Caring for the Elderly: Western and Islamic Response

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Abstract: Elderly is the inevitable stage of human life. Delicacy in this stage makes the aged persons dependent on others. Though elderly is a mark of respect in every culture, the problems faced by them are partly or mostly overlooked almost everywhere. With the advent of individualism as well as nuclear family system evolved primarily due to rapid industrialization and urbanization made the elderly problem more excruciating. The western world developed different institutional arrangement for dealing with newly evolved problems. As the problems of the aged people involve multidimensionality, the institutional approach proved not be proficient enough to meet all the aspects of their need in an optimum manner. On the other hand, Islam addresses this problem in a comprehensive manner through generating motivation as well as imposing obligation on others concerned. It is attempted in this article to make a general description of the west and Islam in their response towards the caring for the elderly.

Key Words: Elderly, Care, Western and Islam

Introduction

Human life in this world is a one-way journey composed of different stages. Variations are there regarding the phasing of the stages. But common to all the thinkers is the elderly. Generally significant and apparent deterioration of the daily functioning of an individual indicates this stage. Cultural and geographical variations are there as to the beginning the elderly stage. There is an also gender-based variation in this regard. Due to societal changes and development of medical science elderly starts later than earlier times. The World Health Organization has no standard, other than noting that 65 years old is the commonly accepted definition in most core nations, but it suggests a cut-off

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somewhere between 50 and 55 years old for semi-peripheral nations, such as those in Africa (Little, 2014)

Element of social construction is there, both local and global, within the way individuals and nations define who is elderly; that's , the shared meaning of the concept of elderly is created through interactions among people in society. This is exemplified by the truism that you are only as old as you feel. Psychologically, according to Erik Erikson, old age or elderly is the life stage which is named as 'ego integrity vs. despair (Kaufman, 2009). During the integrity versus despair stage, people reflect back on the life they have lived and come away with either a sense of fulfillment from a life well lived or a sense of regret and despair over a life misspent (Perry,2015).

In Islamic original sources i.e., the Quran and Hadith, issues regarding old age are mentioned profoundly. There is no specific starting point of elderly in the texts. Rather, some subjective descriptions are there for elderly. For example, in the Quran, some of them are to be mentioned here as, a stage of weakness and infirmity and the greying of hair (Qur'an, 30: 54, 36: 68), infirm old age (Qur'an, 19: 8) learning wisdom (Qur'an, 40: 67), physical weakness (Qur'an, 28:23), venerability (Qur'an, 12: 78), senility (Qur'an, 12: 94), the most abject stage of life (Qur'an, 16: 70) men's impotency in producing offspring and women's' inability to conceive children (Qur'an, 3: 40). In Islamic literature however, old age is referred to across a wide range of terminology, with a wide range of meaning, encompassing *shaykh, shaykhukhah, dhi al-shaybah, sha'ib, musinn, mu'ammir, kabir, and kibar* and old women are called *'ajuz'* (Bensaid & Grine, 2014).

What are the Needs Elderly People?

People feel the various types of needs during their different stages of life. Need refers to the feelings of getting something materialistic or non-materialistic. A famous sociologist Bradshaw identifies need as: *normative* (distinguished by professionals, such as vaccination), *felt* (wants, wishes and desires), *expressed* (vocalized needs or how people use services) and *comparative needs*, which indicates that needs arising in one location may be similar for people with similar socio-demographic characteristics living in another location (Bradshaw, 1972. George, B. Leonard has mentioned that human needs are the physical, emotional, thinking, imaginative and spiritual realm of existence (Leonard, 1972). A famous psychologist Abraham Maslow has pointed out some human needs. These needs are: ***Deficiency needs include*** *Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Love, Belonging and Social Needs, Esteem Needs,* ***Growth needs include*** *Cognitive Needs, Aesthetic Needs, Needs of Self-actualization* (Maslow, 1943). People

do not feel all these needs at all the stages of life. Some needs are exposed as essential for one stage like early childhood and some are for middle life and some are for later part of life. It is well known to all that elderly is a vital and vulnerable part of life. It is a period of making balance sheet of life. People normally become alone in this stage. Especially elderly people want special attention regarding their needs. The needs of the elderly are pronounced explicitly in the "United Nations Principles for Older Persons" which was adopted by the UN General Assembly bearing resolution no. 46/91 (ESCAP, 2000), can be summarized as follows:

