

The Great Women behind Great Men

(part 1 of 4): The Mother



Behind every great man stands a woman; behind every man stands a great woman; behind every successful man stands a woman. These are three different versions of an old saying, best remembered as a feminist slogan of the 1960s and 1970s. When you think about it however, it rings true. How do we respond when we hear about the man whose mother gave up everything to give him an education, the woman who worked 3 jobs to raise her children, and the woman who stands silently in the background as her husband rises to power as a statesman, businessman, politician, or educator? Men rise to soaring heights when the women in their lives nurture, support and encourage them to be the best men that they can be. Even the Prophet's of God benefitted from the wise counsel of the women in their lives.

Today we start a series of articles about the great women who stood, not behind but at the side of the men in their lives. These great women, in their own individual ways, supported and encouraged men whose lives were fraught with danger and monumental change. Mothers, wives, daughters; the influence these women have over the men in their lives is remarkable. Islam calls these women the best of humankind.

'The best women of humankind are four: Mariam, daughter of Imran, Assiya, the wife of Pharaoh, Khadija, daughter of Khuwailid, and Fatima the daughter of the Messenger of God[1].'

The key to success for any woman is to live life according to God's guidance. As we know, this guidance is contained in and completed by the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. Let us begin with mothers; Islam emphasises their significant role on numerous occasions. Prophet Jesus, peace be upon him, says, "...and He has made me blessed wheresoever I be,

and has enjoined on me prayer, and alms, as long as I live, and to be dutiful to my mother, and made me not arrogant.” (Quran 19:30-32)

And when the angels said: ‘O Mary! Verily, God has chosen you, purified you, and chosen you above the women of the worlds of mankind and jinn.’ (Quran 3:42)

Prophet Muhammad’s son in law and close companion Ali, said, “*I heard the Prophet of God saying Mary, the daughter of Imran was the best among women.*”^[2]

Maryam, the Arabic word for Mary, means maidservant of God. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was dedicated to God before she was born. Mary’s mother dedicated her child to the temple and by doing so she secured Mary’s freedom because she understood that true freedom was only attainable through complete submission to God.

Mary grew up having complete trust in God and her story can be found in Quran, particularly in chapters 3 and 19. In chapter 5 of Quran Mary is referred to as a *siddiqa* (truthful one) and the Arabic word *siddiqa* implies more than just speaking the truth. It indicates one who achieves a very high level of righteousness. It means that one is truthful, not only with themselves and those around them, but also with God. Mary was a woman who fulfilled her covenant with God, Whom she worshiped with full submission. She was pious, chaste, and devout; the woman chosen above all other women to be the mother of Jesus.

After the birth of Jesus, Mary faced incredible hardship. Even though she was a young woman of faith, character and self control, try to imagine the courage it took for her to return to her village with a babe in arms. She left the village a young woman not much older than a child but with a reputation for piety and righteousness. She returned as an unmarried mother of a new born child. Imagine the talk, the gossip and accusations. When the townspeople surrounded and questioned her she followed God’s instructions and did not speak. Jesus himself, a baby cradled in Mary’s arms, spoke, declaring himself to be a prophet from God.(Quran 19:30)

Islam tells us very little about the life shared by Jesus and his mother Mary. Of course we can surmise that Mary was a woman of her time. With the exception of her education and possibly her ability to read, Mary would have lived and learned just like the other Jewish girls around her. She would have kept house, cooked, cleaned, sewed, walked to the well for water but above all she was an educator. It is easy to imagine Jesus sitting on her lap or at her feet listening to the stories of her people and their prayers. He would also have experienced at close hand Mary’s profound love and trust in God. How much of Mary’s character influenced Jesus as he grew up? A great deal, is the most probable answer.

As Jesus grew and began his mission, Mary must have behaved like any other mother. She probably swallowed her fears and encouraged her son to strive to please God. Mary would have sensed the danger of Jesus' mission yet undoubtedly she held onto her total trust in God and conveyed her sense of contentment with God's will to her son.

