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## The Preservation Of The Islamic Tradition And How Current Organizations Seek To Prevent Exploitation Of Sacred Texts And Religious Authority Spiritual Abuse And Sexual Abuse Within The Islamic Community

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**THE PRESERVATION OF THE  
ISLAMIC TRADITION AND  
HOW CURRENT ORGANIZATIONS SEEK  
TO PREVENT EXPLOITATION  
OF SACRED TEXTS AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY**  
Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Abuse  
within the  
Islamic Community

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by Misbah Younus Awan  
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ  
الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ  
شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَّا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ  
وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُّورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ  
وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth.

The example of His light is like a niche with in which is a lamp,

The lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star,

Lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree,

Neither of the east nor of the west,

Whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire.

Light upon light.

Allah guides to His light whom He wills.

And Allah presents examples for the people,

and Allah is Knowing of all things.

— Translation by Sahih International

*Chapter 24: Verse 35*

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***To My 22 Year Old Self.** When there is a will, there is a way. And even if there was no way, you always found loopholes. And even when there were no loopholes, you rose to the occasion every single time and never stopped seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. You counted your blessings through the most heartbreaking as well as the most heartwarming of times. Thank you for keeping it together and preserving as much of your innocence as you could during your four years in a bubble. I am proud of you for going your own path because it led you to where you are today. The rite of passage towards womanhood does not begin at marriage and does not end with babies. You always aspired to be an untouchable and honorable woman, and you are. It has always been in you, you have to work towards finding her through maintaining and unlearning and learning. The process is never over. Now, you should continue to cultivate the skill of responding versus reacting, having standards you hold yourself to above expectations you project onto others, holding your own and building up your team by lifting as you climb, reflecting on what legacy you want to leave behind. God got you in all ways, always.*

## **ABSTRACT**

This research project focuses on the ways in which spiritual abuse and sexual abuse show up in religious communities, specifically within the Islamic context. It is important to speak about the spiritual abuse and sexual abuse that happens within the Islamic communities because, while a faith can be perceived to be perfect theoretically, it can be practiced and implemented in improper ways. The tradition of the faith can be lost along the way due to personal interpretations and decontextualization of religious sacred texts, which is what is meant by spiritual abuse. When these two are paired with abuse, especially when vulnerable subjects are involved, there is an obvious disconnect that occurs between oneself and their faith. A person's own psyche can be influenced negatively by such an experience, causing them to understandably isolate and orient themselves away from the problem at hand. Why is there an abuse of spirituality and sexual abuse within faith-based systems? What is the exact disconnect to explain why this is happening specific to Islamic communities? What can a sociologist say about the topic after close analysis and how can one frame the context? In the case of such a tender matter, it becomes urgent to find a solution to such a (unfortunately common) humanitarian issue. The importance of this study is focused on how three main organizations approach the issue of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse within the Islamic context. This project will not only highlight the problem at hand, but will aim to center what action-based solutions are being implemented to counteract the sexual as well as spiritual abuse happening via the analysis of two main different organizations.

## **KEYWORDS**

Sexual Abuse, Spiritual Abuse, Gender, Spirituality, Decontextualization, Faith, Power Relations, Masculinity, Colonization, Islamic Tradition



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Introduction

<i>Background on Project: Why am I passionate about this?</i> .....	9
<i>Research Question &amp; Methods</i> .....	14

## Chapter 1

<i>How Gender Operates in the West</i> .....	16
<i>The Examination of (Toxic) Masculinity</i> .....	23
<i>The Powerful and the Powerless</i> .....	27

## Chapter 2

<i>Quranic Gems: Femininity and Masculinity in Islam</i> .....	33
<i>How the West tainted the Islamic World through Colonization</i> .....	40
<i>The (Mis)Education of Sex within Muslim Communities</i> .....	43
<i>How the Islamic Tradition Deals with Matters of Spiritual Abuse</i> .....	48
<i>How the Islamic Tradition Deals with Matters of Sexual Abuse</i> .....	52

## Chapter 3

<i>The Hurma Project</i> .....	56
<i>Understanding Trauma</i> .....	58
<i>In Shaykh Clothing</i> .....	61
<i>Code of Conduct for Islamic Leadership Analysis to Approach</i> .....	63

## Closing

<i>Resources on Learning about Sexuality and Erotology in Islam</i> .....	69
<i>Further Studies &amp; Moving Forward</i> .....	71

<b>References</b> .....	73
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## INTRODUCTION

Though, just like my parents, I was born in Pakistan, I came to New York when I was in my toddlerhood. This would mean I did not fall easily in step with their beliefs growing up because, while I did attend weekend Islamic school and dutifully completed my most of my daily prayers as well as read and learn the Quran on a regular basis, there was still a stark difference in the way I found my Islam.

I always perceived my parents to believe that faith is closely intertwined with culture. Those two together can lead to respectability politics (defined as what occurs when marginalized communities or individuals themselves are told that if they want to receive better treatment from the elite, they have to behave better/according to the rules of the group that is in power) being taught and being concerned about what the world thinks. Learning through the internalization of those two things did not resonate with me for long. I did not feel like I could or was evolving into my own personhood and developing a progressing relationship with God.

Growing up as a Pakistani-New Yorker hybrid, I am blessed to be pushed to develop a more nuanced and personal relationship with Islam. I never felt fully part of the Pakistani community, and instead of absorbing religion through osmosis, I poured over everything from online resources—never a wise choice—to traditionalist sheikhs. I have relentlessly questioned my faith. I soon adopted an Islam that embraces social justice and equity, with what I believe is a purer relationship to the scriptures.

As I struggled to define my religion through the tradition, my still-forming values brought me to social justice work where I immersed myself in working with several social justice

organizations to uplift multigenerational, low-income communities in an effort to demand radical change during all of my high school and beginning of my college career. I plan to continue with this after May 2020, post-graduation. I felt comforted in knowing I was doing the work the Prophets (peace be upon them all) have done so perfectly.

In other words, through a contemporary example, I was doing exactly what El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (previously known as Malcolm X) declared: “Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery.”

Personally, what I have found is that Islam is generally not a pacifist faith system. It requires one to fight for what is right. Although being a pacifist and fighting for what is right may not necessarily be contradictory, in the context I am using these concepts is that when one fights for what is right, they are able to simply stand their ground and voice their opinions, despite criticism. Even when I was on public transit, I was becoming anxious, riddled with my parent’s worries about a young woman riding alone. They rightfully had a reason to be fearful with the ignorance of the world. However, I stood my ground. In my heart, I knew practicing Islam through social justice did not mean sitting at home. It does, however, mean bringing the advocacy I learned outside to my household too.

Furthermore, through my own research, I even started to become firmer in my understanding and commitment to the *hijab* (veil). I began completely wearing it early on in middle school, despite going to an all girls public school. I grew with it like one grows into themselves through puberty: went from quick hijab slip-ons with easy access as a child to monochromatic colors as a beginner to loosely tying it around my head like a *dupatta* (cultural traditional shawl) to being more colorful and fashionable in how I wear it while still abiding by

the code. In the end, the *hijab* is more than just a physical cloth; it represents my roots and my character wherever I go. Through the veil, I am reminded on how to move and to preserve parts of myself for those who are deserving. There are admittedly moments where I struggle or consciously choose to deviate from the hijab in physical forms but what comforts me is that the beauty of Islam lies in the fact that one must question, experiment, unlearn and learn, and be open hearted and open minded.

To this day, my journey of figuring out my faith—my Islam—isn't over. I don't begrudge my parents of their culturally imbued religion. My faith also teaches forgiveness and understanding, and I try to apply both to my parents, no matter how much our views in practice diverge. They are, in fact, the catalyst that led me on this path of aiming to understand my faith.

As I grow further into my womanhood and step more into myself, I am capable of understanding far more advanced subject matters. The concept of science and faith being seen as two forces that are binary has *never* been what I have accepted to be the truth, ever. Firstly, it is important to note that not all religions and philosophies have had the same parkour in life. For example, coming from the perspective of a Muslim, the Quran does not see empirical observation, rational thought and gnostic contemplation as pulling mankind in different directions. It insists that all of these things lead to God. Thus, we are repeatedly exhorted in the Book to “see” and to “think” and to contemplate. Fear of science and empirical evidence was foreign to Muslim scholars and astronomers and mathematicians, in specific. Quite simply, the sciences and all other tangible things were seen as tools to reach a higher understanding of our purpose in this world.

Also, the way in which Muslims practice their faith is far different from the way Christians do. For the activity of understanding the Holy Book, for Muslims, every Muslim was expected to read and preferably memorize the Quran. People came to mosques to not only study the religion, but also practice other arts and academia-related knowledge.

Also, it is important to note that when it comes to faith, to deem spirituality as a “lesser intellectual” realm of religion is not right. I understand the intentionality of this comment: there’s an apparent lack of scholarly work surrounding spirituality but I don’t view that to be true because, in Islam, sufism, for example, is a major spiritual practice and it’s turned into a sect due to social movements and politics. However, within the Islamic tradition, sufism is core and means the purification of the heart. Furthermore, there are, in fact, many textual concepts that relate to the practice. There is much academic contempt regarding the unknown or the unseen when, in actuality, it is not so contradictory to the sciences, or the known. In relation to the subject of sexual abuse and spiritual abuse that I am speaking on in this thesis, the unseen/spirituality is important to discuss within an academic dissertation because religious communities, in particular, make sense of their world through an understand of spirituality, even if it has to do with material experiences. Invalidation of those perspectives is to lack a full understanding of what is at hand.

Furthermore, it is important to discuss another problem, which is that sex education as a whole when it comes to educating younger children is minimal to none. Despite this, I remain passionate about sexuality and erotology in Islam. Firstly, topics that are taboo and controversial have always piqued my interests, so naturally nothing was out of line for me to study, especially considering that I have found that Islam has many scriptures that speak on matters of love and

desire through the lens of the Islamic tradition. Secondly, the miseducation of this subject has led many Muslim youth, in particular, to go astray from the path of knowledge and use other mediums to satisfy their questions, which disrupts the idea that one must preserve their health, body and mind. Miseducation is something I am also passionate about, given that I am an aspiring education, so I am deeply frustrated and very outspoken to speak about sexuality and erotology. Through a cultural lens, it is also taboo to speak on this but Islam challenges this, which brings me much peace. This leads to how I decided upon a topic for my senior thesis dissertation.

Combining my advocacy for social justice and being so adamant about one's own personal journey within their own faith, I believe that it is important to speak about the spiritual abuse and sexual abuse that happens within the Islamic communities. While a faith can be perceived to be perfect theoretically, it can be practiced and implemented in ways that do not follow the general tradition of Islam. The tradition of the faith can be lost along the way due to personal interpretations and decontextualization of religious sacred texts.

When one begins to interpret the texts from merely a personal point of view along with contextualizing the religious sacred texts, there is an obvious disconnect that occurs between oneself and their faith. It is important to view religious work through the guidance of a scholar, as the context of verses, for example, can become misinterpreted due to the lack of knowledge the common person may have. For the person facing such oppression like being sexually and spiritually abused, it can lead to isolation and deep rooted conflicts about one's sense of belonging in a space. Perhaps it is the same for the person who is responsible for doing the oppressing in this particular case. However, the main question is what are they ways in which the

Islamic tradition deals with spirituality and sex and why are religious authorities, in particular, exploiting these fundamentals through sexual abuse and spiritual abuse within Muslim communities?

