

# Popular Islam and Misogyny: A Case Study of Bangladesh

## [Part-2]

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In this section I want to discuss the correlation between popular Islam and misogyny in Bangladesh by exploring and analyzing some misogynic writing and speeches by two very influential mullahs in the country, one dead and one alive. The late Maulana Gholam Rahman's Bengali book, *Maksudul Momeneen* [objectives of the faithful], a very popular wedding gift for Muslim brides in Bangladesh, which had its 45<sup>th</sup> edition in 1994 is an epitome of misogyny and vulgarity, full of anti-Quranic and non-Islamic expositions. Maulana Delwar Hussain Saidi, the other rustic mullah whose equally vulgar and misogynic speeches, recorded on audio and video tapes, are available in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi groceries in like New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Montreal, London, Rome, Sydney and Singapore. Both of these eloquent and persuasive mullahs having some *madrasa* education, with vague to no idea about the modern world, social science, history, philosophy and comparative religion are extremely popular among Bangladeshis at home and abroad. Their popularity is not confined to the backward and not-so-educated rural masses but large sections of highly educated Bangladeshi Muslims cite them as authorities on Islam. Their popularity among Bangladeshi Muslims is also due to their similar world views and perceptions of women.

We begin with the most controversial and popular book *Maksudul Momeneen* by Gholam Rahman, which first came out in 1935. This work is the parallel of *Bihishti Zewar* by North Indian Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi [Metcalf, *passim*] and *Miftah ul-Jannat* by Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri [Hashmi, 1976], mainly written for Muslim women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, *Maksudul Momeneen* is extremely vulgar and thoroughly misogynic in comparison to North Indian urban Urdu writers' works. Many Bengali feminist and progressive writers and scholars find this work very offensive. Controversial Bangladeshi feminist writer Taslima Nasreen's vituperations against Islam are based on this book and the misogynic Bengali translations of the Quran and Hadis literature [Nasreen 1993, *passim* & Hashmi, 1995].

This work justifies husband's beating and punishing their wives (it seems taking one Quranic verse literally) under the following circumstances:

1. If the wife refuses to have sex with her husband whilst having no valid excuses.
2. If the wife does not dress up and go to her husband if asked to do so.
3. If the wife does not clean herself.
4. If the wife visits someone's house without her husband's permission.
5. If the wife does not practice Islamic rituals and fails to observe seclusion.
6. If the wife gives away things to others without her husband's permission or runs away after taking the dower [Rahman, 378].

However, relying on a Hadis, the author, Gholam Rahman, urges his readers *not to beat their wives like slave girls* [as if beating one's slaves is permissible in Islam]. He cites Imam Shafi (founder of the Shafi sect in Sunni Islam) who is said to have regarded beating one's wife as *mobah* (neither an act of sin nor virtue) [Rahman, 378]. The most repulsive example which expounds the worthlessness of women and the virtue of men is approvingly citing the following Hadis:

If the wife of a leper cleans her husband's wound with her tongue, this act is not good enough to repay her debt to her husband [Rahman, 329].

Glorifying the submissiveness of wives, Gholam Rahman supports the view that:

- Disobedient wives are cursed by God, their prayers being never accepted by Him.
- The wife, who spends one hour with her husband keeping him in good mood, earns the virtue one can get by saying prayers in a year.
- The Prophet affirmed that whenever the husband calls his wife she should rush to him even if she is engaged in cooking.

Citing some Arabic and Persian books, which are reflective of Arab-Persian "little traditions" or popular Islam, Rahman highlights the virtues of obedient wives and how their parents are rewarded by God and the suffering of the disobedient ones in hell-fire. He addresses his female readers (very common style in popular Bengali literature): "Look what may happen to wives if their husbands are unhappy with them!" [Rahman, 327-8]

Maulana Gholam Rahman's *awrat-i-hasina* or "ideal woman" is not only pious and obedient to her husband but who also "totally surrenders herself to the will of her husband" [Rahman, 342]. It seems an ideal Muslim woman ceases to exist as a person having any opinion or say about anything in life.