The mother's role is both monumental and overwhelming. Not only does she go through both the joys and difficulties of pregnancy and giving birth, she dedicates her entire life to nurturing and caring for her children. It is her responsibility to raise and to educate them to be righteous and pious human beings. She cooks, cleans, nurtures and educates, she is also responsible for their spiritual, emotional and physical health and well-being. A mother's role does not end when her child grows and begins a life of his or her own, it goes on and on and continues to influence her children and grandchildren.

In this day and age when the role of motherhood is being undermined at every turn, women should draw strength from great women such as Mary the mother of Jesus.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

(part 2 of 4): The Foster Mother

Another great woman who raised a great man despite the difficulties and pressures she faced was Assiya. She is more often remembered as the wife of Pharaoh; however this great lady was also the foster mother of Prophet Moses.

Like Mary the mother of Jesus, Assiya was a woman chosen by God to care for a child who would grow up to be a prophet of God. What qualities did Assiya have with which to support and influence Moses? It was, once again, as we will discover her complete and total trust in God. As the wife of the most powerful and arrogant man in all Egypt, Assiya was surrounded by luxury, wealth and beauty yet she was able to recognise that without God human beings were lost bereft and incomplete.

“Many men reached the level of perfection, but no woman reached such a level except Mary, the daughter of Imran and Assiya, the wife of Pharaoh.”^[1]

When Moses birth mother was compelled by circumstances to put her tiny new born baby in a basket and float him down the waters of the Nile her heart was nearly broken beyond repair. But God is the best of planners. Assiya's maidservant drew Moses from the river and presented the tiny bundle to Pharaoh's wife. Assiya, in contrast to her arrogant, proud husband was a

righteous, merciful woman. God opened her heart and Assiya looked down upon the tiny baby and felt overcome by her love for him. She asked her husband to accept him into the family.

The wife of Pharaoh said, a comfort for the eye, for me and for you; kill him not. It may be that he may be of benefit to us, or we may adopt him as a son.” And they perceived not (the result of that). (Quran 28: 9)

Once again the Quran tells us very little about Assiya and even less about her relationship with her foster son Moses. However, as a woman of faith, she must have had a profound influence on her foster son. Moses, the man was forthright and believed in speaking his mind and standing up for the weaker members of society. Whenever he witnessed oppression or cruelty, he found it impossible to stop himself from intervening. Today psychology tells us that this sense of justice, and the ability to empathise, is learned at a very early age. They are skills that are often not able to be acquired in later life. Assiya must have helped instil these qualities in her foster son.

As Moses grew up he was considered a wise young man; in all respects regarded as Pharaoh's son. We do know from the words of the Quran however that Moses' birth mother was his wet nurse. Ibn Kathir believes that Moses' birth mother lived in the palace while she was breast feeding him and that as he grew up she was allowed the privilege of visiting him. Her influence must also have played a part in shaping Moses' character.

“So did We restore him to his mother, that she might be delighted, and that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the Promise of God is true. But most of them know not.” (Quran 28:13)

Moses was quite possibly a child that was loved by both his real mother and Assiya. There is little doubt that before he reached manhood Moses knew about the Children of Israel and the political situation in Egypt. A number of circumstances, the details of which can be found in the Quran,^[2] forced Moses to flee Egypt. From royal son to common criminal, how must Assiya have felt?

We can surmise that Assiya knew the danger inherent in allowing Moses to understand the differences between his life in the palace and his birth family's life in an impoverished district. Eventually Pharaoh discovered that his wife was secretly worshipping the God of Moses. He was incensed and raged with anger. Pharaoh both threatened and cajoled his wife Assiya, but her heart now belonged to God Alone. Pharaoh offered his wife a choice, to accept him (Pharaoh) as her God or to continue to worship the God of Moses and be tortured until death. Assiya chose torture and death and in her last painful moments she could be heard calling out to God.

