his textual approach. Indeed, this approach is important to show that true Islam promotes justice, liberation, gender equality and religious pluralism, it does not give a real solution to the current social problems within Muslim communities. The crux of liberation theology is analyzing social reality and finding appropriate solutions to problems through praxis. This means that the interpretation of religion should begin with reality, not from texts.[3] To analyze the problem of women's empowerment, for instance, one has to analyze critically the existence of a patriarchal society that has been established over the course of many centuries. To change such social structures, it is not enough only to claim that it is against Islamic teachings with respect to justice and equality. It does not resolve the problem of patriarchal society, its complexities and its impacts on many social aspects, such as culture, education, economy, and politics. Moreover, a textual approach gives the impression of defensiveness. In the normative sphere, of course, Islam offers and promotes human values such as justice, equality and liberation. The real problem is in fact, how to actualize these values in real life. Nevertheless, Engineer's ideas on Islamic liberation theology and on women's status and rights in Islam undoubtedly represents significant contribution to the development of contemporary Islamic thought.

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[3] See, Hassan Hanafi, *Religious Dialogue and Revolution*, p. 210.

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