

# ARTICULATING GENDER: MUSLIM WOMEN INTELLECTUALS IN THE PRE-MODERN PERIOD

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## Introduction

This article sheds light on the forgotten history of women religious scholars in the pre-modern period of Arab Muslim societies.<sup>1</sup> The research follows trends in recent historical studies that have demonstrated the active presence of women in the public sphere through the practice of various professions and occupations.<sup>2</sup> Women's legal rights, their ownership of property, their diverse charitable work, their commercial and investment activities in pre-modern Ottoman times before the nation-state and its administrative disciplinary models have all been subjects of innovative research and important contributions.<sup>3</sup> These studies have dismantled assumptions about modernity and its relation to women's history, about the opposition of modern Enlightenment to traditionalism, about the actual origins of the ideological separation of private and public spheres, domesticity, and other issues. In this vein, the present reading is also meant to dispel stereotypical notions about the characters, lives, and social context of Muslim elite women in Mamluk societies.

Specifically, it is in the area of religious learning and activity that research about women's presence and involvement in their societies and about social interactions can be revealing. The topic here is not so much the "image" or "representation" of the "feminine" in religious texts, but rather Muslim women as historical agents, as subjects not objects. Indeed what was the contribution of women in medieval societies to the fields of religious knowledge, as well as to the teaching or dissemination of these sciences? In what way did they have access and to what branches of this learning? How did the participation in disseminating take place and what characterizes the environment in which it happened? Did this activity provide them with authority and an opportunity to articulate/reveal a gendered identity?

It has always been pointed out that the foremost problem in this field is the general scarcity of formal historical sources and its scattered nature in this particular period

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of pre-Ottoman times, hence no court records or archives. Such information can be found either in biographical dictionaries that document the lives, births, and deaths of prominent figures in special categories and professions, or can be “hunted” and “dug out” from other types of sources.<sup>4</sup> The information can be very brief and concise, which gives great importance to paying attention to narrative details and tone of narrator/historian. It is also equally worthwhile for the researcher to fill in between the lines and gaps using what has been termed as “historical imagination” or “re-construction.” Another problem related to the issue of historicizing has been noted by Ruth Roded in her study<sup>5</sup> (and also by other researchers in the field of tracing women’s work and occupations, see note 1), which is a systematic decrease in the number of women recorded in these histories from medieval to modern times. The big question, of course, is to what extent does this decrease reflect the actual decrease of women participating in the public life, and to what extent does it reveal the increasing marginalization by male historians who have always been more interested in the histories of male religious and political elites anyway?

In previous papers, we have shown that women’s participation in the field of religious sciences included their being *muhaddithat*, *faqihat*, and *muftiyat*. A *muhaddithah* was a *hadith*-scholar and teacher, among women of the succeeding generations following the early *rawiyat*/transmitters of the Prophet’s sayings and traditions (known as the Prophet’s companions—*al-sahabiyat* and *al-tabi’iyat*). They engaged in professional and scholarly dissemination of canonical *Hadith* collections to male and female learners. *Faqihat* and *muftiyat* were specialists in studying different branches of Islamic jurisprudence and were often consulted on matters related to law and *ahkam*. In continuation of this endeavor, the present article will focus on two cases of women religious scholars from Cairo in the fifteenth century and from Damascus at the beginning of the sixteenth century who are officially documented in the biographies as both religious figures *and* literary authors. I am arguing that each of the portraits display an all-around intellectual and public figure within the circle of cultured elites—portraits that do not reveal the stereotyped preoccupation with seclusion or gender segregation whatsoever. To the contrary, both women are depicted as speaking interactive subjects—and as agents—not silent objects, and major space is given to their voices and literary output. At the same time, an awareness of gender and an embedded, implied discourse of equity and resistance to discrimination also form a significant dimension of the biographies. The article will look closely at the women’s biographical portraits in order to shed light on these implications and analyze the texts attributed to them, in an attempt to explore the problematic noted by Leila Ahmed that “women were not, in this age, creators of texts in the way that they were in the first Islamic age, when they were among the authors of verbal texts, later written down by men.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, the fact that she considered them rather “textually invisible” can be re-thought.

