

Sita, Mary & Khadija (R.A)

Their status in Hinduism, Christianity and Islam

Dr. Tahira Basharat*

There have been several women in history who are revered as the most prestigious personality of an institution be it a country, a political movement, a revolution or a religion. The three largest religions of the world, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism can be counted in the category of these religions. Sita the wife of Rama, Mary the Mother of Jesus, Khadija the wife of Muhammad and are those revered women that not only inspired the making of the school of thought but are considered the ideal women for the followers.

The role of a wife is most truly exemplified by Sita, wife of Rama in the epic Ramayana. Whatever one may feel about the nature of this epic, Sita epitomizes all that is good in the woman hood – to be emulated in real life. Her story is told in Ramayana and presented as the faithful wife of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu who ruled India a million years ago. The genre of this story is tragedy. By an elaborate twist of fate, Rama's stepmother, who is presented to be an evil woman, acquired the power to banish Rama to the forest and install her own son, Bharat, on the throne. Rama went into exile along with her wife Sita, and her brother, Laksman. He established a hermitage in the Dandaka forest. While living there, a witch named Surpanakha became angry with Sita and Rama. She wanted to marry Rama and felt that Sita was in the way, so she asked her brother, the Sri Lankan king Ravana to kidnap Sita. Ravana sent Marici, a mystic yogi in the form of a spotted deer to distract Rama and Lakshman and while Sita was unattended, Ravana disguised himself as a sannyasi and came into the encampment on the pretense of begging alms and kidnapped Sita. When Rama found out that Ravana had kidnapped Sita, he enlisted Hanuman, another avatar of Vishnu, and an army of monkeys to build a bridge from India to Sri Lanka. In Lanka, Rama fought a fierce battle and, as the story tells us, severed all ten of Ravana's heads with a single arrow. He rescued Sita and returned to Ayodhya, his capitol in the north, to assume his rightful position as king. When Sita and Rama returned to Ayodhya, "Sita successfully proved her purity by passing unharmed through a ring of fire."¹ In this symbolic act, the fire god returned the real Sita to Rama. Still, certain citizens in the kingdom began to gossip about her saying that Rama had broken the religious principles by accepting his wife, after she had been touched by

* Associate Professor, Faculty of Islamic Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore

another man. Swayed by the gossip about her, Rama sent Sita back into exile. Thus, it is obvious that Sita's trials did not end with her liberation from the demon's captivity. "All versions of the Ramayana are unanimous in reiterating her fidelity and devotion towards Rama even in times of extreme adversity". For example, when Rama is preparing to go into exile alone, she addresses him, "O son of an illustrious monarch, a father, a mother, a brother, a son or a daughter in law, all enjoy the fruit of their merits and receive what is their due. It is only the wife who actually shares the fortunes of her husband. When you depart this day for the dense forests which are difficult to penetrate, I shall walk ahead of you crushing under feet, all the thorns that lie in your way. Sita, who was pregnant wandered in the forest until she reached the hermitage of the sage Valmiki, (author of the Ramayana), who gave her shelter. The other sages criticized Valmiki, saying that if Sita was pure, her husband Rama wouldn't have cast her out. Thus Sita had to pass another test of purity to satisfy the sages. In the hermitage. She was delivered of twin sons, Lava and Kusha. Sita raised her sons single-handedly in the hermitage. "They grew up to be valiant and intelligent and were eventually united with their father."² Once she had witnessed the acceptance of her children by Rama, Sita sought final refuge in the arms of her mother Bhumidevi, the Earth Goddess. "Hearing her plea for release from an unjust world and from a life that had rarely been happy, the earth dramatically split open; Bhumidevi manifested herself and took Sita away to a better world"³

But this part of Ramayana is disputed, it is said that Rama & Sita lived together happily ruling their kingdom for 11000 years, (which was a common kind of lifespan in that yuga i.e. tretayuga), it was only for a period of 14 year exile in which one year Sita spent in Ravana's kingdom, so it is generally considered that Rama & Sita had a perfectly happy married life with very little disturbances. Sita, of course, was desired by many. But even the most noble and powerful of men failed to win her hand – her dowry was supreme valor and the goodness of God himself. She was the topmost jewel of Janaka's kingdom, and he treasure her as the most valuable object of love.⁴