> *"Independence:* Older persons should have access to food, water, shelter, clothing, health care, work and other income-generating opportunities, education, training, and a life in safe environments.
>
> *Participation:* Older persons should remain integrated into community life and participate actively in the formulation of policies affecting their well-being.
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> *Care:* Older persons should have access to social and legal services and to health care so that they can maintain an optimum level of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. This should include full respect for dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy.
>
> *Self-fulfilment:* Older persons should have access to educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources and be able to develop their full potential.
>
> *Dignity:* Older persons should be able to live in dignity and security, be free of exploitation and physical or mental and be treated fairly regardless of age, gender and racial or ethnic background."

Response of the West to Elderly

Generally speaking, by west we try to mean the people and the regions consisting of the majority of Europe, North America and Australasia inheriting the ancient Greek and Roman civilization. In this Article we will resort this loose definition emphasizing the beliefs and practices therein including some oriental regions which were under the control of Greek and Roman empires.

Like all other societies, in ancient Greek and Rome, it was a common expectation that the children would take care of their parents in their old ages. If we look into the ancient Greek, we find general motivation and statutory provisions obligatory for the

children for looking after parents. "In Athens a statute from the period of Solon states that a son must care for his parents or be deprived of his citizenship. In Egypt (under the control of Greece) some parents handed over their possessions to their children in exchange for a promise of care and provision for their own old age" (McClain, 2003). Almost similar practices were there in Rome. "In Rome no law compelled children to support their parents, but cases appear to have tested the issue and put the responsibility on the children when the parents were clearly in need and the children had the means to support them" (McClain, 2003). But Cicero's words are noteworthy here: ''Old age will only be respected if it fights for itself, maintains its rights, avoids dependence on anyone, and asserts control over its own to the last breath'' (Encyclopedia of Aging: www.encyclopedia.com).In upper-class and middle-class families, familial support could address the elderly issue to some extent. Family care for older and disabled people in 'the past' should not be romanticized … families gave such care as they could (Thane,2009). But elderly in poor families and among slaves had to face indescribable troubles. We may find an evidence from the old proverb "old age and poverty are both burdensome, but in combination they are impossible to bear" (Parkin,2021).

In Bible there are motivations for the care of the parents. *"Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old* (Listen to your father who gave you life, and don't despise your mother when she is old) (Bible Hub, Proverbs 23:22). But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (New American Standard Bible, Timothy 5:8). *Monasteries* (a building in which monks live) served as orphanages, as homes for the old, the sick and the handicapped, and as refuge for the homeless, continuing the tradition of the Greek *xenodochia*-guest houses (Friedlander, 1963). The churches provided some sort of services for the elderly care along with services for other vulnerable groups. 'Ladies of Charity' and 'Daughters of Charity' that was organized by Father Vincent de Paul in France may be mentioned in this regard (Friedlander, 1963). From medieval times, residential care was provided for older and disabled people in almshouses and care institutions, run by faith organizations or other voluntary associations, often charitable and/or charging fees to those who could afford them (Thane,2009 Later on, maternity and old age homes, health visiting, home nursing, clinic and sanitariums for tubercular patients, hostels for mentally defective children and adults were established under the auspices of voluntary agencies (Friedlander, 1963). In case of Britain, it continued till the formulation of the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. Following the provisions of this law, in the seventeenth century two provisions were made to help the destitute poor 'out door relief' (usually in kind including sending

food, clothes and fuel to their homes) and 'indoor relief' (for the impotent poor who were placed in the institution like almshouse) were introduced in England under the state guardianship in the family level and institutional level to help the destitute elderly (Friedlander, 1963). This provision continued till almost mid of twentieth century with slight modification in 1834 especially for addressing the social changes due to industrial revolution and rapid urbanization. Other regions of the west replicated, more or less, the British practices in this regard. In 1889, Germany took an initiative to introduce a social insurance program that provided relief from poverty for seniors for the first time. At the request of the German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, the German emperor wrote to the German parliament: "those who are disabled from work by age and invalidity have a well-grounded claim to care from the state" (Little, 2014).