## Theoretical Contexts

The subject of studying women's biographies and histories in the middle ages can be grounded in theoretical issues and discourses in new historical criticism, medieval textual analysis, feminist history, and cultural representation. One debate that has arisen concerns the relationship between history and historiography, reality and representation, actuality and image. Analyzing histories as literary and rhetorical texts employing techniques of literary criticism, poetics, and discourse analysis constitutes a challenge to traditional historical practice. This recent orientation opens new areas of historical criticism and the possibility of a so-called rhetoric of history or poetics of history. Roots of this endeavor can be traced to postmodernist theories of representation (present re-presentation of the past) and multiculturalism (diversity of voices and viewpoints). It is a theorizing that urges scholars to look at history differently through what is called "textualism" or "textuality." This refers to a strategy by which "texts are 'read' as systems or structures of meaning" emanating from certain social and cultural processes that ultimately construct them.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the literary or rhetorical theorist/critic is to analyze how the text is constructed, or how it goes about saying what it does. Of course this approach raises problems for traditional historians' assumptions about the clear-cut difference between objective reality (true events and lived realities) and reducing the past to the texts describing and imaging those realities.

Whether history is factual or interpretive is a debate that proved its significance to the study of the medieval history of women, and to the questions particularly posed by Western feminist historians examining women's historical experience in medieval Europe. Joan Scott, a pioneer feminist theorist on history and gender, expresses the necessity of an interpretive perspective that looks at discourse and representation. Individual experience is never transparent to its own viewpoint but created through historical forces, thus in need of an active interpretive lens: "...we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position historical subjects and produce their experiences."<sup>8</sup> Hence, such scholars discussed the problematic of male authorship and mediation in most of the important medieval historical sources on women as factors in doubting the complete veracity of information or the authenticity of their textual pronouncements and depictions. Yet even if most of the deeds, acts, and words of those women reach us filtered through male writings, there is still room for research on "understanding historians, where they account well, where they neglect evidence, and where they reify into construct their own contemporary notions...."<sup>9</sup> This means a researcher interested in exposing women's history can still reinterpret these writings anew and decode clues of past social relations and political structures: "We ask not only what the image of woman was

and whether it correspond to reality, but who created it and what function it served in a larger social setting.”<sup>10</sup>

More theories on medieval “ventriloquism” and reverse imaging<sup>11</sup> have been offered, thus leaning towards considering the extant material more as sites of social and cultural construction/re-presentation than as complete factual reality. The first term has been used to describe female voices which proceed from male authors:

Such voices...are equivocal. They do not wholly speak from the place of their male authors, since the meanings they embody are cultural rather than the sole property of individual authors, yet neither can they be romanticized as the repressed and marginalized voices of women from the past.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, male-authored works can still be viewed as medieval textual representations of women, unconsciously reflecting either forms of verbalizing and inscribing gender or even enfolded cites of resistance: “...the binary oppositions of *sexual difference* which such [male] discourses try to nail in place can be shown to *undo themselves continually*...”<sup>13</sup> (my emphasis).

However, an opposing viewpoint to the above is expressed by Mohja Kahf in an excellent article examining women’s compositions in the early Islamic era. Kahf discusses the same problem of authenticity applying it to the case of women in Islamic history and cultural memory. She criticizes the extreme position that assumes those compositions are purely the contrivances of male writers, for they are to be studied as “discursive traces of women” and as literary evidence of “women’s eloquences.” Even if one were to take the position of male appropriations of women’s voices, “the process entails envisioning women as speaking subjects rather than silent submitters and can activate unintended challenges to the gender status quo ante.”<sup>14</sup>

The present article combines the two positions. First, the compositions under question are to be considered historical “voices” of women, even if they are documented “within” male works. To concede that until the sixteenth century women in Muslim societies were incapable of composing poetry or other forms of literary and religious texts is to reinforce, and re-cycle, the old masculinist dismissal and belittling of women’s abilities and historical achievements. The question arises: why is it difficult to believe in women’s expressiveness while taking for granted male literary achievement? Why is the category of “man-of-letters” (*adib*) historically accepted but cannot be applied to women of the same time period? To exaggerate the workings and power of male embellishments/contrivances is to deny women’s historical presence altogether and to turn them into almost imaginary characters, hence chasing them back into disappearance from history all over again. Bringing this category of women religious intellectuals and *litterateurs* to the foreground will retrieve their visibility and “voices,” as well as re-inscribe women’s words/

texts into the mainstream of Arab Islamic cultural memory. Secondly and simultaneously, these written histories—as representing the full picture—can be also studied as cultural productions to be investigated in terms of how they textualize certain socio-cultural gender attitudes.

