

Popular Islam and Misogyny: A Case Study of Bangladesh

[Part-1]

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Since misogyny is as old as civilization and as common as flu or chicken pox everywhere in the East and West – among rich and poor, rural and urban areas – there is no reason to portray it as a pre-modern, pre-capitalist syndrome. The synonymy with hate highlights the inherent positive correlation of misogyny with male fear of women as competitors and rivals in both the corporate world and peasant communities. Women being liabilities in turbulent, lawless communities, where their abduction and rape by enemies bring shame and distress to the traditional people, misogyny and forced seclusion of women are but natural outgrowths. Again men hate the weak ones, who cannot defend themselves against gangs of rival tribes and communities, and most importantly, who cannot be that useful in predatory and productive activities where physical strength plays the most important role. Women in such communities are nothing more than objects of sex and procreation.

The so-called male chauvinism, which epitomizes misogyny, is in fact male fear and ignorance about the unknown. Misogyny is very similar to racism and hatred of the working classes by dominant groups and classes. In short, the super-ordinate needs subservient and hardworking subordinates. Misogyny is a tool of hegemony, an indispensable one in the realm of ideology, for legitimizing patriarchy and the inherent privileges associated with it for the “stronger sex”. It is very similar to racism. The perpetuation of slavery in America needed an ideology to “prove” the inferiority of the Afro-Americans. The American and South African Apartheid in the recent past relied on a racist ideology, including religion, to exploit and subjugate the “others”. This ideology was not devoid of hate either. Hate is the key and cultural hegemony through false consciousness is the rich pasture of the hatemonger. One may highlight hate as the only element in the recent Danish Cartoons of Prophet Muhammad, which is just another step towards demonizing the “alien others” for the sake of some short- and long-term gains.

Misogyny is not just an apolitical cultural construct. It is very much a part of a political discourse in power perspective to perpetuate male hegemony or dominance with the consent of women. So, there is no reason to single out Islam or the “popular” version of the faith as misogynous. However, thanks to the subjective interpretations of the Quran (almost exclusively by men), the preponderance of the misogynic mullahs and the regressive Shariah law in most “Muslim” countries, Islam is synonymously known as a promoter of misogyny in its worst form. Although there is no way of defending the so-called “great” traditions of Islam as libertarian and egalitarian with regard to women, we

may draw a line between the Quranic texts and the corpus of avowedly misogynic writing and spoken words by the mullah having very little or no relevance to the Quran. We may classify the latter as upholder of the “little” traditions of Islam, which represent and mould “popular” Islam, everywhere, including Bangladesh.

Despite the persistent attempts by human rights and gender activists and donor-driven NGOs with specific programs to uplift persecuted, poor and powerless women in Bangladesh, there seems to be no decline in the popularity of rustic misogynous mullahs, their writing and speeches at the popular level. Traditional rural courts, known as *salish* in local parlance, run by village elders under the supervision of village mullahs have punished thousands of rural women for violating the Shariah code. Various reports indicate that about 3,000 women were victims to these rural courts annually during the mid-1990s. In 1993 alone about 6,000 persecuted and humiliated rural women committed suicide in different parts of Bangladesh [Hashmi, 97].

Although there has been a substantial decline in the number of arbitrary summary trials of women in the name of Shariah since the late 1990s, persecution of women by men – male relatives, neighbors, strangers, employers and even members of the law-enforcing agencies – is quite common. The “Shariah-run” courts even do not spare poor victims of rape and abduction for “violating” the moral code of conduct and punish them accordingly. While sparing the male perpetrators of rape and illicit sexual relationship, who often over-power their victims or lure them into the act through deceit and temptation, Salish courts remain legitimate to the average Bangladeshi Muslim, who represents the rural, illiterate/semi-literate peasant community [Hashmi, 96-105].

It would be too trite an assumption that only rural men and the not-so-educated Muslims are misogynous under the influence of popular Islam. Misogyny is so well-entrenched in society that no single measure, such as spread of literacy or enactment of laws, is a good antidote. The understanding of persecution of women and discrimination against them requires an understanding of patriarchy and the inherent misogyny embedded with it in all pre-modern and, to a great extent, in modern societies as well. The differences between the “great” and “little” traditions [Redfield, *passim*] of Islam with regard to misogyny are in degrees, not in spirit.