“O my Lord! Build for me, a home with You in Paradise, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from those that do wrong.” (Quran 66:11)

As the primary caregiver and educator, the mother has many heavy responsibilities, the most important of which is her responsibility to teach the children entrusted to her by God. It is the mother who first teaches her children how to know and love God. The best way to instruct children is by example because from the moment they can interact with their surroundings they are learning. As mothers, both Mary and Assiya taught the boys in their care to have complete trust in the One most worthy of Trust – God.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[2] God mentions Moses in Quran more than 120 times, and his story ranges across several chapters. It is the longest and most detailed story of a prophet in the Quran and is discussed in elaborate detail. Chapter 28 of the Quran is named, ‘The Narration’, the first 45 verses focus solely on the story of Moses.

(part 3 of 4): The Wife

“And among His Signs is this that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts.” (Quran 30:21)

Love and mercy between your hearts is a beautiful way to describe a tranquil relationship between a man and a woman. Marriage is a sacred contract, one made not between a man and woman but between a couple and God. It is a relationship where rights and responsibilities are clear and the purpose is to please God by striving to secure a place in Paradise. Just as



mothers are able to exert great influence over their sons, wives too are able to influence their husbands. Great women, woman who love God above all else are a mercy and their husbands are often great men due to the unwavering support they receive from their wives.

Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, “*The best among you are those who are the best to their wives.*”^[1] Why would he have made this clear on numerous occasions? Possibly because a

partnership built on love and mercy cannot help but be successful, whereas a relationship built on dominance and mistrust rarely succeeds except in heartache and sorrow. Another reason might be due to the fact that in pre-Islamic Arabia females were so undervalued that baby girls were buried alive and women were owned like livestock.

One of the greatest role models for women, particularly wives, was born in this time of ignorance, yet she was able to rise above the discrimination around her and have one of history's most successful marriages. She was Khadijah, the first, and for 25 years, the only wife of Prophet Muhammad. What do we know about Khadijah that made her such a fantastic wife and incredible role model?

Why do we consider Khadijah, the daughter of Khuwaylid, to be a great woman standing by the side of a great man?

"Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, was the best among the women (of the world of her time) and Khadija is the best amongst the women (of this nation)."^[2]

Khadijah was 40 years old and twice widowed when she married Muhammed, then aged 25, who had not at that stage been granted prophethood. She was an accomplished businesswoman, wealthy in her own right with a reputation of dealing with the disabled, orphans, widows and the poor with kindness and compassion. Just as Prophet Muhammad was known as Al-Amin – the trustworthy one, Khadijah was known as At-Tahira, the pure one. Khadijah was impressed by Muhammad's honesty when she employed him to trade for her in Syria and on his return to Makkah she defied the conventions of her time and proposed marriage to him. Muhammad accepted eagerly and promptly.

Islam teaches that a woman should always display tenderness and care towards her husband. Khadijah loved and supported Prophet Muhammad through the difficult years of the establishment of Islam. In the spirit of partnership and companionship inherent in a truly Islamic marriage, great men and women find no difficulty helping each other. Prophet Muhammad was known to perform many household chores such as cleaning and mending garments. It was narrated regarding him, *"He used to keep himself busy in household chores and went out when the time for prayer came."*^[3]

Khadijah, for her part kept a home that was a refuge from the trouble and problems Muhammad faced every day. She also gave freely of her time and knowledge. She supported her husband with advice, and opinions and generally helped in practical ways. Prophet Muhammad said: *"This world is just temporary conveniences, and the best comfort in this world is a righteous woman."*^[4] (Wife, mother, daughter)

When Prophet Muhammad first received revelation from the angel Gabriel, it was a very frightening experience. Although it was his habit to spend time alone in a cave meditating and pondering the wonders of the universe he did not expect to be visited by an angel demanding that he, an unlettered man, read.

He ran home to his loving supportive wife as soon as he was able, saying “Cover me, cover me!” Prophet Muhammad told her what had happened and expressed his fear. Khadijah did not belittle him or disbelieve him rather she responded to his request to “cover me” and reassured him with kind loving words.

