

Asiyah, Maryam and Khadijah as Role Models for Contemporary Muslim Women

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ABSTRACT

Islam envisions a society which is built upon individuals' contribution and mutual co-operation towards a greater goal. Its aim is the achievement of piety at personal level and the establishment of the creed of Islam at a societal level. This is how the role of the individual is visualized in the Quran and the Ahadith of the Prophet (PBUH) as a part of the greater picture. Women, consisting at least half of the population, must work in conjunction with their male counterparts to achieve the overall aim. But there is much confusion among the women today as to the nature of this cooperation. This article discusses the examples of three great ladies of Islam, shedding light on how this confusion may be resolved.

Keywords: Islamic vision, Muslim women, personal achievements, contributions to the family, contributions to the society.

INTRODUCTION

What is the goal of life for a Muslim woman? How can she fulfil the goal? What is the ideal role for her in an age where the gender roles have become muddled and at times reversed over the previous centuries? How can she fulfil her responsibilities towards her family and towards her society at a time when the roles of women have become diversified to an enormous extent? How does she balance between her spiritual, familial and societal duties under these circumstances? Is she to secure her place as a productive member of the society in competition with her male counterparts or in collaboration with them? What should be the nature of her relationship with the male members of the society? These are some of the questions that trouble the minds of the Muslim women today, especially among those who are trying to strike a balance between their spiritual and their worldly existence. This paper attempts to find an equitable solution for these questions in the light of the examples presented in Islamic sources, keeping in mind the perspectives of the modern times. With this purpose in focus, this article strives to highlight the examples of three women from various periods in the history of Islam who played crucial roles at critical moments to provide support and shelter to three major prophets. The three ladies are Asiyah Bint Muzahim, Maryam Bint Imran and Khadijah Bint Khuwailid. The first was the wife of the Pharaoh of Egypt, the second was a descendant of the noble house of Imran, the third was a powerful businesswoman of Makkah. Nevertheless, their stature and honour in Islam is not based on their social positions or personal achievements, but for their roles in protecting

and nurturing three prophets of the highest calibre – Musa (PBUH), Isa (PBUH) and Muhammad (PBUH) respectively. They epitomised how women can utilize their potentials not only for personal gain but also to create a better environment in the world, in collaboration with their male counterparts. Their examples can provide a guideline for modern women as to how Muslim women today may achieve spirituality while contributing effectually towards the betterment of the family and the society they live in.

METHOD

In searching for the best examples for the modern Muslim women to emulate among their Islamic predecessors, this paper wishes to focus on the most consummate paradigms instead of esoteric examples of various women in order to be able to derive a complete and more harmonious picture of the virtues, qualities and characteristics that enable a Muslimah to strike an appropriate balance between spiritual fulfilment and worldly success in their lives. In analysing the chosen precedents, this paper will concentrate more on those attributes that resonate with the lives and problems of the women today. For information about the paragons this paper wants to highlight, this paper will explore the authentic Islamic sources, primarily the Quran and its translations and explications. Secondly, this paper will look into the Ahadith and Sunnah of Prophet (PBUH). In cases where not much information is available in the first two sources, this paper will peruse the biographies of the selected ladies written by Islamic authors. After collecting all relevant information, this paper will sift through them, analyse them and strive to construct an integrated set of guidelines for modern women to follow in order to live spiritually fulfilling lives while being productive members of their families, communities and societies.

THE BEST EXAMPLES

When we search for role models for modern women to emulate in the Islamic world, the following ahadith from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) can serve as a guide:

Narrated Abu Musa Al-Ash`ari: Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said, "Many amongst men attained perfection but amongst women none attained the perfection except Mary, the daughter of Imran and Asiya, the wife of Pharaoh. And the superiority of Aisha to other women is like the superiority of Tharid (i.e. an Arabic dish) to other meals." (Sahih al-Bukhari 3769, Book 62, Hadith 116).

