

Islamic Concept of Polygamy: An Analysis of Montgomery Watt and Robert Spencer's views

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Abstract

Islam is a natural religion, and the teachings of the Holy Quran and Prophet (PBUH) are in accordance with human nature and fulfill ample resources for the fulfillment of human economic and social needs. However, Orientalists have distorted the facts and reasons with regard to polygamy. This article presents a research and critical review of the Orientalist William Montgomery Watt and Robert Spencer's objections to the concept of polygamy in Islam. They have unsuccessfully tried to challenge Islamic dignity and status in this issue. William Montgomery Watt and Robert Spencer are included in the list of those Orientalists who have discussed this issue in their Quran commentaries. They consider that only Islam is the religion which permits its followers to have more than one wife and it was not practiced before. In this research written with a comparative and analytical approach, it is proved that according to Quran, sciences of Tafsir, Hadith literature, history and logic, the explicit concepts of both scholars about this issue are baseless and have been rejected with the arguments given by the majority of the scholars and Muslim thinkers.

Key words: Watt, Spencer, Quran, Orientalists, Polygamy

1. Introduction

It is objected to polygamy by western thinkers that it is against the nature of man to have many wives. Moreover, it is unjust for a woman that a man brings home another in the presence of his wife and she stayed with her throughout her life as a competitor.

Where Orientalists have criticized other aspects of Islam, they have also criticized this subject. William Muir called Islamic polygamy a soft evil.¹ After mentioning the five pillars of Islam, Witton Davies writes regarding polygamy, "Then to be a good Muslim, you need to accept slavery, polygamy, easy divorce, the use of the sword in defense of the faith and true friendship with Muslim brothers."² Washington Irving misunderstood the Qur'anic verse about four wives, and believed that the Holy Prophet (PBUH)

permitted each of his followers to marry more than one but did not forbid it for himself.³ Another orientalist Winwood Reade tried to mislead his readers that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a Christian prophet in Arabia but he did not try to abolish polygamy.⁴

Opinions of Dr. Montgomery Watt⁵ Robert Spencer⁶

Montgomery Watt and Robert Spencer have criticized the subject in their Qur'an commentaries and major books. William Montgomery Watt writes about polygamy that "it is to be noted that this verse, on which the permission for a Muslim to have four wives is based, does not restrict a previous unlimited polyandry. Some modern Muslims argue that, since no man can be impartial between several women, this virtually prescribes monogamy."⁷

Montgomery Watt writes about polygamy that "One or two cases are mentioned of men having up to ten wives, but it is not clear within what social system this occurred. The verse of the Qur'an on which the restriction is based appears to be encouraging men to have more than one wife."⁸ Watt describes his allegation that "the family consisting of one husband and several wives, which was a special feature of Islamic society in the eyes of Christians for a long time, was an invention of the mind of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). There are examples, but this ritual was not common and especially for the people of Madina, it was completely new."⁹

William Montgomery Watt expressed his views on the same subject in an interview. In his opinion, "an essential change in Islam was to emphasize that a woman should have sexual relations with only one man at a time. Divorce or change of partner was relatively easy for a man in particular. But for a woman it was necessary to spend special period before marriage with other partner."¹⁰

Robert Spencer writes about polygamy in his Qur'an commentary that "V.3 is the basis for Islamic polygamy, allowing a man to take as many as four wives, as long as he believes he is able to "deal justly" with all of them." But of course, justice in these circumstances is in the eye of the beholder."¹¹

Critical, Analytical and comparative review of the Opinions

In the Qur'an, the rulings on polygamy are described in Surat al-Nisa. ¹² Maulana Maududi says that the commentators have explained three meanings of the above command of the Holy Qur'an. The first meaning is from the sayings of Hazrat Aisha (R.A), about the commentary of this verse. She says that before the advent of Islam, the orphan girls who were under the guardianship of people and because of their wealth or beauty or absence of guardians, people marry with them and then they would do injustice to them. It was said on this that if you people fear that you will not be able to do justice to orphan girls, then there are other women in the world, marry them whom you like. The second meaning is derived from the commentary narrated by Hazrat Abdullah bin Abbas (R.A), in which it was stated that there was no limit to marriage, before the advent of