### **“The God of Sha’ban and Ramadan is One”: a Sub-text of Equity?**

The primary source of the biography of Fatima daughter of Qadi Kamal al-Din Mahmud ibn Shirin al-Hanbali (b. 1451 in Cairo) is the twelfth volume of *Al-Daw’ al-Lami’*, the biographical dictionary by the historian and *muhaddith* (Hadith scholar) Shams al-Din al-Sakhawi.<sup>15</sup> I would like to focus on this particular distinctive biography that covers more pages and receives on the part of the author more personal attention than any of the remaining 1,077 entries on women *muhaddithat* of the fifteenth century. The portrait of this woman scholar, as well as the depiction of the interactive professional and intellectual camaraderie between the author Sakhawi and her, convey an interesting model of a medieval female religio-intellectual who displays both specialized religious knowledge *and* literary/critical practice. I intend to shed light on the content of this biography, analyzing the characterization of Fatima and the texts included by the author and attributed to her, in terms of: (a) the assimilation of a literary and critical dimension within a narrative of religious portrayal and worth; (b) an articulation of a gendered/female identity and its implications; (c) a submerged discourse of synthesis. It will be shown that these three features of the whole portrayal also correspond to three successive stages or layers of a sub-text argument on gender, duality, and equity concluding with a reconciliation of binaries.

The immediate surface feature of this biographical representation is that of Fatima, the religious scholar and specialist in the science of *Hadith*. Interestingly, the first descriptions that meet our eyes refer to her “cleverness in poetry composition,” “soundness of her understanding,” and “the strength of her heart or soul” (107). These are characteristics that have to do more with an accomplished author and intellectual possessing literary skills and critical insights than with a strictly traditional theologian. Yet, what immediately follows is also mention of the number of her pilgrimages and the time of her *mujawarah* there, when Sakhawi met her. *Mujawarah* appears in both men’s and women’s biographies referring to the practice of pious travelers, mystics, and pilgrims settling in the proximity of the holy places in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem for a period of time to lead a life of praying, *dhikr*, and pious contemplation. Hence, we find evidence of interaction among various scholars in this environment, and also between men and women traveling pilgrims or religious scholars. Hence, Fatima is both a serious traveling religious scholar *and* a woman-of-letters.

Sakhawi then presents a 31-line poem, a traditional mono-rhyme *qasida*, by Fatima addressed and dedicated to him on account of the death of his two brothers. This long poem that Sakhawi includes wholly from beginning to end is very much in the tradition of *ritha'*, the Arabic poetic genre of elegy, and includes the traditional tropes of lamenting the loss of the deceased figures and grieving over their worth, human mortality, and the consolation of the afterlife and eternal reward. (An interesting question that might arise is whether Fatima also knew and interacted socially with the two brothers, as she talks about them in detail.) The poem, however, slips into a panegyric of Sakhawi as a renowned and accomplished *muhaddith* and also as a man-of-letters in two of its sections: the first comes approximately in the middle of the poem, and the second towards its end. What we have, then, is an interesting mixture of two poetic genres.

The first section of praise consists of four lines that focus on the superiority of Sakhawi as a reliable and true religious scholar of *Hadith* and employ the traditional hyperbolic aspect of Arabic panegyrics:

- ... He who has uniquely and wisely mastered the sciences of *Hadith*
- And whom God Almighty has chosen for a great bounty, as he is capable of narrating true *hadiths* coming down from the Prophet
- Your articulateness shamed all mankind, and your eloquence and lucidity in grammar is a great endeavor
- You have combined in you all the sciences and knowledge of God and become unique in this world, attaining a high status granted to you by Him. (107)

