

The Ontology of Woman According to Mawlana(Rumi)¹

Fatih AMAN, Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Study of Religion and Philosophy
Faculty of Theology, Ondokuz Mayıs University
Samsun/Turkey

Abstract

The ontology of woman is one of the much discussed issues throughout the history. Many different things have been said on the nature of woman and almost every religion and ideology expressed something regarding woman. Historical figures that are coming from certain systems of thought put their views on the nature of woman in the local way, and one of them is Mawlana. His answers to the question “what is woman” mirror his ideas on the ontology of woman.

Keywords: Mawlana(Rumi), İslam, Woman, Ontology

1. The Basic Dynamics of Mawlana’s View on Woman

Human beings are social beings. Thus, they are subject to influence. There are the aspect of being influential and being influenced. It is quite obvious that human passes through the stage of being influenced before he comes to the stage of being influential, since it is impossible for him to live alone. There are several factors such as faith, culture, society and education in the scope of this influence. Throughout the human history, important personalities did not stay out of this socio-cultural environment. They took some facts as a starting point for themselves and before influencing others, they were influenced by some facts.

Mawlana is certainly included in this explanation regarding the relationship between being influential and being influenced. We think that it is impossible to correctly understand him, a person whose works and the works written on him have been quite influential on millions of people in spite of the fact that 700 years passed after he died, without knowing what the basic dynamics of his thought are.

After our readings in the area, we think that there are two dynamics which shape Mawlana’s view on the matter of woman and actually, not only they show his attitude on woman, but also on the life in general. 1. Religion and 2. Love and tolerance. We are of the opinion that the socio-cultural structure at that time played its role in the influence of these two dynamics in Mawlana’s thought. Therefore, first we deal with the issue of woman in Islam, second the socio-cultural environment in which Mawlana’s thought were shaped and finally the reflection of the Islamic understanding, which is the base of these thoughts, on Mawlana’s ideas. Afterwards, we go on with the ontology of woman according to Mawlana.

A. Woman In Islam

There is a lot of emphasis on the issue of woman in the Quran and the Hadith. It must be noted here that the Quran presents a balanced attitude in general regarding human. In the Quran, positive attributes of human are mentioned that human is viceroy of God on earth² and that he wished to bear God’s burden³. On the other hand, some negative attributes are also mentioned that human is ungrateful⁴ and mean⁵. The reason why we stressed this point is that there are some excessive arguments about Islam’s viewpoint on woman and some argue that Islam presents very negative aspects against woman.⁶

¹ The founder of the Mawlawi order, great sufi. Born in September 30’ 1207 in Balkh. Died in December 17, 1273 in Konya. His works are : Divan-ı Kebir, Mathnawi, Fihi Mâ Fih, Letters and Mecâlis-i Seb’a.

² Bakara, 2/30

³ Ahzap, 33/73

⁴ Hud, 11/9

⁵ İsra, 17/100

⁶ See *İslam Kültüründe Aile Planlaması*, Diyanet yay., Komisyon, Ankara, 1995.

However, Islam does not only point to the negative aspects of woman. Man is subject to the negative criticisms in terms of the general human profile as well. Moreover, when the Quran talks about unbelievers, hypocrites, tyrants and polytheists, it alludes to man in general.

This balanced attitude in human description is also relevant when it comes to woman. It is a fact that Islamic values abolished the understanding of the Jahiliyya period that woman is a kind of commercial commodity. It is also a fact that Islam, while demolishing the humiliating attitude of Jahiliyya towards woman, did not provide with a completely free woman profile. Besides, Islam suggested a certain portrait of woman whose freedom and limits are determined. Islam offered pro-woman solutions in issues like dowry, heritage, *zihar* all of which are against woman in Jahiliyya time.⁷ Islam obviously stated the rights woman and man against each other.⁸ It can also be accepted that it provided relief from certain inconveniences in the issues like marrying more than one woman⁹, problems between husband and wife¹⁰, justice between women¹¹ and polygamy.¹²

Some stories in the Quran regarding the attitude against woman can be seen as important information about the issue. We see in the Quran, the examples of the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot as bad women, while Mary and Asiya (Pharaoh's wife) as good ones. Besides, the statements that the love of woman is placed in the hearts of men¹³ and that men should control their gazes¹⁴ are other remarkable verses in the Quran.