Islam and a person would have ten wives and when the due to this multiplicity of wives expenses increases he was forced to encroach on the rights of his orphaned nephews, nieces and other helpless loved ones. Therefore, Allah Almighty fixed the limit of four for marriage and said that in order to avoid cruelty and injustice, it is better to have one to four wives with whom you are able to establish justice. The third meaning is explained in the light of the explanatory statements of Hazrat Saad bin Jubeer (R.A) and Hazrat Qatadah(R.A). According to them, it was good to treat orphans even before the arrival of Islam. But one thing with them was that they did not treat women fairly, there was no set number for them to marry. It was not a bad thing to treat cruelly with wives in that particular period. For this reason, it was said that if there is a fear of not being able to treat the orphans well, then it is better not to marry more than four, and also to have so many women as you can deal fairly.¹³ Syed Maududi says that the words of the verse are capable of these three interpretations and it is not surprising that all three meanings are meant.¹⁴

In his book "Fiqh al-Sunnah", Sayyed Al-Sabiq Masri quotes Imam Shafi'i and says that in the Hadith of the Messenger of Allah, limiting himself to four wives indicates that it is not permissible to have more than four wives. And all scholars agree on Imam Shafi'i this view.¹⁵

Along with the Holy Book of Allah, the sayings of the Messenger of Allah indicate the validity of the law of polygamy. Before Islam, those who were married to more than four wives divorced all the other wives except four according to the sayings of the Holy Prophet. Ghalyan Ibn Salama al-Saqafi accepted Islam and he had ten wives at that time. The Prophet (PBUH) ordered him to marry four of them.¹⁶

Qazi Muhammad Sulaman Mansoor Poori has proved polygamy in his book from the teachings of different religions.¹⁷ Polygamy is not only one of the inspired religions, but it is also a part of the Eastern traditions because Hinduism is a non-inspired religion, but it also allows polygamy and the leaders of this religion have also followed this permission.¹⁸

The divine commands for the human beings are full of innumerable wisdoms and spices. It is in the collective interest of the whole society. Even in normal situations, abundance of numbers is a reason to increase honor and dignity. New countries have learned the value of abundance in numbers for production and wars. In addition to jihad and wars, it is a natural tendency in some societies that there are more women than men.¹⁹ In view of this importance, Abdul Jabbar Shakir says that in different times and in different parts of the world, sometimes the number of men is less than women. It can be said that this will create the causes of what kind of pomegranates, bad morals, indecency and poor civilization.²⁰

Benefits for Personal Gains

A man can have four wives without any reason because in any case he has benefit in it and controlling lust and adopting such means that can prove helpful in controlling sexual

desire is praiseworthy. One who has married for the sake of children, he has desired to keep the causes of temptation even further away from himself.²¹

Moral wisdom in Polygamy

In a society where the number of women exceeds the number of men, it becomes morally and socially necessary for men to follow the order of frequency.²² It is a fact that at present every citizen of the West is looking for sexual freedom apart from the marriage bond despite the freedom of marriage.²³ The scholar Noor Ahmad Rahmani says that "If polygamy is not allowed, those women will not be able to become house wives and have husbands; they will not be able to get a place of respect in the society. It is beneficial in favor of women and it has the protection of her future and interests."²⁴

Terms and Conditions of Polygamy

As far as the conditions of polygamy are concerned, one of the rulings that the commentators have derived from verse no.3 of Surat al-Nisa is that it is permissible to have only four wives at a time and justice attitude with all wives is must. The permission of polygamy has been granted in this regard that "Islam has allowed more than one marriage. It is only a legal permission. There is no duty imposed on Muslims. It is not a general constitution of Islam, therefore Muslim societies and even in Islamic countries, monogamy is practiced and cases of polygamy are rare."²⁵ Hazrat Aisha narrates, "Indeed, the Prophet (PBUH) used to set the turn between his wives (for sleeping at night) and used to do justice in (marital) rights."²⁶ Maulana Maududi says about the condition of justice that, "This verse is about multiple wives. A person, who does not fulfill the condition of justice, but takes advantage of the justification of having more than one wife, commits fraud against Allah. The courts of the Islamic government have the right that if the husband is not doing justice to his wife or wives, it should take legal action."²⁷ Explaining the same verse, Imam Qurtubi has taken a stand that out of fear of injustice, second marriage was declared illegal and it was made clear that it is obligatory on the husband to do justice to his wives.²⁸

It is a fact that there is a natural tendency in man to have more than one wife, and those who have such a strong tendency, if such permission is not allowed to them, it is feared that they will be doing something wrong and illegitimate. They will start looking for other ways to satisfy them. In this regard, the experience of the West is in front of us.