“God would never forsake you. You uphold the ties of kinship, speak the truth, spend money on the needy, give money to the penniless, honour your guests and help those beset by difficulties”^[5]

Consequently Khadijah was the first person to accept the message of Islam and she stood by her husband as family and friends turned against him, and plotted to kill him. As the fledgling band of Muslims grew, Khadijah supported the rise of Islam with her wealth and health. She provided food, water and medicines for the banished and boycotted community. Even though she was not accustomed to deprivation, Khadijah never complained about the poor conditions she was forced to endure nor did she begrudge that all her money went to support her husband in his mission.

Khadijah was the perfect role model for wives in any situation or century. A marriage in the eyes of God makes two people one. They love and protect one another and never lose sight of the big picture. Khadijah understood that her real and everlasting life with Muhammad would be in Paradise where they would not need money nor want for comfort and shelter.

One day the angel Gabriel came to Prophet Muhammad and said, ‘*O Messenger of Allah, Khadijah is coming to you with vessels containing food and drink. When she comes to you, convey to her the greeting of peace from God the Cherisher and Sustainer and from me, and give her the glad tidings of a house of pearls in Paradise, in which there is no noise or hard work.*’^[6]

Khadijah died shortly after the banishment ended, almost surely as a result of the poor conditions she endured. However, the love and mercy between the Messenger of God and Khadijah had continued to grow through their trials and tribulations and not even death could break the ties that bound them. Aisha^[7] asked Prophet Muhammad if she had reached what Khadijah had reached in terms of the Prophet’s love. He replied, "She believed in me when no one else did; she accepted Islam when people rejected me; and she helped and comforted me when there was no one else to lend me a helping hand."^[8] Aisha’s words also reveal the depth of love that is possible between a man and a woman whose marriage is based on seeking the pleasure of God.

Never did I feel jealous of any woman as I was jealous of Khadijah. She had died three years before he married me. I often heard him praise her, and his Lord, the Exalted and Glorious, had commanded him to give her the glad tidings of a palace of jewels in Paradise: and whenever he slaughtered a sheep he presented (its meat) to her female companions^[9].

It is said that marriage is half of one's religion^[10] and this becomes understandable and obvious when we are able to observe a marriage such as that of Prophet Muhammad and Khadijah. This great woman stood beside a great man when he felt lost, alone and worried.

Footnotes:

[1] At Tirmidhi

[2] Saheeh Al-Bukhari

[3] Saheeh Al-Bukhari

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid.

[6] Saheeh Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim

[7] A beloved wife of Prophet Muhammad whom he married after Khadijah's death.

[8] Imam Ahmad

[9] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[10] Al Bayhaqi

(part 4 of 4): The Daughter

“The best women of humankind are four: Mariam, daughter of Imran, Assiya, the wife of Pharaoh, Khadija, daughter of Khuwailid, and Fatima the daughter of the Messenger of God^[1].”



The key to success for any woman is to live life according to God's guidance. This guidance is contained in the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. In our discussion about great women standing with their men we have talked about the role of wives and mothers, today it is the turn of daughters. Daughters can hold great sway over their beloved fathers. You might have heard the expression,

“she twists her daddy around her little finger”, meaning that the daughter is able to persuade her father easily. That certainly holds a great deal of truth but daughters can also guide, protect and support their fathers.

A daughter's love can propel a father on to new and greater things and a daughter's support can be invaluable. The daughter we will discuss is Fatimah, the beloved youngest daughter of Prophet Muhammad and his wife Khadijah.

Fatimah was the youngest of four living children, all daughters. She was a quiet, sensitive child, devoted to her parents, and close to her sisters. However by the time she was ten years old she had occasion to stand before what must have appeared to be invincible men and speak up for her father. She had the shape of a child and the heart of a lion.

One day when the Prophet was praying near the Kaba some men from the noble families of Makkah bought a pail of she-camel intestines and dumped them on his back while he was in prostration. They were undoubtedly heavy and smelly yet the Prophet continued with his prayer. Fatimah stood amongst the men unafraid of their menacing behaviour. She removed the intestines and verbally lashed out at the men, who stood by but did not respond to the little girl.^[2]

On another occasion Fatimah was with her father as he circumambulated around the Kaba. The mob gathered around him and tried to strangle him with his own clothes. Young Fatimah screamed and shouted for help and on this occasion Abu Bakr came to the Prophet's rescue and was beaten severely. While other little girls were running and playing Fatimah witnessed her father's ordeals. Instead of gaiety and laughter Fatimah worried about her father and defended his mission. Both Father and daughter became very close companions.