The Prophet (PBUH) said: "Sufficient for you among the women of the world are Maryam the daughter of Imraan, Khadeejah bint Khuwaylid, Faatimah bint Muhammad and Aasiyah the wife of Pharaoh." (Jami at-Tirmidhi, 3878, Vol 6).

The question arises as to what the word "perfection" indicates in the first hadith. It simply denotes the attainment of the highest level of the ideal characteristics and virtues of a

Muslim woman in order to achieve success with their Creator. The question that naturally follows is, how is success measured in Islam? Two examples should suffice to clarify it.

Firstly, in Chapter Tahrim, verse 6, Allah says:

Believers, guard yourselves and your families against a Fire fuelled by people and stones, over which stand angels, stern and strong; angels who never disobey God's commands to them, but do as they are ordered:

Secondly, in Chapter Mu'minun, verses 1 and 10-11, Allah declares:

[How] prosperous are the believers!

Who will rightly be given Paradise as their own, there to remain.

Success, according to Islam, is the ability to save oneself and one's family from humiliation on the Day of Judgment and instead receive a reward from the Creator by earning His pleasure. It is beneficial for Muslim women to look into the lives of the women mentioned by Prophet (PBUH) to find examples that can guide them towards success in the life of this world as well as the life hereafter. In the following passages, I intend to discuss the examples of Asiyah Bint Muzahim, Maryam Bint Imran and Khadijah Bint Khuwailid that are pertinent to the issues of the modern day Muslim women to provide a guideline to achieve personal success as well as earn the pleasure of Allah.

Lessons from the Life of Asiyah

Wife of the Pharaoh

Allah has immortalized Asiyah Bint Muzahim by mentioning her in the Quran in Chapter Tahrim, verse 11, as the one who uttered the following prayer:

“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.”

The character of Asiyah is summed up in the Quran when, in the same verse, Allah Himself bears witness that she was a believer in spite of having been married to a non-believing man and what a man he was! Scholars speculate that the Pharaoh mentioned in this verse was Ramses II, the proud and mighty Pharaoh of Egypt who remained defiant even after Musa (PBUH) was sent to him with the divine message. He is certified by Allah Himself as the one who “was a tyrant who exceeded all bounds.” (Chapter Dukhan: Verse 31). Egypt had been systematically submerged in ignorance and prejudice over the previous centuries in an attempt to subjugate its people to the tyrannical Pharaohs without the possibility of rebellion. The Bani Israil were the only people who still held on to some semblance of knowledge. Pharaoh held them in slavery. But he could not altogether disregard the appeal of knowledge and married Asiyah, a lady from Bani Israil, against her will. She had no escape because everything and everyone in Egypt belonged to Pharaoh. So, she sought refuge in the shelter of Allah from the evil tyrant and all his misdeeds. She could have had all the palaces and wealth the powers of a tyrant ruling over a vast kingdom could procure, if she had willed. But she did not want any part of it. Rather, she begged for a house in Paradise “near” her Lord where she would be able to devote herself to her Lord unhindered. This was the person Allah placed in the palace of the Pharaoh to protect Musa (PBUH).