Similarly, the differences between modern and pre-modern misogyny are not that startling either. There is hardly any difference between the misogynic expositions by Aristotle and a village mullah in Bangladesh. Aristotle prescribed the subjection of women as a “social necessity” and “natural”. To him, the rule of men over women was like the rule of the “soul over the body.” He also thought that while men were “complete”, women remained incomplete, defective and like “impotent men”, and that by nature, women were “more jealous, more querulous...more void of shame and self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive” than men [Ahmed, 29]. And we know, Aristotle influenced not only European but also Arab or Muslim philosophers and theologians, including Imam Ghazzali (1058-1111).

Ghazzali and Abul Hasan al-Ashari (d.935), the most influential proponents of orthodoxy and scholasticism, brought back mysticism as the main guiding philosophy for the Sunni Muslims by discarding rationalism and free thinking. Ghazzali also promoted misogyny in the name of God and nature. We may agree with the view that “the scholastic shell constructed by al-Ashari and al-Ghazzali has held Islam to the present day” [Hitti, 432]. The Muslim world’s stagnation and backwardness, nourished by Sufism and scholasticism, have also contributed to the subjection of Muslim women. Before the transformation of the Medina-based Islamic republic into Arab monarchy in 661, Muslim women enjoyed more rights and freedom than their Umayyad and Abbasid counterparts.

Both the Umayyad and Abbasid empires replicated many Greco-Roman, Christian Byzantine and Zoroastrian Sassanid institutions, including the harem, eunuch (castrated) guards to protect the harem, seclusion of women and concubinage, albeit in the name of Islam. Many shortcomings of Christianity crept into the Muslim empires from the 7th century onward. The spread of Christianity despite its lofty egalitarianism failed to get rid of Jewish patriarchal ideas about women. The Biblical account of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib and Jewish customs allowing concubinage, men’s unrestricted rights to divorce and women’s lack of inheritance rights crept into Christianity in Mesopotamia and Palestine [Tress, 309 and Ahmed, 26-35] . We may assume, later these practices and institutions crept into Islam.

We find the reflection of Biblical and Christian misogyny in the Hadis literature, Shariah law, religious and secular institutions, writings and the popular culture of the Arab and non-Arab Muslims. Although Muslims do not believe in the stories of the Genesis, both the Old and New Testaments, which justify inferiority and subjection of women as desired by God for Eve’s vulnerability to temptations by the Satan, misogynic expositions by church fathers are very much parts of Muslim culture. Muslim scholars from Arab Ghazzali to Indian Ashraf Ali Thanvi and thousands of obscure mullahs in modern Bangladesh echo the tone of church fathers, Augustine, Origen and Tertullian who considered women as “inferior, secondary, .., and useless to men – and, worse, as causing sexual temptation, corruption, and evil”. Tertullian’s misogyny was even more relentless. He wrote of women:

You are the Devil’s gateway. You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him [Adam] whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man [Ahmed, 36].

While the Christendom believes that only men are “God-like” and women can achieve salvation by only “becoming male” [King, 247], Hinduism and Buddhism are equally harsh and discriminatory against women. Both Buddhist “birth-stories” or Jataka tales and the Hindu laws of Manu portray women as demonic, licentious, immoral and dangerous. According to Manu’s laws women can never be independent and their husbands, “though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure [elsewhere]...must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife [Max Muller, V, 147-8].” Sons, according to Manu should be the sole inheritors, “because a son delivers (*trayate*) his father from the hell called *Put*, he was therefore called *put-tra* (a deliverer from *Put*) [Max Muller, IX, 104-38 and 345-54].” In *Mahabharata* we find women being considered as much more dangerous and harmful

than poison, snake and *Yama* or the angel of death [Azad, 50-3]. Ancient Indian culture was so misogynic that a woman was nothing more than an object of sex or *ramani*. This derogatory expression is still in vogue in Sanskrit and other Sanskrit-based languages, including Bengali.

Although women, slaves and other under-privileged groups of Mecca had been the first among the early converts of Islam, the end of the Early Caliphate in 661 signalled the end of this egalitarianism. Arab, Turk, Iranian, Indian and other Muslim empires who inherited the Byzantine, Sassanid, “Hindu” and other pre-Islamic empires borrowed profusely from their culture. Consequently it is very difficult to distinguish between Islamic and un-Islamic cultural traits, rituals and institutions. Hence the preponderance of misogynic sayings and proverbs throughout the Eurasian and African continents. While one hears that: “The fool praises his wife, the wise man praises his dog” [Turkish proverb], some Arabian proverbs depict women as “handful of trouble, “devoid of God’s mercy” and so go the sayings: “When a daughter is born the threshold weeps for forty days” and “When the hen crows like a cock, it should be killed [Lunde & Wintle, 5, 85 & 87].”

