

# THE DEEN OF OLD WOMEN

BY FAREEHA KHAN, PHD

**Q**uestion: *I find the idea of being an old woman depressing, and hope to die when I can no longer take care of myself and be a contributing member of society. Is that wrong?*

**A**nswer: It is understandable that someone today would find the idea of becoming old depressing. There is a sense in contemporary Western society that if one experiences debilitating aspects of aging, it is one's own fault, as captured in these jarring poetic lines:

*You have let yourself go. You  
have not refused the years  
politely, firmly like an anorexic  
at a dinner party.<sup>i</sup>*

Some of this has to do with the fierce individualism of Western and particularly American society, the “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” attitude for which many American is proud. Liberal thinkers have even proposed a “successful aging paradigm” in which they promote three aspects of well-being for the elderly: 1) low probability of disease and disability, 2) high cognitive and physical capacity, and 3) active engagement with life.<sup>ii</sup> Predictably for a liberal perspective, those who promote this paradigm believe that these parameters for successful aging “can be attained through individual choice and effort.” In other words, to have health, strength, and the ability to actively engage as an old person is solely dependent on you and your will to achieve it. If this is the view one subscribes to, it is easy to see why weakness and decrepitude would be seen not as a fact of life but a sign of moral failure.



Modern Questions, Grounded Answers

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Other intellectual factors also contribute to the modern devaluation of aging and the elderly. Capitalism as a mode of thinking values the production of capital, i.e. wealth, so when one is no longer in the actively working phase of one's life, his value in a capitalist society is much decreased. In such societies, the stigma against the elderly is not as obvious as that against black youths or single-parent mothers. The elderly are still seen as being deserving, so while they can be patronized and neglected, they can't be openly attacked.<sup>iii</sup> Since people are evaluated in terms of their accumulation of capital, their current labor power, or their ability to reproduce labor power, if you can't produce or reproduce, you are seen as essentially useless. From such a perspective, it is the *dependence* of the elderly that is most irksome. "To be permanently retired...lacks the sense of legitimacy and purpose attached to the role of the worker,"<sup>iv</sup> causing not just society but the old person himself to doubt his own worth.

Along with capitalism, feminist activism also ends up devaluing the elderly. Barbara MacDonald (d. 2000) pointed out this problem relentlessly among feminist circles. As a feminist herself, she called attention to how old women were particularly victimized by capitalist thinking: "she was the first to point out that young women's alienation from old women, their dread of becoming them, their revulsion toward old women's bodies, is a direct result of a sexist consumer society that falsely empowers youth and disempowers the old."<sup>v</sup> MacDonald pushed her fellow feminists, who were overwhelmingly younger women than herself, to take seriously the social justice needs of not just the young but also the old. But her

paradigm for reforming the ageism among feminists was itself deeply feminist. She refused to let old women be defined by their roles within the family, since feminists see family roles as being constrictive to their individual freedom. "We [old women] are not your grandmothers, your mothers, or your aunts,"<sup>vi</sup> she angrily declared to an audience of feminist activists. She wanted such family roles to be shed as primary forms of identity so that old and young could work together on the basis of age equality. Even her view of what special contribution old women could make to the movement was grounded in her feminist vision. MacDonald did not hold to the "romantic cliché"<sup>vii</sup> of old women having wisdom. Instead, she saw the old woman to have a special *power*: "For the first time in her life, an old woman can refuse society's meaningless busywork and self betrayals and she can take charge of her own life. Such a woman won't do what she is told, she will only do what is important to her own life direction."<sup>viii</sup>

MacDonald's feminist activism never went very far, however, despite the decades she spent trying to bring other feminists around to her point of view. The reason for her failure to make feminists take on the "old women's cause" is obvious to an outsider: despite claims for any new power held by the old woman, the fact is that generally the old woman is not powerful. She is weak, dependent, and in a sense the personification of vulnerability itself. For a movement whose whole focus is on empowerment and the attainment of full independence, the vulnerability of the old woman is the antithesis of everything the feminist stands for. "The elderly," are "largely *redundant* as agents of radical change,"<sup>ix</sup> which

is why the specter of the old woman makes feminist activists uncomfortable.