The Background of Bani Israil

A little bit of history is required to understand the background in which Asiyah lived. Bani Israil were a noble family descended from a long line of prophets. It began with Ibrahim (PBUH). His second son Ishaq (PBUH) had a son, Yakub (PBUH), who was nicknamed Israil. Yusuf (PBUH), the eleventh son of Yakub (PBUH), became the ruler of Egypt through a number of events. He, then, invited his father and his eleven brothers to settle in Egypt. Their descendants formed the twelve tribes of Bani Israil. In time, they deviated from the true message of Islam. As a result, Allah overwhelmed them by humiliation and torment. He subjugated them to the Pharaohs, some of the most ruthless tyrants of all time. They learned their lesson, that the favour of Allah was not a matter of genealogy but of righteousness. They began to solemnly invoke Allah for mercy and help. Allah would not give it to them without a test of faith. So, before sending Musa (PBUH), He showed the Pharaoh in a dream that a firebrand would rise from Bani Israil and engulf his palace. It did not take long for Pharaoh and his associates to figure out the meaning of the dream. They began to slaughter the male children of Bani Israil in designated years in which they believed the prophet would be born, as Allah described, they: “subjected you to terrible torment, slaughtering your sons and sparing only your women— this was a great trial from your Lord” (Chapter Baqarah: Verse 49). The soldiers of Pharaoh were thorough and ruthless. There was no way a child could be kept safe once it was born. So, when Musa (PBUH) was born, in the designated year, his mother panicked. But Allah sent Jibrail (PBUH) to provide solace to her and advise her to trust Allah and set the baby afloat in a basket on the Nile. She did as instructed. This was where the role of Asiyah began.

The Saviour of Musa (PBUH)

Asiyah was the one who picked up the basket containing the baby Musa (PBUH) from the Nile as Allah describes in Chapter Qasas, verses 8-9:

Pharaoh’s household picked him up — later to become an enemy and a source of grief for them: Pharaoh, Haman, and their armies were wrongdoers — and Pharaoh’s wife said, “Here is a joy to behold for me and for you! Do not kill him: he may be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.” They did not realize what they were doing.

The safest place to hide from an enemy is to be concealed in the only place they will not look. The basket landed at the palace steps of Asiyah. She picked up the baby and expressed her wish to the Pharaoh for her to be allowed to adopt it. From the direction of the flow of the river and the features of the baby, it was obvious that it belonged to Bani Israil, who were immigrants and as such looked different from local Egyptians. Pharaoh was reluctant, but she managed to convince him not to kill the child saying, perhaps “He will be a comfort of the eye for me and for you” (Chapter Qasas: Verse 9). It is interesting how she dissociates herself from him even in this happy event. So, Musa (PBUH) grows up in the palace of the Pharaoh under the protection of Asiyah, his mother as his wet nurse and his sister as his playmate.

Musa (PBUH) grew up under the watchful eyes of the Pharaoh, who was often suspicious of the baby. But Asiyah was able to protect him with the help of Allah. He grew

up to be a big, strong man who was oblivious of his own strength until one day it manifested itself to him in an uncanny way. He killed a man, inadvertently, and fled Egypt until many years later, when Allah designated him to be a prophet to the Pharaoh, and he returned. Pharaoh appointed his court magicians to falsify Musa (PBUH)'s claim of prophet-hood and prove him a magician. But when the magicians realized that Musa (PBUH) was indeed a prophet, they proclaimed their faith. In consequence, they were executed ruthlessly by the Pharaoh. A hairdresser of the daughter of the Pharaoh, from Bani Israil, was killed along with her children in the most gruesome manner for saying Allah, not Pharaoh, is the true God. In spite of witnessing these events first hand, Asiyah accepted Islam. When one of his own household did not acknowledge him as god, Pharaoh's claim of godhood was seriously at stake. Pharaoh could not just let it go. Unimaginable torture descended upon her and she was denied even basic human rights. It was at this time that she made the prayer for a house near Allah in Jannah. Allah granted her wish. She died a martyr and He immortalized her as an example to the believers.

The influence of Asiyah on Musa (PBUH)

Musa (PBUH) came to know in time who his real parents were. But, in his heart, Asiyah was the "mother" who brought him up and protected him from Pharaoh. She exemplified to him the struggles of a single woman against a host of non-believers, one of whom proclaimed himself god. He witnessed first-hand her relentless efforts to maintain the purity of her faith in spite of insurmountable obstacles. She showed him how to co-exist with non-believers, and also how to stand up against them when the time came. She protected Musa (PBUH) with intelligence, diplomacy and sincerity as long as she was able to. When that was no longer possible, she supported him by proclaiming her faith in spite of overwhelmingly adverse circumstances. As a result, she was martyred. How did her death affect Musa (PBUH)? Whereas he tried to make all possible excuses to escape the duty of preaching the message of Islam to Pharaoh when Allah first told him about his appointment at the burning bush, after the death of Asiyah, he rose from strength to strength in his perseverance to make Pharaoh see reason until finally he led Bani Israil on an exodus from Egypt under the very nose of the Pharaoh who pursued them and eventually met his doom.