Now, with regard to the very cruel practice of female genital mutilation (widely known as an Islamic custom), going on for centuries in North and East Africa and Arab lands, one may cite the following from a report of the London-based Minority Rights Group (“Female Genital Mutilation: Proposals for Change”) to shed new light on the subject:

Although often associated with Islam, it is not ordained in any Islamic text. The practice continues thanks to the superstitious fears of female sexuality, habit and the mistaken belief that it is hygienic [*The Economist*, 25 April 1992, 44].

Since fear breeds hate and ignorance prejudice, misogyny is a by-product of ignorance and fear of the unknown. And this fear is so well-entrenched that misogynic mullahs favour this pre-Islamic cruelty against women in parts of Africa and Arab World. The late Sheikh Gad al-Haq, an influential Egyptian cleric of the al-Azhar University, defended this institution as “Islamic” [BBC Current Affairs, 11 May 1995]. Another Egyptian cleric, Sheikh Yousuf El-Badry, defends the practice as prevention against AIDS [*Time*, November 17, 1997, 9].

This paper is going to raise and answer the following questions along with an appraisal of misogyny as reflected in Popular Islam in Bangladesh:

a) Is it fair to draw a line between the so-called “great” and “little” traditions of Islam, with the assumption that while the written version of Islamic law and codes of conduct represent the “great” traditions of the religion, the unwritten, grassroots based and syncretistic codes of conduct represent the “little” traditions of Islam?

b) Has the popularity of misogynic mullahs, their speeches and writing, which glorify patriarchy, subservience and seclusion of women something to do with Muslim men who have more to gain by depriving women of their rights in the name of Shariah law?

c) Is the polity of Bangladesh too afraid to question patriarchy and misogyny or the popular Bengali culture and popular Islam in the country are the two sides of the same coin?

d) I am also going to highlight the nature of misogyny, glorified and promoted in the name of Islam in the popular discourse of Bengali mullahs, through their writing and speeches. The reciprocity between the misogynous mullah and his “secular” admirers, including sections of the highly educated Bangladeshis, strengthens my hypothesis that i) the average man is a promoter of patriarchy if not misogyny and that ii) the worst of crimes and injustice can be legitimized in the name of an overpowering ideology, such as religion and patriotism.

However, the prevalent gender hierarchy in the country – the natural outgrowth of misogyny and the theory of female inferiority – is not necessarily a by-product of Islamic law. According to an empirical study, the “living law” is more powerful than the “lawyers’ law”, especially with regard to marriage and inheritance by Bangladeshi Muslim women. The village community’s autonomy at the grassroots level with the blessings of the village mullah is well-reflected in decisions taken by village courts, often flouting the written Islamic code or Shariah [Rahman and van Schendel, 254-74].

There are again problems with the various schools of the Shariah and scores of diverse interpretations of the Quranic text with regard to the status of women in Islam. Some scholars have rightly pointed out the subject as the “mother of all battles” [Haddad and Smith, ch. 19]. The age-old “Orientalist” prejudice against Islam, the subjectivity of Muslim apologists and the androgenic/misogynic interpretations of the Quran by Muslim scholars have turned the subject into an enigma, leaving little room for clarity. Since the amorphous Islamic “feminism” and “modernism” are in the nascent stages, traditional Islam as practiced by Muslims and perceived by others represents the main stream of the religion. Consequently any discussion on women in Islam conjures up a situation where:

- Women are inferior to men, having lesser rights and privileges than men.
- Women have been created for the comfort and enjoyment of men.
- Eve was created from a rib bone of Adam.
- Women must not come out in public without covering their body, hair (and face, according to some jurists).
- Men enjoy absolute freedom to keep more than one wife and concubines in special circumstances.
- Men may divorce their wives at will while women may only disengage themselves from their husbands by returning the dower to them with the permission of the court.
- The testimony of one man is equivalent to that of two women.
- Women are defective, not intelligent enough to run governments and lead nations.
- Women do not need higher education – it is actually bad for them.
- Women should inherit half of what men inherit.