Sexual abuse can be argued to be as consequential to spiritual abuse, and vice versa. A person's own psyche can be influenced negatively by such an experience, causing them to understandably isolate and orient themselves away from the problem at hand. Why is there an abuse of spirituality and sexuality within faith-based systems? What is the exact disconnect to explain why this is happening specific to Islamic communities? What can a sociologist say about the topic after close analysis and how can one frame the context? In the case of such a tender matter, it becomes urgent to find a solution to such a (unfortunately common) humanitarian issue. The importance of this study is focused on how three main organizations approach the issue of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse within the Islamic context. This project will not only highlight the problem at hand, but will aim to center what action-based solutions are being implemented to counteract the sexual as well as spiritual abuse happening.

## **Research Question & Method**

The main question is what are the ways in which the Islamic tradition deals with spirituality and sex and why are religious authorities, in particular, exploiting these fundamentals through sexual abuse and spiritual abuse within Muslim communities? I hypothesize that these such things occur through the decontextualization of sacred texts, personal engagement with masculinity under the patriarchy, and miseducation on sex within Muslim communities as well the exercise of power on the powerless.

The way I am looking to answer this question and conclude if my reasoning is true as well as how effective the methods of the organizations are regarding spiritual abuse and sexual abuse is through looking at The Hurma Project and In Shaykh Clothing as a case study.



# CHAPTER ONE

In this chapter, I will be discussing scholarly ideas about connections between masculinity and sexual abuse to set the foundation to speak on how these two function within the Islamic structure in Muslim communities. Prior to this, however, I will be aiming to illustrate what exactly is masculinity and what are the extents of it, which will lead into a discussion on the structure of power, inherently involving two binaries: the powerful and the powerless. To begin, we must first define gender and explore masculinity in opposition to femininity.

## **How Gender Roles Operates in the West**

Gender is timeless in the sense that it varies from time and place and is neither fixed nor innate. Experiences are in close relation with gender, but such experiences evolve over the lifetime of an individual, hence proving that gender is always in flux. Often what happens is that one is socialized to desire *someone* or *something* by being conditioned about desirability through the binary of gender. When desirability is associated with women, it is often in an effort to attract men. In reality, the proximity of a woman to manhood is inconsequential. Women collectively are desirable based on the standards that they set up for themselves because that is the agency they rightfully have. Although individuals intrinsically function on a spectrum that is inherently more fluid and only feed into a capitalist and patriarchal belief of gender by force, the universally standard understanding of gender is accepted as the binary being the singularly correct way of being. Therefore, the way one—especially the woman—is perceived in regards to

gender determines desirability, which subsequently affects how one is addressed interpersonally, internally and institutionally.

It is evident in the way that we acknowledge one another that proves how much of our being has been conditioned to actively participate and be complicit in the binary expectations of gender so effortlessly. When it comes to interpersonal relationships with men—those who are, in particular, cisgender heterosexual men—the woman immediately realizes how little she is made to occupy space, which makes it easier to note how men interact with her. In *Men Explain Things to Me* by Rebecca Solnit, the speaker says, “...the out-and-out confrontational confidence of the totally ignorant is, in my experience, gendered. Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they’re talking about” (Solnit 283). Earlier in the narrative, the protagonist (name unknown) who identifies herself as a woman displays her uncomfortableness and surprise when a man attempts to explain her own novel to her. He continues speaking, even though he is interrupted to be informed on how the novel is, in reality, belonging to her. When the man speaks, he is clearly creating a space in which the woman would feel inadequate. His very presence exudes arrogance and defeat, which is the “out-and-out confrontational confidence” the speaker herself speaks of when finally lets the information dawn on him.

Even though the passage ends with the rhetorical “some men,” the behavior is typical of enough men to conclude how they have a preconceived image on what makes and how women are. The preconceived image is certainly one that fits snugly into the backwards concept of how women are incapable of acquiring or holding the very same knowledge of a man. It is the gender binary that normalizes these interactions between the woman and the man. Regardless about whether the superiority is intentional or not is irrelevant since the impact is what matters at the

end of the day. In common circumstances where women and men are involved, the man is valued more, hence those surrounding him to favor him more than the woman, almost naturally. This fittingly ties into West and Zimmerman's *Doing Gender* piece where larger sociological concepts of the resources of doing gender are discussed where "Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness'" (137). Thus, when I mentioned "almost naturally" above, it is to highlight how the favoring of a man above a woman in relation to who is seen as more valuable has been constructed in such a way where their differences are considered factual (or essential, as West and Zimmerman describe).

However, this is obviously because of the way individuals have been indoctrinated to believe women are a certain number of ways: superfluous, silent, submissive, incapable. Again, in West and Zimmerman's *Doing Gender* piece, there is an idea of "gendered selves" where the doing of gender is about how gender is produced in every interaction. West and Zimmerman argue that "Gender is a powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category. An understanding of how gender is produced in social situations will afford clarification of the interactional scaffolding of social structure and the social control processes that sustain it" (147). The "gendered selves" argument is therefore how people are socialized early on into certain gendered ideas about how to act and feel about gender. Hence, it being the reason for why women are believed to be behaving in certain stereotypical ways, as mentioned above. This indoctrination leads one to address the other quite differently than how the individual might address those of their own,

which proves how there is a clear distinction of gender when it comes to desirability. Though this is shown in relation to interpersonal relationships, internalized effects of how one is desired by the polarization of gender is also extremely ordinary.

Binary expectations of gender cause an individual to remove layers of how they identify themselves merely to look attractive to the mainstream, thus becoming one-dimensional in character and distant from intersectional struggles. In *Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion* by Judith Butler, the author uses bell hooks', a Black American author and feminist, utilization of the film, Paris is Burning, to criticize how drag is misogynist in the way that it apparently is aimed to imitate women through degradation. The author states:

“This ‘being a man’ and this ‘being a woman’ are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norma fails to determine us completely” (Butler 62).

The text serves to counter what Bell Hooks previously spoke on about how drag reinforces gender roles, especially stereotyping women. Identification is definitely in itself an ambivalent process, especially under hegemonic powers where you are mad to fit into a category. In Western cultures especially, gender is viewed rigidly, grounding itself in the physical anatomy of an individual. To speak on structural power and gender further, it is very apparent that structures of power are gendered, especially when looking at Western societies where much of the

colonization comes from European countries through the spreading of their culture under the ideology of white supremacy. The apparancy comes from empirical observations of one's own surroundings and understanding how historically things have shifted and played out.

Colonization has largely impacted many ancient civilizations in such a way where their society structures were dismantled and built in a gendered manner that was arguably deemed civilized.

In "Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics" by R.W. Connell, Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, is mentioned. Before speaking on what it means to combine both hegemony and masculinity together, it is mentioned in the reading that there are "Two common misunderstandings of the concept [that] should be cleared up immediately. First, though 'hegemony' does not refer to ascendancy based on force, it is not incompatible with ascendancy based on force... 'Hegemony' does not mean total cultural dominance, the obliteration of alternatives. It means ascendancy achieved within a balance of forces, that is, a state of play" (184). Given this, hegemonic masculinity would mean that it is inclusive of patriarchal violence and thrive off the fantasization of groups of men in a society. In order for masculinity under hegemony to continue to exist, there needs to be an emphasis on femininity, therefore being created in relation to the subordination of women and men who do not conform. Examples of how this ideology plagues society is through the heteronormative cisgendered narratives televised in entertainment and media industries as well as the illegitimization of the LGBTQIA+ community. There is also a push for certain women to be on top that fit the standard, so it is not just a separation between man and woman but also a type of hegemonic masculinity that woman herself internalizes.

However, rather than having just two distinct polars, biological gender actually occurs across a listless amount of possibilities. This spectrum of anatomical variations by itself should be enough to disregard the simplistic notions of a binary gender system. When the woman, in particular, is so narrowly defined instead of being allowed to live in “ambivalence,” she is simultaneously being stripped of other ways in which she may identify that does not possibly remain within the boundaries. She is, then, closely surveilled, making sure that she performs within the social concept of gender that is determined through the physical realm in relation to toys and clothes and behaviors.

If the woman were to act otherwise, she would not be desired within the accepted social gender roles and expectations so entrenched in the culture. If she is properly conditioned to remain inferior in pleasing the man above her, the patriarchal system is working as it should. The theme of being a subordinate continues on through various texts in connected ways highlighting how desirability is indeed a result of a rigid universal understanding of what gender is and how it manifests. To combine the aforementioned sociological references, both internal and interpersonal situations, however, trace back to the institutionalized ways in which gender is about performativity to control how one addresses the other through the concept of desirability.

Institutional powers manipulate the way in which we perceive things to be, and gender happens to be one of the things used to marginalize women from men as a whole, nevermind the intersectional manifestation of gender and whatever other form of social construct there is that is use for justifying the dehumanization of a people. Institutional ways in which gender is performed proves how the notion of desire and its implications of gender is dependent on who is addressed. In Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the addressing of gender is

illustrated through how “Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heaving butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence...” (Rankine, 101). In reality, boys should be held accountable on the same premise as girls are. However, overlooking the action of boys comes from the implicit desire under the system of patriarchy to keep them at the top—in control and totally dominant. Most importantly, it is a perceived point to apparently keep men above women because they are believed to be more capable of handling and owning their spaces far better than women, in Western institutions particularly.

The practice of this binary is dangerous because it pushes for a one-dimensional understanding of what it means to be a desired person on what is actually a spectrum. If women truly suffer from “the condition of being addressable,” then it is proven that our addressability is totally intended to exploit since visibility is only experienced in stratification. In other words, women are only addressed in ways that exploit her rather than celebrate her. It is only in the best and worst of times are women thus worthy of anything. They are desired when they fulfill expectations, but never when they seek to liberate themselves from the realms that confine them and prevent them from being fluid. It is almost always a performance for women to ultimately feel the need to want to be desired while also brainwashing men to believe they want a particular thing out of a woman.

## **The Examination of (Toxic) Masculinity**

This is the perfect segue to speak on masculinity and sexual abuse. Thus far, we have talked about gender roles and femininity and its relation to desirability in proximity to masculinity, in particular. However, in opposition to femininity, masculinity should also be studied separately and individually so as to truly understand the gender conflict theory. The gender conflict theory is a feminist sociological approach to understanding power relations within the realm of gender. As previously acknowledged, there is a face-to-face interaction that is studied (interpersonal) as well as a larger structural level that is studied (institutional). When it comes to masculinity, there is an extreme that makes one participate in machismo behavior. This machismo behavior is often toxic, otherwise known as toxic masculinity. According to my own observations, toxic masculinity is basically when traditional male gender roles are exaggerated and essentialized to further stigmatize and consequently limit boys as well as men to comfortably express themselves.