The author of *Maksudul Momeneen* also classifies two types of women – one, who should be preferred to others as wives and the other, who should never be selected as brides – not on the basis of their qualities of being God-fearing or obedient but on the basis of physical beauty and the lack of it. The first category of women consists of the "the beautiful ones with long hair, shapely eyebrows, beautiful teeth, thin waistline, big eyes and chastity". The other category of women (who should never be considered for marriage) consists of the ones "with squint [one who looks obliquely] or with restless, wandering eyes and women with dimples on their cheeks as well because they are most likely to be sterile" [Rahman, 318-19]. It is very interesting that the above classification of

women is a direct replication from a traditional Indian/Hindu text, which classifies women into four categories on the basis of their complexion, facial features, figure, body odour, eyes, lips, torso, legs and organs. One wonders how an “Islamic scholar” could have racial parameters and prejudice against disability in classifying “desirable” and “undesirable” women as wives. One may point out that this Maulana has not cared about classifying men as “most desirable” and “least desirable” as husbands from the women’s points of view. Another aspect of Gholam Rahman’s misogyny is reflected in his assertion (albeit by citing a Hadis) that: “For women, grinding wheat is as good as going to a *jihad*. The moment a wife tells her husband that she is not happy with any of his activities, she is assured of losing all the virtues one can earn in seventy years” [Rahman, 332].

The epitome of the theory of male supremacy and the consequential inferiority of women lies in the “Thirty five Commandments” in *Maksudul Momeneen*:

### **The Thirty Five Commandments to Women:**

1. Follow the teachings of Islam and observe the rituals of Islam as prescribed in this book [*Maksudul Momeneen*].
2. Obey your husband but his command cannot supersede that of God.
3. Never lie to your husband or to others.
4. Never speak against someone behind his back. Always observe *purdah* [seclusion] and protect yourself from sin. Because this is obligatory.
5. Observe the instructions with regard to menstruation.
6. A husband is a precious wealth. Always keep him in good humour because those who are on good terms with their husbands are the happiest in this world. Therefore, if you desire happiness in this world and the hereafter, love your husband.
7. Never let your husband be displeased with you. Follow his instructions so long they do not violate the commands of God. *If your husband asks you to stand erect, fording your hands whole night by his side, obey him as it would please God and His Prophet* [emphasis added].
8. Never hurt your husband’s feelings by rude utterances. This sort of rude behaviour might permanently antagonize your husband towards you.
9. If your husband asks you to go to him promptly follow his order and try to fulfill his wish if there is no physical difficulty such as menstruation or illness.
10. While your husband is around, never perform any non-obligatory prayer or fasting without his permission [so that he can go to bed with you whenever he wants to]. Never eat ahead of your husband. It is more virtuous to obey one’s husband than performing non-obligatory prayers and fasting [it implies the husband is only next to God to a Muslim wife].
11. Never give anything away without your husband’s permission. Never visit your neighbours and relatives without your husband’s permission.
12. Never expose your husband’s limitations to others. Always share his happiness and sorrow.