Although the Quran does not promote male supremacy, the subjective interpretations of the Quran and reliance on thousands of spurious Hadises found in the corpus of the Hadis literature, based on the “sayings” of Prophet Muhammad collected more than 200 years after his death, are full of misogynic stories, rules and regulations, codified later as the diverse Shariah codes of the various Muslim sects and schools of thought. While the Quran is very specific about the equality of the sexes: “And for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women” [2:228]; what we get in a Hadis is that: “I [the Prophet] have left behind no temptation more harmful to my community than that which women represent for men” [Walther, 48]. In some other “authentic” Hadises we find the Prophet telling his followers: “Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse [Bukhari, *Sahih*, Vol. III, 243]”; “I took a look at paradise, and I noted that the majority of the people were poor people. I took a look at hell, and I noted that there women were the majority” [Mernissi, 76].

As the very utterance of the term “Shariah” evokes bad memories among its victims, especially Muslim women, our experience tells us that nothing short of a drastic reform and/or elimination of this medieval code, which is inherently prejudicial to women, non-Muslims and freethinkers, is going to eliminate discrimination against women. Misogyny is the first and most important step towards subjugation of women. While through misleading interpretations of Quranic verses and reliance on the obsolete Hadis literature the mullah glorifies patriarchy and demonizes women in every possible way, the Draconian Shariah law legitimizes the subjection, humiliation and persecution of Muslim women almost everywhere in the Muslim World and beyond. As reliance on the problematic Hadis literature by the average Muslim is an obstacle towards elimination of misogyny, so is the conventional interpretation of the Quranic verses with regard to women’s rights and status in society. Jan Hjarpe has aptly evaluated the problems of understanding Islamic laws and regulations as emanating from the Quran:

The problem is that of interpretation. What do these instructions mean? In what way are they norm-giving? How are they correctly applied... to determine the literal meaning of, for example, a Koran text is usually not difficult, but in what sense is it normative? [Bo Utas, 12].

The re-interpretation of the Quranic verses which apparently suggest lesser or inferior rights for Muslim women is essential in accordance with the changed circumstances and needs of society in the 21st century. Unlike the traditional *ulama* (Muslim theologians), some “Islamic modernists” insist that since Islam signalled greater security, justice and economic liberty for women – from the abolition of female infanticide to the granting of inheritance right to women – the Islamic law “represents a radical improvement on earlier practice” when women inherited nothing. We think in the spirit of Islamic law, “this means in our time... men and women should have equal inheritance rights” [Bo Utas, 13].

However, mere classifying the Muslim scholars as “traditional” and “modernist” does not help us understand the intricacies of the problem. A “modernist” view of women’s rights and status in Islam of the 19th century may be quite obsolete and “traditional” from the modern perspective today. Consequently “modernists” and “Islamic feminists” of our

time, such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud-Mohsin, Asghar Ali Engineer, Haleh Afshar, Leila Ahmed, Ahmed Ali and Suha Sabbagh, are more relevant to the empowerment process of Muslim women today than Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Sayyid Ameer Ali, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and Begum Rokeya had been in the previous centuries. We should also remember that the Muslim scholars do not represent a monolithic group. The various Sunni and Shiite scholars, both the “traditional” and “modernist” of our time, have diverse views on Muslim women’s rights and status. This diversity is subject to their diverse culture, geography, political structure and historical experiences. Local or unwritten “little” traditions have always been instrumental in influencing and even transforming the “great” traditions of all religions, including Islam.

Now, with regard to the prevalent misogyny in Bengali Islam, we must look at the history of Islamization of Bengal. The bulk of the converts came from the persecuted and marginalized non-Hindus, some Buddhist and mostly tribal. As a renowned historian has shown in his seminal work [Eton, *passim*], Muslim saints and Sufis were instrumental in Islamizing the deltaic southeastern Bengal, especially during the 16th and 17th centuries, by providing leadership in clearing forests and reclaiming lands in the wake of a series of catastrophic turbulence caused by the shifting of riverbeds. The process of reclaiming forests and driving away wild animals in the newly reclaimed southeastern Bengal under the Turco-Persian Sufi leadership under the Mughal patronage exposed Bengali Muslims and the new converts to the “great” and “little” traditions of the Turco-Afghan-Persian Islam, which we know were patriarchal and misogynic to the core. Above all, the predominance of syncretistic traditions in Bengali Islam implies the blending of local Hindu-Buddhist misogynic traditions with those from the Near East and Central Asia [Roy, *passim*].