Due to this limitation of men being unable to comfortably express themselves, boys grow up to become men without emotional intelligence. In layman terms, boys grow up to be angry men, to put it in short. As highlighted in Maya Salam's New York Times article: *What is Toxic Masculinity?*, to reiterate, she says that "researchers have defined [toxic masculinity], in part, as a set of behaviors and beliefs that include the following: suppressing emotions or making distress, maintaining an appearance of hardness, and violence as an indicator of power (think: 'tough guy' behavior) "(7). In other words, it is the maintenance of what is perceived to be seen as masculine so that one does not appear weak, which is unsurprisingly synonymous with what is perceived to be feminine unfortunately.



Moving forward, prior to going into the connections between how masculinity and sexual abuse operate within different Muslim communities under the religion of Islam, it is important to highlight the connections between toxic masculinity and sexual abuse through scholarly literature first. It can be hypothesized that the victims of sexual abuse are, in fact, systematically victims of “a gender practice that is related to normative masculine gender practices that involve the construction of relations of power,” as Annie Cossins and Malory Plummer note in their piece on *Masculinity and Sexual Abuse: Explaining the Transition from Victim to Offender*. The authors take on a sociological approach to determine whether the social construction of gender, as previously discussed, is core to the sexual behaviors of men. The concept of the powerful and the powerless is heavily involved in this examination of masculinity and sexual abuse. Michael Kimmel, a well known sociologist that speaks on gender and sex, highlights this in his “Contextualizing Men’s Violence: The Personal Meets the Political” piece under the book of *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. He states that:

“Men, as a group, may be in power; individually, [but] men don’t feel so powerful. This exposes the theoretical inadequacy of simply focusing on whether or not men have the power, and whether or not men feel powerful. ... Masculinity is not, however, the experience of power; it is the experience of entitlement to power”  
(Kimmel 2007, 101, emphasis in original).

As previously noted, masculinity is related not only to an individual and their character but rather a hegemonic structure where there is a hierarchy of power relations. We must also not forget that gender is very much the production of our interaction with the world, so therefore when men

engage with structures of power, they interact through the result of being socialized through their many different experiences of power and powerless seen through the lens of racial dynamics, ethnicity, sexuality and religion (which will be discussed soon). Circumstances do not have to totally determine the identity of a person, but it does indeed impact the behaviors of an individual. In this particular case, the man.

However, to really understand the role of masculinity within cases of sexual abuse, we must look at sexuality as a key social practice between different kinds of men but also between the man and the women. To clarify, when speaking on sexuality, we are not examining the capacity to have sexual feelings. However, the participation in sexual activity is definitely central to how masculinity is often expressed amongst different communities to prove their power. Sex is used, ultimately then, as a tool to exercise power and reproduce the dominant forms of masculinity. The dominant forms of masculinity, of course, involve the cisgendered male body and heterosexual masculinity. A major component of such a masculinity is to see it through opposition: homophobia. From an early age, men learn to engage with and differentiate themselves from other men through homophobic practices actually. Annie Cossins and Malory Plummer speak on this by stating that “Through homophobic practices, a man can prove or exaggerate his heterosexual status, since heterosexual men regularly differentiate between each other based on what the male body does or fails to do” (170). It is commonly the case where many young boys will be taunted for not conforming the dominant form of masculinity through language like “faggot” or being in proximity to the feminine. In this entire discussion, the body does not leave the conversation, as:

“The construction of masculine sexualities involves sexing the male body which means the attribution of particular cultural values to the male body to create a cultural (or sexed) body: virile, potent, penetrating, initiating, aggressive, conquering, focused, piercing, incisive, strong, purposeful, erect, unemotional, tough, hard hitting, as well as weakness and impotence, such that the male body becomes a site for both success and failure” (170).

All this goes to show that the sexual practices that men engage with involves different sexual ideals that are associated and pronounced with the male disgendered body. In this manner, the “illusion of potency is created,” as Collins and Plummer put it precisely. Men’s sexual practices involve a variety of ways in which masculine sexual ideals (associated with the sexed male body) are affirmed, and the illusion of potency is created. In other words, power is derived from the body for most men. However, since the concept of potency is an illusion, then that would consequently mean that many men, in actuality, are not successful in living up to the so-called masculine ideal, which, as we have established already, is a cultural construct. It is proving to be the case that matters of masculinity are very fragile, especially when making observations of masculinity between men and between men and women both on an interpersonal level. How does, then, this relate to sexual abuse?

A core part of my argument is understanding why sexual abuse as one component of the main question occurs. It can be determined that sexual abuse can be from a man’s own traumatic experiences with his interaction with his own identity as a masculine entity or his own interpersonal oppressive experience with it on a sexual level. However, in order to dig deeper,

the struggle for experiences of power through sexual abuse must be examined through the absence of power. In brief, sexual abuse occurs between the predator and the prey, otherwise known as the powerful and the powerless.

## **The Powerful and the Powerless**

In order for the powerful to exist, there must be the powerless. One cannot exist without the other so when it comes to how men determine their powerfulness, it is entirely dependent on what is deemed as powerless within their cultural contexts and the societal norms they partake in. Commonly, their engagement between the powerful and powerless happens when amongst other men who experience manliness in opposition to their perceived notions of femininity and where the socially constructed masculine ideal prevails. As Annie Cossins and Malory Plummer say in *Masculinity and Sexual Abuse: Explaining the Transition from Victim to Offender*, it is indeed true that “Sexuality can be a site for the reproduction of power for both socially enfranchised and disenfranchised men through social practices such as homophobia, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape. While sexuality can also be a site for experiences of powerlessness, as a result of being sexually abused, coercive sexual practices may provide experiences of potency or power for some men” (171). Again, the body is involved. All manhood acts aim to claim privilege as well as explicit submission and a form of respect. The male body here is an asset while the female body (or the body of a child) becomes a liability when trying to showcase the masculine ideal and prove one’s manliness to another or oneself. It is very much about how there is a maintenance of membership within a dominant gender group.

In order for the sexualization to occur (and thus sexual abuse), the subject who is a liability must first be sexualized and be perceived to symbolize vulnerability and desirability. This is not difficult, especially in the modern world where we live in the age of technology. On social media and newspaper articles as well as movies and advertisement, one can find themselves in a trance where there are pervasive meanings associated with especially *both* children's bodies and the female body. It is unfortunate to see the normalization of sexualization of these vulnerable targets increasing by the day, but it is definitely associated with cultural aspects of sexual desire and its relation to the dominant form of masculinity and sexual practices. Therefore, the connection the man himself makes between sexuality and manliness will determine how sex is performed and who is the target. In a lot of these cases, sexual abuse enters into the picture and becomes a central experience in which power is derived from. Feelings of powerlessness within the male entity can also be an experience that may lead to the objectification and subsequent abuse of a vulnerable subject too.

Although the sociology of powerfulness and powerlessness is an important approach to gain understanding of the connections of masculinity and sexual abuse from, one must combine it with psychological aspects of the individual to have a more holistic and greater understanding of the topic at hand. With this in mind, a journal article of Consulting & Clinical Psychology called *The Characteristics of Persistent Sexual Offenders: A Meta-analysis of Recidivism Studies* by K.R. Hanson and K.E. Morton-Bourgon states that the "unstable [and] antisocial lifestyle" of the typical abuser who may "respond to stress through sexual acts and fantasies may be responding to the stress of a cultural environment that is premised on power" and the masculine ideal. These ideas are supported in the previously mentioned piece as well, although it speaks

more so about sexual offenses made towards children rather than both children and the female body as vulnerable targets to sexual abuse. Although it seems quite simplistic to say that one abuses others due to stress, it is actually not a far fetched concept, as there are many psychological ideologies that support this viewpoint. Also, when one is not aligned with themselves and has a fragmented idea of identity and the self, they are most likely to act out and infringe harm upon others. It is as the old saying goes: Hurt people hurt people. To clarify, however, this is in no way a justification for sexual assault acts whatsoever. It is merely an attempt to understand the reason behind such assaults and predatory acts towards those perceived to be vulnerable, or powerless.

Furthermore, one can study these cases through the lens of criminological theories but it seems like that would only put the abuser as the subject of the predator *without* understanding the root cause of why men behave in abusive ways, perpetuating the notion of toxic masculinity, and where there is a need for them to get restorative institutional help instead of being totally isolated from society (imprisoned, for example) where these same men would most likely fall into a similar pattern. So, it is important to look at the situation by contextualizing it adding on to this idea of “hurt people hurt people,” there are many situations in which the abuser has been abused. It is up to the individual to make the conscious decision to not become an abuser. In *Breaking with Norms of Masculinity: Men Making Sense of Their Experience of Sexual Assault* by Charlotte C. Petersson and Lars Plantin, it is being reiterated that “Hegemonic masculinity ideals characterize *real* men in western contexts as strong, sexually assertive, heterosexual, dominant, active and in control of their emotions. Violence is an integral part of this masculinity... These ideals are institutionalized during the childhood years and in family and sexual relationships”

(373). With that being said, being a male victim of sexual assault stands in contrast to hegemonic forms of masculinity. This is key to examining why sexual abuse occurs under the concept of masculine ideal and furthers our understanding of toxic masculinity.

In the aforementioned piece, the study determined four main components that help to understand and process the experiences of sexual assault as gendered and embodied concerns. As the study highlights, these four components are as follows: conflicting feelings and difficult conceptualizations, re-experiencing vulnerability, emotional responses and resistance and disclosure and creativity. The study states that the conflicting feelings and difficult conceptualizations emerges as not seeing the sexual assault acts as particularly violence and having mixed feelings in regards to the situation as perhaps pleasure and feelings of specialness were also felt, which, in return, shows that “their conflicting feelings make them question their gender, sexuality and whether they as victims resisted enough” (376). When it comes to re-experiencing vulnerability, there is a bit of romanticization that is involved to turn the horrendous events of abuse into something positive so that there is less room for traumatized responses that the individual feels, which leads into emotional responses and resistance that one may participate in. The healing process includes restorative ways of reconciliation with the events that took place at the time of their abuse: music and writing, for example.

It is not always the case that the men who were victims themselves of feeling powerless aim to be resilient survivors of sexual assault, or some sort of traumatizing sexual circumstances. Often times, as Cossins and Plummer put it, “these boys’ decision to sexually offend [involve] the sexualization of their own powerlessness by forcing sex upon more vulnerable people than themselves. As their bodies were inscribed or sexed according to particular cultural values by

their peer group, so too these boys inscribed the bodies of children and young women with cultural meanings of powerlessness” (180). Therefore, it can be understood that men are victims of the patriarchy just as much as the woman is, as the masculine ideal becomes overemphasized to the point that it is toxic and manipulates men into thinking they must behave in a certain way to achieve a certain level of masculinity. If their masculinity is violated in any manner, they either become perpetual victims or grow into become the perpetrators themselves.

It is important to remember how masculinity operates in relation to sexual abuse on the general scale of things and, as one reads further, it will become apparent that the varying functions of masculinity are not so different within the Islamic realm, although presented a bit differently due to the religious context attached to the behaviors.



