

## **Towards Establishing an Ideal Family: Insights from Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur***

**- Zubair Hamid**

### **Abstract**

*The institution of family is a social unit known for the notions of love, care, concern and understanding. The Quran describes and regulates the workability of the family relations in general principle 'affection for kinsfolk' (Al- Quran 42:23). In this way a natural and licit love has been established between humans and their families in accordance with the degree of closeness between family members. Due to industrialization, the problems of mixing of sexes, moral degradation, individualism and economic independence of women, this love, degree of closeness, bond and concern of the family received a setback. Nowadays, a family lasts only up to as long as the children are helpless and in need of constant attention. This issue has been addressed and penned on by many Muslim intellectuals. In this connection, this paper shall be an attempt to explore the stance of Said Nursi on the institution of family.*

**Key Words:** Family – Social Institution – Said Nursi – Risale- i Nur

### **The Institution of Family**

Family is a basic social institution and the first relation (Husband-Wife) Allah has created. It operates as a micro-society in itself. The regulation of rights, obligations, behaviour, mood and attitude by this micro-society at the fundamental stage aims at manifestation of these notions at a large scale. A principle of balance is created to regulate the relationship between different persons at different stages. The Muslim family is not a nuclear one rather constitutes of three or four generations as is evident from the Islamic law of inheritance. But this institution also underwent a change due to changing global scenario.<sup>1</sup>

### **Functions**

As a plinth of socio-cultural mansion it ensures socio-cultural and ideological stability over the society. It is not for mere reproduction and procreation although the preservation of race is one of its prime objectives. But procreation also demands a stable structure to come into operation which is provided by the family. Secondly, the function of the family is to protect morals and satiation of the sexual urge in a unique perspective.

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It enjoins the institution of marriage to fulfill this natural desire where pleasure and responsibility go together and protects both from illicit relations.<sup>2</sup> Another objective of the family is to sustain and generate love, kindness, mercy, compassion, mutual confidence, self-sacrifice, solace, tolerance, fellow-feeling and succor. Hence, family provides a conducive room for the development of human personality. Function of child upbringing, their education, character-building and their initiation into religion and culture which no other institution can take care of other than family. The family also provides social and economic security to the members. The head is entitled to and responsible to take care of the maintenance of the members. Members remain intact, orphans are not thrown into orphanages, the old are not left at the mercy of old age homes and the unemployed are not left at the assistance of the public which leads to the cohesion and integration among the relations.<sup>3</sup> At the higher level Family makes a wider spectrum including diverse families and groups through matrimonial relations. Family set up inculcates and increases the sense of responsibility and stimulates one to make efforts towards improving one's social and economic lot. Family is a 'cradle of civilization' which enables the new generation to interact with the society.<sup>4</sup>

### **Impact of the Changing Global Scenario**

From the late eighteenth century the Christian capitalist West began to encroach the Muslim world economically, culturally and politically following 'colonizing tactics'<sup>5</sup> introducing Western concepts and values such as secularism and modernization, as well as the territorial bureaucratic state. Westernization also brought the industrial and technological advancement lacking in the Islamic world. Various explanations have been given for the fact that Europe had developed into an industrial society while the Islamic world was unable to do so. While many of the prerequisites for the development of the Middle East into an industrial society existed, its development was seen to have been prevented by external factors namely colonialism, "which dominated politically and exploited economically and which led to cultural humiliation and the loss of self-confidence."<sup>6</sup> Colonialism is not a European innovation rather, with its accompanying ideology – imperialism, has been a repeating force in and the feature of the human history. It is the conquest and control of other people's land and goods, as defined by Ania Loomba.<sup>7</sup> Social setup in the Muslim societies also underwent a change. The mass migration of the rural people into cities for the employment resulted in

rapid urbanization. The work too became unavailable in the cities due to the growing unemployment with the passage of time. It led to the breakdown of the social fabric as men folk left home in search of work and the women were forced into single parenthood and burdened with running the family alone.<sup>8</sup> Humans turned individualistic, selfish, and materialistic and developed utilitarian attitude.<sup>9</sup>

However, with advancements in science and technology, humanity conquered new means of progress and prosperity but lost the spiritual and moral basis for the basic institution for social stability; that is “the family”. The industrial shift has debarred family to play its role as an important social institution. The overwork of the parents has created a gap between husband-wife and parent-children relationships. Parents have not enough time for character building of their children and the mature children too are insensitive about their parents. Domestic violence, unsatisfactory relationship between spouses has badly affected the personalities of children. The real wisdom behind marriages and the nature and importance of family as an institution of the society has been forgotten.