13. Even if your husband is wealthy, never ask him to bring anything for you. Be patient and accept whatever he gives you to eat and wear. Your forbearance would be rewarded by God.
14. Always keep yourself clean and tidy; otherwise your husband might be unhappy with you.
15. Even if it is against your will, never ever argue with your husband. Although you are innocent, never contest your husband's opinions about you and try to convince him of your innocence with an obliging tone. Consequently your husband would understand your viewpoint and he would be more loving and understanding.
16. Never ever speak ill of your husband's behaviour with you to others. Always be patient with your husband and happy with whatever he brings for you. Never undermine his gifts.
17. Never ever be ungracious and express your unhappiness in front of your husband telling him that you have never been happy with him and that your parents have committed a grave mistake by arranging your marriage with him. The Prophet told us that he had seen women outnumbering men in hell and this was *because of their ingratitude to their husbands* [the part in italics is a doctored version of the Hadis by the author].
18. Always try to comprehend your husband's frame of mind. While he is in a jovial mood be smiling showing your happiness but if he is not in good mood, never ever giggle in front of him. *It might be too irritating for him and he might hit you back* [emphasis added].
19. If finding fault with you your husband reprimands or beats you up, you should not be in a withdrawing, melancholic state of mind, *you should rather be apologizing to him, seeking his forgiveness, by grabbing his feet* [emphasis added].
20. Be tactful and sly in leading your conjugal life. If sometimes out of love and affection your husband tries to massage your arms and feet, never ever allow him to do it. As you would never allow your parents to touch your feet, let alone your husband *because his status is even higher than that of your parents* [emphasis added].
21. If your husband is back from abroad (after a short or long stay) rush to his service by providing him with something to sit on, touch his feet to pay obeisance and fan him if it is a warm day and arrange for food if he is hungry. Never ever ask him if he has brought anything for you as it might make him annoyed or angry with you.
22. If your husband gives you money, accept it in good grace and if he gives his money only to his parents, be happy and remain contented with this as well. It is even better for you to ask your husband not to give you any money but to his parents only. This gesture would enhance your position to your parents-in-law and other members of the family.
23. So long as your parents-in-law are alive serve them and never argue with them.
24. Always perform your household duties (domestic chores) to the best of your ability. Never ever tell anything bad about your husband's family to your parents.
25. Never ever tell anything bad about your parents' family to your husband's family.
26. Always keep your home and clothes neat and clean. God forbid, if there is any disagreement with your husband, never disclose it to others, because if your

- husband learns about it he would be very upset and angry. This would be eventually disastrous for you.
27. Never leave your husband's company for any duration without his permission. According to a saying of the Prophet *if a wife stays away from her husband for a night without his permission, 70,000 angels curse that woman for the whole night* [emphasis added]. One who stops a wife from staying with her husband, is equally cursed by angels.
  28. Never ever think of outwitting your husband in any matter, because it is extremely difficult to do so [as men are supposed to be more intelligent than women]. *If you really want to outmaneuver him, start crying by holding his feet and saying all the pleasing and flattering things to win him over* [emphasis added].
  29. Follow your husband's instructions and do whatever he wants you to do. Never express your dissatisfaction at your husband's lifestyle because you would not be held responsible for his sins, but try to dissuade him from sinful acts by mild persuasion.
  30. *Your husband is the greatest asset for you in this world* [emphasis added]. So long as he is alive, serve him to the best of your ability because *your salvation in the hereafter lies in your selfless service and dedication to him* [emphasis added].
  31. If your husband asks you to give up your claim on the *mehr* or dower, do so immediately because nothing is more precious in this life than your husband's contentment. Ayesha and other wives of the Prophet also gave up their claims on the dower. Actually, *the real virtuous women are those who gracefully give up their dower* [emphasis added].
  32. Do not be like those women who do not dress up or wear ornaments for the pleasure of their husbands but for the pleasure of others, because by doing so you would be assured of nothing but hell-fire.
  33. The wives of the *ulama* should be considered as the most fortunate among all women, because the *ulama* are the most gifted and exalted among all men. The wives of the *ulama* earn a million times more virtue than other women by serving their husbands. *One married to an alim should consider herself very lucky and should always try to make her husband happy* [emphasis added].
  34. *You should be thankful to God even if your husband happens to be insane, stupid and illiterate. You should regard your husband as precious as the moon and spend your life at his feet so that you get eternal bliss* [emphasis added].
  35. *Whether your husband is rich or poor, educated or illiterate, blind or crippled, good-looking or ugly always serve him as your master and be loving and caring. According to the Prophet, an immoral woman is worse than one thousand immoral men combined together and one virtuous woman is better than seventy saints combined together* [emphasis added].

