

# THE HUSBAND WIFE RELATIONSHIP IN ISLAM

Marwan Boustany

As is commonly (if not always) the case in the Qur'an, we can look at a topic from the general perspective and from the specific perspective. The general perspective acts as the interpretive context for specific guidelines. Whether it is modesty, marriage or economic theory, we have two levels of consideration to guide us to a proper interpretation.

## The General Guidelines

The following general guidelines must be adhered to always in a marriage and they must act as the background for the specific guidelines dealt with in the next section.

### Love, Mercy and Tranquillity

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

*And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought.*

(30:21)

Allah has indeed created man and woman to be the natural counterparts of the other. They are natural companions both physically and mentally. These indeed are signs for us.

The nature of the relationship from the outset is that it should be one conducive to the fulfilment of companionship, affection/love, tranquillity and mercy. Furthermore, it is these elements which should be the context of marital interactions.

أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ لَيْلَةَ الصِّيَامِ الرَّفَثُ إِلَى نِسَائِكُمْ ۚ هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَهُنَّ

*"On the night of the fast it is lawful for you to have sexual relations with your wives. They are clothing/covering (libaas) for you and you for them...."*

(2:187)

Libaas is used for the clothing/covering term above. In this context it would seem to imply intimacy and closeness, concealment of faults, fulfilment of needs and an adornment for one another. We act as a covering and protection for each other from fornication and any other such danger by sexually and otherwise fulfilling one another.

وَالَّذِينَ يُقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا هَبْ لَنَا مِنْ أَزْوَاجِنَا وَذُرِّيَّاتِنَا قُرَّةَ أَعْيُنٍ وَاجْعَلْنَا لِلْمُتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا

*And those who pray, "Our Lord! Grant unto us wives and offspring who will be a source of comfort/happiness/consolation, and give us (the grace) to lead the righteous."*

(25:74)

قُرَّةٌ أَعْيُنٍ is a very powerful phrase in the Qur'an and it means rest, comfort, pleasure, happiness, consolation etc. Literally it means the coolness of eyes, when used in the Qur'an it means that by which or in consequence of which the eye becomes cool or refreshed or in consequence of which it becomes at rest and sleeps (Dictionary of the Holy Qur'an, by Malik Ghulam Farid M.A.) from a state of sadness, worry etc.

A great example of this is in the story of Musa in 20:28-40, where his mother gets him back alive and safe after having cast him into the river by the command of Allah. Imagine the sense of consolation and happiness she had, and this is using the same phrase in its correct form for that verse (تَوَّءَّ عَيْنُهَا).

The lesson from this is that the wife has the potential to be a great source of comfort and happiness for her husband and it is for this that a Muslim man can pray to Allah for.

## Courtesy and Consultation

*"You who believe! It is not lawful for you to inherit women by force. Nor may you treat them harshly so that you can make off with part of what you have given them, unless they commit an act of flagrant indecency. Live together with them correctly and courteously. If you dislike them, it may well be that you dislike something in which Allah has placed a lot of good."*  
(4:19)

Men are commanded not to treat their wives harshly for the purpose of getting back anything they have given them, unless they commit a clear 'fahisha', like physical and sexual immorality of any type etc...

- They must instead live with their wives in a correct and courteous manner.
- In fact, Allah tells us that if men dislike something in their wives then they should bear with it as Allah may have placed a lot of good in it.

Consider for example a verse in the context of divorce, a hard time in which anger, sorrow, resentment etc... are powerful emotions: -

*"Let the women live (in 'iddat\*) in the same style as ye live, according to your means: Annoy them not, so as to restrict them. And if they carry (life in their wombs), then spend (your substance) on them until they deliver their burden: and if they suckle your (offspring), give them their recompense: and take mutual counsel together, according to what is just and reasonable. And if ye find yourselves in difficulties, let another woman suckle (the child) on the (father's) behalf."*  
(65:6)

\*the waiting period before final divorce or when cancellation of divorce process can take place.

Even with the context of a painful divorce the husband must not annoy his wife, furthermore he should consult with her on relevant issues. If this is what is expected at such times, how much more within the context of a loving marriage?

In fact from the very basic fact of consultation that Allah requires of Muslims we can understand the need for it in the marriage relationship, consider: -

*“Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular Prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual Consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance;”*  
(42:38)

That affairs are conducted by consultation is seen from this verse to be an important quality of the Muslim character.