## CHAPTER TWO

The connection between masculinity and sexual abuse operates similarly within different Muslim communities under the religion of Islam, as the gender roles are often exaggerated based on interpretation and cultural norms already set within a society. In particular, sexual abuse is often perpetrated by those who hold religious power for the stated reasons in the previous chapter. To reiterate, trauma and a fragmented sense of self along with perceptions of masculinity creates a poisonous mix for how behaviors are influenced and desires become irrational and recklessly enacted upon, becoming sexual abuse. This portion of the thesis will be focused on not only sexual abuse, but also how spiritual abuse is perpetuated by male authority figures within Muslim communities cross-culturally in opposition to the feminine.

In this chapter, I will first be discussing the role of femininity and masculinity in Islam through texts that are emphasized in the Quran as well as through the Prophetic sayings of Muhammad (peace be upon him), the last and final Prophet in Islam that Muslims all around the world adore. I will then lead into a discussion how such roles have been tainted by the West through colonization, which had then led to the unfortunate miseducation of sex within Muslim communities that lead to both spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. These terms will later be defined in this chapter as well, using scholarly literature to determine their connections. Towards the end of the chapter, there will be a conversation on how the Islamic tradition deals with matters pertaining to both spiritual abuse and sexual abuse.

## **Quranic Gems: Masculinity and Feminity in Islam**

Islam was eras ahead of its time. Dating back to beyond 1400 years ago, there were many struggles that civilizations at the time were facing that had to do with humankind and their civil rights. Women, in particular, were not seen as having the same or similar capabilities that men have and were thus forced to conform into very restrictive roles both outside and within the household. There was not, as is true even today, much respect for women, which is an unfortunately striking thing to note, as women are the bearers of entire nations. To learn that they were and still are reduced to small roles or dismissed is disappointing, to say the least. However, Islam has always been a revolutionary faith based system, especially in this regard.

Like other religions, Islam has a book of guidance, a Holy Book called the Quran. It was known to be filled with revelations and stories directly from Allah (translation: God) spoken through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him<sup>1</sup>) who passed it down to his Companions orally. His Companions consequently would memorize the verses from the Quran and organize the chapters in written form with the direction of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The Quran has a total of 114 chapters, one of which is called Surah Maryam. Surah Maryam is translated as the Chapter of Mary, Jesus' mother. Out of all the chapters in the Quran, there is a hefty dedication towards women, in particular, addressing their rights and privileges as well as honoring their status within Islam and society as a whole for generations to come. However, this specific chapter speaks on the best of women: Maryam (known as Mary in biblical terms).

The Chapter of Mary was revealed around the year 614. It is the 19th chapter in the Quran, detailing out the miraculous birth of Isa (peace be upon him), also known as Jesus, as

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<sup>1</sup> "Peace be upon him" is a term of endearment and a complimentary phrase that is attached to the Prophets in Islam names. It is said after their name as a sign of respect and to honor them simply.

well as speaking on the fundamental aspects of Islam like the existence and oneness of Allah and the seal of prophethood. The chapter is divided into eight parts with different messages pertaining to each of the eight sections. All this goes to show the importance of the status of Maryam and how honorable she is amongst the people and in the eyes of Allah. In the third chapter of the Quran, Surah Al Imran (Chapter of Imran), Maryam is mentioned once more in an interesting fashion, as it stated that: "But when she delivered her, she said, 'My Lord, I have delivered a female.' And Allah was most knowing of what she delivered,' *And the male is not like the female*. And I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for her in You and [for] her descendants from Satan, the expelled [from the mercy of Allah]" (Chapter 3, Verse 36; emphasis is mine). Now, according to Asma Lamrabet's piece called *Maryam and the myth of "the male is not like the female,"* it is important to note that Allah chose a woman to have the privilege that men typically have of having the status of being a *muharraran* (consecration), showcasing that a woman is capable of the same things a man is and that "ultimately it was not a matter of *gender* but rather of *virtue* and *piety*" (7). Interestingly enough, take note of the fact that the verse states that the male is not like the female, and not the other way around. This is intentional, as nowhere in the Quran does it state the opposite, which goes to show one how powerful of a statement this is and how femininity is, in fact, celebrated in the Islamic tradition.

It is unfortunate, however, that many Muslim commentators who interpret the Quran through male-centric lens tend to remove this specific part of the verse, decontextualizing it and interpreting a mean unlike what the Quran intends for it to have. It is very much of a contradiction to assert this verse to be a justification of "the supposed supremacy of men over women" when the verse was sent down as to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a

story to “correct an injustice and therefore to abolish the sexist tradition of the time” (9). It is also not only paradoxical to propose such a concept, but is a general contradiction towards how Islam truly views women. It is true, generally speaking, that both the man and the woman are “separate but equal,” so to speak, in that they are definitely distinct physically but this does not imply a superiority on a spiritual or virtual level whatsoever. The differences materially are instead celebrated and used to advantage; everybody, in other words, has a role. Maryam is an example to both Muslim men and women of how one can liberate themselves from restraints because “By beseeching the Creator to accept her daughter amongst the *liberated* human beings, Hannah has transmitted a hymn of deliverance to the whole of humankind. Maryam was to be born liberated *from* all constraints and through her *liberation*... This is unquestionably the profound meaning of the Islamic vision of human liberation” (17). Alas, one must understand deeply the verses of the Quran in its context, so as not to misinterpret the chapter and have it support the cultural misogyny of society. The importance of contemplation is also significant, as one must really ponder over the miracle that Maryam was gifted with, especially being a woman at the time when most people would marginalize her. The many honorable women that came after her were also indeed of a similar status of exaltation, if not completely identically.

Khadijah bint Khuwaylid is a common classical example of revolutionary Muslim women and the West’s inability to catch up to those progressions throughout history. Khadijah is the first wife of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the first follower of when Islam became institutionalized, but prior to that, she was still known to be a somebody and was of high status in the society. She was, in her own right, a respected business woman, rich in wealth, beautiful on the eyes, and was the one who proposed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon

him) himself. In fact, she was much older than the Prophet when she decided to propose to him, despite his low status in wealth and how strange his message of the oneness of Allah seemed to Arab pagans at the time. *She* was the one who saw strength and honesty in *him*. Her story is unlike that of any woman of her time, as the aforementioned examples prove. Therefore, it is truly ahistorical and dishonest to ever think that Islam favors men over women because the Quran is inclusive in mentioning all women of all social roles: widowed, married, single, divorced, wife of a great man or wife of a terrible man, married woman seeking to have an affair, etc. It is all represented in the Holy Book without bashing the women whatsoever. As far as the role of femininity goes in Islam, once again, the Quran speaks on the feminine in a different light by giving woman a sense of purpose and a commitment to better society as well as strengthen their relation to God, the same as the Muslim men. It is unlike the Western myth of the woman playing the household role and the man playing the working role; It also does not illustrate women as being inherently evil as well. To end, a Muslim woman scholar, Tamara Gray's article, *Courage & Commitment: The Femininity of Muslim Women* called under the Yaqeen Institute, talks about how the question of what exactly is the role of women in society is actually one that comes from Western ideologies and practices. She points out that Muslim women have instead been asking: What does society need from me? The reverse of the question from the role of women in society to society's need and dependence on the woman's role is phenomenal.

In harmony with the rights a woman has access to under the Islamic tradition, the man is also seen as an exalted and very important figure within the Muslim community. Within Islam, many believers adore and tend to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as he is also considered to be the most influential person in history, according to the

Michael H. Hart 1978 book called *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*. Both Muslim men and women looked towards him for how guidance on how to live a prophetic lifestyle. He is a great example for male figures, especially. Being a man is, after all, an integral part of not only the family structure but everyday life within society. This is particularly the case for the Muslim man. Through the Yaqeen Institute organization, there is an article piece called “*Be a Man!*” *Constructing Prophetic Masculinity* by Yahya Ibrahim that speaks about masculinity within the Islamic tradition in three parts: how Arabic masculine pronouns are used in the Holy book, a Quranic dissection of the qualities of an ideal man, and the construction of the Prophetic masculinity, all tying heavily into the spiritual aspect of Islam.

It is first very important to deconstruct how the Quran uses the Arabic masculine pronouns because it can be decontextualized and subsequently misinterpreted by those who lack knowledge of the nuances of the Arabic language and linguistics. In Arabic, similar to the language of Spanish, when one refers to a group of women, feminine pronouns are used, and when one refers to a group of men, masculine pronouns are used, but when referring to both men and women, the masculine collective noun is used to refer to everyone. This is actually the case with most languages throughout the world, but English language speakers are specifically sensitive to these matters regarding gender, so if one were to translate Arabic into English, a problem may arise in translation because the linguistic knowledge of the descriptions is lost, as the translations tend to be very male-centric in English and does not, as Yahya Ibrahim notes, “reflect the reality of the Quran in its original Arabic” (6). Prior to going any deeper, this is important to highlight and understand.

Now, going further into our research, we will find that the Quran speaks on how Muslim men are indeed religious equals of Muslim woman, as they are to protect and provide for each other. The Quran does talk about how the man and women are separate entities, but is it not to be disparaging whatsoever. In Chapter 2 of the Quran, Surah Al Baqarah (The Cow), there is a verse that involves objects metaphorically as a way to simply communicate an idea rather than dehumanize anyone. The verse goes, as follows: “You men are allowed to approach your wives (for intimacy) during the nights of Ramadan. They’re like a garment for you, and you’re like a garment for them” (Chapter 2, verse 187). This short statement encompasses the relationship between a husband and a wife. It is not the heavy-handed methods of misguided machismo we are told is traditional, but which are simply reflections of our cultures’ flaws. It is not the process of infantilization passed off as “empowerment” either. It is not a process where women must do this, or men do that. Rather, it is a relationship where discretion must be used, where every situation is different, but protection of each other is central.

And so, Yahya Ibrahim claims that there is a “clear Qur’anic paradigm distinguishing a male from a female and, as important, a man in attitude and behavior from a male by biological sex” (11). Ibrahim goes on to speak on the Arabic words *rajul* (singular; man) and *rijaal* (plural; men) being associated with different characteristics, such as being honored able, having self-restraint and modesty, being devoted and focused, and showcasing ethical behavior. These characteristics are important not only in associated with the Arabic words, but also in relation to masculinity within Islam: *rujala*. In Surah An-Nisa (The Women), there is a verse that goes “Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter” (Chapter 4, Verse 34). The beginning of the verse is read as

*ar-rijal qawwamun* in Arabic, which translates to “in charge of” or “should take good care of” or “manager of affairs,” according to some translations, which can cause a lot of controversy, especially when reading this through mainstream (white) feminist lens. However, the case is otherwise. We can see this through Quranic exegesis.

Muhammad Asad, an Austro-Hungarian-born Muslim and Islamic scholar of the 20th century, actually explains this matter of the *ar-rijal qawwamun* in a very informative and accessible manner. He says that “The expression *qawwam* is an intensive form of *qa'im* (“one who is responsible for” or “takes care of” a thing or a person). The grammatical form *qawwam* is more comprehensive than *qa'im*, and combines the concepts of physical maintenance and protection as well as of moral responsibility: and it is because of the last-named factor that I have rendered this phrase as “men shall take full care of women.” With that being said, understanding the matter through a linguistic and scholarly point of view, one can see that the perspective of men dominating over women that is often interpreted from the verse is not present in the verse itself. It is simply a statement that charges men with protecting women without it being dehumanizing towards the women or taking away from the capabilities of the women.