As can be seen from the above discussion, dependence and vulnerability are the exact opposite of the core values of autonomy and empowerment that are the stated goals of liberal, capitalist society. It is understandable that a Muslim living in such a society would absorb these values and wish for death before these socially undesirable traits become apparent on one. But the conscientious Muslim probes beyond this model, and asks, what is it that is really required of me from this earthly existence?

*I have not created jinn nor mankind except for the sole purpose of manifesting their slavehood to Me.* This point is mentioned by Allah Most High in *Surah al-Dhariyat*,<sup>x</sup> as well as in other ways throughout the Qur'an. The manifestation of our slavehood means to obey Allah and His Messenger (Allah bless him and grant him peace) such that at each stage of one's life and in each role assigned to one (child, spouse, parent, elder), one gives what is due, according to the supreme wisdom of God. We are tried through changing stages and the challenges faced in our lives "in order to test which of you is best in conduct."<sup>xi</sup> The best conduct is not statically determined, but in fact shifts with the changes that our bodies, intellects, and capabilities undergo as we develop into adulthood and then begin to age. The "good deed" of a believer is not always an action, like earning, spending, or fighting for the truth. Sometimes, the most appropriate good deed is simply to show patience before Allah when face to face with one's own weakness and dependence.

The fact that good conduct changes according to one's circumstances is a tremendous mercy of Allah. It means also that life in all its variety is always a source of benefit, if lived for the sake of God. When asked who is the best of all people, the Messenger of God (Allah bless him and grant him peace) replied, "*One whose life is long and his deeds are good.*" He was then asked about the worst of people, and said it was "*One whose life is long and his deeds are evil.*"<sup>xii</sup> A lengthy life is therefore a blessing, but contingently. It works in one's favor if one uses it well and is productive, productivity being defined as doing what Allah commands and refraining from what He forbids. The person who reaches old age and still is stubbornly clinging to his bad old ways, for him "there is no excuse,"<sup>xiii</sup> since he had a long grace period in the form of a lengthy earthly existence to figure out what is ultimately required of him. But for the believer who, year after year, acted according to his aim of pleasing Allah, when he finally reaches old age his gray hair is a sign, a kind of badge of honor, indicating the multitude of rewards he has gathered up for himself: "*Whoever has one hair turn gray in the path of Allah, it will be a light for him on the Day of Resurrection.*"<sup>xiv</sup>

It is for this reason that the presence of the elderly among us is a tremendous blessing. They are a sign of where we are heading, a reminder of our eventual return to God, and their gray hair and their prayerful submission to Allah are a means for us to see through our own illusions of self-sufficiency. For this reason, there are many traditions related from the Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace) that attest to the honor that is due to the elderly Muslim, such as:<sup>xv</sup>

***“Anyone who does not show mercy to our children nor acknowledge the right of our old people is not one of us.”***

***“Part of respect for God is to show respect to an old Muslim.”***

***“One may exalt Allah through showing kindness and respect to the elderly among you.”***

One can see from these Prophetic teachings that rank, honor, and status—what is valued in a person—is not due to their worldly accomplishments, but is rather measured according to the time they have spent in the service of God.

In many ways, it is the old woman more than anyone else who best represents the reality of our human existence. Having toiled and served her family for years, often without praise or thanks, her sincerity (*ikhlas*) is at a level that few younger folks can match.<sup>xvi</sup> And having been dependent in one way or another throughout her life—first on her parents, then husband, and finally her children (or having no one at all)—she sees her incapacity and vulnerability before God in a uniquely perceptive way. Thus, one finds that heartfelt prayers, for herself and for others, issue forth easily from the mouths of such women. In some narrations, great scholars like Imam al-Juwayni and even Sayyiduna ‘Umar (Allah be pleased with him) asked Allah for the faith and religion (*dīn*) of old women,<sup>xvii</sup> indicating their wish to embody the old woman’s unencumbered perception of her absolute neediness and reliance on Allah.