## The Specific Guidelines

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْمَحِيضِ ۖ قُلْ هُوَ أَذَىٰ فَاعْتَزِلُوا النِّسَاءَ فِي الْمَحِيضِ ۖ وَلَا تَقْرُبُوهُنَّ حَتَّىٰ يَطْهُرْنَ ۖ فَإِذَا تَطَهَّرْنَ فَأْتُوهُنَّ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَمَرَكُمُ اللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ. نَسَاؤُكُمْ حَرْثٌ لَّكُمْ فَأْتُوا حَرْثَكُمْ أَنَّىٰ شِئْتُمْ ۚ وَقَدِّمُوا لِأَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّكُمْ مُلَاقُوهُ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

*“They question you concerning menstruation. Say: It is an annoyance/hurt/uncleanliness, so keep away from women in their menses, and do not approach them until they are clean. And when they have purified themselves, then come to them as Allah has commanded you. Truly Allah loves those who turn unto Him, and loves those who have a care for cleanness. Your women are a Harth for you, so come to your Harth however you like. Send good ahead for yourselves and have fear of Allah. Know that you are going to meet Him, and give good news to the believers.”*  
(Qur’an 2:222-223)

From 2:222 we can see intercourse should be avoided when women are menstruating, however once the menstruation has ended and the woman has cleansed herself then intercourse is fine again. This verse says nothing of other physical contact, so the idea that women should be apart or be deprived of any physical contact during the menstrual period has no basis.

Harth: There are various ways to understand حَرْثٌ in this context, the most common is:

- A place (ploughed) for sowing, crops. If we use this meaning, then it would be understood (as found with modification in Lane's Lexicon) as: “Your wives are (those) wherein you sow your offspring”. This meaning of the word (i.e., tilth) seems to be the meaning regularly used in translations.

The traditional meaning took a very plain direct meaning from a farming context, namely, you sow seed in your wife and you get a baby in return. While this can be a shade of the meaning, it should not be the only meaning for this word in this verse.

The word however has also more general meaning reflected by:

- Gain or acquisition, recompense or reward; a lot, share or portion; worldly goods.

In the context of crops, you till the land and sow the seed and you get the recompense when something grows. The crop context is likely the original context for the word harth; however

the word is used in other contexts by abstracting the process of planting seed and benefiting from what grows. In the nature of Arabic words in the language, the various shades of meaning of a word are typically linked by a common foundation. And so from this foundation you have general meanings coming like recompense, reward, etc. That is, something in which you expend effort and from which you derive a reward or recompense.

Let's have a look at a verse that uses this word *harth*:

*"Whoever desires the recompense (harth) of the Hereafter - We increase for him in his recompense (harth). And whoever desires the recompense (harth) of this world - We give him thereof, but there is not for him in the Hereafter any share."*  
(42: 20).

This is clearly not narrowly referring to farmers or the like. We have here a statement from Allah saying that for those who put in the effort for the hereafter, they will get the recompense in the hereafter and for those who put the effort for this life; they will get their reward in this life.

So within the context of a wife, we should take the general meaning in all its applications as relevant. Your wife is the one that you protect and love, the one you support and guide. And in return for your effort, she is the one who obeys and loves you, the one that gives you affection and tranquillity, the one that guards you honour etc.

The wife should be receptive to her husband and his needs, as Allah has revealed that the husband comes to his wife as he pleases.

*"Men are the protectors/guardians and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore/so the righteous women are devoutly obedient (to the husband), and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct (nushuz), admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) separate from them; but if they obey you, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all)."*  
(4:34)

Men are the guardians and maintainers of women and women should accept and submit to this arrangement. This is the decree of Allah that must be established if at all possible. It is not for men, women or society at large to dictate otherwise.

Recall:

*"And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought."*  
(30:21).

It makes sense that Allah would specify the dynamics between husband and wife that fulfil this verse and further, that Allah would design the man and the woman to be fulfilled by this dynamic.

A man should not only accept this arrangement, he must embody it as best he can so that his wife appreciates and submits to the arrangement. He should seek to be a worthy leader and caretaker for his wife, to organise his finances and circumstances as best he can to fulfil the dynamic defined by Allah.

A man will be most content when he is in charge, protecting and looking after his wife/family. When he is respected and obeyed in his role and when he is loved and cared for because of his role.

A woman will be most content when she is protected and cared for, when she respects and submits to the authority of her husband and can give her love and devotion in this context. In short, for the man that embodies the strength and leadership of the correct Muslim man, a woman will automatically respect and submit by her nature.

