

BEYOND AGE

ISLAMIC INSIGHTS INTO THE ESSENCE OF MATURITY

In the war-torn streets of Gaza, amidst the rubble of a once lively neighbourhood, stands a 13-year-old boy with eyes that reflect a life of sorrow and responsibility far beyond his years. He has become the unintended guardian of his seven siblings, their ages spanning from a tender 6 months to 12 years. Each day, he navigates the challenges of finding food and safety, of comforting cries and drying tears, his childhood a faded memory replaced by the burdens of adulthood.

Half a world away, in a sprawling urban apartment filled with the latest technological luxuries, a 23-year-old indulges in the virtual battles and fantastical quests of video games. His days and nights blend into a seamless tapestry of leisure and entertainment, untouched by the harsh realities of survival or the demands of caregiving. His world is one of perpetual adolescence, where responsibilities are few and the concept of adulthood seems a distant concern.



Faced with these contrasting lives, one is compelled to ask: Who among them truly embodies the essence of maturity? Which one can be considered an adult? The young boy, who has taken on the role of parent, protector, and provider before his time? Or the young man, whose days are marked by personal enjoyment and freedom from care?

This narrative sets the stage for a deeper exploration into the nature of childhood and adulthood as understood in Islam as well as well as other contexts, shaped and defined, at times, by the cultural, economic, and historical contexts in which they exist.

UNDERSTANDING ADULTHOOD AND CHILDHOOD IN ISLAM VS THE MODERN WORLD

Neil Postman, in his work *The Disappearance of Childhood*, traces the concept of childhood back to the Renaissance, arguing that it, like other social structures, was a cultural invention. According to Postman, the demarcation between children and adults was much blurrier in the oral traditions of the Middle Ages, where childhood effectively ended at the age of seven, coinciding with a child's ability to communicate effectively. This period saw no need for primary education as we understand it today, as learning occurred through apprenticeship and direct experience.

The concept of adolescence was absent, creating within young men and women a sense of maturity that modern societies would find unrecognizable. They were considered to be younger adults who took on many of the same responsibilities as adults. Adolescence is a relatively new concept and was not considered a stage of human development until 1904 when G. Stanley Hall coined the term in one of his works.



The transformation in the perception of stages of human development, particularly following the First World War, with the introduction of new educational paradigms and legal definitions around the age of consent, goes against the general understanding of this concept throughout history. Puberty has always been a symbol of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Despite slight differences on specifics, which reflected diverse societies as well as broader shifts in political, economic, and social ideologies, it was normal for a child to transition to adulthood around the time of puberty, without the existence of the concept of adolescence.

This is a foolproof marker dictated by biological changes and tailored by our Creator to each person based on their unique circumstances, including genetics and environment. For example, women in warmer environments reach puberty at a much earlier age than those in cold environments. The average temperature of the country or area is considered the chief factor here, affecting not just menstruation but also the entire process of sexual development at puberty. A girl becomes a woman when she begins her menstruation cycle. The significance of menstruation is that it is a sign that the female body is being prepared to bear a child amongst other things. As such, Allah has directed that puberty should be the determining factor when passing a judgment on the age of responsibility, duty, consent, etc.

When looking at the modern understanding of the transition to adulthood, we note that in some countries, this is marked by the stark boundary of an 18th birthday. This legal demarcation, however, belies the nuanced reality of human development. It fails to acknowledge the absurdity of considering a person a child at 11:59 PM and suddenly an adult capable of consent at 12:00 AM. In Japan, people can legally have sex at 13 years of age, and in Spain they can legally have sex at the age of 12.. During the last century, the age of consent was 10 years old in the U.S. California was the first state to change the age of consent to 14, which it did in 1889. After California, other U.S. states also raised the age of consent. This fluidity underscores a broader incapacity to differentiate between the vulnerability of a child and the maturity of an understanding adult, trapping society in a moral quandary. Through these examples, it becomes clear that in the modern world, irrefutable biological stages are side-lined, while social constructs and ever-changing models have been used as the determining factor.

WESTERN MORALS VS ISLAMIC MORALS

In Western societies, the delineation of moral and immoral behaviours is frequently mediated through laws and legislations, reflecting a profound reliance on political figures and other mortals. This inevitably leads to subjective, everchanging standards and goalposts depending on which ideology holds the most sway at that given time or what the influential people of that era deem most convenient.

Ironically, these politicians and philosophers, who wield significant influence over the moral compass of their constituents, are often perceived as embodiments of unethical and corrupt behaviours.

The average individual in the West harbours a deep-seated mistrust in their innate understanding of morality, opting instead to defer to the authority of other mortals. Such deference is manifest in the arbitrary legal frameworks around age of consent as illustrated above. When put into practice, this highlights the absurd nature of morals and laws in the modern world. A 40-year-old man having sex with a 14-year-old woman may be a "paedophile" in the United States according to the current law, but that is not true in China today, where the age of consent is 14, nor was it true in the United States a century ago.