Now to turn to the advice to men with regard to their treatment of women, one finds the author of *Maksudul Momeneen* telling them either to be condescending to women or to keep them under strict surveillance and control. Citing a Hadis the author extrapolates: "*Since inferiority of women is an established fact* [emphasis added], men should always give good counsel to their wives. Most certainly women are created from a curved rib-bone of Adam. If you try to straighten it, you would simply break it into

pieces....Therefore, you should be happy with whatever is attained by advising your wives.” He also tells men about women’s possessing half of man’s *iman* or faith and *aqal* or intelligence. “As women are devoid of intelligence, so do not pick on them rather be forgiving” [emphasis added], so goes his advice to men [Rahman, 379-80].

He also advises men to divorce their wives:

- a) if they pose threats to their husbands’ lives;
- b) if they are always engaged in adultery;
- c) if they are disobedient [Rahman, 381-3].

If the above expositions are misogynous, one does not know how one would classify the speeches of itinerant “mad mullahs”, delivered at *waz mahfils* (religious gatherings), mostly in small towns and villages throughout Bangladesh. Contrary to our expectation, with the passage of time and the transformation of “Islamic” East Pakistan into “secular” Bangladesh in 1971, there has been a tremendous growth in the number of such mullahs throughout the country. Maulana Delwar Hossain Saidi, a member of the Central Committee of the Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh and a member of the Parliament, basically an itinerant mullah, came to the limelight as a *bakta* (public speaker) in the 1980s. His speeches are available in audio and video tapes, both within and outside Bangladesh. He is both despised and admired by millions of Bangladeshis. While liberal secular groups and individuals demand his arrest for his alleged collaboration with the Pakistani occupation army in 1971 and for his “anti-Bangladesh” and “anti-Islamic” activities, he remains unscathed and continues spreading his message at home and abroad.

From his numerous recorded speeches on audio and video tapes with catchy and misleading titles like “Liberation of Women”, “*Purdah* [seclusion] and Women’s Rights in Islam”, “Rights of Husbands and Wives”, “Women and Non-Muslims in Islam” proceed vulgar and misogynous expositions, which not only undermine modern civilization but also degrade women to the level of animals, objects, fruits and eatables.

Women’s liberation, to Saidi, is the harbinger of the doomsday. He is firmly opposed to women working in the office with men. “When a well-groomed, young and beautiful woman with dark and inviting eyes, cloured lips and low-cut revealing dress sits on the other side of the desk, do you think office-work is going on there?” Saidi retorts [Weekly *Bichinta*, 12]. He attributes road accidents involving truck drivers on the streets of Dhaka to the distractions provided by the “tight-fitting” uniform of policewomen. He ridicules policewomen in the following manner: “How can policewomen protect national wealth when they need police force to protect their ‘wealth’ “? [Bichinta, 12]. Like most mullahs, Saidi also considers employing women for office work as a “National loss” because “women workers would spend their salary on lipsticks and clothes whereas men working in similar positions would maintain their families with their salary” [Bichinta, 13].

Sometimes the demagogy of Saidi can be so misleading as to be mistaken for a “progressive” social reformer, especially in the light of his condemnation of those taking dowry from brides’ parents or guardians. His true nature is revealed, however, when he exhorts, shouts, screams and sarcastically tells his audiences that Bangladeshi Muslim men have lost all interest in “half-naked” and “easily available” women, hence the demand for dowries – cash, television sets, fridges and even cars. He thinks that *purdah*

(seclusion) would save women from being raped or molested, and most importantly, that they would remain attractive to men. He even compares secluded women with the beautiful spotted deer from the Sundarbans, and the “*be-purdah whores*” – or unveiled women – with the stinking goat, since the former is very attractive because it lives in “*purdah*” in the forest, and the latter is not attractive because, it is “available” everywhere. He even compares *purdah*-observing women with fruits like bananas, mangoes and pineapples. He argues, “God sends these fruits to us in ‘packets’ to save them from flies and insects that is why they taste so good. All good things in life are shrouded with covers and mystery. That is why women should be covered from head to toe” [Hashmi, 2000, 88-9].

