The Features Of Individualism In Islam

Introduction

The family structure is the bedrock of society that helps create a nurturing and secure space for all its members. It is an institution that has existed in some form, from time immemorial and will continue in spite of all the social evolution that we are experiencing. Irrespective of our race or nationality, homes have traditionally been seen as safe havens from the hustle of the outside world, however, we now see the traditional household structure cracking at the core, across cultures and religion - all in the name of freedom and personal autonomy. The idea to put one's own interest above the family and hence community, is now catching speed causing us to witness a real human relationship catastrophe. We have so many apps and websites to keep us connected but we still crave the old fashioned hug and time spent talking to a close friend or relative in person. We thought that by spending all our energy in building our skills and talents that we would find happiness, but the truth is that, real joy comes from being confident in one's abilities and using them to help others. An individualist simply cannot imagine this.

The Family Change

In the West, more couples are now choosing to cohabit instead of getting married, finding it more convenient and less demanding. More children are being born out of wedlock and the percentage of single mothers is at an all time high (Lewis, 2001). Divorces are sharply increasing in Muslim and Non-Muslim homes, and children from these broken homes when left on their own to cope, end up doing drugs, develop mental disorders or get involved in juvenile crimes. Up till recently, a 'normal' family constituted having a father and mother and their resulting offspring. And this nuclear family would be bolstered by grandparents, aunts and uncles who would always be there to assist and guide. However, materialism, the new-found religion of the West, has led each person to fend for themselves without thinking about the rest of the 'herd' (Shafique, n.d.)so we are floating in our lives with utter disregard for where we are 'all' headed (Asad, 2007, p. 28). In Islam marriage has a two fold objective, to live harmoniously as a family unit while also contributing to the betterment of society at large (Mawdudi, 2019, p.107). And the current of individualism targets this specifically, thereby rendering the family and society as a whole, value-less.

Individualist vs Collective Cultures

In the European-American culture we see a dominant individualistic group formation where values like independence, self-efficacy, autonomy and uniqueness are highly encouraged and nurtured through parenting, classroom dynamics and popular media (Cherry, 2019). While it may have its economic advantages, research shows that individualists have fewer close friends and experience a lower subjective wellbeing which implies that the European culture does more harm than good when enforced on a culture based on entirely different values (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014). In the Muslim culture, men and women have roles assigned to them by their Creator and not by the patriarchy, so equity for women in Islam is about them being able to preserve their femininity and not equate themselves with men (Raja, 2014). Muslim thinkers like

Iqbal saw a fundamental change in the people's understanding of self vs society as early as in the 30's and mentioned the importance of the 'group principle' where each member of society is not obsessed with mere self-aggrandizement but thinks of the greater good and wellbeing of all around him (Shafique, n.d.).

Effects of Individualism on the Family Structure

Role Imbalance

Women who value family but want to live the modern life face a big dilemma between belonging and individual performance. While it is noble to pursue the cause of women's right, it should not be an exercise to equate men with women. More women are stepping out to work, not always out of dire financial strain, but to build their careers and have an independent life outside the home. There is nothing wrong with working and using one's abilities as long as the family doesn't suffer. More often, we see cases of families breaking down because there is no anchor at home managing the family (Raja, 2014). As a result, the family breaks down.

Power Shift

Individualism also upsets the power structure of a family because financial independence makes two heads of the family and soon enough, conflict erupts. It's like having two CEO's of a company, both with their own vision for how to run things. It seems that the ultimate focus of the western influences is to not only equate men to women, but to erode our religious understanding of family roles (Kazemi, 2000). When the power shifts from men to women, one party may abuse the excess power and divorces become casual while domestic abuse is rampant. While Islam gives men a grade of respect over women, it also expects them to carry out their duties with responsibility. And when women are given the role of being care-takers, its because they are best suited for this multi-faceted role. No man can fulfill the challenging requirements of an organized and caring wife and mother.

Value-less generation

In the Islamic paradigm, not only are we trained to live within our families, many South Asian cultures have the concept of extended families living in one accommodating residence. The idea was perhaps similar to the one captured in the African proverb, 'it takes a village to raise a child." This meant that it takes many different people from various age groups and walks of life to nurture a child in its most formative years. However the ground reality is that although we have many modern means of communication, we are severely isolated. Mothers are supposed to figure out 'mothering' on their own and so hardly ever feel confident in parenting. Children often see their immediate relatives once in a few years, thereby losing a meaningful connection and a sense of belonging. When they don't have experiences with their uncles and grandparents, they relate less with them and their children. This means that the next generation of the family will barely know each other.

Lack of Support

The traditional family setup with extended family being physically and emotionally near is losing its charm. Stay at home mothers feel more isolated today and this forced seclusion cannot be

undone with the modern means of communication. Couples choose to leave family homes for better job opportunities abroad and seldom take into account the emotional wellbeing of everyone involved. While Muslim women are encouraged to grow their families, they seldom have any familial support to manage the home with their growing brood.

Group Mentality

So far we have looked at the impact of individualism on families. Now let's extend that to communities, that are nothing but a grouping of families working for a common cause. Allama Iqbal, a political and philosopher thinker was convinced that the ummah cannot revive unless individuals accept that their existence is only purposeful when working towards the fulfillment of a collective goal. He worried that we were losing the 'herd instinct' and only thinking for our individual progress without much care or concern for how our actions translate to the greater community (Shafique, n.d.). A strict individualistic interpretation of life creates a deception where we think that we are doing well for ourselves and somehow amorphously contributing to the community we belong to, but this is a mirage. In order for our communities to thrive, we have to actively think about our role in the community and how we can put down common goals and then work towards achieving them. When families come together and start working on small projects that help change mindsets, end poverty, educate the young, then a big change can be expected.

Conclusion

Individualism has not only impacted the wellbeing and functioning of our families, it has caused the Ummah to become a sleeping giant. With everyone working to realize their own dream, we have deliberately sidelined the agenda of our communities. Only when marriages are seen to be a way to implement the Islamic lifestyle and families come together for a common goal, will the narrative of the 21st century muslims be taken seriously. Our dispersion and scattered way of being has caused our families to struggle because we are not looking at the common vision of implementing Islam in our daily lives. If we are to change our condition as Muslims and bring about change, it starts from the self to the family and will eventually transform society as we know it.