Sexual desire is a natural desire and a single woman is not enough for people who have this desire and who cannot control it. The reason for this is that a woman is constantly going through menstruation, childbirth, pregnancy and childbirth. In these situations, her sexual feelings become weak and she cannot fully support the feelings of a man. Moreover, due to pregnancy, nursing and child birth, a woman's physical system is greatly affected and she becomes old quickly and in comparison to this, a man stays young for a long time. Therefore, if a person wants to marry again, he can only be restricted to pay the rights of both and not to violate the rights of any of them.²⁹

The desire for children is natural in man. If a woman is barren, it is better for her that the man marries a second time and the first woman stays with the same man. If it is difficult to maintain marital relations, then it will be useful for the woman to stay with the same man herself and allow him to remarry.³⁰

The Social Necessity of Polygamy

In some situations, polygamy also becomes a necessity of the society. Generally, the number of men and women in a society is equal, but if this nation is affected by war, then this ratio deteriorates. In this situation if polygamy is allowed instead of leaving married women alone, it helps to solve many social problems in the entire society. Manpower plays an important role in the life of nations and multiple marriages are also a means of increasing manpower.

Robert Spencer's answer to the objection that why a woman cannot have more than one husband is that his practice is against woman's nature. A woman is burdened with family responsibilities, she has to bear the hardships of pregnancy and nursing, she is also sometimes forced to do some outside work. Therefore, it is very difficult for her to satisfy the sexual desire of many men. Due to this, there is a risk of her health deteriorating and contracting many sexually transmitted diseases.³¹

If a woman has several husbands, it also creates some social problems. If a woman has several husbands, she can be made pregnant to only one of them at a time, so it is impossible to decide who she married and whose children are. It is also difficult to decide identity of their real father. A few husbands also have bad effects on the society. It is the nature of a man that he cannot tolerate another person's relationship with his wife. In this way, the spirit of jealousy and rivalry emerges between these people. Likewise, Allah Almighty has placed the spirit of modesty in a woman and this spirit is natural. Her relationship with more than one man undermines this virtue and she gradually becomes more promiscuous. If a woman takes off the dress of modesty, the society starts moving towards sexual promiscuity.³² Married life in Islam is surrounded by responsibilities, and polygamy increases these responsibilities. He has imposed so many restrictions on him and placed so many limits and restrictions that a man cannot dare to marry more than once without any real necessity.

Justification of Polygamy

It is clear from this verse of the Holy Qur'an that Islam accepts polygamy for one person and social necessity, but it is not ready to accept a situation in which a man has to have more than four marriages. He considers it illegal and forbidden. The second thing is that the verse clearly states that Islam has allowed, not commanded, and its purpose is only to take advantage of the need. Thirdly, in this verse and other teachings of Islam, polygamy is neither encouraged nor motivated; rather attention is drawn to its complex responsibilities so that a person should take this step thoughtfully and not think of it as a means of pleasure and entertainment. Fourthly, this verse refutes the wrong idea that

polygamy is only for pleasure. It could also be a form of compassion, so it was allowed under the protection of the rights of orphans.

Limitations and Conditions

A person who takes advantage of the permission of polygamy and marries another wife in the presence of one wife, Islam has imposed some restrictions on him. He should be in a financial position that with the first wife, he is able to take responsibility and provide a house for second wife. Some jurists have even written that if the second wife does not want to live with the first, he should provide her with a separate house.³³ The jurists have debated about his legal status and its duration if he is physically able to have husband-wife relations. Regardless of this, one of the purposes of marriage is the protection of chastity; it is supported by a decision of the time of Hazrat Umar (R.A).³⁴ If a man is financially and physically capable of four marriages, then he should marry four. If a man's financial condition or physical condition does not allow him to have sexual relations, he should marry according to his strength.

