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Female Infanticide in Pre-Islamic Arab Society: A Quranic and Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Female infanticide is the deliberate killing of female babies. Infanticide can be dated back to antiquity and the particular killing of females has been a prevalent practice not only in ancient times but also in the contemporary era. In the pre-Islamic era, Arabs used to bury their daughter alive for the fear of poverty and shame. Quran and Hadith strictly condemned this practice. This repugnant custom of killing infants was deeply rooted in Arabs after Islam there was a significant decrease as Infanticide either of male or female is unlawful according to Islamic jurisprudence. This research will provide a historical and analytical overview of female infanticide in the pre-Islamic period explaining its origin, factors, dynamics, and methods. The article also tries to figure out some honorable personalities who struggled against female infanticide in the pre-Islamic era, later on, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) appreciated them for their righteous deeds. The condemnation of infanticide frequently appears in the hadith literature, as well as praise for adherents who rescue females from execution, suggests that this practice was widely prevalent in medieval societies. This article will discuss some pieces of evidence of female infanticide from Arab societies and the Qur'anic perspective regarding this inhumane and barbaric custom.

Key words: *Female, Infanticide, Pre-Islamic era, Quran, Medieval, Society.*



Introduction

Female infanticide manifests gender inequalities and female oppression that is linked to the global phenomenon of women's marginalization and descriptive attitude. Several definitions have been proposed for the act of infanticide, with much believing that this is premeditated murder of a newborn child within 12 months of age, with so much of the variation according to the means used. Infanticide is the intentional killing of a child under the age of one year (or according to some definitions two years or more).

Female infanticide is normally committed within a few minutes or hours of female birth. Female infanticide is the willful murdering of newborn girls owing to a desire for a male child and the poor value perceived worth of female birth. Active infanticide, in which measures such as lethal wounds and overdoses are the obvious causative agent, and passive infanticide, wherein intermediate means such as prolonged malnutrition are applied to kill an infant.¹

Generally, females were entitled to face more infanticide because of the lower religious, social, and economic value of daughters as compared to sons.² Female infanticide was prevalent in the early Islamic era. Islam abolished it and strictly condemned it through its various teachings.

Origin of Female Infanticide

From the Golden Age of Greece to the magnificence of the Persian Dynasty, infanticide has penetrated nearly every community on the globe. Female infanticide dating back to antiquity had its evolution to Medieval times and even in the contemporary world. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, infanticide was regarded as legitimate and a prevalent custom in various classes of society. A newborn was regarded as the father's property. According to Roman law, a father had the authority to dispose of his children when he saw appropriate; however, this judgment was sometimes taken by a public authority. The custom of smearing opium residue on a baby's breast to cause bodily harm was mentioned in Roman writings.³

Infanticide remained permissible in ancient Greeks and Romans until the fourth century A.D. The various attempts from that time forward to prohibit parents from abandoning their children via state and church regulations and admonition reflect the upheavals within the religious, cultural, and political system. The recurring law demonstrates how deeply rooted the customs of infanticide and child trafficking were and how fruitless it was solely to legislate the elimination of these customs not only during the late Imperial and early medieval periods but also during the late Middle Ages.⁴

Throughout the prehistoric period, access and supply of foods seem to have been a continuous restraint on humanity's population growth. Controlling the number of kids permitted to live to adolescence was one strategy for managing the catastrophic impacts of mass starvation. The most significant drawback on the dispersion of primitive humans was infanticide, specifically of infant girls.⁵

Infanticide was frequent in Middle Ages European society, and the church took notice of it as a public sin for which the sanction was public shaming or atonement; nevertheless, if the law was broken by someone other than parents, the Local rulers began to take discernment in the twelfth century.⁶ Infanticide was also prevalent in Europe until the nineteenth century, in addition to China, Rome, India, and Arabia.⁷ Female infanticide has also been generally linked to the wider societal discrimination against females that is prevalent throughout most patriarchal cultures and civilizations. Even, in two interconnected places of the globe India and China, female infanticide has been a noteworthy and widely accepted practice for centuries. Even to this day, the magnitude of this problem is worrisome.⁸

Quranic Injunctions on Infanticide

Infanticide is referenced in five surahs in the Holy Qur'an, the first four of these are from the Meccan timeframe. The setting and substance of the verses concerned with the practice indicate that infanticide was prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabic society and that Muhammad saw it as a major sin, with its ban as one of Islam's most fundamental things. In Quranic verses, the killing of infants either male or female is strictly condemned and referred to as "Qatal-e-Aulad"(Killing of offspring).