### **Said Nursi: A Brief Biographical Account**

Commonly known as *Bediuzzaman* (wonder of the times), was born in Nurus, eastern Turkey to – Mirza and Nuriye – a Kurdish family. He received early education at various religious schools in the region. He mastered the Quran, Islamic jurisprudence, oratory, philosophy, history and geography in a short period. He had a photographic memory; as a result he memorized the Quran by heart and the most important Arabic dictionaries and several texts on Islamic law. He studied science, mathematics and gained proficiency in some foreign languages. Said Nursi visited a number of *Madaris* (Islamic seminaries) but his thirst was not quenched by any of the teachers or *Madaris*.<sup>10</sup> Said Nursi spent some time in *Naqashbandi* lodges and studied mostly under the direction of the teachers who belonged to the *Naqashbandi* order. In 1907 and 1908 in Istanbul and Salonica, he advocated the establishment of a university in Eastern Anatolia (*Madrassa al-Zehra*) where physical sciences would be taught alongside religious sciences. He founded an organization to combat Western addiction of Turkish society known as *Al-Ittehad-i Muhammadi* (The Muhammadan Union). Nursi took part in World War I, got wounded and was taken as prisoner of war in 1915.<sup>11</sup> In 1925, he began writing his *Risale-i Nur* (Epistle of light) and completed a greater part of it. Said Nursi was arrested, imprisoned, and exiled to various Anatolian cities although

the accusations against him were never proved. After a brief illness in 1960, he died in Urfa in southeastern Turkey. His *Risale-i Nur*, a commentary on the Quran, explains and expounds the “truth” in the Quran, besides covering numerous subjects such as concepts of belief in God, purpose of life and creation, life after death, human responsibility and accountability, justice and worship.<sup>12</sup>

### **Nursi’s Understanding of Family**

The fountainhead of the worldly life is the family. It is a paradise which provides shelter and works as a ‘fortress of worldly happiness’ plus acts as microcosm for its members. The happiness of this world is possible through real, sincere and firm respect and self-sacrificing compassion. These notions can be practically implemented due to everlasting friendship and sense of togetherness among the members and their belief in these values. Nursi cites an example that if a husband says, “My wife will be my constant companion in an everlasting world and eternal life. It does not matter if she is now old and ugly, for she will have an immortal beauty.” A husband needs to convince himself that he will be kind, loving and devoted to his wife as she was a ‘beautiful *hoor*’. Otherwise the apparent friendship would evoke superficial, temporary, animalistic feelings and false compassion and would transform this worldly paradise into hell.<sup>13</sup> The relations of the family members are so intact that a mother trembles when she sees his children exposed to any kind of danger she would sacrifice her soul. Nursi says:

A mother is so generous, so compassionate, so self-sacrificing a friend that driven by her compassion she will sacrifice all her world, her life, and her comfort for her child. A timid hen, even, the simplest and lowest level of motherhood, will cast herself at a dog and attack a lion in order to protect her young, through a tiny manifestation of that compassion.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, the children feel disturbed for being unable to save their father or brother from any calamity. Due to the turbulences of the worldly life, the happy family loses its happiness in many respects; this period acts as a touchstone to the relations, togetherness, character and love. Family members should provide open valve to belief in Hereafter to illuminate its members with sincere respect, love, compassion and kindness. The happiness of humanity starts to unfold from this home. Towns act as a larger family unit which if governed with belief in hereafter the values of cordiality, sincerity, virtue, self-sacrifice, morality and

zeal will dominate. If these values are not inculcated then anarchy, savagery, selfishness, hypocrisy and deception will poison the life of the town where the children will be trouble-makers, the youth will drink, the strong will oppress and the elderly will weep.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Dress of Women**