After second world war Britain turned to be a welfare state with a huge volume of social security system focusing social insurance and social services. Though for many years the British government attempted to enable the old people at maximum level to stay in their own homes without proper guidance and direction but this approach had some sort of limitations which is reflected in report of the Seebohm Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services that reads: 'Services for old people in their own homes will not be adequately developed unless greater attention is paid to supporting the families who in turn support them...If old people are to remain in the community, support and assistance must often be directed to the whole family of which they are members' (Home Office, 1968). In the western societies, there is an emphasis on community care for the elderly along with the institutional care generally known as old home. A succession of documents in the 1980s emphasized the need to improve services for older and disabled people and promoted care and improved services in the community. (Tinker,1992). And instantaneously there are also concerns which are reflected in a Report of the House of Commons Social Services Committee in 1985 that criticized services for mentally disabled people, many of whom were older people and vehemently recommended that no-one should leave an institution without a community care plan (Thane,2009).

Response of Islam towards Elderly

Islam appreciates elderly with utmost honour. In religious and public sphere, elderly people generally take preference over others and it can, almost without any exception, be said that honouring the elderly is a habitual activity of Muslim societies. The aged Muslims enjoy concessions or alternative privileges on their daily prayer, fasting in Ramadan, performing pilgrimage and so on. During times of war, the elderly, irrespec-

tive of their religious identity, cannot be killed, and if they are captured as captives, they are entitled with distinct status requiring kind treatment towards them. So, it can unhesitantly be said that the Muslim cultural framework consistently holds older individuals in high regard and respect, and grooms its youth to show respect and defer to older people, and further treats them with honor and dignity (Bensaid & Grine, 2014). Actually, this sort of practice is the reflection of the following Hadith and such other instructions. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said "He who honours an old man for his old age – meaning during his old age – God will grant him one to honour him during his old age" (Tirmidhi, 3: 440).

Islam has its own system to address the vulnerability of old age. Islam encompasses spiritual motivations as well as a wide range of provisions for this purpose. For the purpose of ensuring the positive course of elderly life, Islam sets out a number of spiritual, ethical and legal measures to sustain just treatment and mercy reflecting essential values and principles such as dignity, honor, kindness, respect, appreciation, ease, support, solidarity and service (Bensaid & Grine, 2014). Showing respect towards the elderly is a condition to be among the Muslim community A famous hadith in this regard may be mentioned: "Anyone who does not show kindness to our children nor have appreciation for the right of our old people is not one of us" (Tirmidhi, 3: 386). The elderly generally possesses the position of parents. Rights of the parents and the responsibilities towards them are mentioned in the Quran and Hadiths from multiple perspectives. Allah, the Almighty, mentioned the parents as thankworthy along with Him. The Holy Quran reads," We have commanded man to be dutiful to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness upon weakness, and his ablactation lasted two years. (We, therefore, enjoined upon him): "Be grateful to Me and to your parents. To Me is your ultimate return." (31:14). In another place it is said "And recall when We made a covenant with the Children of Israel: "You shall serve none but Allah and do good to parents, kinsmen, orphans and the needy; you shall speak kindly to people, and establish Prayer and give Zakah (Purifying Alms). And yet, except for a few of you, you turned back on this covenant, and you are still backsliders (2:83). The highest consideration required to show to the parents at vulnerable elderly are clearly instructed, not merely as motivation, in the Quran as such: Your Lord has decreed: Do not worship any but Him; Be good to your parents; and should both or any one of them arrive at old age with you, do not say to them even "fie" neither admonish them, but speak to them with respect (17:23). From this verse of Quran, it also can be deduced that any sort of harm, abuse and negligence in no way are expected from the children. It is also instructed to pray for them, in their lifetime as well as after their death, by remembering

their nonrepayable contribution at the minor age of the children: "And be humble and tender to them and say: "Lord, show mercy to them as they nurtured me when I was small" (17:24).