After telling the story of Sita, we would move on to the biography of the Blessed lady Mary, the mother of Jesus. There are different traditions about the place of the birth of the blessed Lady Mary. First, the event has been placed in Bethlehem. A second tradition placed the birth in Sephoris, about three miles north of Bethlehem, the Roman Diocaesarea, and the residence of Herod Antipas till late in the life of Jesus. "The third tradition that Marry was born in Jerusalem is the most probable one we have seen that it rests upon the testimony of St. Sophronius, St. John Damascene, and upon the evidence of the

recent finds in the probates the Feast of Mary's nativity was not celebrated in Rome till toward the end of the seventh century; but two sermons found among the writings of St. Andrews of Crete (d 680) suppose the existence of this feat, and lead one to suspect that it was introduced at an earlier date into some other churches.⁵

When she was fourteen, the high priest wished to send her home for getting married. Mary reminded him of her vow of virginity, and in his embarrassment the high priest consulted the lord. Then he called all the young men of family of David and promised Mary in marriage to him whose rod should sprout and become the resting place of Holy Ghost in form of a dove. It was Joseph who was privileged in this extraordinary way. "All Christian believe that Mary was a virgin before and at the time of birth of her son Jesus".⁶ The virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.⁷

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with the child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold angel of the God appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take your wife Mary into your home, for it is through the Holy spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name her Jesus, because he will save his people from sins." All this took place to fulfill what lord had said through the prophet: "Beloved, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name Emmanuel," which means "God is with us". When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus. After bringing forth her son, Mary wrapped him up in a manger, a sign that she did not suffer from pain and weakness of childbirth. These inferences aggress with the teaching of some of the principal fathers and of theologians⁸.

The Virgin Mary in Islam (*Maryam* in Arabic) is the mother of Jesus (Arabic: Isa). Jesus is considered by Muslims to be one of the Prophets of Islam. According to the Qur'an, Isa was born miraculously without a human biological father, but by the will of Allah (God). His mother is regarded as the most saintly, pious, chaste, and virtuous woman ever and a highly respected figure in Islam. The Qur'an quite decisively declares that Jesus was the result of a virgin birth, but that neither she nor her son was divine.

In the Qur'an no other women is given more attention than the Virgin Mary. In fact, the nineteenth Sura (chapter) of the Qur'an is named after her and is about her life. Of the Qur'an are 114 suras, she is among only eight people who have sura named after them. Mary is also the only woman specifically named in the Qur'an. In Islam she is generally referred to as Maryam and Umm Isa (Mother of Jesus). Mary is viewed as both as an example and a sign of all people.

اذقالت امرأة عمران ربّ ائى نذرت لك ما فى بطنى محرراً فتقبل منى
انك انت السميع العليم) 9

(Mention, O Muhammad), When the wife of 'Imran Said, "My Lord, Indeed I have pledged to You what is in my womb, consecrated (for Your service), so accept this from me. Indeed, You are the Hearing, the Knowing."

فلما و وضعتها قالت رب انى وضعتها اتى و الله اعلم بما وضعت و ليس
الذكر كالاتى وانى سميتها مريم و انى اعيزها بك و ذريتها من الشيطان
الرجيم-) 10

But when she delivered her, she said, and God knows best what she brought forth – 'And no wise is the male than the female. I have named her Maryam, and her offspring to Thy protection from Satan, the Rejected.'

فتقبلها ربها بقبول حسن و انبتها نباتا حسنا و كفلها زكريا كلما دخل
عليها زكريا المحراب وجد عندها رزقا قال يا مريم انى لك هذا قالت هو
من عند الله ان الله يرزق من يشاء بغير حساب-) 11

God states that He accepted Mary as her mother had asked. She was assigned into the care of a priest named Zechariahs (Zakariya). "Every time that he entered (Her) chamber to see her, He found her supplied with sustenance. He said: "O Mary! Whence (comes) this to you?" She said: "From Allah. For Allah Provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure."

According to Qur'an, Mary's father was Nabi Imam and her mother was Hannah. Mary's story begins while she was still in her mother's womb. The mother of Mary said, When Mary was delivered, she said "O my Lord! Behold! I am delivered of a female child!"¹ She had expected her baby to be a boy who would grow up to be a scholar or religious leader. Qur'an 3:36 continues "¹² Although his wife was barren and he was very old, God blesses Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth with John known as "John the Baptist" in Bible-

اذقالت الملاءكة يامرهم ان الله يبشرك بكلمة منه اسمه المسيح عيسى
ابن مريم وجيها في الدين والآخره و من المقرين-) ¹³

“(Remember) When the angels said O Mary! God Gives thee Good News of a son through a Word from Him! His name shall be the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, honored in this world and in the next, and of those who Are Granted Nearness to God!”¹³

(وبكلم الناس في المهد و كهلا و من الصالحين)¹⁴

“And he shall speak to the people in the cradle, and when of middle age, and he shall be of The Righteous.”¹⁴

(قالت رب انى يكون لى ولد ولم يمسنى بشر قال كذلك الله يخلق ما
يشاء اذا قضا امرا فانما يقول له كن فكيون-) ¹⁵

“She said My Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me? He Said, That is as it shall be. God Creates what He Pleases. When He decrees a thing He says to it "Be" and it is!