Nursi accuses modern civilization which encouraged men towards tyranny, hypocrisy, lust, oppression and licentiousness. But the Qur'an compassionately commands women to wear the veil of modesty to demand respect and prevent themselves and their chastity from being trodden by the ill desires and not to be like unworthy goods for the excitement of lust. Civilization (modern) has drawn women out of their homes, ripped their veils and corrupted mankind. Family life is based on mutual love, respect and understanding of man and wife but immodest dress has poisoned family life, remarks Nursi. Men look lustfully and with desire at the corpse of a beautiful woman, who is need of pity and compassion, hence destroy moral values.<sup>16</sup> Said Nursi says, "Cleanliness is their adornment; their good character is their splendor; their gracious beauty is their chastity; their compassion, their perfection; their children, their relaxation."<sup>17</sup> Nursi accuses those women who have been given increased freedom which resulted in immorality in mankind. Risale-i Nur contains a treatise (The Twenty-fourth Flash) on 'Islamic Dress for Women' in which Nursi marks that the proportion of marriages decrease with the abandonment of Islamic dress. The youth wants his wife to be chaste and not careless in matters of dress and morals.<sup>18</sup> Nursi says that the Asian lands cannot be compared with that of Europe which has a cold and frigid climate. Climate has a considerable influence on the persona of an individual's morality. He further adds:

Asia, that is, the lands of Islam, are relatively torrid countries... Perhaps in those cold countries immodest dress does not stimulate the animal appetites and carnal desires of those cold people, and be a means of abuse. But immodest dress which continually excites the carnal lusts of the easily influenced and sensitive people of hot countries is certainly the cause of much abuse and waste and the weakening of the young generation and a loss of strength.<sup>19</sup>

The basic characteristic of women is loyalty and she is entitled to protect and preserve her chastity, property and children, carelessness may destroy her loyalty and she may suffer the pangs of conscience.

## The Licit Love

Love sincerely your wife in this world in response to her tenderness, virtues and character for she prevents you and herself from disobeying Allah. Allah has promised an eternal wife in hereafter to those who love their wives licitly in this world, records Said Nursi. Nursi uses the term *hoor*- the ultimate epitome of beauty- beautifully adorned, intimate, friend and attractive which will be endowed to those men to love and beloved.<sup>20</sup>

Man should build his love on her fine conduct, the most permanent and best of beauty, which is particular to womanhood and its compassion. In that way, when the unfortunate advances in years, her husband's love for her will persist. For his wife is not merely a temporary helper and companion in this worldly life, but an eternal, lovable companion for everlasting life, so the older they grow they should increase also in love for each other, and compassion, and respect. Family life now, which, under the guise of culture and civilization is a temporary animal relationship followed by eternal separation, is being destroyed at its very foundations.<sup>21</sup>

The result of this licit love is the procreation thus accomplishing the family. Cherishing, nourishing and caressing children has a unique taste which pleases parents.<sup>22</sup> Said Nursi counsels women:

My dear sisters, you should be certain that ... pleasures and enjoyment outside the bounds of the licit [cohabitation] are pains and distress ten times greater. In which case, make ... licit pleasures and be content[ed] with them. Innocent conversation with your innocent children in your home is more pleasurable than a hundred cinemas.<sup>23</sup>

Nursi suggests women not to be dominated under a westernized husband rather obtain your livelihood like an innocent peasant women with frugality and contentment and do not sell yourselves.<sup>24</sup>

## The Pursuit of Happiness

The only way to preserve women's happiness in this world and hereafter and save their innate qualities from corruption is to train them in religion. Risale-i Nur maintains:

Happy the man who in order not to lose his companion of eternity, copies his righteous wife and so becomes righteous himself. And happy the woman who, seeing her husband to be pious, adheres to religion herself so as not to lose her everlasting friend and companion. Unhappy the man who follows his wife in sin, does not try to make her give it up, but joins her. And unhappy the woman who, seeing her husband's sinfulness, follows him in another way. And alas for the wife and husband who assist one another in throwing each other into the Fire. That is, who encourage one another to embrace the evils of civilization.<sup>25</sup>

The happiness could be pursued through following the Islamic conduct and teachings within the bounds of Shari'ah. If a woman sees bad conduct and disloyalty in her husband, she should try to reform her husband's faults to save her companion of eternity. She should avoid showing herself to others by unveiling herself just to attract others is harmful. Women are compassionate and weak hence frightened of strangers and compelled to conceal themselves with the outer garments. If a man commits a sin for eight minutes but the penalty of these eight minutes of pleasure is bore by the woman for eight months and then rears this unprotected child for eight years therefore has to pay the penalty a hundred times greater. Women are a blessed creature created to live their lives happily in the family within the circumference of Shari'ah.<sup>26</sup>