When we look at the hadiths, we see that the situation is the same with the verses. However, we come across much more information about woman than in the Quran. According to one saying of the Prophet, most of dwellers in hell will be women since they utter bad words and they are ungrateful to their husbands.¹⁵ It is also stated in the sayings of the Prophet that women are source of mischief (*fitna*) for men¹⁶, a fact that shows Islam does not provide a complete positive attitude towards women. Here, the word *fitna* was used in its broadest sense, i.e., "the test which causes to be away from God". Hence, we can infer that the good woman has nothing to do with mischief and it is indecent woman who would make it.

Like in the Quran, the positive sides of woman are more stressed in the sayings of the Prophet. However, the positive woman is a religious and pious woman. Hadiths also affirm that the most precious thing in the world man has is a pious woman¹⁷, and that the religious woman is preferable among other four characters when someone intends to marry¹⁸, all of which shows that positive woman in Islam is pious and religious woman.

We are of the opinion that Islam, which highlights rather positive attributes of woman, gives more freedom to woman in public sphere than today's societies. The best example for this is the issue of women's attendance to worship in mosques. It is noticeable that scholars tended to keep women from participating in the religious worship in mosques depending on a narration from Aisha¹⁹ and preventing from causing *fitna*, although women freely went into the mosques at the time of the Prophet.

Consequently, Islam supports a proportionate attitude in the issue of woman and suggests a profile of woman whose freedom is rather limited, instead of totally free one.

B. Socio-Cultural Characters of the Period

In order to give brief information about the time Mawлана lived, the Anatolian Seljuk State was under the control of Mongols and was at its hardest times.

⁷ About the issue, these verses can be looked at: Nisa 4-7; Mücadele 1-2-4-7. verses.

⁸ Bakara, 2/228

⁹ Nisa, 4/3

¹⁰ Nisa, 4/3

¹¹ Ahzab, 33/50, Nisa, 4/129

¹² Nisa, 4/3

¹³ Âl-i İmran, 3/14

¹⁴ Nur, 24/30

¹⁵ Buhari, Hayz 6, Zekat 44, İman 21, Küsuf 9, Nikah 88; Müslim, Küsuf 17, İman 132; Nesai, Küsuf 17; Muvatta, Küsuf 17

¹⁶ See Buhari, Nikah 17; Müslim, Zikir 97; Tirmizi, Edeb 31

¹⁷ Müslim, Rada 64; Nesai, Nikah 15

¹⁸ Buhari, Nikah 15; Müslim, Rada 53; Ebu Davud, Nikah 2; Nesai, Nikah 13

¹⁹ For this saying and its explanation see İbrahim Canan, *Kütüb-i Sitte*, Akçağ Yay., İst.1997, c.15, p.329-330

The public opinion was that these are the signs of the coming of the Last Day and all happened just because basic principles of Islam are not being observed.²⁰ People who were in very bad economic conditions were fond of religious authorities. Since they see the sultan and the officials as responsible for the bad situation, they increasingly became more interested in the mystic personalities and religious scholars.

Although this was economically and socially bad times, the situation was good about the cultural/ideological side. The ideological tolerance of the Seljuks and the Mongol pressure led the way to the progress of Sufism.²¹ Anatolian Seljuk sultans were under the pressure of Mongols. In their desperate situation, they tried to use every possible power, be it physical or spiritual, in order to protect their governments.²² In consequence of this, the scientific environment came out to be very rich in both cultural and ideological levels. We observe that the scholars of the period created together very important achievements.²³ This situation also contributed different religious affiliations and sects to come together.²⁴

In Anatolia, the environment was ready for tolerance. In this period, Mawlana explains how love and tolerance covers every mistake: "The eye of tolerance is blind to every mistake. Intolerance reveals all kinds of difficulties. When you see the eye start to see the mistakes, know that love perishes. Do not you see that compassionate mother neither becomes sick of the mistakes of his children nor she dislikes them."²⁵

The tolerance atmosphere is also seen in the social relations. Marriages are especially the best examples. In 1237, Sultan Kayhusraw II married the daughter of the Georgian king. The princess brought with her the bishop, the icons and the Christian maids to Konya. There was not pressure on her. The princess converted to Islam in the Seljuk palace. We know that this lady who was known as Gurcu Hatun had strong relations with scholars and mystics (particularly Mawlana).²⁶ Marriages like this were being seen at the other social ranks in the society as well. There was not any pressure in these marriages.²⁷

We think that this atmosphere at the last period of the Anatolian Seljuks has quite much impact on the thought of Mawlana. Playing his role in the Sufi circles, he took the liberty to benefit from tolerance environment around him. His works are the best examples of this fact. We should also state that the author himself is a place to escape when people face social difficulties. We learn from *manakibnamas* that people consulted him to seek for solutions to their many problems.