Holy Virgin Mary is one of the four most highly regarded women to have ever lived. There are several verses in the Qur'an praising her and confirm that she was an extremely chaste and pious woman. The other three women are: Bithiah (Asiyah in Arabic), foster mother of Prophet Moses (Musa) and wife of Pharaoh, Khadija, wife of Prophet Muhammad and Fatimah, daughter of Prophet Muhammad. Mary (Maryam), is known and respected by millions.

The third woman that we intend to discuss is Khadija, the wife of Muhammad. No study of Islam is complete without acquainting oneself with the woman who played the most important role in the life of the Prophet. This amazing woman was Khadija, the wife of Prophet Muhammad. Khadija was known during her time as 'Al-Tahira', the pure one, and *Ameerat Quraish*, Princess of Quraish. Khadija is known to be one of the four most perfect women of all time. The prophet said, “The best women in the world are four: the Virgin Mary, Aasiyaa, the wife of Pharaoh, Khadija Mother of the Believers, and Fatimah, daughter of Muhammad.

"By God, the Almighty did not grant me a better wife than her. She believed in me when the people used to mock at me and she acknowledged me when the people denied me. She shared her wealth and property with me and she bore me children which I was not destined to have through other women." (Sahih Bukhari) These are not the emotional words of any ordinary husband lamenting the loss of a wife. These are, in fact the words of the Last Divine Messenger to mankind, who, as God vouches in the Holy Qur'an: “Does not speak out of desire. It is naught but revelation that is revealed.”¹⁶

Prophet Muhammad did not express these words in the state of bereavement at the passing away of the faithful Khadija, who for over 25 years was his one and only spouse. He said these years later when one of the many wives that he had taken in the last ten years of his life out of social necessity, dared to mock the memory of the Mother of Believers (Umm al-Momenin) and thought herself as a younger and better wife. A closer scrutiny of the Prophet's tribute to his beloved wife reveals some interesting facts. It is a confirmation of the great sacrifices offered by Khadija to the cause of Islam and Muslims. She was no ordinary Arab lady. As the daughter of the noble Khuwailed, she was linked five generations earlier to the same pedigree as the Prophet's. She was respected in the pre-Islamic society of Arabia, not mere for her vast wealth that earned her the title of *Malikat al-Arab* (Queen of Arabia) but for her wisdom, knowledge, dignity, excellent temperament and above all chastity to the extent that she was acclaimed as *Tahera* (Spotlessly Pure). On hearing of the reputation of Prophet Muhammad – who had not yet been commanded by God to announce his mission – as *Sadiq* (Truthful) and *Ameen* (Trustworthy), she entrusted him with management of her trade caravans. Impressed by the 25-year old youth's honesty in discharging his duties, she proposed marriage to him, thereby setting a lasting precedent (as is evident in the *Aqd* formula for every Muslim marriage) that it is the woman who proposes and the man who accepts. The Prophet consulted his uncle and guardian Abu Taleb, and history bears witness that the latter along with his younger brother Hamza and other chiefs of prominent Arab families assembled at the house of Khadija to formally seal the marriage offer. The nuptials were solemnized with great rejoicing by Abu Taleb who recited the sermon on behalf of his nephew, the groom.

For the next quarter century they made the perfect husband and wife. Fifteen years after marriage when divine revelation dawned upon the husband, the dedicated wife immediately believed in his mission as the Almighty's Last Messenger to mankind and, thereafter, spent all her wealth in the propagation of Islam and protection of the neo Muslim community from persecution and poverty. Afif al-Kindi, who years later became a Muslim, says that on one of his visits to Mecca he accompanied Abbas ibn Abdul-Mutallib to the Kaa'ba where an unfamiliar sight greeted him. He saw a man praying in what appeared to him a strange manner, while behind him stood a lady and a lad, earnestly emulating his acts of worship as he bent down in genuflection and touched his forehead on the ground in prostration. He was told that the gentleman was (Prophet) Muhammad, the lady was his wife Khadija and the lad was his

cousin and ward, Ali ibn Abi Taleb. Afif was told: Besides these three there is no one in the world professing the new faith.