### **Polygamy**

Polygamy refers to a system of marriage wherein one person can have more than one spouse at a time. It is neither obligatory nor encouraged or forbidden but merely permitted. Polygamy is generally of two types; polygyny (wherein a man has more than one woman in marital relations) and polyandry (wherein a woman marries more than one man). Islam provides a room for limited polygyny and prohibits polyandry vehemently. It existed from the initial stage of human civilization on the earth. It is a traditional practice supported by the legal rulings of the Quran and the Sunnah, but was not an invention of Islam. Islam regulated this practice, limited it, made it more humane and instituted equal rights and status for all wives.<sup>27</sup> According to Said Nursi:

Civilization does not accept polygamy. It considers the Qur'an's decree to be contrary to wisdom and opposed to man's benefits. Indeed, if the purpose of marriage was only to satisfy lust, polygamy would have been contrary to it. But as is testified to by all animals and

corroborated by plants that ‘marry’, the purpose and aim of marriage is reproduction. The pleasure of satisfying lust is a small wage given by Divine mercy to encourage performance of the duty. Since in truth and according to wisdom, marriage is for reproduction and the perpetuation of the species, since women can give birth only once a year, and can be impregnated only half the month, and after the age of fifty fall into despair, and men can impregnate till a hundred years old, and thus one woman is insufficient for one man, civilization has been compelled to accept numerous houses of ill-repute.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Family has functioned as a socio-biological institution throughout the history. It also witnessed changes due to industrialization and modernization but displayed a remarkable rebounding. Apart from the role of procreation, socialization and regulation of the relations with the community are unwavering. The institution of the family is a fortress of happiness for all its members. It provides the refuge and members (of the family) come to rescue one another during the upheavals. This institution is based on the values of togetherness, love, compassion, kindness and self-sacrifice. Family which represents a microcosm is the basis of a humane society which works as a conjunction between the members and the society. Family represents the culture, structure, mood and regulations of the society. Family ensures the contentment of an individual regarding his life. The chord of understanding must be strong to make the relationship everlasting between the members.

## References and Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Khurshid Ahmad, *Family Life in Islam*, Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers, New Delhi, 2018, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-32.

<sup>5</sup> The colonizer prepared itself adequately in order to face the obstacles. During the process of colonization scholars were made to work alongside soldiers. One of the colonizers Napoleon is said to have about 160 scholars (who were charged to gather the firsthand information about Egypt) to help him in the colonial administration and produce a body of knowledge about the colony and the local masses that became central to the mission. He himself had acquainted himself with the European writings both recent and classical extensively. The colonizing nation developed a justification to colonize and assured the colony to restore its greatness. For further details see; Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of the Empire*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012, pp.26-27.



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- <sup>6</sup> Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam, Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 43.
- <sup>7</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge, 2015, p. 20.
- <sup>8</sup> Tamara Sonn, *Islam*, p. 133.
- <sup>9</sup> M. Zaki Kirmani, *Western Civilization: Impact on Individual, Society and Knowledge*, Aligarh: Nai Naslen Publications, 1983, p. 21.
- <sup>10</sup> Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: Towards An Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi*, State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Hassan Horkuc, *Said Nursi's Ideal for Human Society: Moral and Social Reform in the Risale-i Nur*, Duham: Durham University, 2004, p. 112.
- <sup>12</sup> Ian Markham and Suendam Birinci, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought, and Writings*, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>13</sup> Said Nursi, *The Rays*, (tr.), Sukran Vahide, New Delhi: Barla Publications, 2015, p. 204.
- <sup>14</sup> Said Nursi, *The Letters*, (tr.), Sukran Vahide, New Delhi: Barla Publications, 2015, p. 60.
- <sup>15</sup> Said Nursi, *The Rays*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 246.
- <sup>16</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, (tr.), Sukran Vahide, New Delhi: Barla Publications, 2015, p. 423.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 761.
- <sup>18</sup> Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, (tr.), Sukran Vahide, New Delhi: Barla Publications, 2015, p. 259.
- <sup>19</sup> *Idem.*
- <sup>20</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 678.
- <sup>21</sup> Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 262-263.
- <sup>22</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 678-79.
- <sup>23</sup> Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 264.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264-65.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 263-64.
- <sup>27</sup> Cenap Cakmak (ed.), *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia*, ABC-CLIO, California, 2017, pp. 1238-1239.
- <sup>28</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 344.