The second section coming towards the end of the poem calls Sakhawi a “scholar, a learned man, an imam,” who has achieved unprecedented fame that she would be incapable of enumerating all his “uncountable” virtues (108). Fatima then invokes God to extend His protection to him against any harm, so that he can “benefit humanity with his *adab*” (the second /a/ is a long vowel, hence the plural form: literatures). This last word refers to literature, the art of writing, or *belles lettres* in general. We also notice in the phrase quoted above the strange use of the word “*habr*” in between the other two titles of “*’alim*” (scholar) and “*imam*” (a religious leader). “*Habr*” here puns on more than one meaning or association: first, it directly evokes rabbi, bishop, or any non-Muslim religious authority and learned man; second, it also connotes both the verb *habbara* (to embellish and compose in elegant style) and the noun *hibr* (ink). In other words, this description given to Sakhawi points to the non-religious, literary dimension of his achievement, although it comes between two other clearly religious titles—meaning his “uniqueness” that she mentioned before lies in this combination. In addition, the pun itself (a learned religious authority and a perfect writer/composer) underscores this dual role.

So far, this mutual or two-way self-reflexive representation (Sakhawi represents Fatima in his biography who represents him in her poem) seems to highlight a significant literary dimension in both of their lives and characters: she is a *muhaddithah* and a poetess (the long *qasida* embedded in a biographical dictionary of religious scholars); he is a *muhaddith* but also praised for his literary output, writing style, and eloquence. Now, he introduces his own book of consolation, *Irtiyah al-akbad* (The Comfort of Hearts) that he had sent earlier to Fatima to read and evaluate, but also “to find comfort in it or to be consoled by it as a result of the loss of her daughter” (108). According to the narrative, Fatima sends him—in poetry composition—a specific personal comment on one of his verses in that book. Notice the structure of the biography so far: Fatima’s consoling elegy to Sakhawi because of his brothers’ deaths is mirrored by his consoling book to her on account of *her* daughter’s death. Earlier in her poem she had reminded him of the *hadith* that “paradise is surrounded by adversities,” and then in his book he writes a poetry verse about patience that Fatima quotes in her response to him: “Be patient and wait for disasters to run their course, for after they come in succession, they also depart.” Here they are discussing fate, mortality, and human suffering from a religious point of view, reminding each other of known Islamic concepts and *hadiths*. She puts forth the *hadith* on forbearance against adversity and the prospect of heavenly reward, and he talks about the importance of *sabr* or patience. Hence, both of their portraits combine elements of literary output and religious scholarship or specialization. It is this doubled nature that leads into and reflects upon the second layer or stage of this sketch, where gender awareness will be fore-grounded.

In her second main poem, Fatima once again addresses Sakhawi as “imam” and as “fine poet” and refers to the aforementioned verse on patience and life’s calamities as difficult to apply, because when disasters come they leave one with “sore eyes” from weeping. In one line she says: “I couldn’t bear, sir, waiting for calamities to reach their end and run their course; my endurance waned and weakened” (108). Her adversity is too big that she feels it has broken her spirit. This particular advice cannot be easily fulfilled. It is here in the last two lines of this poem that she specifically refers to her gender, as a woman who has nevertheless enjoyed his book tremendously (*taribtu*, the same word used in describing an aesthetic response to music or fine poetry) and thus is asking God to increase his bounty to Sakhawi. It is also here that Sakhawi replies to her sad verses in praise of her character as one woman who “surpassed [in excellence] lots of men in addition to women, and who composes poetry as good as that of Al-Khansa’.” He follows this with a *do’a* (an invocation to God): “May God protect both your religion and life—*dinak wa-dunyak*” (109). Two things are to be noted here: first, the pattern of mirroring is once again repeated, as he plays the role of consoler that she has played in the first part of the biography through her first elegiac poem (he even quotes again to her the

very same *hadith* she has used about paradise surrounded by adversities); second, the twin significant words of *din* and *dunya* underscore the duality of religious learning and literary endeavor we have seen from the beginning.

What follows is a prose segment by Sakhawi himself elaborating more on the theme of patience and human forbearance in the face of calamities of fate. The segment relies on paradoxes and opposites, such as enduring pain leads to tranquility of the soul, the notion of the healing of both hearts and bodies, calamities bring also heavenly reward and hence sustenance and blessing...etc. He concludes this segment, which he had initiated with a reference to Fatima surpassing men and women, with saying that this forms a resolution to the problem that had merited her objection—an objection that “lacked *men*, or was in need of men [to answer it]” (109). Does this mean that Fatima, who is better than many men, asked Sakhawi a question too difficult for men to answer, but he did? In praising her, does he also praise himself, thus making his own veneration a reflection of hers? Noticeable here is the element of gender-identity awareness used in this equation: if she is one woman of a kind, then he is also one man of a kind.