The couple had several children including son Qasim, from whom the Prophet derived his agnomen Abu'l-Qasem. But all died in infancy except the youngest daughter Fatema az-Zahra, who was conceived after the Prophet's return from Me'raj (ascension to the heavens in the twinkling of an eye) and his tasting of the fruits of paradise. That is one of the reasons God has referred to Hazrat Fatema as Kowsar (Spring of Perpetual Abundance) in the Holy Qur'an. During the Meccan phase of Islam's movement, Khadija was the main pillar of support for Prophet Muhammad. She was the first one to declare her faith in Islam. Her declaration of faith was a great testimony of the Prophet's character: a wife knows her husband's outer as well as inner character. By being the first person to accept Islam, Khadija demonstrated that she believed in the truthfulness of Muhammad as Messenger of God. "Islam will forever remain indebted to the sacrifices of Khadija, who as part of her selfless jihad for faith, endured three years of socio-economic boycott imposed on the Muslims by the pagan Arabs led by Abu Jahl and Abu Sufyan.¹⁷ During those days of confinement to the mountain pass outside Mecca known as She'b Abi Taleb, she spent everything, up to her last dirham, for the sake of Islam, to protect and feed the persecuted neo-Muslim community. Often, her future son-in-law, Imam Ali would risk his life to procure the needed grains for the Muslims. When she passed away on 10th Ramadan shortly after uplifting of the siege by the frustrated pagans, the wealthiest Lady of Arabia had no money left for even a shroud, let alone leaving any inheritance for her daughter Fatima. She was shrouded in the cloak of her weeping husband and laid to rest in the Jannat al-Mu'alla Cemetery.

P. De Lacy Johnstone writes, "The marriage with Khadija gave Muhammad that ease of circumstances which he needed, freedom from the cares of daily life, they stay and comfort of deep mutual love, which for twenty-five years never failed him."¹⁸

One of the characteristic weaknesses of women is said to be jealousy. Khadija was untouched by jealousy of any kind. She was woman who found fulfillment, pleasure and satisfaction in giving. She was a munificent patron of the poor. She was at her very best when she was feeding the hungry and comforting the cheerless. "The acts of feeding and comforting the needy did not call for a conscious effort on her part; for her they had become a reflex."¹⁹

Just as Khadija was free from jealousy, she was also free from cynicism. One thing she never did was to hurt anyone. She never made fun of any woman; she never tried to belittle anyone; she never despised anyone; she was never angry and never spiteful; and she was strictly nonjudgmental. She never uttered an ugly or a pejorative word against anyone. So true to the dimensions of the understanding heart, she was solicitous of the feelings of even the humblest and the poorest women, and she was distressed by the distress of the other people. "There was a time when Khadija was called the Princess of Merchants and the Princess of Mecca. Then a time came when her great fortune changed hands".²⁰ From her hands, it passed into the hands of Islam. She was rich and she became poor in the material sense. She exchanged a lifestyle of luxury for a lifestyle of austerity. But nothing changed in her temperament. She remained cheerful, magnanimous, and idealistic as before. She spent more time than ever in devotions to Allah and in service to His messenger, and of course, she was never forgetful of the well-being and welfare of the Community of the faithful. It is axiomatic that the establishment of Islam was momentous in its consequences for women, and yet though the general subject of women in Islam has generated a vast literature, it is still exceedingly difficult to discover what in fact Islam's impact was for women, despite the fact that the issue is ideologically central to any discussion of the subject of women in Islam, contemporary as well as historical. Partly, the subject being so ideologically charged, it has tended to generate a literature of assertion rather than evidence. Muslim apologists and New Muslim circles declare that Islam accords women. They declare that it banned the *Jahilia* practice of female infanticide, gave women the unprecedented right to inherit property, and, in permitting men up to four wives, curbed a previously rampant polygamy. Such claims are often reiterated in well-meaning Western works on women in Islam, a recent one, for instance, declaring that "in the pre-Islamic era there was no question of a woman being an heir" – self-evidently a claim meriting fuller investigation in light of Khadija's financial independence.²¹

Women's inheritance, indeed, may have been a custom in Mecca, and there are other instances of Meccan women trading, like Khadija, in their own right.