C. The Impact of Islam's Tolerance on Mawlana's Thought

Given that love and tolerance is a part of religion when considered totally, they are also the central term in the thought and the life of Mawlana, if his life and works are considered. Because of that reason, we refer to love and tolerance as two main dynamics in shaping Mawlana.

Readers of Mawlana's works first see that his works are compatible with the main sources of Islam. His magnum opus *Mathnawi* is full of Quranic verses and the hadiths. *Fihi Ma Fih*, which can be seen as a moral guide book, has many verses and the sayings of the Prophet. *Majalis Saba* and *Letters* are completely written in the borders of the religion of Islam. This aspect of Mawlana's works is also stated in the *manakibnamas* which convey relevant narrations about him.

For Mawlana, Islam is very important. As mentioned before, in his works there are lots of quotations from the main religious sources. In most of stories he relates, his references are the Quranic verses and/or the sayings of the Prophet. He explicitly accepts this fact by these verses:

²⁰ Füzüzanfer, Bediüzzaman, *Mevlana Celalettin*, trans. F.Nâfiz Uzluk, M.E.B. Yay., İst.1997, p.337

²¹ Gölpinarlı, Abdülbaki, *Mevlânâ Celalettin*, İnkılâp Yay., İst.1985, p.19

²² Füzüzanfer, *ibid*, p.338

²³ Önder, Ahmet, *Mevlânâ ve Mevlevilik*, Aksoy Yay., İst.1998, p.98

²⁴ Sevgi, Ahmet, '*Anadolu Selçuklularında Hoşgörü Ortamı*', *Türkler, Yeni Türkiye yay.*, Ank. 2002, vol.7, p.446

²⁵ Mevlana, *Mathnawi*, trans. F.Nâfiz Uzluk, M.E.B. Yay., İst.1991, vol.4, p.351

²⁶ Turan, Osman, *Türk Cihan Hâkimiyeti Mefkûresi Tarihi*, Boğaziçi Yay., İst.1992, vol.2, p.142

²⁷ Şeker, Mehmet, *Anadolu'da Bir Arada Yaşama Tecrübesi*, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yay., Ank.2000, p.46

“Kuluyum can durdukça ol hikmetli Kur'an'ın
 Toprağının tozuyum Muhammed-i Muhtarın.”²⁸
 (I am the slave of the Quran as long as my soul lives
 I am the dust of the soil of the Prophet Muhammad)

In all the works written on Mawlana, his appreciation of love and tolerance along with religion are more or less emphasized. Only his famous proverb “Come, come whoever you are” is enough to show how much importance he gives to love and tolerance.

In the base of the importance Mawlana gives to love and tolerance lays the idea that human beings are good from nature. According to Mawlana, human beings are naturally good. Appearances are not unchangeable, but accidents.²⁹ This idea goes in parallel with the saying of the Prophet on the *fitra* (disposition).³⁰ It is their parents who change human beings afterwards, though they are good beings by birth. In conclusion, a syncretism of Islam and tolerance rules Mawlana's thought. We can say that these two facts shaped his ideas on the ontology of woman.

2. The Ontology of Woman with Descriptions

Mawlana clearly puts his position on the issue of woman in terms of religion and tolerance: What is woman? In explaining this question, he draws attention to four aspects and thus determines the ontology of woman.

First in Mathnawi, woman is equalized with self (*nafs*) while man with reason.