وَكَذَلِكَ زَيْنَ لِكَثِيرٍ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ قَتَلُوا أَوْلَادَهُمْ شُرَكَاءَهُمْ لِيُرُدُّوهُمْ وَلِيَلْبِسُوا عَلَيْهِمْ دِينَهُمْ. وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ مَا فَعَلُوهُ فَذَرَهُمْ وَمَا يَفْتَرُونَ⁹

And their associate gods have made the assassination of their offspring seem fair to many idolators so that they may ruin them and may confuse their faith for them. Had Allah so willed, they would not have done that. So, leave them alone with what they fabricate.

In the next verse of this Surah, Allah Almighty criticized this custom saying,

قَدْ خَسِرَ الَّذِينَ قَتَلُوا أَوْلَادَهُمْ سَفَهًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ¹⁰

Surely vanished are they who slay their offspring idiotically and without knowledge.

One of the matters about which the Holy Prophet (PBUH) used to take oath from women was that they will not kill their children¹¹, as mentioned in Quran. (Al-Quran 60:12) The injunction shows that

Arabian women used to kill their infants and besides Polytheism, massacre, infidelity, and disdain toward one's parents, infanticide was one of the major faults that characterized the pre-Islamic Arab society. As a reason, infanticide tends to have been one of the most significant issues. Quran openly speaks against Infanticide and strictly condemns the parents who do this for the reason of poverty.

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةَ إِمْلَاقٍ ۖ نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُهُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطْئًا كَبِيرًا¹²

“And do not kill your offspring due to fear of poverty. We alone provide for them and you (as well). Indeed, killing them is a major sin.”

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ مِنْ إِمْلَاقٍ ۖ نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُكُمْ وَإِيَّاهُمْ¹³

“And do not slay your children for (fear of) poverty-- We provide for you and them” (Al-Quran 6:151)

The two verses mentioned above show that the motive of infanticide of both sexes male and female was deliverance from adversity.

Female infanticide in Quran

In pre-Islamic Arab society, generally, both male and female infants were killed for the fear of starvation and poverty but Quran mentions some supplementary motives for which female newborns were likely to face more infanticide. Females were regarded as a sign of disgrace, as Quran says

وَيَجْعَلُونَ لِلَّهِ الْبَنَاتِ سُبْحَانَهُ ۚ وَلَهُمْ مَا يَشْتَهُونَ ۚ وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُمْ بِالْأُنثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ۚ يَتَوَارَىٰ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِنْ سُوءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهِ ۚ أَيُمْسِكُهُ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ فِي التُّرَابِ ۚ أَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ¹⁴

“They ascribe daughters to Allah - Pure is He - and for themselves is what they desire. When one of them is given the good news of a female child, his face becomes gloomy and he is choked with grief. He hides from people because of the (self-presumed) bad news given to him (and wonders): Shall he keep it despite the disgrace (he will face in the society), or put it away into the dust? Evil is what they decide.”

The exercise of infanticide was ingrained among many of the dwellers of Arabia in pre-Islamic periods for religious rituals, for cultural purposes, a discriminatory mindset toward females, and, particularly, for monetary reasons, as evidenced by these verses. Quran

"وَإِذَا الْمَوْءِدَةُ سُئِلَتْ ۖ بِأَيِّ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ"¹⁵

And when the female (infant) is buried alive will be questioned. For what sin was he killed?

Generally, the root of word "المودة" (Wa'da) means burying alive.¹⁶ It can also be used for male newborns but here, in this verse, it refers to a female infant. The Arabs used to burden the living girl with so much dust that she would die. That is why it was called Mu'awd. Some Arabs used to bury their daughters alive for fear of embarrassment and poverty. The purpose of questioning the buried in the verse is to humiliate and degrade the burial. As previously, the practice of infanticide is referred to as "Qatl al-Aulad" in most Quranic texts (killing male as well as female offspring). Female infanticide is mentioned only twice in the book. Conversely, most Quran interpreters understand "Qatl al-Aulad" as "Qatl al-Banat" ("killing female children") or Wa'ad al-Banat (killing female children or burying female children alive).

Female infanticide in Hadith

Holy Prophet (PBUH) strictly prohibited infanticide in many of his hadiths and various occasions. Holy Prophet (PBUH) said: "Allah has forbidden for you to bury your daughters alive."¹⁷ When Muawiyah asked Mugairah to write him important things Allah's messenger taught him, he wrote to him and one of those important things was "Holy Prophet used to forbid burying girls alive."¹⁸

The Prophet (PBUH) said

الْوَائِدَةُ وَالْمَوْوَدَّةُ فِي النَّارِ¹⁹

The midwife burying and by whom the midwife used to go and bury the baby (The mother) are both from Hell.