To clarify, the verse is not designed to “rob women of their power” or their agency. In fact, it has nothing to do with women; it is rather speaking to the men. What it is saying is exactly what Yahya Ibrahim begins with: Man up! If the man is unable to provide for and protect the woman in his union, the woman has the right to leave. It is as simple as that. After all, there is a *hadith* (Prophetic saying) that goes: “All of you are shepherding guardians and are responsible for your flock... A man is a steward of his family, the woman is a guardian and is responsible for her husband’s house and his offspring; and so all of you are guardians and are



responsible for your subjects” Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 2:5 #893. All in all, the way masculinity functions in Islam is in opposition to the toxic masculinity running rampant today in the modern world. Like the role of femininity in Islam, it comes with deep purpose and caution.

## **How the West tainted the Islamic World through Colonization**

The Islamic World is a force of power and the Quranic message has remained unmatched and unhindered officially throughout history, but its traditions have been tampered with around the 1800s during the colonialist rule. This is truly when the roles of femininity and masculinity began to change in tremendous ways in society. Tamara Gray speaks on this in her *Courage & Commitment: The Femininity of Muslim Women* article piece. She says that:

“Western governments and missionary schools introduced their own beliefs about femininity to Muslim lands. Their concept of the delicate and fainting woman clashed strongly with the example of bravery in battle of Safiyya [a warrior Muslim woman] but it began to permeate local cultures nonetheless. Eventually the ‘ideal woman’ who cooks, cleans, docilely serves her husband, and gently raises her children became part and parcel of *khutbas* (sermons) and *halaqas* (religious circle)—all without questioning where that ideal came from in the first place” (4; translations and description of Safiyya bint Abdul Muttalib are my own).

She goes on to mention how Muslim women began to be sexualized and became part of what she calls the “feminine ethos.” During this time, the idea of a nuclear family was introduced where the gender roles became rigid and restrictive. The distinction between the man and the woman was no longer treated in an honorable way nor in the way the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught. Muslim societies soon began to change culturally due to colonization. The domesticated woman, thus, became, as Tamara Gray mentions, the “false ideal.” These tropes should be remembered as a cultural assassination of Muslim societies through these colonial acts that were placed upon them as well as the subsequent decontextualization of the sacred texts, not as an extension of the Islamic tradition through the Quran and Sunnah (ways of the Prophet). The same goes for how the masculine ideal came about in Muslim communities.

Prior to colonization, on a global level, Muslims were thriving. However, by the 1800s, most Muslims began to be under the control and demand of non-Muslim powers where terminology of polarization emerged: colonizer versus colonized, traditional versus modern, etc. These are the few examples that Jonathan Brown, an American scholar of Islamic studies, notes as being the reason for the Islamic tradition being tampered with in an overwhelming manner. Similar to the question of the woman’s role in society, Brown asks a modern question that impedes amongst men today within Muslim communities: What is masculinity? What does it mean to be a man? In his article piece under the Yaqeen Institute called *An Open Letter to Muslim Men: The Sunnah Trumps Toxic Masculinity*, he says that:

“The American public square seems dominated by two proposed ideals of masculinity. The first is what we might call the Progressive Male: he is sensitive, intellectual, woke, does dishes, is

a stay-at-home dad, and is so in touch with his feminine side that he seems to straddle the male/female boundary and even dissolve it altogether. The second is what we could call the Traditional Man's Man: we can imagine him coming in two models; there is the blue-collar father and husband who knows right from wrong, knows 'what it means to be a man,' enjoys beer with the boys and baseball with the kids in all its Americana glory" (9).

These two ideals, however, do not seem to fit into what the Quran and Sunnah itself speaks on. Jonathan Brown argues that they are, in actuality, contradicting the Islamic teachings because Islam does not envision any removal of the distinction between male and female," as Islam makes it so that "gender is not determined subjectively but objectively by one's physiology" (10). Furthermore, the two polar opposites (Traditional Man versus Progressive Man) are seen in two extremes, which is inevitably bound to fail in society, as a balance is very much required in all aspects of life. When it comes to the Traditional Man, for example, the idea that he will go about his office work while his woman cleans and cooks in the kitchen is entirely a Western thought and not attached to Islamic thought in any way whatsoever. Everything is context based with a mutual respect for one another. When it comes to the Sunni schools of law, cooking and doing housework, as Jonathan Brown also states, is not a requirement towards the woman, but instead only obligatory if the husband is poor and she does not see the job under a patriarchal lens. The Western requirement of the woman to do so without context or understanding is wrong and should be met with resistance, always. In Islam, masculinity does not mean being the alpha male or toxic individual. It comes with a line of distinct responsibilities, but not so different from

his woman. A Muslim family has a shared value system that relies on community and each other. This is something the West is unable to comprehend, as they are entirely individualist.

Even while Islam is a very sex-positive religion that teaches sensuality as linked with spirituality, during that time period in which Muslims were globally reigned over, there were many censorship initiatives towards such knowledge that occurred and occurs to this day.

### **The (Mis)Education of Sex within Muslim Communities**

Due to colonization and the subsequent censorship of certain knowledge pertaining specifically to sexuality and sexual activity, the education amongst Muslim societies has decreased by generation when it comes to such a matter. This is unfortunate, as the Islamic tradition goes into the topic very explicit and in a very accessible manner. However, it is the truth that we are now faced with a miseducation of sex cross-culturally in Muslim communities.

One of the big reasons why there is not much information that Muslims in the community, especially the youth, have of sex education and its relevancy within their own spirituality is not only due to the institutional ways in which the knowledge has been censored and damaged, but also because there is a lack of contemplation and motivation driving one to study their own religion pertaining to gender. Perhaps this is due to how sometimes the sacred texts can be inaccessible in translation or they are not being taught correctly, primarily. Nevertheless, it is important to speak on this subject matter. Earlier I had mentioned Judith Butler as a secular feminist author to frame gender amongst sociologists like West and Zimmerman and Michael Kimmel. Islamic scholars have not ignored these ideologies by Western scholars. Rather, they

have read and analyzed their viewpoints and dissected them under the lens of how the Islamic traditions see them.

Fatimaah Knight, a Black Muslim woman scholar and research fellow at Yaqeen Institute, writes in her piece called *And We Created You in Pairs: Islam and the Gender Question* that “As much as Western culture debates gender and rights, it does not have a coherent message about gender” and that “philosophers, sociologists, religious scholars, and others have knowledge to contribute but it is from within their own disciplines that they can authoritatively speak” when it comes to the topic of gender (3). In her paper, she speaks on the role of femininity and masculinity under the realm of Islamic metaphysics and cosmology to address a modern argument having to do with gender. Her argument essentially is supported by the understanding that, of the main things that have plagued the modern world, it is this stubbornness to restructure gender through the reimagination of it without being concerned for what is at loss. It is clear, then, that Knight vehemently disagrees with Judith Butler's argument that gender is totally a social construct, almost but not entirely denying biological sex. Knight finds her critique to be fairly reductionist and quite dependent on the Western idea of how a man and a woman should perform gender, which is something that does not concern Muslim cosmologists.

Within American culture, in particular, there is this concept, which Knight, too, highlights, that boys should wear blue and girls should wear pink as well as how American attire is very gendered and sexualized. Judith Butler's arguments are valid as far as her area of expertise and studies goes. However, it is not an argument that should be used as a blanket statement to study gender cross-culturally. Fatimaah Knight argues that “Islam, of course, deemphasizes and desexualizes the body in any public setting and therefore disincentivizes

profiteering over the body, women's bodies in particular" (8). She supports this idea by citing the Quranic verse that reads, as the following: "And of all things We created two mates; perhaps you will remember" (Chapter 51, Verse 49). It is important to note that "the language of pairs is distinct from the language of binaries, the former brings into focus difference as well as sameness whereas the latter emphasizes only difference" along with recognizing that "Biology advances the idea that men and women are bimodal, not binary, that while we exist in two categories this does not deny variance within each of those categories, as well as the overlapping of categories" (8). To reiterate, Islam sees gender as two distinct entities, possessing similarities, as well as prevents the overemphasis on sexuality amongst these two different categorical identities. This is important knowledge moving forward in this chapter, as it is important to understand sexual experiences and spiritual experiences through the relevancy of the Islamic tradition and its polarity to the Western ideologies. The reason is because these things inform the way we perceive the world and are influenced by our surroundings.

Although we have established how Islam frames gender and sexuality, anecdotes of Muslim adolescents' views on sexuality are still alarming, although not representative of all Muslim youth perspectives and ongoing modern thought. In a research article published by the BMC Public Health organization called *An exploratory study of Muslims adolescents' views on sexuality: Implications for sex education and prevention*, 44 Muslim youth were interviewed and had a discussion on sexuality as it relates to Islam along with 33 non-Muslim youth. The intention of the study was to "[reveal] several issues that are relevant for the design of future sex education programs targeting Muslim youth" (1). It is a significantly important point to understand that Islam actually practices sex not only as a form of reproduction, but also for pleasurable purposes

and a way to express one's spirituality. There are restrictions, of course, on what is considered a permissible practice of sexual activity between two individuals and what is not. The study takes place in the Netherlands where amongst the Muslim youth, Muslim girls are not as knowledgeable about sex as their Muslim boy counterparts who are relatively on the same page as the Christian youth. When it came to masturbation, the study states that "[Muslim participants] agreed that all sexual acts outside marriage, including masturbation, are haram," as they considered it with having sex with oneself (4-5). While these are the perspectives of the Muslim youth in the Netherlands, this is not entirely synonymous with what the Islamic tradition has to say about masturbation, as there are many schools of thoughts having differing opinions on the matter. While this is not entirely representative of everyone that is a Muslim youth, it certainly does go to show how there is a need for conversations in the Muslim household as well as Islamic institutions to take place regarding matters of sex and spirituality.

Another observation from the discussion that was alarming to read about was the Muslim youth's perspective on abortion. The study writes that "According to the Muslim participants, the mothers-to-be are to blame for their unintended pregnancies; they should have anticipated the consequences before acting upon their impulses or desires" (5). It is unfortunate that the Muslim participants thought this way in contrast to their non-Muslim counterparts because the viewpoint, once again, does not align with the Islamic tradition. Abortion is an extremely sensitive topic, but the matter is taken very seriously and through contextual based analysis and understanding, not judgement and guilt tripping the parents of the potential soon-to-be newborn. The viewpoints of the Muslim youth in the study also do not reflect the possibility of them pondering about what if these pregnancies occurred through coercion or sexual abuse.

Islam is not a faith based system that relies heavily on mere and reckless punishment; it is rather a merciful religion, so the viewpoints of the Muslim youth, again, are not to be held synonymous with what Islam has to say about such sensitive topics. For Muslim youth to think this way and perhaps even go on to tell an unknowing person of their opinion, irregardless of their religion, can lead to spiritual abuse. Furthermore, say, for example, the person who coerced the other person to have sex forces the latter person to keep the baby or abort without Islamic proof of what they are to ideally do based on their situation, what happens next? Even worse, what happens when they force the other person to keep the baby or abort through the justification of (decontextualized) verses in the Quran? Therefore, from an early age, if there is a miseducation on the topic or trauma that has been endured, the disconnect between the Muslim person and their spirituality will falter and leave an opening for spiritual abuse to subsequently occur.