Islamic morals on the other hand, are dictated by the directives issued to us by Allah, who is above all error and fault. Therefore, we have objective, unchanging ethical standards that have stood through centuries of change and are still as relevant and correct as when they were first revealed. The legal framework of Islam has remained unchanged for past 14 centuries despite the fact that Islam has encountered many cultures and spanned across many centuries. That allows us to confidently judge any situation using the framework given to us by Allah without the interference of subjective human opinion in areas where it is not needed. With regards to this specific case, biology is a much better standard by which to determine puberty, not the arbitrariness of human culture.



ISLAMIC MARRIAGE VS SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Western legal framework's approach to regulating sexual relationships is arbitrary, particularly the legalization of sex outside of marriage. This stance necessitates a complex system of regulation, including the contentious issue of age of consent.



In Islam, there is no space for sexual relationships outside of marriage. Islam considers marriage as a sacred covenant, imbued with legal, ethical, and moral considerations that ensure the protection and rights of all parties involved.

According to Islamic law, the marriage contract and the act of sexual intercourse are distinct entities, each governed by its own set of rules and conditions, although no sexual relationships are allowed between two people before marriage. The marriage contract serves as a formal agreement establishing the mutual rights and responsibilities of the husband and wife, including, but not restricted to, physical relations. These measures are designed not only to safeguard individuals, but to uphold the societal fabric, underscoring a profound depth in the understanding of marriage, consent, and maturity.

This contrasts sharply with the Western approach, where the equivalence of sexual relations inside and outside of marriage dilutes the sanctity and seriousness with which such unions are approached. Casual sex has been normalized in most societies bringing with it the increased risk of STIs, physical assault, unplanned pregnancies and abortions as well as negatively impacting many people's emotional wellbeing. The harms to society are also notable with an increase in adultery, single parent households, children with unknown fathers, the absence of family structures etc. All of these have a negative impact on society.

The Western societal trend towards the sexualization of children has reached alarming levels, with educational systems introducing concepts of gender identity and sexual orientation to children at an increasingly early age. This has led to contentious debates over the rights of children to make life-altering decisions about their gender, including irreversible medical procedures, based on the premise of self-identified gender awareness.

Such practices are totally at odds with Islamic principles, which advocate for the protection and innocence of childhood, free from the imposition of adult concepts of sexuality and identity.

In reflecting upon the contrasts between Western and Islamic perspectives on childhood, gender identity, and marriage, it becomes evident that these are not merely academic debates but issues deeply rooted in the ethical, cultural, and spiritual fabric of societies.

The Western approach, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and the legalization of practices that are detrimental to society as well as the holistic happiness of the individual, raises profound ethical concerns.

Meanwhile, Islamic traditions offer a framework that prioritizes the protection of society and the individual, upholding innocence and the sanctity of marriage, and emphasizing the importance of physical and emotional readiness for adulthood and its responsibilities.

THE PRINCIPLE OF NO HARM IN ISLAM

Amongst the fundamental principles of Islamic Jurisprudence is, "No harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated" (lā ḍarar wa-lā ḍirār). Therefore, Islamic jurisprudence stipulates that for sexual relations to be permissible, both parties must possess the physical and emotional capability for such intimacy because a human beings wellbeing is highly valued in Islam. This principle applies regardless of age, emphasizing that consent alone is insufficient without the prerequisite of maturity, emotional capacity, and physical ability to engage in marital relations responsibly. For instance, while the marriage to a person of advanced age may be legally permissible, sexual relations may be deemed inappropriate or even forbidden if such ability is lacking. In a like manner, a 14 year old girl, part of a Muslim majority community, in a metropolitan area, might be emotionally unfit to get married at such a young age. Today, a girl growing up in rural Yemen might be emotionally ready to get married at the onset of puberty whereas a girl who lives in a city could take a few more years to gain that level of maturity. That does not change the fact that both of them would be physically able to have sexual relations and reproduce when each of them reaches puberty. Emotional readiness for marriage would be more subjective and be left to the discretion of responsible guardians as well as a girls willingness to commit to the marriage.

MARRIAGE OF 'Ā'ISHAH (R.A)

The above discussions should all be kept in mind when studying the age of 'Ā'ishah (R.A) at the time of her marriage to the Prophet ﷺ

Two ḥadīth from the most esteemed and authentic books of narrations, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, explicitly state that 'Ā'ishah (R.A) was 6 years old when she was married to the Prophet (S.A.W), and that she was 9 years old when the marriage was consummated. Both of these have been narrated by 'Ā'ishah (R.A) herself. A point to note is the lapse of time between the marriage and consummation, this clearly indicates that her parents were waiting for her to reach puberty before her marriage was consummated. These narrations, corroborated by additional authentic ḥadīth from various sources, establish a consistent portrayal of her age. Consequently, even someone with a basic grasp of Islamic knowledge would find these accounts compelling and integral to Islamic history. The unanimity among prominent medieval Islamic scholars further reinforces this viewpoint, with Ibn Ḥazm, Ibn Kathīr, and Ibn 'Abd al-Barr highlighting a consensus on 'Ā'ishah's (R.A) age without any dissenting opinions.