In such a way Holy Prophet (PBUH) criticize all of the persons who were involved in infanticide no matter he was parent, relative, or outsider. A hadith indicates that the assassinated infants would accompany the Prophet (PBUH) and martyrs in paradise forever.²⁰ Holy Prophet (PBUH) was an ideal father to his daughters, he never disgraced or disregarded his daughters. He described the distinctions of raising female infants and highlighted their importance. It is narrated on the account of Abdullah ibn Abbas (R.A) that Holy Prophet (PBUH) said emphasizing virtues of nurturing daughters,

مَا مِنْ رَجُلٍ تُدْرِكُ لَهُ ابْنَتَانِ , فَيُحْسِنُ إِلَيْهِمَا مَا صَحِبَتَاهُ أَوْ صَحِبَهُمَا , إِلَّا أَدْخَلْتَاهُ الْجَنَّةَ

Whoever has two daughters and treats them kindly as long as they are with him, or if he stays with them, they will take him to Paradise.²¹

Abdullah ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said:

مَنْ كَانَتْ لَهُ أَنْثَى فَلَمْ يَنْدِهَا وَلَمْ يُهَيِّئْهَا وَلَمْ يُؤْتِرْ وَلَدَهُ عَلَيْهَا , قَالَ يَعْزِي الدُّكُورَ أَدْخَلَهُ اللَّهُ الْجَنَّةَ

“Whoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, nor does he despise her, nor does he give the boy superiority over her, then Allah will grant him Paradise.”²²

This Hadith signifies the significance of raising a daughter and supplies the motivation to treat the daughters equally to sons without giving superiority to sons.

Female Infanticide in Pre-Islamic Arab Society

Pre-Islamic Arab society has records of the dreadful ritual of burying girls alive. It was so prevalent in Arab society that people used to publicly dispose of their girl child as a common practice.

Tamim, a significant tribe of Arabs, was the most vociferous about it, claiming fear of being enslaved as they were warriors. Al-Haytham bin Adi mentioned that the wa’ad (female infanticide) was used in all Arab tribes, and it was used by one out of every ten, so Islam came and it was less in them except for the people of Tamim, for it increased in them before Islam.²³

Qais ibn Asim, one of the chiefs of Banu Tamim, buried his eight daughters by his hand, as it is narrated that once came to the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) and said: Messenger of Allah! I buried my eight daughters alive in pre-Islamic times. The Prophet (PBUH) said: Free a slave for each of them. He said: I am a camel man. The Prophet (PBUH) said: If you want it, then sacrifice a camel one by one.²⁴ It shows that Holy Prophet (PBUH) hated this act and asked the man to sacrifice for atonement.

Al-Halbi narrates “Pre-Islamic Arab clans used to bury girls alive, especially “Kindah”, a tribe of Arabs, out of fear of shame or fear of poverty and destitution.”²⁵ Some other tribes of Arab also had the custom of female infanticides such as Mudhar and Khuza’a tribe had pieces of evidence of burying girls alive. It is said that it was mainly frequent in Banu Tamim, Banu Qais, Banu Asad, Banu Hudhail, and Banu Bakr bin Wa’il which were branches of Madhar.²⁶

A narrative from Qatadah cited by Qurtubi shows that a man from Jahiliya killed his daughters and feed his dog.²⁷ This shows that various methods of female infanticides were used in pre-Islamic Arab society. Narrated by Ibn-e-Hajar Asqalani, one of the ways was that a man would order his wife to go to the edge of a pit when she was pregnant, so she would give birth by the edge of the pit. If she had a son, she would keep him alive, and if she had a daughter, she would throw him into a pit. On the other hand, some people used to say that when the daughter was six years old, she would ask her mother to prepare her so that we could take her to meet relatives and kin. Then they would take her to the desert until they reached the well. The man would tell the girl to look into the well, (as soon as she

saw him in the well) he would push her from behind and kill her by falling into the well.²⁸

Apart from burying life, Arabs used some other methods of infanticide such as throwing them from height in pits. After accepting Islam, a companion came to the service of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and requested “I want to confess a great sin of my ignorance so that I could lighten the burden of my heart.” He continued, “I had a daughter in Jahiliya, my wife brought her up without my approval. Once I asked my wife to adorn her and I took her to a deep ditch in the forest. I pushed my daughter into the pit. From the pit, she kept calling for help until she died. Nothing gives me relief, whenever I remember her words and sighs. What was widespread in Jahiliya has been abolished by Islam, and whatever guilt committed in Islam would be vitiated by begging God's pardon.”²⁹

Imra-ul-Qays had no male offspring, narrated by Ibn Qutayba. He was enslaved by his jealousy, and if a girl was born to him, he would murder her. His women spread their daughters across other Arab regions when she noticed this trait in him. When he learned about this, he rushed after them and killed them.³⁰ The given two narratives show that many of the Arab women tried to save their daughters from getting killed by their fathers and protest against female infanticide.