To conclude, it is the lack of knowledge on these such matters that proves how there should definitely be classes of sex education in Islamic institutions so as to prevent Muslim youth from relying on outside recourses to acquire some type of information on the matter, but especially to prevent sexual abuse and spiritual abuse to occur within Muslim communities.

## **How the Islamic Tradition Deals with Matters of Spiritual Abuse**

In this section, I will be talking about how the Islamic tradition deals with matters of spiritual abuse. However, prior to that conversation, it is important to first define what exactly is spiritual abuse and how it emerges in different Muslim communities through the brief



exploration of various scenarios. After that, I will finally speak on how the Islamic tradition utilizes the experience and story of Aasiyah, the wife of Pharaoh and a powerful female character in Islam, to talk about how spiritual abuse is dealt with and how one can protect themselves against spiritual abuse through the support of a beneficial article I have researched.

Spiritual abuse can generally be defined as anything that interferes with someone's spirituality or religious practice. It is when one person misuses a verse in the Quran or plucks a phrase from a hadith to justify their own manipulative behavior and shame their victim. The abuse of spirituality also occurs when one is forced to deviate from their religious practice as a way to please their significant other or society as a whole. There are a plethora of ways spiritual abuse is utilized amongst Muslims in different communities, whether intentionally or unintentionally. It all happens under the illusion of one individual that it is okay to treat another or manipulate another in a certain manner under the justification of religion.

Spiritual abuse can be totally separate from sexual abuse as well, as not all cases involve one's sexuality being exploited. It should not nonetheless be dismissed, though. Sexual abuse cases aligning with spiritual abuse cases mostly come in the form of a woman being forced to remove her hijab by her husband or family member perhaps, which exposes her in a non-consensual way to the public, revealing her most modest features. It can also come in the form of forcing one's spouse to have sex with them during the month of Ramadan *while* one is fasting, which is not only rape but also goes strongly against the jurisdiction and guidelines in Islam regarding sex during Ramadan in Islam. Cases that are non-sexual in nature but that still involve spiritual abuse include parent-child relations or teacher-student relations where the overemphasis of the child's responsibility towards an authority figure like their parent or teacher

is too common when, in reality, in Islam, the right of the child comes before the right of the parent. For the most part, the general Muslim community does not understand this, as they are not taught this. Victim blaming, thus, becomes an issue. The most notorious of cases involve the those that hold a leadership position within Islam: spiritual leaders like Imams or shiekhs.

Within many differey Muslim communities, like other communities, there is a strong trust that is ideally placed upon spiritual leaders, as they are in a position of leadership and percieved ideal state of piety. When one trusts an individual of a perceived higher status, what happens when that level of trust is broken is feelings of betrayal and confusion that follows, especially because it was unexpected coming from a person you expected to practice what they preach. Spiritual abuse can be quite subtle and often hard to pinpoint as the victim because of the position of vulnerability that one is in. In *Understanding Spiritual Abuse: An Interview with Salma Abugideiri* by Chelby Daihle, an example of a woman seeking counseling from the spiritual leader is mentioned. Say, for example, the woman is coming to the leader “after a divorce, or she’s in the process of getting a divorce and she’s feeling extremely vulnerable and she’s really turning to this leader to guide her, advise her and give her moral support, and in that moment of vulnerability, if he offers to marry her, that can be a real abuse of her trust” (29). Not only is what the spiritual leader’s actions unprofessional and inappropriate, but it is dismissive and crosses many boundaries. Therefore, any time there is any type of abusive behavior under the guide of religion that is happening or has happened, there is bound to be spiritual trauma. In the end, when we assume that children are safe with imams or sheikhs without boundaries and ethical standards, like seeing the classroom, having a biography about the teacher and many other ethical paradigms, we put our children, most especially, at risk. As far as to why spiritual

abuse occurs, it is for similar reasons why sexual abuse occurs and, as previously mentioned, having to do very much with toxic masculinity and wanting power over the powerless.

Moving forward, I will speak about how the Islamic tradition utilizes one of the most gracious and headstrong woman that is beloved to Islam as an example of facing and resisting spiritual abuse: Lady Aasiyah. Often times, the West paints Muslim women to be oppressed and submissive entities, which signals out wrong messages to the public about the reality of the strength and lineage of Muslim women. Many individuals should look towards Aasiyah, as she has one of the most powerful and empowering stories in the Quran. She was married to a tyrannical Pharaoh through a set arrangement as a way to sacrifice for her people, but has sexual relations with the man. One of the things she is known for is raising a young man famously known as Moses in the Bible but as Musa (peace be upon him) in the Quran as one of her own. Prior to Aasiyah finding and adopting him, the Pharaoh was paranoid of such a young man who he was set out to kill prior to his birth. He had ordered the nation's unborn baby boys to be killed, as he knew of and was frightened to know that there could be a prediction of a man like Musa (peace be upon him) existing. Once Musa (peace be upon him) grew older and began to receive revelations from Allah, as the story goes, Aasiyah wholeheartedly and immediately believed in the message of the oneness of Allah, but had to keep her faith a secret, knowing of her husband's oppressive ways.

However, soon after, the Pharaoh had found out about her faith, he deprived her of any sort of humanity. It is known that he took her to the desert to starve and strip her of her garments while his daughters and concubines were there to witness the show, laughing at her with no remorse. Aasiyah, however, had no attachment to the worldly life and remained strong in her

belief of Allah. In the Quran, she is known to supplicate a prayer that goes: “My Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds and save me from the wrongdoing people,” and indeed God subsequently showed her a vision of what the rewards of her belief would be in the hereafter (Chapter 66, Verse 11). This story is an example of not only how impeccable one’s faith ought to and can be, but also resonates with many women who have come forward pertaining to similar situations in their lives where men have silenced and took advantage of them under the name of a false type of Islam the men felt justified in and believed. Lady Aasiyah remained strong in her faith, despite knowing the Pharaoh did not believe similarly and wanted to be known as the God to his people. She was indeed a victim of spiritual abuse, but to this day, serves as an example to stay true to who you are and what you believe. And so, one must take note that the Quran does, in fact, speak on this matter quite explicitly so that those in various Muslim communities know they are not alone in such situations.

## **How the Islamic Tradition Deals with Matters of Sexual Abuse**

In this section, unlike the previous section, I will be talking about how the Islamic tradition deals with matters of sexual abuse. However, just as done in the last section, it is important to give a concrete definition sexual abuse. Following that conversation, there will be three main different examples that will help to understand just how exactly Islam deals with and speaks on sexual abuse, dating back to a thousand years ago, in a timeless manner that involves accountability and self-evaluation through the story of Prophet Yusuf (peace be upon him) and one of Prophet Muhammad’s wives and another influential woman of her time, Aisha. On top of

this, I will be narrating a *hadith* illustrates how the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not victim blame, but rather put the responsibility on the one who truly perpetuates the problem.

Sexual abuse is defined as being exploited through any non-consensual sexual behavior exchanged, typically, between one person to another. It comes into the form of the ongoing emergence of rape culture that exists in modern society in a normalized fashion. It is also seen through objectification of the bodies of women and the dehumanization of their personhood. Another way one can often pinpoint what is sexual abuse is through accusatory claims of one person being the perpetrator or through victim-blaming. Either way, similar to spiritual abuse, sexual abuse runs rampant in Muslim communities, as it does not discriminate. As previously stated in the beginning of the chapter and as detailed in the prior chapter, sexual abuse often happens by people, especially those who hold religious power, for reasons like them experiencing trauma themselves and/or having a confused idea about what masculinity is.

The Quran deals with such matters of sexual abuse in both an explicit manner as well as implicit manner, mainly done through the storytelling of the Prophets and their companions. There are two specific accounts, in which sexual abuse is addressed in a detailed and insightful manner, one of which has to do with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and how he chose to deal with a situation involving seeing a gorgeous woman in the street. The story goes that the Prophet was travelling on the road with his cousin, Al-Fadi ibn Abbas, when a woman stopped him to ask him a question. The woman was very beautiful, and Al-Fadi could not help but stare at her. Instead of telling the woman to cover her face or change her clothing or letting her know she was looking indecent/tempting, what the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did was that he turned his cousin's face away. His cousin's impolite stare was the problem, and

the Prophet recognized that (Bukhari Volume 8, Book 74, Number 247). This a great example of recounting an occurrence between different genders and understanding one of the ways to prevent rape culture, as it runs rampant in today's society, especially. However, in modern times, the woman would most definitely be blamed, but 1400 thousand years ago, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) recognized the root of the problem in how rape culture is perpetuated and advised the *man* instead of policing the *woman's* lack of control on her beauty. Sexual abuse starts through the most smallest of things, so therefore, the gesture of averting one's eyes away was and is an important step to practice, so as to prevent being tempted.

In the Chapter of The Light in the Quran, there were several accusations of adultery, including one that targeted the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) wife, Aisha. Her innocence was later maintained, but in order to properly handle the situation of abuse, the steps to do so were to be elaborate and logical. The verse goes: "Those who brought out the slanderous are nothing more than a gang among you (who tried to stir up trouble). Don't think of this as a bad thing, however, for it was ultimately a good thing for you (that this issue was dealt with openly). Every man among them will have his sin recorded, and the one who was most involved among them will have a terrible punishment (from God)" (Chapter 24, Verse 11). The latter part of the verse is important to take note of, because one may be involved in the matter simply through gossip or even eavesdropping on the matter, but the sin being recorded is stated so that people know how severe such an accusation is without pure knowledge or evidence.

According to the related hadiths, during a trip with the prophet and other Muslims, Aisha left her camel to relieve herself. Her slaves mounted the camel and prepared it for travel without noticing any difference in weight without Aisha's presence, so the caravan accidentally departed

without her. She remained at the camp until the next morning when Safwan ibn al-Muattal, a nomad and member of Muhammad's army, found her and brought her back to Muhammad at the army's next camp. Rumors that Aisha and Safwan had committed adultery were spread. What the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) chose to do was to speak directly to his wife, Aisha, about the situation and chose not to alienate her in the process of him waiting for response and a way to handle the rumors through Islamic laws and punishment regarding adultery and slander. What this particular story can teach us is to take caution in the same way the prophet did, as he conducted himself without judgement and held himself together through remaining fair and noble. He remained patient till it was revealed to him what punishment of those whose guilty would suffice, deciding to spare those that backbited against his wife and desired to ruin his wife's situation. Rumors such as this revolve around a form of sexual abuse because, while it is not physical, it is still emotionally and mentally harmful towards the vulnerable party in the interaction. How Aisha's family responded is admirable, too, as it would not be the common response amongst some Muslim communities today, despite the Islamic tradition outlining a conduct code of behaviors on how to preserve the tradition in matters like this. While the family had to deal with their daughter being accused of their daughter's moral character and falsity of the accusation, they kept quiet and were dignified in doing so.