The obligation and instruction for performing responsibility towards parents are there in lot of places in the Hadiths. Ensuring the pleasure of Allah depends on ensuring the pleasure of parents as is said by our Prophet (peace be upon him): "The Lord's contentment is in the parent's contentment, and the Lord's anger is in the parent's anger" (Tirmidhi 1899). In another occasion, it is said that one of the supplications which is to be accepted by Allah in favour of oneself is the supplication of parents as pointed out in this Hadith: The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, "Three supplications are responded without doubt. The supplication of the oppressed, the supplication of the traveler, and the supplication of the parent…" (Riyad As Salihin :980).

That the precondition for entering into the Paradise is looking after any or both of the parents is mentioned in the following Hadith: Sayyiduna Abu Hurayra (Allah be pleased with him) narrates that the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him & give him peace) said: "Let him be humbled into dust; let him be humbled into dust; Let him be humbled into dust. It was said: O Messenger of Allah! Who is he? He said: He who sees either of his parents during their old age or he sees both of them, but he doesn't enter Paradise" (Sahih Muslim, no: 2551). Almost the same thing was described in another Hadith as such: "May the man before whom I am mentioned – and he does not send Salat upon me – be humiliated. And may a man upon whom Ramadan enters and then passes, before he is forgiven, be humiliated. And may a man whose parents reached old age in his presence, and they were not a cause for his entrance to Paradise (by being dutiful to them), be humiliated." (Tirmidhi 3545)That the parents are to be regarded as the most deserving for good treatment among all the people is described in a Hadith narrated by Abu Huraira where he reported that a person said: Allah's Messenger, who amongst the people is most worthy of my good treatment? He said: Your mother, again your mother, again your mother, then your father, then your nearest relatives consistent with the order (of nearness). (Sahih Muslim :2548b) Not only the maintenance of parents is obligatory for the children, it is also said that the children's properties belong to father with contextual interpretation. Here we can cite a hadith narrated from Jaabir ibn 'Abd-Allah that a man said: "O Messenger of Allah, I have wealth and children, but my father wants to have all my wealth." He said, "You and your wealth are for your father" (Ibn Maajah, 2291). It is also known that if the parents remain alive after any of their children dies leaving property, then each of the parents will have minimum one-sixth share of that and, subject to presence or absence of other claimants, it may be increased.

Jihad and *Hijrah* are obligatory if circumstances demand. In two cases where the Prophet (peace be upon him) preferred responsibility towards the parents to the highly regarded *Jihad* and *Hijrah.* To substantiate this two Hadiths may be cited. One was narrated from 'Abdullah bin 'Amr that a man came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and said: "I have come pledging to emigrate (Hijrah), and I have left my parents weeping." He said: "Go back to them, and make them smile as you made them weep" (Sunan An-Nasa'I :4163). In the other case, it was described as: A man came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) asking his permission to take part in Jihad. The Prophet (peace be upon him) asked him, "Are your parents alive?" He replied in the affirmative. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said to him, "Then exert yourself in their service (Sahih Bukhari: 3004). Being unkind to one's parents is regarded as one of the major sins, coming immediate after the first major sin- *Shirk*, that we come across the narration made by Abu Bakr(R): Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said thrice," Shall I inform you of the biggest of the great sins?" We said," Yes, O Messenger of Allah." He said, "To worship anything or anyone besides Allah and to be unkind and undutiful to one's parents" (Sahih Bukhari :5976).

Beyond the family circle, kinship plays a great role to address different social issues including elderly. Allah, the Almighty, instructed "Give to the near of kin what he is entitled to, and also to the destitute and the wayfarer. Do not dissipate your wealth wastefully" (17:26). Instruction for doing good to kin along others is pronounced in another verse, "Serve Allah and ascribe no partner to Him. Do good to your parents, to near of kin, to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbour who is of kin and to the neighbour who is a stranger, and to the companion by your side, and to the wayfarer, and to those whom your right hands possess. Allah does not love the arrogant and the boastful" (4:36). Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Learn your lineage so that you may maintain family ties. By doing so your family love will increase, your wealth will expand and your lifespan will be blessed" (Tirmidhi, Hadith no. 1979). There are so many Hadiths for motivating and instructing to maintain kinship for which we can unhesitantly expect that in an ideal Muslim society a needy elderly lacking immediate family support is not expected to be left out of care.