Thus, Asiyah performed her duty, assigned by Allah, of nurturing a prophet and helping him on his path to success. All the wealth, glamour and power of this world could not deter her from her mission. She was able to reach her Lord with her faith intact in spite of all she had to face. She was granted what every believer works for all their lives, the pleasure of Allah. This was her purpose and she succeeded in achieving it. In this way, she became an example for believers of all times and was rewarded with Paradise which was her ultimate goal.

Lessons from the Life of Maryam

Daughter of Imran

Maryam Bint Imran is the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran. Mentioned 34 times, she is described by Allah in Chapter Tahrim, verse 12 in the following words:

and Mary, daughter of Imran. She guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her from Our spirit. She accepted the truth of her Lord's words and Scriptures: she was truly devout.

She was born in the illustrious house of Imran. The members of this family had been involved in religious professions for many generations. As for Maryam, The Creator Himself testifies to her faith, devoutness and chastity. In return, He blessed her with a miracle that has not been and never will be replicated a second time. He honored her with a son who was one of the greatest prophets of Islam - Isa (PBUH). He was born miraculously without the intervention of a father, spoke in his cradle and spent a life of miraculous displays not least of which will be his return as one of the followers of Muhammad (PBUH) as he had wished.

Guidance in the life of Maryam

A blessed child

There are numerous lessons to be learned from her life beginning from before her birth. As Allah has mentioned in Chapter Al e Imran, verses 35-37:

Imran's wife said, "Lord, I have dedicated what is growing in my womb entirely to You; so accept this from me. You are the One who hears and knows all," but when she gave birth, she said, "My Lord! I have given birth to a girl" – God knew best what she had given birth to: the male is not like the female – "I name her Mary and I commend her and her offspring to Your protection from the rejected Satan." Her Lord graciously accepted her and made her grow in goodness, and entrusted her to the charge of Zachariah. Whenever Zachariah went in to see her in her sanctuary, he found her supplied with provisions. He said, "Mary, how is it you have these provisions?" and she said, "They are from God: God provides limitlessly for whoever He will."

Even before her birth, the wise mother of Maryam made two life-changing decisions for her – to dedicate the child in the path of Allah and to ask Allah to protect her child and its descendants from the influence of the accursed Devil. Allah accepts both her prayers making Maryam a singularly blessed child. When she is born, her mother is worried that her first prayer may not have been answered as it was a female child and there is a matter of safety and other concerns for a girl. As she converses in her heart with her Lord on the best decision, He solves it in an unprecedented way as described in Verse 44 of Chapter Al-e-Imran. A number of people competed for the guardianship of Maryam so that she could safely stay at the temple. They eventually cast lots and her uncle Zachariah won. She grew up in the temple, in the service of Allah, under the patronage of Zachariah, who, whenever he visited her, found provisions in her room. We are not told what these provisions were but we imagine they were unusual enough to attract the attention of her uncle. When asked, she answers, "God provides limitlessly for whoever He will" (Chapter Al e Imran: Verse 37), expressing her gratitude to her Lord for His gifts. This taught Zachariah not to give up hope and he gathered the courage to pray for a son though he was old. Allah duly blessed him with a righteous son whom He Himself named "Yahya".