The third poem included by Fatima strikes another subject that also deals with gender, and more specifically with female identity in relation to the Law and divine justice. Sakhawi narrates that Fatima had also sent him one of her queries, and he quotes the poem that begins with the traditional segment of praise and personal address, then the main complaint:

- I ask you, O Sheikh of all reason and intelligence, and whose utterances are like strung pearls
- About her, one who was hindered from reaching this much hoped-for goal
- To pray, O sir, in this holy place between *zamzam* and *al-hatim*
- On this very Night which we were told all things good and wise are granted
- Would she, then, receive the same reward as the one who did perform prayers that Night; would that be equal to possessing a forthright righteous position?
- Would she attain the same that they would, as a kindness granted from the Beneficent and Generous God?
- Tell me quickly, O you whose intelligence excels the understanding of every smart one
- You, whose *fatawa*, when made manifest to those who possess true understanding, enthrall them
- ...
- Sha’ban, however, is made easy, still a worthy month in the sight of God
- ...
- You, and those who took refuge in you in this world, are [connected] to the truth of God who is All-Knowing of every hidden thing. (109-110)

The gist of the problem about which Fatima is consulting Sakhawi for a religious opinion is the fact that she was legally unable to perform prayers around the Ka'ba on the holy Night of Qadr, the night in the month of Ramadan when Muslims commemorate—by long night prayers and reading of the Qur'an—the beginning of Qur'anic Revelation. The legal cause for this hindrance, which she does not explicitly say but keeps referring to Sakhawi's intelligence and the ability to understand subtle allusions, is menstruation. This is definitely a striking reminder here of the gender difference between our two figures, stressing the female identity crisis in particular. Not only so, but we discern a subtle complaint about the justice of the distribution of divine reward (*ajr* is the word she uses in the verses).

We have to look closely at Sakhawi's own answer to her, as he reports it, in order to arrive at an analysis of this surprising exchange between a man and a woman (Muslim religious scholars) on menstruation and its implications to female worshippers, as documented in a medieval biographical dictionary of *hadith* scholars by a renowned *muhaddith* and historian. His first reply is as follows: "Thanks to God, this is a matter that He prescribed upon the daughters of Adam; you can remain in high spirits and good cheer that God will grant you grace and favor by giving you the credit/reward of what you had intended to do, as in the *Hadith*: Those who intended to do a good deed but did not, it will still be counted for them any way" (110). Sakhawi goes on with his argument quoting more evidence to prove and reassure her that she will obtain her due divine reward (*thawab*). If intent alone is enough for one to obtain a reward—whether there is an excuse for not doing the deed or not—then the reward must be guaranteed for the one with a real excuse or actual impediment that is out of her hands. The Prophet says: "When anyone falls ill and is incapacitated, God orders the angels who record his or her worldly deeds to write down the good deeds s/he was used to performing every day and night as long as the illness lasts" (110). Another *hadith* to this effect is also included. Therefore, as Sakhawi argues, if this sick person is unable to perform the good deed in its supposed time, and compensates by performing it in later days or months, the reward will be even more abundant. "Undoubtedly," he says, in reference to her specific situation of being unable to perform the prayers during the month of Ramadan as she had intended, but ended up just praying during the preceding month of Sha'ban which is of a lesser holy worth, "the God of Sha'ban and Ramadan is one." In the end, "He is indeed the One God, whose bounty, grace, and generosity every day and every moment are for all weak human believers in His Oneness; deeds are judged by intentions and Grace is abundant" (110).

The main problem for Fatima and that which Sakhawi is careful to resolve is the issue of justice, specifically equality in distribution of reward: will she be given a reward equal to others who did not face this obstacle that is not in her hands after all? Interestingly, the situation does not begin a discussion on ritual purity/impurity

or a *fiqhi* exposition on the blood of menstruation, which one would expect from a medieval text in general, for the discourse takes another trajectory. Nowhere are there any hints to uncleanness, to the sinfulness of the flesh/sexuality represented by womanhood, or to the inferiority of the female gender as a result of this natural bodily function. The issue—if we were to put it in modern terms—is the provision of a “gender-sensitive” measure that acknowledges existing biological difference, but does not inferiorize or marginalize in essence as a result. It is at this point of the biography that an embedded discourse of a reconciliation of divisions emerges. The dualities suggested and played out all along (the literary and the religious, the elegy and the panegyric, the worldly and the otherworldly, patience and suffering, fate and humanity, man and woman, Sakhawi and Fatima) meet on a note of healing and a synthesis of binaries in the Oneness of God, who is the source and creator of all differences or likenesses. Indeed, “*Rabb Sha’ban wa-Ramadan wahid.*” Gender difference, or rather biological/sexual differences, can be articulated and acknowledged but are to be transcended to forms of integration and unity in the common Creator of all.