Islam imposes a reciprocal exchange of rights and responsibilities among the neighbours which acts as a very effective tool for easing elderly along with other issues. According to Islam, neighbours take preference over other general people while providing assistance. In the precedingly referred verse of Al Quran (4:36) the mention of neighbours we observed. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has said that the rights of the neighbour were so overwhelmingly emphasized to him by Angel Jibraeel that he

feared that neighbours might be made partakers of one's inheritance (Sahih Bukhari:6014). In another Hadith in which Abu Hurairah (May Allah be pleased with him) reported: The Prophet (PBUH) said, "By Allah, he's not a believer! By Allah, he's not a believer! By Allah, he's not a believer." It had been asked, "Who's that, O Messenger of Allah?" He said, "One whose neighbour does not feel safe from his evil"(Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim). A person's belief is to be in question who is not caring to his neighbours. A Hadith narrated by Anas bin Malik (May Allah be pleased with him) reads: The Prophet (May peace and blessings be upon him) observed: None amongst you is a truthful believer till he likes for his brother or for his neighbor that which he loves for himself. A neighbour is supposed to take care of his or her fellow neighbours and it is correlated to the belief of that person. We are very familiar with the Hadith in which The Messenger of Allah, (Peace and blessings be upon him) says:" He is not a believer who eats his fill whilst his neighbour beside him goes hungry" *(Sahih Bukhari).* Islam ensures an elderly-friendly environment with some special arrangements. There is a motivation for honouring the friends and loved ones of parents. It was narrated that Abu Usaid, Malik bin Rabi'ah, said: "While we were with the Prophet (May peace and blessings be upon him), a person from the Banu Salamah came to him and said:" 'O messenger of Allah, is there any way of honoring my parents that I can still do for them after they die?' He said: "Yes offering the funeral prayer for them, praying for forgiveness for them, fulfilling their promises after their death, honoring their friends and upholding the ties of kinship which you would not have were it not for them" (Sunan Ibn Majah :3664). Another Hadith in this regard may be mentioned here in which Abdullah b. Umar reported Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) as saying: The best act of goodness is that an individual should treat kindly the loved ones of his father (Sahih Muslim). With this practice in society, ultimately, elderly generation enjoys a loving and caring atmosphere bestowed from different corners. To sustain this environment, additionally, there is a prohibition of abusing parents of other persons. It is interpreted in a Hadith that abusing parents of other persons is eventually abusing own parents which is regarded as one of the major sins. There is a Hadith in which some companions of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) asked him, does a man abuse his parents too? He (the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: Yes, one abuses the father of another man, who in turn abuses his father. One abuses his mother and he successively abuses his (the former's) mother (Sahih Muslim).

Islamically, the government is obliged to address the needs of the persons in trouble if the needs are not met by the family, relatives or neighbours. The state is supposed to collect Zakat from the capable donors and distribute those to the deserving receivers.

The destitute elderly people are genuinely a claimant of zakat. The state is also expected to spend money from the state treasury if the need of the destitute including the needy elderly not otherwise met. The example of the second Muslim Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab's (Allah be pleased with him) initiative regarding an old Jewish impoverished person to whom 'Umar provided with adequate financial support and exempted him from the payment of taxes (*jizyah*) (Bensaid & Grine, 2014).

Conclusion

People getting long life in this world in no way can escape elderly. In one way, elderly is enjoyable as this stage is honoured by almost all the cultures. But on the other way, elderly life encompasses various types of physical, mental, social and emotional troubles. Throughout the history, different cultures resorted different composite of mechanisms to conciliate the vulnerability of elderly. Familial responsibility, more specifically responsibility performed by the children, is common to all cultures. Islam and the west are not exception this. The west eased this troublesome job with the help of the churches for long time till the last portion of sixteenth century. For last four hundred years, a trend of institutionalization had got a upper hand in the programs and services provided by the state, the churches and voluntary agencies. But the recent trend is emphasizing family and community-based services. On the other hand, Islam resorted a comprehensive mechanism in which the family, the kin, the neighbours and finally the state perform as different cog of the wheel of the elderly issue in a framework befitted with required proportion of spiritual, moral, emotional and social motivation and obligation.

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