The virgin mother

Allah chose this blessed girl for a special miracle when she came of age as He recounts in Chapter Al e Imran, verses 42-47:

The angels said to Mary: “Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure: He has truly chosen you above all women. Mary, be devout to your Lord, prostrate yourself in worship, bow down with those who pray.” This is an account of things beyond your knowledge that We reveal to you [Muhammad]: you were not present among them when they cast lots to see which of them should take charge of Mary, you were not present with them when they argued [about her]. The angels said, “Mary, God gives you news of a Word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, who will be held in honour in this world and the next, who will be one of those brought near to God. He will speak to people in his infancy and in his adulthood. He will be one of the righteous.” She said, “My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me?” [The angel] said, “This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says, “Be”, and it is.

Maryam was purified from all sins at birth due to the prayer of her mother which Allah had accepted. Now, she is blessed with the honor of being chosen above all the women of the world. Since honor in Islam is based on servitude and obedience to Allah, immediately after being given the good news, she is advised to continue in servitude as she has been, instead of taking it easy thinking she has already reached the pinnacle of devoutness. Rather, she is assigned a new test. She is to have a child without the intervention of a male figure, a miraculous birth, a child who will be blessed and honored in this life and the life to come for his mission to preach Islam to people, beginning from the cradle to his manhood. Obviously, she is shocked. But when it is explained to her that it is a command from Allah, she submitted to the will of her Creator without question.

However, she was careful to take the reactions of the society into account as Allah describes in Chapter Maryam, verses 22-33:

And so it was ordained: she conceived him. She withdrew to a distant place and, when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, “I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!” but a voice cried to her from below, “Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet and, if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you, so eat, drink, be glad, and say to anyone you may see: “I have vowed to the Lord of Mercy to abstain from conversation, and I will not talk to anyone today.”” She went back to her people carrying the child, and they said, “Mary! You have done something terrible! Sister of Aaron! Your father was not an evil man; your mother was not unchaste!” She pointed at him. They said, “How can we converse with an infant?” [But] he said: “I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet; made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live, to

cherish my mother. He did not make me domineering or graceless. Peace was on me the day I was born and will be on me the day I die and the day I am raised to life again.”

When she conceived the child, Maryam went off to a place where no one would recognize her. A young girl, alone, in an unfamiliar place, in labor! She cried in anguish and was consoled, “Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet and, if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you,” (Chapter Al e Imran: Verse 24-25). She was not given the food and the drink on a platter, she must exert herself for it, even in her condition, indicating that we must work hard in this life if we want ease in our afterlife. But her test of faith did not end there. She must return to her people and face them. However, this part of the test is made easier by Allah, allowing her to fast, and the fast included not speaking to people. Instead, it was the baby who spoke, proclaiming the chastity of his mother, one of the miracles of this miraculous child. He went on to declare his prophet-hood, and gave a sermon on prayer, charity and looking after parents. It is interesting to note here the fickleness of human beings. Maryam was a much-coveted child, as we learn from Verse 44 of Chapter Al e Imran. She was of the family of Aaron, the first of the temple’s devout servants. For generations, her family had been renowned for being God-fearing and a model of piety. She herself was an example of devotion to Allah. Yet, when she arrived with her child, they did not hesitate to accuse her of having been unchaste. So much so, that the baby in the cradle had to refute them to protect his mother. But perhaps it is only natural for people who do not understand the power of Allah, yet try to explain miracles in vulgar terms, to arrive at wrong conclusions.

The reward

Allah has promised a special reward for the mother and the son on the Day of Judgment as He declared in Chapter Mu’minun, verse 50:

We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign; We gave them shelter on a peaceful hillside with flowing water.

Maryam was special as a child, as a woman, as a mother and best of all, as a believer. She was devout, intelligent, responsible and she fulfilled the duty assigned to her to give birth to and nurture a miraculous child. It is because of her miraculous example of devotion, piety and chastity that Allah has allocated her a beautiful place in Jannah along with her son.