A woman should be devoutly obedient to her husband, in that she should obey him in matters that are not expressly forbidden by Allah. We can notice that because of the underlined 'therefore/so' in 4:34, that it is as a result of the role and effort of the husband that the wife owes him this kind of obedience, and of course the guarding in the husband's absence what Allah would have them guard. A lazy, immature husband that neglects his role does not deserve the obedience of his wife. It should be noted that some have stated that the obedience mentioned in this verse (the first time it is mentioned) is for Allah. This cannot be true as Allah would not make obedience to Him conditional, whereas the therefore/so that is used in the verse does make the obedience conditional. For this reason, the obedience is to the husband here and not in relation to Allah.

Obedience of the wife is critical part of the husband and wife relationship. The role of the husband is to protect and guide his wife, to look out for her affairs. To complete this task properly and to embody the role, he must have both authority over and obedience from his wife. The analogy here is if you work in a company and you have someone under your management, you must have the authority to order this person to do tasks otherwise the company will not work harmoniously. The example of the husband and wife is even more important than this as the husband cares for his wife much more than a manager for his subordinate and a husband has larger responsibility for his wife and her wellbeing.

It must be clear that the difference in authority in the marital relationship is not indicative of a difference of worth, as Allah clearly states: -

*"The nobler among you in the sight of God is the more muttaqi (righteous) among you."  
(49:13)*

The next part of the verse tells us that the wife must guard her modesty and her husband's honour/affairs etc. when he is absent.

*"Therefore/so the righteous women are devoutly obedient (to the husband), and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard"  
(4:34)*

4:34 introduces us to the fact that the relationship of husband and wife is one of differing roles, right and responsibilities. Another example of this is:

*"Women for whom the process of divorce has begun\* (begun by the husband) should wait by themselves for three menstrual cycles; and it is not lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and the Last Day. Their husbands have the right to take them back within that time, if they desire to be reconciled. Women possess rights similar to those held over them (i.e., their obligations) to be honoured with fairness; but men have a degree above them (in both rights and obligations). Allah is Almighty, All-Wise."  
(2:228)*

\*That is at the start of the iddah or waiting period.

This verse implies that men have been given both more obligations and rights with respect to their wives. That is, the husbands have a degree above their wives in responsibilities to, and rights from, their wives. (4:34) explains these rights and obligations to some extent. In the verse itself is an example of the husband exercising this right, namely if the husband starts the divorce process and wife is in the waiting period, the husband has the right to take her back if he chooses to reconcile.

Another example of where the rights and responsibilities can be different the fact that a husband is required (based on his ability) to pay some maintenance for the woman he divorces:

*"And for divorced women is a provision according to what is acceptable - a duty upon the righteous."  
(2:241)*

The woman that divorces her husband does not have this obligation. At the most, she may need to return a part of what she received as a gift from her husband if it helps the divorce.

In conclusion, all of the above must be within the context of love and compassion as is defined in the general verses. Let us remember that Allah also specifically tells husbands to be patient with things they don't like about their wives:

*"O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion. And do not make difficulties for them in order to take [back] part of what you gave them unless they commit a clear immorality. And live with them in kindness. For if you dislike them - perhaps you dislike a thing and Allah makes therein much good."  
(4:19)*

This clearly indicating a relationship of compassion, forbearing with faults and love as is indicated by:

*"And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought."  
(30:21).*

It is absolutely vital that the general guidelines for husband wife relations are used as the context within which the specific guidelines are understood and practiced.

I believe that it is the deviation from this marital pattern of 4:34 in the areas of sociology, psychology and economics that is a big contributor to economic, social and family problems. A separate document will look at idea in more detail.

## What is nushuz?

The word means high headedness, rebellion, disobedience, treating unjustly, treating unkindly etc...

It is used in both the context of the husband fearing it from his wife in (4:34) and the wife fearing it from her husband (4:128), in both cases they are followed by a reference to the possible break-up of the marriage.

Nushuz can take a number of meanings in the context... The wife could be high headed and decide she is better than to respect her obligations to her husband and as such rebel against the will of Allah for her. She could of course be generally treating her husband unjustly and/or unkindly.

The husband could be acting unkindly and unjustly with his wife and he could be rebelling against his obligations to her and as such rebelling against the will of Allah for him.

I believe nushuz is a general term for something, which the spouse does that they shouldn't do or something they don't do that they should, both being as a result of disrespect or rebellion against the pattern defined by Allah in a marriage, which makes the marriage very difficult and hence allows the consideration of divorce.

If we read the last part of the verse (4:34) it would imply that the most likely nushuz a wife may do is to be disobedient to her husband.

Let us not forget that women who work obey their manager's commands for the sake of money, yet they feel irritated when Allah commands them to obey their husbands as a religious obligation. This shows that they care for this world more than the next life.

Men and women should make sure they can and will fulfil their obligations to their spouses if they are going to marry.