The biographical sketch does not end here, but is followed by another large segment that records other literary activities practiced by Fatima and her relations with the literary elites and intellectuals of the day. The biography documents poetic exchanges between Fatima and other named male figures, poetry compositions consisting of riddles, wordplay, puns, and poetic exercises/contests on rhyme and rhythm imitations. There is a quick reference to her actual presence in one of these events, perhaps to distinguish it from other exchanges through written correspondences. Sakhawi also reports on her other panegyric poems dedicated to *qadis* (judges) and other religious elites of the time. There is also a mention of her taking residence in a *khalwah* (retreat) belonging to Sakhawi’s brother the “Hanafi *Qadi*, or judge” (111), as well as instances of *mutaraha* (exchanging questions and verse lines) with a number of male poets. This part of the biography highlights the public nature of Fatima’s intellectual activity within the cultural and social milieu of her time and class.

As was discussed in the first part of the article, whether one chooses to consider this biography “authentic” history of a true medieval Muslim woman “religious scholar and intellectual,” or a mere representation mediated by a male-authored narrative and point of view is left to a reader’s decision concerning the adopted method of approach and reading, as well as the point of emphasis. There are, however, questions to ponder, such as: why would a medieval Muslim male historian concoct poetry about such frank topics falsely attributing it to a particular known Muslim elite woman, mention names of other male figures in contact with her, and document all this information in a public biographical dictionary for everyone’s perusal? Would there be no concern whatsoever of accusations of fraud on the part

of these figures? Can Fatima Kamal al-Din Mahmud—with a known birth date, a family lineage, and a city of origin—be an imaginary figure? And if one takes the middle position that all these characters did exist and the events did take place but the narration was greatly embellished and exaggerated by the author, then why does he create a *re-presentation* that textualizes and highlights, rather than ignores, issues of gender and female identity? If we are to doubt that this is indeed Fatima's voice but Sakhawi's, aren't these views still a product of a culture that acknowledges gender and easily admits female presence—a site for a certain cultural construction of the duality of gender difference?

### **"Our Lady-Scholar": a Game of Irony and Resistance**

A'isha al-Ba'uniya (d. 922H) is originally from Damascus from a well-known elitist Syrian family,<sup>16</sup> and she appears in two major biographical dictionaries, *Al-Kawakib al-Sa'irah* by Al-Ghuzzi (d. 1651) and *Al-Durr al-Manthur* (1896) by Zeinab Fawwaz, a Syrian-Egyptian woman writer.<sup>17</sup> Aside from a few differences in the kind of details and emphasis between the two biographies, which we will discuss later, both portraits clearly demonstrate the public nature and social status of A'isha as a poetess and a woman-of-letters (*adibah*). Secondly, she is also presented as a religious scholar and a mystic (a *shaykhah*, *'alimah*, and a *sufiyyah*) teaching and practicing *ifta'*. Thirdly, all throughout, an undercurrent of gender awareness—if not tension—can be detected in subtle instances, and in Fawwaz's version it turns to an open game of playful irony.

Al-Ghuzzi introduces A'isha as a clever, intelligent, and pious scholar and mystic, the mother of one Abd Al-Wahhab. He praises her as one of the "extraordinary persons of all time, in terms of superiority, knowledge of the sciences, literature, poetry, religiousness, and virtue" (288). Then he mentions her professional qualifications, the fact that she worked in teaching and *ifta'*, and gives a list of her books and various compositions—four titles, two of which are volumes of mystical poetry and two are summary poems in the meter of *rajaz* (hence, *urjuzas*) of other poems by two male poets. Besides the diversity of her attributes (combining the mystical, theological, and literary aspects), we notice her important status and high esteem among the cultured and scholarly elites of the time, then her social mobility and frequent travels between Syria and Egypt. There is mention that she "learned devoutness, piety, and asceticism on the hand of Shaykh Isma'il al-Khawarizmi, then his follower al-Muhayyawī Yahya al-Armawī, before she traveled to Cairo where she obtained in study a great deal of sciences and was given a license to teach and practice *ifta'*..." (288). We are given the names and positions of male scholars and literary figures with whom she either met on special visits or exchanged poetry panegyrics, riddles and literary contests—such as Abu al-Thana Mahmud