Lessons from the Life of Khadijah

The pure and capable lady

Khadijah Bint Khuwailid was considered “Tahirah” (the pure) by her society, even before the advent of Islam, as she did not indulge in the vices prevalent in the society at the time. She came of a good family, was married twice in reputable families, had five children and considerable wealth from her previous marriages. Her business caravans equalled the caravans of all other businessmen of Makkah combined. She required someone trustworthy to look after her huge business and hired Muhammad (PBUH) having heard he was considered Al Sadiq al Amin (the truthful and the trustworthy). On his first business trip, she appointed her trustworthy servant Mysarah to keep an eye on Muhammad (PBUH) and

report to her about him. But even as she was evaluating her new employee, she was also considering him as a future husband in spite of his poor financial conditions. This was not only because of his qualities as a human being but also because she had heard of the advent of a final prophet and she saw signs in him that made her consider if he might be the one. She stepped into the marriage knowing full well what she was shouldering (Mujahid, 2012). So, when Muhammad (PBUH) wanted to take long trips to the Cave of Hira to contemplate on the Creator and the purpose of creation, she not only supported him but also began taking care of all his affairs. She even carried his food to the cave herself in spite of the long, steep climb. She would sit outside the cave until he came out so as not to disturb his contemplation.

The woman who shaded Prophet (PBUH)

When Jibrail (PBUH) came to the Cave of Hira with the first message from Allah, Prophet (PBUH) was frantic and confused. He rushed home to Khadijah and asked her to cover him with a blanket. He began to have doubts about whether he had been possessed by the devil. But his wise and intelligent wife consoled him with words of sympathy and understanding, saying: Allah would surely protect him from any danger, and would never allow anyone to revile him as he was a man of peace and reconciliation and always extended the hand of friendship to all. He never lied, was always hospitable, carried the burdens of others and helped those who were in trouble (In the Shade of the Quran: Chapter Alaq). But she did not leave it at that. Rather, she took him to her cousin Waraqah bin Nawfal, a scholar of the Bible, to talk about the incident. Waraqah reassured him that he was indeed the prophet foretold in the scriptures and gave him examples of previous prophets to prepare him for what was to come. Khadijah's trust in Muhammad (PBUH) gave her the honour of being the first believer in Islam and her initiative to support him contributed to Muhammad (PBUH) becoming the prophet he was.

When the inevitable troubles began; as Prophet (PBUH) was jeered at and tortured by the non-believers of Makkah for preaching a new religion; when the non-believers began to insult him in all possible ways, tortured and killed his companions in malevolence having failed to stop him; Khadijah was always supportive and never once showed sorrow or annoyance at the turn of events. This gave him the strength to continue his mission. All her children, from previous and current marriages, accepted Islam. Her son - Harith Ibn Abi Halah - from a previous marriage, died defending Prophet (PBUH) when he was attacked in the early days of Islam. Her two sons from the marriage with Muhammad (PBUH) also died young but she bore it all with patience and faith in Allah. She spent her tremendous amount of wealth to establish Islam and help people in need. Allah was so pleased with this servant of His that He sent her "salam" through Jibrail (PBUH) who conveyed his own "salam" to her as well. The wise lady replied, "indeed He is salam, the source of all peace", because the One Who is the source of it all cannot be replied saying, "peace and blessings upon you too"! (Al-Mubarakpuri: 1976). She was promised a soundproof palace made of pearls in Jannah (Sahih al-Bukhari 5658, Sahih Muslim 2435). She had sacrificed all she had in this world to be rewarded with the pleasure of her Lord in the next. However, that was not the end of her sacrifices. When Prophet (PBUH) was boycotted by the non-believers of Makkah who cut all ties with him and his followers, refusing ties of kinship

and even to sell them food and water for three years, Khadijah would continue to get food and support from her relatives. But she distributed it among the Muslims, hence she did not have enough herself. Perhaps the stress and struggle led to her early demise. Muhammad (PBUH) was so heartbroken that his companions feared for his life.