“Woman and man are respectively self and reason”³¹

“Know that reason is man! Woman is self and nature.”³²

We see that Mawlana does not only stay with equalizing woman with self, but he explains the situation more. “In most sources and primarily in the *Mathnawi* of Rumi, self is portrayed as the mother of human beings and reason as the father of them. In the verses of Rumi one encounters a very factual description of a dispute between husband and wife.”³³ The story of this dispute in Mathnawi is in this way: “Even if she says “my love, my sweet”, she gives you no more than bother and envy, that grows day by day. This mother says to the father “my kid is sick of school, his face paled. If you had another wife, you would not have given her that hardship. To tell the truth, had this kid belonged to another father and had I not gave him birth, her mother would have said the same thing”. Find yourself. Run away from this mother and her mercy. To be beaten by the father is better than her cake. Mother is self. Father is generous reason. Who obeys reason first gets bored, but finally finds much relief.”³⁴

As a consequence of the description of woman as self and man as reason, personal wishes and benefits come to the fore. According to Mawlana, women are more lustful to worldly wishes than man: “In woman, the character of self is more dominant. This is because she tends to colours and odours.”³⁵ However, man is more cautious and careful. These attributes make him superior to woman. If man does not have these attributes, he comes imperfect like woman. The fact that man is superior to woman is due to his foresight.

“If you need, consult someone alive, so that he makes you alive. But where is this alive? O traveller, ask traveller! But if you ask woman, it makes you lame.”³⁶

“If man is not foresighted, he must be regarded as imperfect like woman.”³⁷

Second, another aspect of the ontology of woman according to Mawlana, is her weak disposition. In this regard, he uses the argument that war is not incumbent upon women: “War is not incumbent upon women.

²⁸ İsmail Ankaravi, *Minhac'u-l Fukara*, İnsan Yay., İst.1996, p.25

²⁹ Ahmet Önder, *Mevlânâ ve Mevlevilik*, Aksoy Yay., İst.1998, p.131

³⁰ See Buhari, Cenaiz 80; Müslim, Kader 22; Muvatta, Cenaiz 52; Tirmizi, Kader 5; Ebu Davud, Sünnet18

³¹ Mevlânâ, *Mathnawi*, trans.Veled İzbudak, M.E.B. Yay., İst.1991, vol.1, p.210

³² *Mathnawi*, vol.1, p.233

³³ Annemarie Schimmel, *Ruhum Bir Kadındır*, trans. Enis Akbulut, İz Yay., İst.1999, p.74

³⁴ *Mathnawi*, vol.6, p.35

³⁵ *Mathnawi*, vol.5, p.203

³⁶ *Mathnawi*, vol.4, p.162

³⁷ *Mathnawi*, vol.4, p.132

War against self has nothing to do with them, since the latter is the big war.”³⁸ There is an allusion to one saying of the prophet, when he and his companions returned back from a big war. According to this saying, battling the enemy is the little war. The real big war is battling self. If so, how can we see woman as responsible for the real war, while they are free from the little war? Women’s weak disposition not only covers their bodies, but also their minds and souls. Hence, it covers everything related to mind and soul. “Because they are weak in reason and soul, their dreams are inferior to those of men.”³⁹ Naturally, it is difficult to arrive at such a sweeping conclusion. After all, Mawlana particularly states this exception: “However, in very rare cases there is Rustam in some women. It is hidden like Mary.”⁴⁰

After the second issue mentioned above, now we go on with the third issue Mawlana gives much emphasis.

Third, we are of the opinion that the most important aspect of woman’s ontology is women’s win against men and their being source of mischief (*fitna*). Here *Fitna* means test. In his works, Mawlana gives examples of men who were tested by women and failed. Anyone who reads the *Mathnawi*, can see that there are a lot of stories that deal with men deceived by women. Moreover, the idea that women are potentially guilty cannot be seen in Mawlana. By nature, men cannot be free from women since they become complete with women. However, one must be very careful here. Even if man is superior to woman, in reality women win against man. “Women can deceive even the strongest man on earth. Water is superior to fire but fire boils water”⁴¹

“In appearance, water is superior to fire and you are superior to woman. But in reality, you are defeated to her and wish her.”⁴²

No matter man becomes Rustam, son of Zal and brave like Hamza, he is prisoner of woman.”⁴³

The hadith Mawlana took as the base for his explanation gives us very intricate opinion. “The Prophet said: Women have the control over reasonable man. On the other hand, ignorant people try to overcome women for they are rude. They have little passion and love. The animal side in their nature is dominant. Woman is the light of God, not a lover. She is like creator, not something created.”⁴⁴

Even in some case Mawlana sees women as imperfect, it can be seen that he appreciated them by saying “She is like creator, not something created”. Giving woman the rank of being creator is the best proof for her important place.