In contemporary discourse, the curious debate surrounding the age of 'Ā'ishah (R.A) among modern scholars contrasts sharply with centuries of relative disinterest in this particular point. Scholars treated it just as they would any other narration, scrutinizing the narrators and other factors which would establish the authenticity of the narration or cause any doubt with regards to its credibility.

In fact, there are no records from any historical sources which display any criticism levelled against the Prophet (S.A.W) over this marriage, nor did any of his adversaries at that time use this marriage in an attempt to tarnish his reputation despite their continuous efforts to vilify and slander him in all ways possible. Rather, the Prophet (S.A.W) was considered a model of good morals and character.

The truth is that a shift in societal sentiment towards child marriages sparked a reconsideration of these ḥadīth concerning 'Ā'ishah's (R.A) age as well as other historical Islamic events. This lens, influencing our perception of the past, often leads to one of two erroneous outcomes: either casting doubts on the Prophet's (S.A.W) character or dismissing certain ḥadīth as unauthentic simply because it seems incompatible with our present worldview. To judge the Prophet's (S.A.W) character based on the relative standards of some cultures today is not only absurd, but also unfair. Discarding authentic ḥadīth due to mere societal trends is also illogical and warrants the dismissal of centuries of academic expertise on this subject.

The conundrum arises when certain ḥadīth conflict with our modern sensibilities. Do we instinctively question the authenticity of ḥadīth or rather challenge our contemporary worldview? Continually scrutinizing ḥadīth based on subjective inclinations, despite their authenticity, risks the systematic dismissal of ḥadīth. If subjective preferences can negate ḥadīth, we are diminishing their role in Islam, reducing them to tools that merely validate our desires, rather than being a means of guidance to communities.

Claims suggesting she was older at marriage lack substantive evidence to discard well-documented ḥadīth in Bukhārī and Muslim. Such contentions often stem from our own insecurities, attempting to justify our present beliefs rather than accepting true historical facts that are perfectly moral according to Islamic teachings as well as rationally sound by all standards.

The ḥadīth regarding 'Ā'ishah's (R.A) age are well-documented and agreed upon by classical Islamic scholars.

Modern critiques often stem from a contemporary worldview, which are not applicable when analysing historical events. Understanding the Prophet's (S.A.W) actions according to the laws set out by Allah, within the cultural and societal norms of his time, is crucial for a fair and balanced view of Islamic history.

When dealing with such issues, a critical evaluation of our worldview becomes imperative. What does Islam have to say about it? Were child marriages prevalent during the Prophet's (S.A.W) time? How were they perceived by society?

The Islamic stance on the matter is clear, as explained previously. It was the norm of the Arab society in the 7th century to allow pubescent marriages. This is also the case for many present-day societies in Asia and Africa, as well as some communities in Europe and America. The Prophet's (S.A.W) contemporaries, both friends and enemies, raised no objection to his marriage to 'Ā'ishah (R.A). We see evidence for this in the lack of criticism against the marriage until today. This has been caused by a change in culture and subjective legislation.

Objecting to the age of 'Ā'ishah (R.A) at the time of her marriage becomes challenging when considering the early onset of puberty among women during that era. While marrying a girl of such age is sometimes considered inappropriate today, historical records and statements, including 'Ā'ishah's (R.A) own words, indicate otherwise.

In summary, the Islamic paradigm provides a timeless framework for understanding human development, morality, and societal wellbeing, contrasting sharply with the fluctuating standards of the West. The marriage of 'Ā'ishah (R.A) to the Prophet (S.A.W) exemplifies this, reflecting practices aligned with principles of consent, maturity, and welfare within their historical and cultural context. Islamic teachings offer a model that prioritizes human dignity and societal harmony, demonstrating resilience and universal applicability across cultures.

The enduring relevance of Islamic principles, especially in matters of marriage and moral conduct, offers clear guidance in a world marked by moral confusion. Far from being a point of criticism, the narrative of 'Ā'ishah (R.A) and the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) underscores the wisdom embedded in Islamic traditions, fostering societies that honour marriage, protect childhood, and celebrate true adulthood.

The Islamic paradigm stands as a beacon of clarity, guiding us towards a harmonious and principled way of life, transcending contemporary biases, and reaffirming the timeless truths that guide towards fulfillment, justice, and peace.



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