Appreciation

Prophet (PBUH) did not marry anyone else while Khadijah was alive and no other wife of his had a child from him. Even years after her death, he prayed for her regularly, maintained good relations with her friends and relatives and praised her so often that his other wives would get jealous. He answered the complaint of Aisha in this regard one day by saying, “she believed in me when all others disbelieved; she held me truthful when others called me a liar; she sheltered me when others abandoned me; she comforted me when others shunned me” (Musnad Imam Ahmad, Vol 6: 118). Khadijah made a place for herself not only in the heart of the Prophet (PBUH) but also among the greatest women in the world. She provided companionship, support and shelter to the greatest prophet of Islam through thick and thin with intelligence, understanding, compassion and sincerity. Islam was financed by her wealth. But like the wise businesswoman she was, she made the best bargain by giving away her riches in this world to buy Jannah in the next.

FINDINGS

When analysing the virtues displayed by these remarkable ladies, I found there are some traits that are common to all of them and some characteristics that are specific to their particular circumstances.

Faith: The most important factor that identifies all three of the great women discussed is their focus on the spiritual relationship with Allah. Their every thought, word and action was regulated by the motivation to please Allah alone. Their servitude and obedience to Allah is remarkable in that they patiently persevered on His path against all odds and tribulations, they did not hesitate to accomplish their duties no matter how arduous or perilous it was because they believed wholeheartedly that forgiveness, appreciation, honour and rewards lie only with Allah.

Knowledge: They realized the importance of knowledge in keeping themselves and their families safe from getting deluded by the eternal enemy, the Devil. Knowledge is the only antidote to folly. The Quran emphasises the importance of gathering and applying knowledge in its first command to mankind, “Read” (Chapter Alaq: Verse 1). Thus, they devoted themselves to earning knowledge and using it. In this way, they were able to cultivate their intelligence and wisdom to amazing levels.

Moral and spiritual strength: Knowledge, intelligence and wisdom instilled in them the moral and spiritual strength to struggle against the enticements of the devil and overcome all obstacles. It also made them strong against injustice and untruth in spite of the consequences they had to face from tyrants and oppositions. They realized that the hardships in this life are nothing compared to the rewards awaiting them in the afterlife.

This strengthened their moral foundation and enabled them to face all kinds of adversity patiently.

Gratitude: They were quick to express gratitude to Allah for every blessing they received. This life is temporary and it is a test. So, anything that helps humans to pass this test, any kind of ease or respite offered to them to make the test bearable, any kind of provision they get to pass this life, is a blessing. Gratitude increases blessings twofold because on one hand Allah fills human life on earth with more blessings, and on the other, He adds rewards in the afterlife for being grateful. They always had the everlasting life in sight so that their resolve did not waver even when the test became difficult and the provisions became limited.

Family: From the worldly perspective, one could see them as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. The family is the building block of the society and women hold a key position in the family. An intelligent and benevolent woman can create a haven of peace and tranquillity for her family members to thrive in, where they feel safe to express themselves unreservedly and find reassurance in times of distress and anxiety. Thus, the role of a woman is crucial to the family and consequently, the society. The three ladies discussed gave their best to their families in whatever capacity they were required to serve.

Mothers: Before everything else, they were excellent as mothers and nurturers. Each of them exemplified the role of a loving and supporting mother whether they were in conflict with their husbands, were without a husband or in loving relationship with the husband. They fulfilled their duties to their children impeccably whether the children were their own, or adopted or in the capacity of a sole parent. They raised their children to become believing individuals who were responsible and upright in their conduct and productive members of the society. They achieved this by setting good precedences for their children to follow. Because the most effective way to inspire someone is to lead by example. Another aspect of their motherhood was the good practice of praying for their children, asking for help from the only One Who can ensure success and security.