ibn Aja al-Halabi, Head of the Official Councils of Composition and Letter Writing (*dawawin al-insha*) of Egypt (whose house she visited together with her son when she traveled to Cairo) as well as Abd al-Rahim al-‘Abbasi al-Qahiri, the father or “Master of writers and authors” (*shaykh al-‘udaba*). There is a long exchange particularly between A’isha and the latter, in which they engage in a literary game of rhyme imitation of each other’s poems back and forth.<sup>18</sup> In addition, we read that one Shaykh Shams al-Din ibn Tulun said about A’isha that she “recited to us” (292) poetry verses describing the beauty of Damascus which are also included in the biography under her name. Noticeable, of course, is the expression “*anshadatna*” that suggests a festive or official occasion when A’isha must have publicly recited these verses celebrating the city of Damascus. Hence, the public nature of this woman intellectual is clearly and unapologetically established.

Signs of an awareness of a gender identity can also be detected in three parts of this biography. The first part is a paragraph that Ghuzzi quotes “from her speech”—as he tells his readers (288). It’s a passage in which A’isha speaks in her own words in a first-person narration about her childhood learning and coming of age. Despite the surface conventional style of overly decorative and rhymed prose (*saj*) known to this century, and which reminds us of the genre of *maqamat*, we can discern a subjectivity of femaleness. The passage is a curious instance of a first-person self-presentation *within* a third-person narrative biography, which creates the effect of two concentric circles; the larger is the diverse and public picture of A’isha presented by Ghuzzi, and the inner is the concise and essential formative identity of her.

God has blessed me, thanks to Him, by making me wander and move along various stages of existence in the luxury of generosity and bounty, until I came out into this world. It’s a world filled with the sights of His manifestation, brimful with the wonders of His might and beauties of His created signs, mixed with ugliness and grievances, created thus through the perfection of power and wisdom in order to test us. It’s a House of a temporary passage onwards to the House of eternal rest. Divine benevolence/kindness has *raised* me up in grace and safety, as well as *nourished* me with the *milk* of support and prosperity, so that I can embark on the straight path of righteousness and reach the degree of distinction. God (the Truth) gave me the ability to read His noble book and granted me the blessing of fully memorizing it at the age of eight. Thus I remained within the sheltering *bosom* of friendliness/amiability of the Almighty Kind until I reached the stage of legal commandment. (288)

The passage draws a picture of an intimate and personal relationship (in the typical Sufi manner) between the Divine and A’isha. In this concentrated autobiographical account of her spiritual upbringing, it is God Almighty who plays the role of parents in rearing her up and providing her with divine sustenance. The extended metaphor of comparing this process to *milk nourishment* and to the *bosom*

of sheltering kindness (*kanaf mulatafat al-Latif*) suggests a projection of a gendered maternal identity upon the nurturing compassionate side of the Divine. There is no mention of a father figure who might have initiated her, and the relationship with the Almighty Divine is expressed in motherly terms.<sup>19</sup>