Even the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) indicated the lack of worldliness and the strong focus on the Afterlife that old women possess. One day as he sat among a group of Companions, a Bedouin joined their company. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) told him “Ask of what you need” upon which the Bedouin requested a camel for him to use as transport and goats for him to milk in order to feed his family. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) then turned to his Companions and asked “Are you incapable (*‘ajaztum*) of being like the old woman (*‘ajuz*) of Bani Isra’il?” They asked, “What is the old woman of Bani Isra’il?” The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) then related the story of an old woman of the Children of Israel who happened to be the only one who knew the location of the grave of Yusuf (Allah grant him peace). Musa (Allah grant him peace) tracked her down and said, “Show me the way to the grave of Yusuf” and she said, “Only if you grant my request.” “And what is your request?” he asked, to which she promptly responded, “That I be with you in Paradise.” Musa (Allah grant him peace) hesitated, but Allah revealed to him to give her what she had requested.<sup>xviii</sup> Instead of asking for wages, power, or provision (as in the case of the Bedouin), the old woman was avid for what truly benefits: a rank with the best of believers in Jannah. She had no delusions regarding her dependence and vulnerability, and unabashedly used every available opportunity to beseech the One who could help her in reaching the ultimate goal.

This emphasis on slavehood, dependence and vulnerability is with regards to one’s internal state and one’s relationship with Allah. Outwardly, one follows the command of Allah in procuring one’s livelihood, living with

dignity, and taking care of one's own needs as well as those of others. The Prophetic statements "*The upper (giving) hand is better than the lower (receiving) one*"<sup>xxix</sup> and "*the strong believer is more beloved to Allah than the weak believer, though there is good in both,*"<sup>xxx</sup> indicate that self-reliance with respect to one's social existence and relationships is laudable from an Islamic perspective. But it is not the end goal of one's existence, nor does it really reflect reality, since even when one is at the height of one's youth and vitality, one is utterly dependent on the *qayyumiyya* of Allah, through which he is held up and allowed to move and act and exist. It is the latter reality that the existence of the elderly among us reminds us of, and as we ourselves approach old age, we should embrace the light and spiritual clarity that it brings, instead of trying to chase after fleeting youth and worldly entrapments.

As Muslims, instead of reviling the occurrence of dependence and vulnerability, we should see them as signs of the real state of things. We acknowledge the desires to be self-reliant, to have well-being, and to successfully age as human and natural, but we channel these desires through our seeing Allah before all things. The Messenger of God (Allah bless him and grant him peace) taught us that this should be our internal state, a constant turning to Allah even as we seek a dignified worldly existence in our old age, as can be seen in the following dua:

*O Allah make the vastest of my provision (rizq)*

*during my old age and at the end of my life*

*And make the best of my life its last portion*

*the best of my works my closing ones*

*and the best of my days the Day that I meet You.*

*O Protector of Islam and its people!*

*Make me firm (on the Straight Path) until I meet You*

*I ask you for freedom from need (ghina) for myself*

*And freedom from need for my dependents.*<sup>xxxi</sup>

As can be seen from the above powerful prayer of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace), it is not our own work or our own empowerment that we rely on internally at the level of our hearts. If we are this way, then when any of these things become compromised, particularly as we age, we still have hope and are grateful for whatever state in life we find ourselves in. That is how a believer should be anyway, since the Messenger of God (Allah bless him and grant him peace) told us, "Wondrous is the affair of the believer for there is good for him in every matter and this is not the case with anyone except the believer. If he is happy, then he thanks Allah and thus there is good for him, and if he is harmed, then he shows patience and thus there is good for him."<sup>xxxii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> from Piercy, Marge, "I met a woman who wasn't there," in *NWSA Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 1-2.

<sup>ii</sup> Rowe, John W. and Kahn, Robert, L., "Successful Aging," *The Gerontologist*, vol. 37, no. 4, p. 433. Interestingly, subsequent contributions to the same academic journal have added a fourth parameter for successful aging, namely "positive spirituality." See: Crowther, Martha, et. al., "Rowe and Kahn's Model of Successful Aging Revisited: Positive Spirituality—The Forgotten Factor," *The Gerontologist*, vol. 42, no. 5, 1 October 2002, pp. 613-620.