The incident became the cause of some very important additions to the social law and injunctions of Islam. Through these, the Muslims received Commandments from Allah which ensured that the Muslim society could be kept clean and protected against the creation of moral evils. In the Quran, it highlights: "Why did they not produce four witnesses? Since they (the slanderers) have not produced witnesses! Then with Allah they are the liars" (Chapter 24, Verse

13). This verse draws our attention to the fact that none of the accusers had actually witnessed what they were accusing the innocent about. The general principle laid down was that all dealings in the Islamic society must be based on good faith. The question of a bad opinion should arise only when there is a definite and concrete basis for it. Every person should, as a matter of principle, be considered innocent unless there are sound reasons to hold him guilty or suspect. Every person should be considered as truthful unless there are strong grounds for holding him unreliable. In short, one must not take this lightly.



## CHAPTER THREE

In this chapter, I am going to be analyzing one organization by describing what the people within that community are doing about the connection between spiritual abuse and sexual abuse as well as if it is effective or not. I am going to further my study by speaking on why such a phenomenon is occurring and researching whether the approach they use addresses the problem, in reality, or simply puts a bandage on the matter of examining sexual abuse perpetrated by those who hold religious power. The two organizations that I will be speaking on that discusses this as the focus is called The Hurma Project and In Shaykh Clothing.

### **The Hurma Project**

The Hurma Project is the perfect study example for my senior thesis, as it describes itself as “upholding the sacred inviolability of all who enter Muslim spaces from exploitation and abuse by those holding religious power and authority” on the front of the site. Many use the organization as a way to learn more about its resources and how best to get access to them as well as viewing their publications and learning how to get involved.

The Hurma Project, an organization that fights against matters of sexual abuse and spiritual abuse, was initiated and launched originally by a Muslim woman by the name of Dr. Ingrid Mattson. She is the Founder and Director of The Hurma Project. Dr. Ingrid Mattson is, as her bio describes, the London and Windsor Community Chair in Islamic Studies at Huron University College at Western University in Canada. She acquired her education in both Canada and the United States of America, consequently earning a PhD in 1999. She heavily studies

Islam and the relations of interfaith groups, especially Christian communities and Muslim communities. The other two women on the board are also Muslim woman: Muhad Fahmy (Senior Researcher; Labor Lawyer and Workplace Investigator) and Maram Albakri (Administrative Assistant; Graduate Student in Anatomy and Cell Biology). It is rare to find an all-female board, so The Hurma Project is refreshing in that way too.

To begin, it is important to note the reasoning behind the existence of such a project. For one, what does “hurma” mean and what is its relation to the mission of the project? Hurma is a word in Classical Arabic that means “inviolability.” Inviolability essentially means prohibiting any means of violation so that one feels secure from any form of corruption as well as infringement. As described under the description of the Hurma Project on the main page, under Islamic jurisdiction, the term “hurma” is used in matters pertaining to the body and forbidding any type of harm to the body. What is interesting is that this term even is used when speaking of those that are dead because abuse can happen to humans that are no longer living as well, such as with mutilation and general disrespect.

The aim of the organization is to, in their words, “truly understand the implications of the Prophet’s words in our communities in our time when we are faced with grave abuses, and accusations of abuse, of vulnerable persons in our Muslim spaces.” In this chapter, we will be revealing the details on *how* they implement their mission and if it is effective or not.

## Understanding Trauma on a Scientific Level

To reiterate, The Hurma Project educates Muslims about the rights they carry in regards to those who use religious power as a means to exploit and abuse others, spiritually and sexually. A Muslim woman researcher and PhD student who graduated from the University of Toronto, Sidrah Ahmad-Chan, presented her response to the trauma of spiritual abuse in Muslim community at the Hurma Project Conference 2020. Her presentation can be found on The Hurma Project's YouTube page by the title of *Trauma & Spiritual Abuse in Muslim Communities*. In her presentation, Ahmad-Chan outlines her argument in three parts: defining spiritual abuse (as we have done above), understanding the neurobiology of trauma, and speaking on different approaches to support survivors of spiritual abuse, particularly within various Muslim societies. Although her presentation focuses on spiritual abuse, she heavily involves sexual abuse into the conversation (domestic violence, cult tactics, etc) since the two go hand in hand most of the time, although not always since one can occur without the other. For the sake of answering the research question stated above within this thesis, we will be studying the two hand in hand through Sidrah Ahmad-Chan's presentation under The Hurma Project.

As discussed earlier, spiritual abuse in any action that happens that would potentially or has already interfered with someone's practice of their own religion, harming their spirituality in the process. It shows up in a diverse amount of ways, in both subtle and overt ways. To go further, an additional definition is "when someone misuses religion in order to gain power and control over the person they are abusing," which includes but is not limited to "physical, sexual, financial, psychological and/or emotional abuse perpetrated by a person who holds a position of religious authority or leadership," as Ahmad-Chan mentions in her presentation. It is most likely

that the person doing the abusing misuses religion by, as mentioned in the earlier chapter, decontextualizing sacred texts such as the Quran and the Hadith to justify their behaviors. The abuse that Ahmad-Chan mentions is supported through examples of religious authorities committing sexual abuse that involves children, rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment. She references an article to gain better insight on what occurs behind the scenes when no one is looking. Utilizing the article from earlier, from *The Tempest*, *I was abused by my Quran teacher and I'm not the only one*, outlines Mehvish Irshad, the author of the piece's experience. Irshad says that she was abused at 12 years old by her teacher she studied Quran with. She recalled that:

“There are things about some Quran teachers that, unfortunately, are kept in the dark... It could be that kids don't think anyone will believe them, or, due to the power dynamic involved with speaking up against a teacher, are afraid of taking a stand. And so, these stories continue to be suppressed and ignored, leaving many children to deal with their torment alone” (1-2).

These would be the main reasons as to why there would be silence surrounding this issue. In the introduction of the thesis, the urgency of this issue of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse is discussed through cult tactics that religious teachers use and how religion is misused to justify the abuse. The impact of spiritual abuse through sexual abuse does not only silence the individual or become harmful to the Muslim community, but it also is damaging towards one's faith in the religion and their connection to Allah and other members of the community. Of course, the effects of spiritual abuse also includes psychological damage and post-traumatic stress disorder. Moving forward, we will be using Sidrah Ahmad-Chan's presentation to speak on “neurobiology

of trauma” in her research. She mentions that examples of psychological trauma include but is not limited to: exposure to war or natural disasters, rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and spiritual abuse.

According to her presentation, the brain is divided into three parts (the triune brain): the neocortex, the limbic system, and the brain stem. The first part is where the brain rationalizes thinking and uses logic. It is what humans are consciously able to control. The second part of the brain is responsible for implicit memory and emotional experiences while the last part of the brain is not under our conscious control but responsible nevertheless for survival and instinctive responses (flight, fight or freeze). When it comes to trauma, the last part is essential, as our brains naturally have an automatic response to trauma as a way to help us survive biologically in an instantaneous manner. The fight-flight-freeze response in regards to trauma is stored in the amygdala of the brain, which detects threats. Ahmad-Chan also mentions another part of the limbic structure called the hippocampus, which “normally connects the snapshot to a larger context of memory and sense of time/chronology.” When it comes to traumatic memory, there is a failure that happens in this system and the fight-flight-freeze response is thus activated, making it seem like the event that was traumatic is occurring once more (usually triggered by something). The trigger can happen in many ways; it does not have to be a major way such as being sexually abused again. Perhaps the memory stores remembrance of a particular color the abuser was wearing or a certain smell in the room. This would be enough to set a trigger.

Another form of traumatic response that occurs is through disassociation. Dissociation has to do with escapism, but when it comes to trauma and the body’s response to it on a memory level, it happens psychologically. What dissociation does, as Sidrah Ahmad-Chan details out in

her presentation, is that it “[people] disconnect from their bodies, feelings, senses, and/or surroundings,” which “[blocks] off or [fragments] memories associated with the trauma.” The trigger would work similarly to the one outlined above via the fight-flight-freeze response.

## **Trauma-Informed Approaches**

The Hurma Project has many trauma-informed approaches they use to support survivors of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. The first step is to speak on the four principles that are attached to their approaches to the matter. The four principles include: being aware of the trauma, emphasizing safety and trustworthiness, creating opportunities for choice/collaboration/connection, and building on skills and strengths. When one is aware of the trauma that has occurred or is occurring in their life, it is more likely they will positively be able to move through their triggers and traumatic experiences by coaching themselves to have a more resilient mindset and find ways to better cope. When one emphasizes safety and trustworthiness, there is less of a threat to the mind and body while informed consent is involved in the process with people that one feels they can find a support network in. There is predictability, consistency and a way to process information within the support network as well. When one creates opportunities for choice, collaboration and connection, there is an equalizing of power in relationships where choice is provided. When one builds on skills and strengths, there is more room for resilient tactics as a way to strategize against trauma. What should be avoided is any form of guilt tripping or avoiding victim-blaming, which would make the person who has gone through the experience feel like they are at fault for their traumatic experiences. Furthermore, one should be compassionate towards triggers, as outlined in the presentation, because when it

comes to spiritual abuse, activities that are usually routine for most Muslims in the community may become especially difficult for the person experiencing.

These different forms of approaches are meant to ease the abused, have them showcase resilient responses to their trauma, and find a way to be comfortable again in their respective communities within the Islamic world. These are all individual and interpersonal ways, in which behaviors are helped and processed. However, a systematic approach is outlined by another organization called In Shaykh's Clothing.

## **In Shaykh Clothing**

In Shaykh Clothing has a similar purpose to The Hurma Project, except their approach is different to dealing with matters regarding spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. It describes itself as a site that “[educates] and [empowers] our community with the practical resources to recognize abuse and stand up to it. There are some who want to use this exposure of abuse for fueling Islamophobia, furthering their own careers, or discrediting Islamic scholars and institutions as a whole. [Their] position is that our Islamic institutions and scholars are valuable...” so when religious authorities violate community trust for their own selfish reasons, it is definitely harmful for both the violator and the violated. Exactly like The Hurma Project, the organization is a way for many individuals within the different Muslim communities to seek guidance and support as far as resources go on how to prevent such things from happening.

In Shaykh Clothing was established by Danish Qasim, the Founding Director, and Danya Shakfeh, the Co-Founder. Danish Qasim has formally studied the Islamic sciences with local teachers and went overseas to study jurisprudence, Arabic, and theology. His background is in

Religious Studies from the U.C. Berkeley. His certification in assertiveness and performance has helped in working with those who have been victims to spiritual abuse for over 10 years. His partner in the organization, Danya Shakfeh, is certified in business law and conflict resolution, where one of her articles called *Using Legal Analysis to Address Claims of Spiritual Abuse* is a hot commodity. She mainly had worked within the organization through law advocacy for women who were victims of spiritual abuse.

Once again, in this chapter, we will be revealing the details on *how* they implement their mission and if it is effective or not. The way In Shaykh Clothing implements their mission is not through reactionary actions that result from what Generation Z calls “cancel culture” but rather through different conducts for Islamic Leadership.