In the name of defending Islam as the “liberator of women”, Saidi argues that those who oppose polygamy are agents of the West or enemies of Islam, because polygamy is better than having sex with mistresses or prostitutes. He thinks that since the Prophet of Islam gave mothers much higher status than that of fathers, women in Islam are the most privileged in the world [Saidi, “Purdah and Women’s Rights in Islam”]. He is opposed to female leadership in any sphere of life. He thinks in Islam men have higher status than but equal rights with women [Saidi, “Rights of Husbands and Wives”].

Muslim orators or *baktas* like Saidi are a prevalent part of popular Islam in Bangladesh. They are specially invited one- or two nights-long *waz mahfils* in the dry season during November to February. They cast a magical spell on their audiences, mostly arousing a fear of hell, in conformity with the popular culture which glorifies death and the hereafter. The *baktas* invariably portray women as the main sources of evil and corruption and justify beating of wives in accordance with Shariah law. It seems there is reciprocity between the misogynous teachings by the mullah and the prevalent persecution of women, especially among the poverty-stricken population in the country side.

Although male supremacy does not necessarily connote misogyny, the proponents of patriarchy need misogyny for its justification. In a way, misogynous expositions by mullahs as well as non-mullah sections of Bangladesh society provide the ideological framework to legitimize male supremacy. Both of them find Islam and its subjective and misogynous interpretations very useful in this respect. They often alter Islamic codes of conduct with regard to male-female relationship and their position in society. They even doctor acceptable Hadises to legitimize patriarchy through misogyny. Thus a famous Hadis, “heaven is at the feet of the mother”, for example, in common parlance glorifies “husband” instead of “mother”. It is noteworthy that, even those Bangladeshi Muslims who are aware of the mullah’s incompetence condone their activities to safeguard their vested interests. This is why the least religious or even agnostic and atheist Bangladeshi men insist on Shariah law, especially with regard to inheritance of property to deprive their sisters from getting equal shares in the name of Islam. These people also need the mullah during marriages and divorces to deprive their wives and former wives from getting their due shares for manipulating the Shariah law.

It is pointless to argue whether the prevalent misogyny, inherited from the various “little” and “great” traditions, is moulding the mullah’s thought process or the mullah’s undue

reverence to the controversial and inherently misogynous Shariah has turned him into an admirer of patriarchy and persecutor of women. In short, the existing gap between the “great” and “little” traditions of Islam has been filled by the ignorance of the mullah. Consequently the modes of persecution of Bangladeshi women reflect the indigenous misogyny and prejudice of *madrassa*-educated peasant-turned-mullah. Otherwise we have no explanations for the erratic behaviour of rural mullahs which led to several deaths of women, persecuted in the name of “Islamic justice” in village *salish* courts in the 1990s. Only the existence of barbarism explains why 22-year-old Razia Khatun, was forced to drink her own urine for her alleged commission of adultery in a village in 1994[Amnesty International, *Bangladesh: Taking the Law...* & *Bangladesh: Fundamental Rights..*]. Islam most definitely does not sanction this type of punishment for adultery.

In sum, as discussed at the outset, the ongoing cold war between the agents of Globalization and Market Economy and the traditional village and peasant communities is accentuating the gender war in Bangladesh. While donor-driven NGOs and the so-called civil society represent the former, traditional village elders and mullahs represent the latter groups. Village elders and mullahs in particular do not like the “empowerment” of women for cultural as well as economic reasons. Mullahs are the junior partners of those having vested interests in keeping women away from power, authority and property. Nothing could be more efficacious than the portrayal of women as inferior and satanic in the name of Islam for the subjugation of women in Bangladesh.