The primary goal of narrating the stories of the three most influential and respected women was to put them together and compare their respective effects on their culture and religion. The common ground that we notice in all three of them was that they were not the influence themselves but they supported the person who influenced the people and, hence, earned the respect that they have today. "Regarding Sita, her actions, reactions and instincts

manifested by Sita at every juncture in a long and arduous life are deemed exemplary.²² Her story is one on which every young girl in India is raised to this day. The values that she enshrined and adhered to at every point in the course of a demanding life are the values of womanly virtue held sacred by countless generations of Indians. "The strength of her character has not gone unnoticed by Indian women, who have found much in her to applaud".²³ Despite being commonly held up as a paragon of the submissiveness, obedience, and loyalty that many men would like to see in their wives, women have often taken other lessons from her behavior. To many Hindu women, she is a great heroine, not just a goddess. "Sita is a unique ideal of fidelity and chastity. She had to undergo unbearable trial and tribulations throughout her life but with the power of her unshakable fidelity and dedication to her husband she bore all the difficulties of life with fortitude and she, along with her husband, smilingly enjoyed the hardships of life in jungle."²⁴ Thus, Sita is depicted in several versions as a powerful figure, bravely facing harsh circumstances. To summarize, we can say these few final words about her. "She is an important Hindu deity. She is the incarnation of the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. She led almost a perfect *dharmic* live. Even in the most stressful situations she was able to keep a clear head. She is the picture of patience. Sita is also known for her chastity."²⁵ She never gave into any tricks. After reading Ramayana, one can totally understand why Sita is such a beloved deity in India. She is the perfect daughter, wife and mother and is the picture of chastity.

Essentially the same essence could be seen in the influence of the Virgin Mary. Devotion to the Virgin Mary as the "new Eve" lent much to the status of women during the Middle Ages. Women, who had been looked down upon as daughters of Eve, came to be looked upon as objects of veneration and inspiration. And taking the current status of Mary into consideration, we find that she has become the focus of feminine aspirations within Christianity, much to the chagrin of those Christian leaders who would prefer to keep Christianity a male-dominated religion. Because Jesus and God are typically described in exclusively male terms, Mary has become the most immediate female connection to divinity that Christians have had. The strongest focus on Mary has occurred within Catholicism, where she is an object of veneration.

Summarizing the role of Khadija, we can say that Khadija was Prophet Muhammad's first wife, and they shared exemplary love, unity, mutual understanding and coherent views. He did not marry further in the presence of Khadija. Purification and piousness have been termed the basis of the religion and Khadija has given new heights to purification and piousness as a result of which she was awarded with the title of 'Tahira' even before the prophet hood

declaration. Khadija was his source of encouragement and comfort. She stood by the Prophet all the time; in moments of trial and difficulty the Prophet used to come to her and she consoled and comforted her husband and encouraged him. Khadija's financial support had a great role in strengthening Islam. She was the ideal woman, the ideal wife for prophet, and the ideal mother for her children. She enjoyed that great status that the Angel Gabriel used to bring salaam for her from Almighty Allah. Muhammad ibn Ishaq, the biographer of the Prophet says that when there was resumption of Divine revelation, after its cessation following the first two visits of Gabriel, Khadija received a tribute and a salutation of peace from Allah. The 10th of Ramadan of the tenth year of the Proclamation of Islam was that black day when Khadija passed away. Khadija was buried in Hujun above Mecca. Prophet himself descended into her grave to lie in it for a few moments. After the burial, he smoothed the earth on her grave. The Prophet termed the year of death of two personalities as Aam-ul-Huzn (the year of Grief) and Khadija-tul-Kubra is one of them.

REFERENCES

1. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) 39
2. *Ibid*, 51
3. *Ibid* 51
4. Steven J. Rosen *Essential Hinduism* (Greenwood Press 2006) 72
5. Hilda Grief, *Mary: A history of doctrine and devotion* (Sheed & Ward 1985)13
6. Jaroslave Pelikan *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1998) 25
7. Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 1; Verse 23
8. Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2; Verse 7
9. (Al-Imran 3:35)
10. (Al-Imran 3:36)
11. (Al-Imran 3:36)
12. (Al-Imran 3:37)
13. (Al-Imran 3:45)
14. (Al-Imran 3:46)
15. (Al-Imran 3:47)
- 16 Qur'an Chapter 53, Verse 3,4
17. Francis E. Peters *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (SUNY press 1994) 178
18. P. De Lacy Johnstone, *Muhammad and his power* (Kessinger Publishing 2003) 53
19. Hajjah Amina Adil Muhammad: *The Messneger of Islam* (ISCA 2002) 127
20. Maxime Rodinson *Mohammad: Prophet of Islam* (Tauris Parke Paperbacks 2002) 207
21. Wiebke Walther, *Woman in Islam* (London: George Prior, 1981), 33
22. Swami Bhaskarwanda *The essentials of Hinduism: a comprehensive overview of the world's oldest religion* (Viveka Press, 1994) 123
23. *Ibid*. 124
24. *Ibid*. 124
25. *Ibid*. 133