## **Code of Conduct for Islamic Leadership**

In Shaykh Clothing outlined why there is a need for a code of conduct for Islamic leadership, how the code of conduct works as well as how to properly utilize it. The organization states that there is a need for a code of conduct in regards to Islamic leadership because “when there is no enforcement mechanism of strong views over weak ones, or of any particular interpretation, we are left with a free-for-all where any interpretation may be used to justify unethical behavior.” Typically, when a religious authority figure is called out for violating community trust, there always seems to be a justification for their actions through “obscure interpretation” and some type of loopholes, especially when there seems to be no official way to determine if it is a criminal offense, thus there being a lack of accountability.



When it comes to how the Code of Conduct works, they determine that their policy “is the document that victims and institutions can use to back their cases when there are allegations involving abuse. If a victim’s claims are dismissed, or if the institution covers up abuse, the policies can also hold institutions themselves liable for not enforcing the policy and remedies as to victims’ abuse... By binding the parties to a contract, victims and institutions can take these contracts, along with the abusers, to court and use the contract to fill in the gap for appropriate behavior that the law otherwise does not fill.” These resources would otherwise be unavailable through legal means if it were not for these guidelines. The Code of Conduct called the *Code of Conduct for Islamic Leadership: A Guide for Recommended Practices* by Danish Qasim and Danya Shakfeh, is easily accessible to the people, as all it takes is a free download and a person can gain access to a handbook, which involves hiring procedures, dealing with marital situations, financial dealing, counseling and therapy and remedies for processing grievances. The guide is based upon evidentiary methods like first hand witnessing, speaking with abusers and other forms of communications like electronics and virtual.

It is uncertain whether The Hurma Project does this or not, but In Shaykh Clothing chooses not to reveal names of the abusers, although they understand it is a systematic problem so they “[remove] abusive religious figures from their positions, helping families take legal action, and successful semi-public exposures of abusive figures.” Publicizing names does not necessarily do anything restorative or productive for the community, as it is not likely that persons would stay away from the violator by any means. The organization instead finds it more beneficial to discuss the phenomenon, help those who are directly impacted and work on

prevention strategies because “there is no shortage of abusive figures in the world,” as they stated in their About page under what their purpose is.

## **Analysis to Approach**

They are framing their work as restorative practices to approach the problem of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse within the various Muslim communities as being effective through handbooks, toolkits, constructive criticism and conversation along with giving out an ample amount of resources to help establish a better sense of community and accountability on a systemic level. The main question is how the Islamic tradition deals with spirituality and sex and how come religious authority figures are exploiting these ideas through sexual abuse and spiritual abuse within Muslim communities. To answer the question, in the first chapter, I spoke about how gender operates in the West and how toxic masculinity subsequently emerges on a general scale through the binary of the powerful and powerless. In the second chapter, I reveal how, under the Islamic tradition, masculinity in opposition to femininity works alongside each other through using examples from the Quran as a way to discuss these roles, leading into a discussion about how the West tainted the Islamic world, tempering with the original way of thought when it came to such matters, implying that it is the background reason for why, within communities, there is a large cultural misogyny and abuse of sacred texts. There, then, becomes a clear miseducation of sex that occurs within Muslim communities, which demands for their to be knowledge on how the Islamic tradition deals with matters of spiritual abuse and sexual

abuse. The Hurma Project and In Shaykh Clothing do not deviate from the Islamic tradition in how they both individually choose to deal with and prevent spiritual and sexual abuse within the community; They instead extend their understanding of these matters through religious practices and by enacting both interpersonal and systematic changes in their organization.

The Hurma Project and In Shaykh Clothing frame sexual misconduct as a systematic problem, which, in return, abolishes the idea that there are a “few bad apples” in a so-called perfect Muslim society. The harm in the “few bad apples” statement is that, for one, it is untrue and perpetuates this idea that there is not any real need for accountability. It relieves these few bad apples from being punished, or facing consequences to match their actions. The aforementioned organizations understand this, which helps support the work they are doing to prevent both spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. It further helps in making sense of the problem at hand, because there is no justification for such cases. When thinking about the problem in both explicit and implicit ways, both organizations do an effective job, especially in providing accounts of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse but also giving accessibility to otherwise inaccessible resources and informations regarding the subject matters.

Spiritual abuse and sexual abuse are not always connected, as stated earlier. However, while sexual abuse can be devoid of spiritual abuse, spiritual abuse is indeed an extension of sexual abuse. It is a “a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle is not a square” situation. The organizations both acknowledge this and combine the work of sexual abuse and spiritual abuse together often times, as they both involve religious practices anyway. It is best for them to use the Islamic tradition in fighting against sexual abuse as a way of implementing spirituality and understanding spiritual abuse because often, within religious communities like the Muslim

societies, these are commonly placed together. Furthermore, there is much discussion within the Quran and hadith talking about how to judicially and individually go about such matters that would help the religious person in maintaining and strengthening their Muslim identity through knowledge straight from the source that they use as a guidance to worship Allah.

## CLOSING

After much conversation on masculinity and femininity in both the secular and Islamic world and how sexual abuse as well as spiritual abuse appears amongst Muslim communities on a cross-cultural level in regards to the empirical problem of these issues being perpetrated by those who hold religious power, it is important to find tangible ways to resist the root of why such circumstances occur and what to do about it, so as to cause radical change. It becomes obvious that the reason such things occur is because of a diverse amount of reasons: trauma-induced responses that go unchecked, the decontextualization of sacred texts used to justify one's behavior towards the vulnerable, how one individually and interpersonally engages with masculinity, lack of education in relation to sex, and how one exercises power over a subject under circumstances where power dynamics are at extremes. Through a deep analysis of The Hurma Project, the matter is further made to be urgent, as the approach the organization takes to stop such actions is revealed through the support of Islamic scriptures. The approaches used by the organized are effectively utilized to determine action-based responses to sensitive matters like sexual abuse and spiritual abuse.

Now, it is important to ponder ourselves on how we can decrease the problem for generations to come and what resources we can look into to education ourselves on the solutions to both spiritual abuse and sexual abuse (which often go hand in hand, but not always). In this closing chapter, I will bring the attention of readers to a highly praised book that provides a scholarly account of how sensuality/sexuality is, in fact, attached to the concept of spirituality, as Islam is an enlightened religion after all. Using the book, I will speak briefly on areas that are

often not commonly talked about in the Muslim household as a way to provide a sneak peak into what sort of education the author provides for readers. Moving forward, I will highlight three women who are sexologists and doulas that provide a substantial amount of resources in regards to matters of sex and spirituality. This will help Muslim youth, in particular, find an accessible way to participate in an understanding of the Islamic tradition and how timeless it is even towards issues concerning the modern world. By the very end, I will talk about the type of justice work that is being done nationwide to prevent sexual abuse and spiritual abuse from happening on a grand scale, or even at all, ideally.

## **Resources on Learning About Sexuality and Erotology in Islam**

As the thesis outline, there has always been the Islamic tradition that has detailed out how to conduct oneself when it came to sex and spirituality, but the knowledge, although widespread, has been buried through the impact of colonization and Western powers over time. However, in this era, with the age of technology becoming more and more advantageous, the information now is starting to reveal itself once more, as Muslim youth are hungry for discussing topics relevant to their respective modern societies today on a faster paced level. One of the main resources for understand sex and spirituality in Islam to prevent miseducation on the topic and to prevent letting abuse get in the way of damaging one's relationship with their faith is Habeeb Akande's book, *A Taste of Honey: Sexuality and Erotology in Islam*. His book speaks on how sensuality indeed works together with sex, as sex is more definitely a sexually enlightened religion. Examples of what is discussed in the book is masturbation, fornication, foreplay tactics, the concept of desire and modesty, etc, for the modern day Muslim to indulge in.

Although one should not participate in identity politics, especially because the scholarship work surrounding these issues do not discriminate against gender, if one is uncomfortable with taking advice and learning more about the Islamic tradition and its view points regarding sex in relation to spirituality, then one can look into three main female figures of our time that not only speak about the work, but also do the work to ensure that people are informed and living in understanding.

These three women are all from three separate backgrounds. The first is Angelica Lindsey-Ali, a Black certified sexual health educator and intimacy and relationship expert, who does a lot of work surrounding sex and spirituality. She has previously researched and written about rebuilding self love in the face of trauma, which is especially helpful to the subject matters we have touched upon in this thesis. Her Instagram and Twitter handle are, as follows:

@VillageAuntie. Another woman goes by the name of Iffet Eve Rafeeq who is a sexologist and student of human behavior. She does tons of work surrounding sensuality and the spirit and holds womb workshops. Her Instagram handle is: @iffetrafeeq. Last but certainly not the least, there is a vaginal steaming coach who, as her bio in her Instagram (@sabrina.womb) notes, helps “women use the beautiful art of vaginal steaming to support fertility and to heal after giving birth.” All these women would provide a better understanding towards matters of sex in connection to spirituality as well as provide workshops on trauma regarding them too.

May all four of these expertise be beneficial to readers.

## **Further Studies & Moving Forward**

My contribution to the study of the problem of religious authority figures abusing knowledge and power of the Islamic tradition and subsequently perpetuating a problem of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse is essential to facilitating and maintaining a conversation about what needs to be reformed within Muslim communities and what knowledge needs to be sought in order for there to be a decrease in such accounts and an increase in resilience and strength in religious communities, particularly Muslim communities. More specifically, it explores the two main organization's approaches on an interpersonal and systemic level to gain insight on preventative measures one can take to abolish such problems. This research has highlighted how the secular world and the Islamic world differ in participating in discussions regarding femininity and masculinity as well as how much of knowledge has, unsurprisingly, been tainted by the West via colonization to result in cultural misogyny and improper religious practices. Furthermore, there was emphasis on empirical cases regarding spiritual abuse and sexual abuse to make urgent the problem with these machinics and how to better one's own community through action-based solutions. This study should be beneficial, as it should allow on to both personally and intellectually speak on these matters without feeling like it is taboo.

However, there were many other factors that sadly could not have been mentioned, given the time allotted for the creation of this project and due to being in the middle of a pandemic where there are a lot of changes going on psychologically and materially in the world. Nevertheless, in looking at studies similar to my own in this project, further studies should include (1) an extended study on how the approaches are effective in various Muslim communities based upon cultural context and how their society functions both in the West and



the other world as well as (2) exploring current curriculums around sex education and determining which model is most fitting for Muslim communities on a general scale today while still aligning with their religious practices. Additionally, I personally wanted (3) to make pamphlets synthesizing the work in senior thesis to make it accessible in different Islamic institutions and mosques to prevent miseducation on sex to Muslim youth and implement a code of conduct on holding religious authorities accountable, similar to In Shaykh Clothing. These are some of the ways in which I envision the study being extended and explored in the near future.

It is my hope that this research project becomes part of academia where there is a lack of knowledge and low accessibility towards the Islamic studies, excluding from oriental lens. It is also my hope that this project would be used as a resource to find organizations that would be most supportive to individuals themselves in their seeking of understanding their own trauma regarding spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. This project was created with these things in mind, as I did not have full access to such knowledge on how the Islamic tradition is, in fact, enlightened on these subject matters and gives a timeless guidance on how to prevent exploitation of religious practices from those in power. I pray this is beneficial to those feeling similarly.

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