The general consensus among “Islamic feminists” and non-Muslim Islamists draws attention to the Shariah code as the “mother of misogyny” in Islam. Shariah, literally meaning the track created by camels to and from the water holes, implies that it is more of a tradition rather than a new set of laws, to be followed blindly by the Muslims. However, the proponents of Shariah argue that there is no scope of further investigation or re-interpretation of the Quranic texts and the Hadis literature. In short, Shariah is the combination of legal opinions of Muslim jurists (Muftis and Faqihs) sought and enforced by medieval Muslim rulers. Thus the main sources of Shariah are: The Quran; Hadises or the so-called and actual sayings of the Prophet; Fiqh or Muslim jurisprudence based on the individual and/or collective opinions of jurists (*qiyas* and *ijma*, respectively); local customs and traditions and common sense.

Since there are only around eighty-odd Quranic verses which are regulative or prescriptive, the thousands of Shariah regulations are obviously based on thousands of spurious Hadises and legal opinions of the pre-modern Sunni and Shia jurists during the 8th and 11th centuries. Since we know about the poor quality of most Hadises with regard to their authenticity and the low level of intellectual capacity of the medieval Hadis collectors, including Imams Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmizi and Abu Dawood and Muslim scholars and jurists like Abu Hanifa, Hanbal, Shafi, Malik and even the great philosopher, Imam Ghazzali, we have every reason to shudder at the very idea of

accepting the infallibility of the so-called Hadis and Fiqh-based Shariah considering it as sacred as the Holy Quran.

An understanding of Shariah requires a re-appraisal of the history of Hadis collection, as the Hadis literature is the main source of Shariah, not the Quran, despite the claims on the contrary. Although the collection process started during the lifetime of the Prophet and immediately after his death, a systematic albeit unscientific collection process started around two hundred years after the death of the Prophet. From its absurdity to abysmal vulgarity, unscientific crudeness, the Hadis literature is full of contradictions, lies and concoctions to justify anything that suits the caprice of unrefined kings and nobles, debauch husbands and womanizers, polygamists, rapists and child abusers, dictators, ruthless murderers and slave owners. The collection process and the contents of the so-called Sahih (authentic) Bukhari Hadises, supposed to be the most authentic in the entire corpus of Hadis literature, are good enough in establishing their absurdity. Imam Bukhari is said to have collected more than 600,000 and retained around 7,000 Hadises considering them Sahih or authentic/acceptable. One may forgive Imam Bukhari's lapses and limitations but there is no justification in accepting all of these "Sahih Hadises" as the sayings of the Prophet ignoring their vulgarity, contradictions and anti-Quranic expositions.

The Hadis literature is full of vulgar, pornographic and totally unnecessary narrations about the Holy Prophet's methods of cleaning himself, his virility and other unnecessary details about his personal life. We also find in many of the "Sahih Hadises" how God created Eve (Hawwa) from a rib bone of Adam and why wives should prostrate before their husbands. We also learn from the Hadis literature that dogs, donkeys, horses and women belong to the same category, which contradict the Quran, history, science, nature and common sense. They are also unjust and humiliating for women, non-Arabs and non-Muslims. As the "Rib Story" about the creation of Eve is a pre-Islamic, Biblical myth and not mentioned in the Quran, so are the other pejorative expressions about women and non-Muslims, quite common in the Hadis literature, also do not exist in the Quranic text. While polygamy is very restrictive and conditional in the Quran (only war widows and orphan girls in the wake of the Battle of Wuhud were allowed to be married, "two, three or four" at a time to Muslim men), the Hadises and the Shariah law have not only justified polygamy but also the pre-Islamic institutions of harem, concubinage, temporary marriage or Mutah (according to the Shiite Shariah), veiling of women, castrating of slaves and among other vices, the subjugation of women in every sphere of life.

Fiqh or Muslim jurisprudence as it exists today as the text of the Shariah law developed during the Umayyad (660-750) and Abbasid dynasties (750-1258), especially during the 8th and 11th centuries. The early Abbasid rulers ruthlessly persecuted many leading Muslim jurists on charges of heresy, although most jurists justified absolute monarchy and other vices associated with it in the name of Shariah. The subservient jurists virtually created two sets of Shariah law and principles, one for the ruling classes and another for the masses. Under the aegis of these opportunist jurists, women, slaves and non-Muslims suffered most. Due to the double standards of Muslim rulers and their subservient *faqih*s

(jurists) it appears that what the Quran has given to women, the Shariah has conveniently taken it away from them. The evil of Shariah became most apparent during the ruthlessly autocratic Ottoman Turkish rule (1280-1922). The sultans and the self-styled Ottoman caliphs (from 1517 to 1924) formally introduced the Shariah as the official code in the empire. Later Indian Muslim sultans also introduced the Shariah for their Muslim subjects.