Even if a man is financially and physically capable of remarriage, it is important that he should be fair and equitable between the two in all matters in which equality is practically possible. It includes bread and sustenance, clothing, housing and overnight stay. Justice and fairness is the life of the Islamic system of affairs. If there is a fear that there can be no justice between the wives, then it is ordered to have only one wife.³⁵ Allama Abu Bakr Jisas Hanafi says that if someone is afraid that he will not be able to maintain justice between four wives, then he should do only three. If you are not sure of justice, you should settle for only one.³⁶

There is a strict order in the Hadith about justice and fairness between wives. It is narrated from Hazrat Abu Huraira (R.A) that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said that the person who does not do justice between his two wives; he will come on the Day of Judgment in such a way that his body will be destroyed and one part will be bent.³⁷ Justice and fairness are essential in matters that are within the power of man. It is not in the power of man to love everyone equally. The inclination of one's heart may be more towards someone and less towards someone. Similarly, in sexual intercourse equality is not possible. It is related to the vitality and willingness of the nature. It is narrated from Hazrat Aisha (R.A) that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) used to divide the things that could be divided between his wives and he would divide them justly. After that he used to say, "But I have made this division among those that I have authority over, and those things that are not in my authority, if there is an increase or decrease in it, do not let me control it." Just as the second wife gets all the rights that the first wife has, so the children born³⁸ from her will also get the same rights as the children of the first wife. The responsibility is a huge burden that falls on a man after taking advantage of the permission of polygamy.

Robert Spencer presents information out of context in his analysis. For example, he fails to acknowledge the historical context that reminds us that the four marriages allowed at the time was to set a limit on the number of marriages at that time.³⁹ Before

the advent of Islam, polygamy was practiced in all the nations of the world. Persia, Africa, India, China, and Arabia all suffered from unlimited polygamy. Islam is the only religion which has limited it to four which is based on nature whose true image can be seen only in Islamic civilization because Islamic legislation is dependent on nature. R.V.C Bodley while describing the benefits of polygamy writes that "in Islam, polygamy united multiple families instead of disuniting them and made the home a sacred institution."⁴⁰

Montgomery Watt has drawn a wrong conclusion from the Qur'anic verse and has unfoundedly objected that the Qur'an encourages polygamy of four women. He writes, "Interestingly, the verse is not putting any limits on the unlimited practice of polygamy. It is not telling men who had six or ten wives that they should not marry more than four. On the contrary, it is encouraging men who have only one wife or two wives. It is not a restriction of an old practice but an introduction of something new."⁴¹ Furthermore, Watt accuses the Qur'an of allowing polygamy but not instructing how to keep those wives. He said "The verse does not say anything about husband and wife living together."⁴²

Montgomery Watt has overlooked the fact that Islam allows polygamy but has also imposed certain restrictions on Muslims. Justice, clothing and housing is a basic and important order of married life. Islam forbids a person from having more than one wife if he is unable to do justice between them.⁴³ Moreover, in reference to the Battle of Uhud, Montgomery Watt tried to prove that Muslims chose the path of polygamy only for widows or female orphans.⁴⁴

Being a natural and ultimate religion, Islam legislates according to human nature. 1676) called polygamy a natural directive. He acknowledged the -Henry Stubbe (1632⁴⁵ fact that both Christianity and Judaism practiced polygamy. He also believes that he cannot investigate a single sentence in Islamic injunctions to prove that polygamy in Islam is only for sexual gratification.⁴⁶

Conclusion

According to Islamic law polygamy is not easy and all the accusations of Montgomery Watt and Robert Spencer in this regard are baseless because Islam has allowed it due to the need of social conditions which is not prohibited but more useful. Polygamy is permissible not only in Islam, but in all religions. Islam abolished the unlimited concept of polygamy and limited it to four by granting respect to women. Before Islam, women were considered as slaves. It is evident from the examples of history that there are benefits for the woman herself in having multiple marriages for a man.

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5 Dr. William Montgomery Watt is a famous Scottish Orientalist and Islamic Scholar. He was born in 1909. He got his higher education from Edinburgh and Oxford Universities. The last Orientalist died in 2006. He wrote many books and articles on Islam, Quran and life of Prophet Muhammad. He also wrote a commentary of the Quran "Companion to the Quran" along with his other books on the Quran.

6 Robert Spencer is an American anti-Islamic writer. He was born in 1962 and has a background in Catholic Christianity. He got his Master Degree from University of Chapal Hill. He is a Director of the website Jihad Watch. He has published more than twenty books on Islam, Quran and other themes. His two books have been the New York Times best seller books. He also wrote a Quran commentary, " Blogging the Quran". His has planned to publish his new Quran commentary, "The Critical Quran: The key Islamic commentary and Contemporary Historical Research" in November 2021

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