The Prophet's treatment of Fatimah clearly shows the love and respect he had for his youngest child. He is known to have said, "Fatimah is a part of me, and he who makes her angry, makes me angry."^[3] Life for Fatimah continued to be difficult and depressing. The persecution and boycott of the Muslims continued unabated and the Prophet, his family and followers were forced to abandon their homes and seek refuge in a small valley. There they were forced to undergo months and months of hardship and suffering and it is said that the wailing of hungry children could be heard across the valley and in the township of Makkah.

Fatimah's mother, the great lady Khadijah died shortly after the boycott ended, probably due to the months of deprivation. Fatimah was grief stricken and her family feared for her health but she rallied and grew even closer to her father. She cared for him and supported him so completely that she for a time was known as Umm Abi-ha, the mother of her father. On one occasion her father returned home covered in the mud and dust thrown on him by a mob. Young Fatimah cried as if her heart would break and her father said to her, "Do not cry my daughter," he said, "for God shall protect your father."^[4]

Prophet Muhammad loved Fatimah, however, he did not show her any special treatment as far as following a path of righteousness was concerned. Prophet Muhammad was concerned, as all good father's are with his daughter's hereafter. One day when dealing with a thief the Prophet was heard saying, "The people before you were destroyed because they used to inflict the legal punishments on the poor and forgive the rich. By Him in Whose Hand is my soul! If my daughter Fatimah did that (i.e. stole), I would cut off her hand."

Fatimah married her cousin and childhood friend Ali ibn Abu Talib. Although many men asked for Fatimah's hand including Abu Bakr and Omar ibn Al Khattab, Prophet Muhammad facilitated the marriage between his daughter and Ali. The bond between father and daughter remained strong and Prophet Muhammad was often seen to visit Fatimah after he returned from a journey or battle before he visited any of his wives. What comfort the Prophet must have found in the presence of Fatimah. Perhaps she reminded him of his beloved Khadijah; perhaps he loved to be in the presence of the little girl who stood up to the mob to protect her father time and time again. That little girl was now a strong and resourceful Muslim woman.

Fathers do not only inspire their daughters but are often inspired by them. Fatimah's reputation for piety and charity would have made her father proud and happy. However no matter how close they were, a father is a father first and last, and when he discovered that Fatimah and Ali did not regularly pray the recommended night prayers, he voiced his disapproval in no uncertain terms^[5]. Another time when Fatimah asked for a servant, Prophet Muhammad taught her and Ali the words of remembrance still said by millions of Muslims around the globe today.

“Shall I direct you to something better than what you have requested? When you go to bed say ‘*Subhan Allah* (How Perfect is God)’ thirty-three times, ‘*Alhamdulillah* (All praise and thanks are due to God)’ thirty three times, and *Allahu Akbar* (God is the Greatest)’ thirty four times, for that is better for you than a servant.”^[6]

When Prophet Muhammad became seriously ill he called for his beloved daughter Fatimah. He kissed her and whispered some words in her ear. Fatimah wept and her father drew her close and whispered again, she smiled. When Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha asked her about the conversation she replied, *“He first told me that he would meet his Lord after a short while and so I cried. Then he said ‘Don't cry for you will be the first of my household to join me.’* ^[7] So I smiled.” In another narration Prophet Muhammad is said to have told Fatimah that she would be the leader of the women of Paradise.^[8]

Fatimah is one of the four great women of Islam. She was a wife and a mother but before that she was first and foremost, a daughter. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of a Muslim daughter is her treatment of her parents. Fatimah was kind and respectful, and full of compassion and love. She learned her manners from the lady Khadijah; she learned forbearance from her father. God fashioned a daughter worthy of emulating.

Footnotes:

^[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

^[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

[4] *Saheeh Muslim*

[5] *Saheeh Muslim*

[6] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[7] *Ibid*

[8] *Ibid*