Mawlana gives emphasis on man’s superiority to woman as well. He does not only give the basic facts, but also clearly explains why they are so. The weakness of man toward women is normal since God created everything in couples. Everything looks for its perfection. “Everything looks for its mate, like iron looks for magnet, amber for straw, sky for earth. God created women as friend for men. How could Adam be separated from Eve?”⁴⁵

If man is not separated from woman by nature, is woman a goal for man to achieve?

This question is as old as history, in our opinion. There are lots of answers. The answer of Mawlana is that woman is not the ultimate goal man should achieve. While he emphasizes that woman is not goal for man, he states that man and woman are inseparable parts. “According to the verse *zuyyina linnas*, how can people be separate from the things God created for them. How can Adam be separated from Eve?”⁴⁶. This quotation is from the chapter Ali Imran, verse 14.

Like Adam cannot be without Eve, man cannot be without woman, thus woman is an important test (*fitna*) for man. Mawlana follow a Quran-centered mystic viewpoint in the issue of woman to be a test. In this very point, there are two verses which interest us and quoted much by Sufis.

³⁸ *Mathnawi*, vol.6, p.151

³⁹ *Mathnawi*, vol.6, p.343

⁴⁰ *Mathnawi*, vol.6, p.151

⁴¹ *Mathnawi*, vol.1, p.195

⁴² *Mathnawi*, vol.1, p.195

⁴³ *Mathnawi*, vol.3, p.265

⁴⁴ *Mathnawi*, vol.1, p.295

⁴⁵ *Mathnawi*, vol.3, p.295

⁴⁶ Mevlânâ, *Fihî Mâ Fih*, trans. Avni Konuk, İz Yay., İst.1994, p.231

The first one of these verses is Yusuf/28 and the second Nur/30-31. In this first one, it is clearly stated that “the mischief of women is great”. Yet the mischief of Satan is weak.⁴⁷ After quoting this verse Mawlana says: “Just because of woman, Josef fell down to prison and got troubles. If he was so, I would be hanged fifty times.”⁴⁸

Examples on the relationship between prophet and woman is not limited to that in Mathnawi. Troubles happened to Noah and Adam because of woman are told as: “Many times Satan tried to deceive Adam, but after Eve said to him “eat!”, he ate the forbidden fruit then. The first blood spelled on earth was because of woman, in the hands of Cain. When Noah wished to cook a meat, his wife was throwing stones in the fryer. His wife was overcoming him and contaminating his pure water of guidance. Secretly, he was saying to his people that “protect your religion from these heretics!”⁴⁹

The verses in the chapter Noor, beautifully explains the test between woman and man and recommend man and woman to keep their gazes from bad things. Depending on his particular verse, he expresses his opinion on why woman is a part of test: “The gaze of woman is test. If the sound of this test is heard, it dramatically increases.”⁵⁰

“Do not keep anyone together with women. Man and woman are like fire and cotton.”⁵¹

The most striking sentences about woman’s being test for man take place in the fifth volume: “When God show the beauty of woman, which take man’s reason and patience, to Satan, he started to dance. He said that give it to me, I now achieved what I wanted”⁵² These sentences are the way to put the idea “woman naturally can be test for man” in another way.

Fourth, Mawlana states that “woman must be accepted as she is”. “What is woman? No matter you say something or not, it is her. If she is not inclined to do something bad, whether you banish her or not, she acts according to her good and clean nature. Just relax and do not be confused! Otherwise, she also acts according to her way and nature.”⁵³

Conclusion

We can summarize Mawlana’s views on the ontology of woman in five main headings:

1. Woman looks like self.
2. Woman was created weaker than man.
3. However, woman is a test for man and she overcomes him.
4. There are good and clean-natured women,
5. It is difficult to change the ontology of woman. They must be accepted as they are.

Mawlana says that man cannot be separable from woman and man looks for woman. Thus, we can say that, “he puts woman higher place than man”. The desire of man towards woman makes them “a kind of creator” beside man.

⁴⁷ Nisa, 4/76

⁴⁸ Mathnawi, vol.6, p.306

⁴⁹ Mathnawi, vol.6, p.356

⁵⁰ Mathnawi, vol.6, p.363

⁵¹ Mathnawi, vol.5, p.315

⁵² Mathnawi, vol.5, p.80

⁵³ Fihi Mâ Fih, p.83