<sup>iii</sup> Leonard, Peter, "Editor's Introduction" in Phillipson, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*. London: Macmillan Press, 1982, p. xii.

<sup>iv</sup> Phillipson, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*. London: Macmillan Press, 1982, p. 17.

<sup>v</sup> Weil, Lise, "Remembering Barbara MacDonald," *Off Our Backs*, vol. 30, no. 9 (October 2000), p. 14.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> MacDonald, Barbara, *Look me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism*. San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1983.

<sup>ix</sup> Leonard, Peter, "Editor's Introduction" in Phillipson, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*. London: Macmillan Press, 1982, p. xii.

<sup>x</sup> Qur'an, 51:56.

<sup>xi</sup> Qur'an, al-Hud, 11:7.

<sup>xii</sup> Sunan al-Tirmidhi

<sup>xiii</sup> "God has left no excuse for the one who lives to be sixty or seventy years old; God has left no excuse for him; God has left no excuse for him." Musnad Imam Ahmad. A similar hadith exists in Sahih al-Bukhari: "Allah has left no excuse for a man whose time of death is deferred until he reaches the age of sixty."

<sup>xiv</sup> Sunan al-Tirmidhi

<sup>xv</sup> The translations of the following ahadith have been taken from Bensaid, Benaouda and Grine, Fadila, "Old Age and Elderly Care: An Islamic Perspective," *Cultura*.

*International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 11(1)/2014, p. 149. This article by Bensaid and Grine is excellent as a resource on aging and Islam. The article is available in pdf format here: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272970617\\_Old\\_Age\\_and\\_Elderly\\_Care\\_An\\_Islamic\\_Perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272970617_Old_Age_and_Elderly_Care_An_Islamic_Perspective) [Last accessed: August 6, 2020.]

<sup>xvi</sup> I am grateful to Sheikh Nuh Keller for this insight. See: <https://untotheone.com/articles/epitomes/the-story-of-umm-iyad/> [Last accessed August 6, 2020.]

<sup>xvii</sup> Haddad, Gibril Fouad, "Faith of Old Women," <https://eshaykh.com/hadith/faith-of-old-women/> [Last accessed: August 6, 2020] and Haddad, Gibril Fouad, "Imam al-Haramayn ibn al-Juwayni (419-478)," [http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/ibn\\_aljuwayni.htm#NOTES](http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/ibn_aljuwayni.htm#NOTES) [Last accessed: August 6, 2020.] Also, my thanks to Ma'arib Jastaniah of Jeddah for sharing her insights on *dīn al-'ajā'iz* and on the hadith of '*ajūz Banī Isrā'īl*.'

<sup>xviii</sup> Sahih ibn Hibban, as cited at <https://al-maktaba.org/book/31691/1461#p2> [Last accessed August 5, 2020.]

<sup>xix</sup> Bukhari and Muslim

<sup>xx</sup> Muslim

<sup>xxi</sup> اللهم اجعل اوسع رزقك علي عند كبر سني و انقطاع عمري و اجعل خير عمري آخره و خير عملي خواتيمه و خير ايامي يوم القاك فيه يا ولي الاسلام و اهله ثبتني به حتى القاك اسالك غناي و غنا مولاي

See: Thanawi, Ashraf 'Ali, *Munajat-i Maqbul* (A collection of supplications selected from the Qur'an and Hadith), Lahore: Iqra, n.d. p. 44.

<https://archive.org/details/Munajat-e-Maqbool/page/n41/mode/2up> [Last accessed: August 6, 2020.] This link has the dua printed in easy-to-read, vowelled Arabic, for those who wish to memorize it.

<sup>xxii</sup> Sahih Muslim, translation taken from <https://abuaminaelias.com/everything-decreed-is-good-for-the-believer-both-ease-and-hardship/> [Last accessed: August 5, 2020.]