Reasons of female infanticide in Pre-Islamic Society

According to some historians, not all of these tribes had the same motives for burying girls alive. Some tribes did it out of pride, some out of fear of economic hardship, some because of their religious beliefs.

a) Fear of financial hardship and poverty

A major reason for killing the girls was to avoid poverty and hardship as the woman was considered an economic burden. Qur'anic verses 17:31 and 6:15 are the evidence that Arabs used to kill their infants for the fear of scarcity. Not only girls but also boys were killed for escaping from financial burden. Boy was likely to be less killed than girls as they were considered earning hands and bread suppliers.

b) Fear of shame and disgrace

The various manifestations of honor found in the Arab temperament suggest that the main reason for burying the daughters alive was the perverted notion of honor. Arabs were warriors and they used to stay in confrontation with other tribes. It was a custom that if rivals had triumphed over them, they might take their women and child with them. So, fear of disgrace and shame was a factor of female infanticide. They killed their women to save them from getting rapped or enslaved in wars.

c) Sacrifice for religious reasons

A group of historians has argued that the Arab burial of daughters was driven by the religious belief in gaining nearness to God through human sacrifice. Some

researchers think that burying girls alive was one of the religious reasons and that is to offer sacrifices to please the gods. As an expression of gratitude for blessings, sacrifice was considered a religious thing among the Arabs. But the question arises that the idea of shedding blood in sacrifice has always been existed, while there is no case of bloodshed in the ritual of burial alive. It is well known that Abdul Muttalib vowed to sacrifice one of his sons. So, when there was the idea of sacrificing both sexes, the mere tradition of burying girls alive and not finding a single instance of burying boys alive breaks the notion that there was a motive behind the proximity of gods. But is clear that all over the world sacrifice was considered to be more efficient to have God's pleasure, for example, the custom of sacrificing a young girl for the flow of the river Nile that was abolished Umer (R.A).³¹

Struggle against infanticide in pre-Islamic Arab society

Not all Arabs used to kill daughters, as narrations show that some faithful and kind-hearted persons were against female infanticide and used to bar people from it.

Saa'sa (R.A) who was the grandfather of famous poet Farzdaq, used to resurrect victim infants from burying alive paying the ransom as stated by Ibn-e-Athir. Once he asked Holy Prophet (PBUH): O Messenger of God! I did work in the pre-Islamic era, so will I have any reward for it? He said: "What did you do?" I said: I had two she-camels lost ten, so I went out seeking them on a camel for me, and two houses were raised for me in a space of land, so I went to them, and I found in one of them an old man. A woman delivered a slave girl. The old man ordered to Bury her. I said: I will buy her soul from you, do not kill her. So, I bought her with my camel and their two sons and the camel under me; Islam appeared, and I revived three hundred and sixty female infants, and I buy each of them twenty she-camels and a camel, so will I be rewarded? The Messenger of God, may God's prayers and peace be upon him, said: "This is a chapter on righteousness, for you will have its reward, as God has blessed you with Islam."³²

Farzadaq took pride in this honorable act of his grandfather, Sasa, as he said,

ومنا الذى منع الوائدات ، فاحيا الوئيد فلم يواد

"Those of us who used to hinder those who were buried alive has passed away, so He gave life to the one who was buried alive and did not bury her."³³

Similarly, Zaib bin Amr bin Nafeel, an honorable man from Quraish, used to revive the female infants. Narrated by Asma bint-e-Abu Bakar (R.A), Zaid bin Amr bin Nafeel used to plea the father if he wanted to kill his daughter: "No! Don't kill her, I will suffice you for her supplies." So, he takes her, and when she grows up, he

would say to her father: “If you wish, I will give her to you, and if you wish, her provisions will suffice.”³⁴

These narratives are the evidence that:

- Female infanticide was prevalent in significant tribes of Arab, resultantly, unknown villagers followed them by killing their daughter, too.
- It was considered legitimate to kill girls as the father had the authority over the newborn baby. They were never taken into account or punished by anyone.
- In some cases, women tried to save their infants but in many of the cases, they agreed with their husbands or remained silent.
- Although female infanticide was a common practice in Pre-Islamic Arabs, not all Arabs were used to it. Many faithful persons hated it and tried for the revival of female infants. They struggled to save girls, brought them up, and give them a respectable living.

Conclusion

Female infanticide appears to be much more widespread than man infanticide, not just in pre-Islamic Arabia but even decades after. Arabs used to kill their daughters due to various reasons, such as fear of poverty³⁵, fear of shame³⁶, or religious purposes. Works of literature show that in the pre-Islamic early era, there were people who used to rescue infants from slaying on account of pity and humanitarian. The persistence of infanticide's ban in the hadith literature, as well as appreciation for faithful who protect female infants from death, could be seen as evidence that this practice was not unknown in the pre-Islamic Arab societies.

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