Wives: As wives, they took marriage very seriously. For example, even as Asiyah was married to the Pharaoh against her will, she was not unfaithful to him; nor did she use him for any kind of personal gain. She abhorred him so much that she always separated herself from him even in speech. Yet she did not defy him openly until the question of her faith was raised explicitly. However, there is a very important lesson to learn from her life. When it came down to choosing between obeying her husband or her God, she chose Allah without hesitation or compunction about the consequences. Because ultimately, the loyalty to a husband springs only from the loyalty to Allah. From the example of Khadijah, it can be seen that it is a woman's right to choose a husband when she believes him to be a righteous servant of God. Even a prophet, let alone pious person, may experience crises of faith at times. A good wife can be a pillar of strength and a reassuring voice of reason to her husband at these times. A marriage, as one can see between Muhammad (PBUH) and Khadijah is a companionship in the path of Allah, helping and supporting each other to progress towards His pleasure. It teaches us the wisdom of choosing a partner for marriage

based on their piety and strength of character rather than other aspects that may be meaningless without the former qualities.

Members of the society: As members of the society they showed strength of character and purpose. Asiyah was inspired to declare her faith when she saw Muslims being put to death for proclaiming their faith in Allah. Instead of being cowardly and submitting to Pharaoh's claim of godhood to save herself from unimaginable torture and humiliation, she took upon herself the responsibility to declare her belief in Allah and set an example for the believers among her people. Maryam, who grew up as a much coveted child, revered by everyone for her piety, was suspected by her people of having been unchaste when she gave a miraculous birth to Isa (PBUH). But she perceived that it is difficult for common people to comprehend what was beyond human conception. So, she took their sentiments into account and was compassionate against their accusations instead of being disappointed in them or becoming heartbroken. Khadijah sacrificed her own rights to the companionship and support of her husband by letting him contemplate in the cave of Hira, taking on the responsibility of the business and the household, hoping for a solution to the maladies that permeated the society. She helped and supported him in spreading the message of Islam when Muhammad (PBUH) received the message from Allah and sacrificed her wealth and her resources to finance the spreading of the religion and freeing of captive Muslim slaves. Even when the Muslims were boycotted for three years, she shared her remaining resources with the Muslims until she succumbed to death. In this way, they fulfilled their duties as responsible citizens.

Allies to men: In each case, the three women can be seen as companions and supporters of their men – whether fathers, brothers, husbands or sons – instead of competitors. Maryam inspired her uncle Zachariah (PBUH) to hope for a son from Allah to guide his people after his death even when he had lost hope of having a child due to his old age (Quran: Chapter Al-e-Imran, 37-41). The sister of Musa (PBUH), followed the basket with the baby in the river, for a long distance until it reached the palace of the Pharaoh and she had the courage, intelligence, and presence of mind, in spite of her young age, to propose her mother as a wet nurse for the baby. Khadijah reassured Muhammad (PBUH) to believe in himself when he began to have doubts after his first meeting with Jibrail (PBUH). One would also commend the strength of Maryam as a sole parent to Isa (PBUH) even though she was frightened out her wits when she was first informed that Allah had assigned her to become a mother to a prophet without any male intervention. In return, not only did they earn respect and gratitude from their human counterparts, but the angels and Allah Himself showed respect towards them. Thus, an ideal relationship between men and women in Islam is that of mutual support, trust and honour. It is a relationship based on sympathy, compassion and collaboration; not antagonism and competition. A woman who can emulate or cultivate these characteristics can become a successful person in the view of Allah and contribute to her family and society in an effective way in this world and earn the pleasure of Allah in the next.

CONCLUSION

In Islam, success is not defined by the exploits and worldly achievements of a particular person, man or woman. Rather, it is about the role of individuals towards creating a harmonious society where men and women respect and support each other to establish the Deen of Allah. These great women are perfect models of success in this life and the next. They are the finest women of Islam and they supported some of the greatest men of their times. They focused on success in the next world but they also performed their duties in this world to perfection. It is incumbent upon all to learn about them, emulate them and cultivate their virtues into their characters in order to achieve success in the worldly life and the next.

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