The grip of the Shariah became overpowering during the reign of the most immoderate Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. He not only implemented Shariah to the detriment of women, non-Muslims and Muslim free-thinkers but he also gave royal patronage and generous funding for the codification of Shariah law. This resulted in the publication of the magnum opus of Shariah in the Subcontinent, the famous *Fatawah-i-Alamgiri*. This collection of Shariah laws dating from the early Abbasid period is the standard source of Muslim law for the Sunni Muslims of the Subcontinent and beyond.

Further elaboration of the Shariah with regard to its contradictions with Quranic teachings and principles portrays it as the source of a new theology, ethics and law in parallel to the Quran and in total contravention of Islam. We may cite a few examples to prove our assertion:

- 1) While the Quran prescribes 100 lashes as punishment for adultery, the Shariah sanctions stoning to death for both the adulterer and adulteress (Stoning to death is a Jewish custom, once applied by the Prophet as a mode of punishment for a Jewish man and woman in accordance with their law in the nascent Jewish-Muslim state of Medina).
- 2) While there is no death penalty for apostasy in the Quran for renouncing Islam, the Shariah is very strict about enforcing the death penalty for the apostate or Murtad (the proponents of this harsh view might have been misled by the first Sunni Caliph Abu Bakr's declaring holy war against the apostates of Arabia who revolted and challenged the Medina-based nascent state of the early Muslims after the death of the Prophet).
- 3) While the Quran stipulates equal status for men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims in the eyes of Allah, the Shariah under the influence of spurious Hadises, deviates from the Quranic injunctions in this regard.

The *ulama* in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Subcontinent, also known by the generic term, mullah, are the main interpreters of the Shariah. These politically subservient, economically dependent and culturally backward and conservative classes of people include imams, *madrassa* (Muslim seminary) teachers, pirs (Sufi mentors) and other members of the *ulama*. Nevertheless, despite their subservience to the ruling elite and the rich and powerful, mullahs are very influential in moulding public opinion by legitimizing particular ideologies in the name of Islam. Their lacking exposure to liberal education has turned them into extremely intolerant and angry people. Their anger, immoderate views and megalomaniac attitude also reflect their inherent inferiority

complex vis-à-vis the modern/Western educated people, members of the rich and powerful elite classes. The mullahs are particularly very angry with the Western-educated, modern and self-reliant women. According to the mullah, these “extravagant” and “loose” women are “taking away” jobs and opportunities from the “productive” male members of society. The mullah’s inherent hatred for the modern, independent woman is also due to the latter’s defiance and hatred for the mullah, who is the least desirable person as her partner for life. We may assume that the mullah’s emphasis on Shariah-oriented education and government has something to do with his desire to empower himself by reversing the empowerment process of women in Bangladesh.

The mullah is so paranoid about women getting more education, independence and opportunities in the socio-economic and even political spheres that he is leaving no stone unturned to see the erosion in the empowerment process of women in the country. Mullahs impute natural disasters – floods, cyclones, pestilence and drought – on free mixing of the sexes by flouting “Allah’s law” as codified in the Shariah. It is interesting that an Indonesian Shariah judge ordered the punishment of women for not wearing headscarves as he felt that: “The tsunami was because of the sins of the people of Aceh”, and that “The Holy Koran says that if women are good, then a country is good [*The Times*, “Tsunami was God’s revenge for your wicked ways, women told” December 22, 2005].

Various civil and military rulers in Bangladesh (as in Pakistan and Indonesia) unwittingly used the mullah in their deceptive Islamization ploys to legitimize their rule among the “Islam loving” and God-fearing masses. The failure of the “welfare state” – the promised socialist-secular-democratic-nationalist Bangladesh – not long after its emergence in 1971, brought Islamism as an alternative political ideology [Hashmi 2004, *passim*]. The rapid growth in Islamization and the consequential obscurantism in the name of Shariah has further accentuated the culture of misogyny in the country. Misogyny in the name of Islam is well-reflected in the anti-NGO campaigns by village elders and mullahs. The nouveau misogyny of the mullah since the late 1970s is aimed at dissuading women from working for the NGOs and garment factories. The mullah diatribe against the Western donor sponsored mega NGOs, such as BRAC, Proshika, ASA and Grameen Bank, who exploit cheap female workers and borrowers to enrich themselves in the name of female empowerment, also reflects the ongoing cold war between the Islamic (rural) and secular (urban) exploiters of women in Bangladesh [Hashmi 2000, 116-33 & ch.5].