The second part where gender awareness lies beneath the surface in Ghuzzi's biography comes in a poem by the aforementioned "Master of writers," Abd al-Rahim al-Abbasi al-Qahiri, which contains a riddle about one of the Divine attributes that is embedded in the verses. Interestingly, the poem takes the form of a traditional *qasida* with a beginning *nasib*, the opening courtly section that usually praises the figure of the beloved according to the conventions of old Arabic poetry and its heritage. This opening ostensibly addresses A'isha and praises her literary and poetic skills. The seven-line introduction contains very obvious gendered metaphors and images that highlight the feminine/masculine duality. The first line establishes A'isha as an excellent poetess who has stripped away the master male poets from their mastery and turned away from them and from their past achievements in individual haughtiness (289). The word used to refer to the male poets is *fuhul* (literally meaning stallions). Although the term—even by that time already—had become almost a dead metaphor or a metonymy standing for mastery in literature and poetry, it continued to be a sexually charged term that is used only to refer to men and so puns on sexual potency, hence the core identity of maleness. Therefore, the opening line puts A'isha in an oppositional stance vis-à-vis traditional male poetic legacy and establishes her independence. The lines that follow elaborate on her creativity and originality through a reinforcement of gender difference, as the poet continues to use gendered/feminine metaphors culled from the heritage of Arabic courtly poetry. In contrast to *fuhul*, the poet uses *ziba'* (gazelles) in a complicated analogy, which compares A'isha's unmatched literary achievement that no one can imitate to running gazelles that no one can get hold of. Her beautiful words and utterances are also compared to brides' "*'ara'is*," and the meanings she composes are likened to the act of sewing bright female robes trailing on the ground. Her genius compositions "unveil" (*musfirat*) wonderful ideas "from whose brilliance, moons would hide in shame" (289).

In a later section of the biography, Ghuzzi quotes two short mystical poems, very much in the tradition of Sufi divine love in general, but which gain a special significance placed following the above sections. We have been made intensely aware of the female identity of this figure, and so it would be natural to recall here the ultimate female model of women mystics in the Arabic tradition and her mystical love doctrine: Rabi'a al-'Adawiya of the 8th century AD. The poems depict this personable, intimate, and passionate relationship between the Creator and created, Divine and human, "beloved" and "seeker/lover" (291). They employ the emotional language of love lyrics, assimilating or transforming it into the well-known unique

Sufi experience of self-annihilation and soul-union with the Divine. A'isha uses all the established terms and notions since Rabi'a as well as maintains the tone of intense love passion: "*habibi*" (my love), "*mahbubi*" (my beloved), "*wisal*" (union), "*shahdtu al-jamal*" (I witnessed Your Beauty), "*aman qalbi*" (the safety of my heart), "*ya-matlubi*" (You whom I seek), "*hubbak tayyam fik al-mughram... walla, hayyam...a'dam 'aqli...*" (Your love has enthralled one enamored of You. ...[it] took away, enraptured...and annihilated my mind...)...etc. These mystical texts complete the diverse portrait of A'isha al-Ba'uniyah, the religious scholar and theologian, teacher and *muftiya*, author and poetess, and finally the mystic—in other words, an all-around religio-intellectual with an uncontested public presence. Furthermore, the biography itself—on a subliminal level—acknowledges gender and inscribes A'isha's consciousness of female identity.

A second version of A'isha's biography appears in Zeinab Fawwaz's Dictionary two centuries and a half later. This particular biography gains even more significance due to the female identity of the author herself and the historical background when Fawwaz was writing her book—a time when the "woman question" and issues of modernization in the Arab region were heavily debated and had occupied a large part of national consciousness in countries like Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Fawwaz produces this pioneering biographical dictionary, the first ever to be written by a woman and devoted only to women as part of a turn-of-the-century trend among Arab women writers and in women's journalism, which used "biographies of famous women" as a counter strategy of empowerment against marginalization and seclusion.<sup>20</sup> In her introduction, Fawwaz clearly states that she has composed this work "as a service to my gender" (6). Hence, this creates an interesting situation where Fawwaz's depiction of A'isha doubly articulates and inscribes gender: it reflects the female identity of the author as well as the figure to be described and represented. Once again the effect of two concentric circles is produced: a larger circle of Fawwaz's whole book, her special intent, and her own gender consciousness; then a smaller inner circle occupied by A'isha and *her* texts.

It is not clear what is the exact classical source of Fawwaz's A'isha, but the initial presentation, qualifications, and list of books and compositions resemble her portrait in Ghuzzi. A'isha is still the same astonishing figure with multiple talents and activities. It may be worth noting that Fawwaz adds the descriptions of "intelligent" (*labibah*) and "rational" (*'aqilah*), as well as "a flash of beauty on her face" (293). The poems and verses included here are different from the texts in Ghuzzi. Prominent are a long 128-line poem (in praise of the Prophet) accompanied by A'isha's own rhetorical commentary on every single verse and an introductory paragraph in which she describes this critical methodology and her intent from this literary production. A'isha considers this work "a [good] means for me, my parents, my progeny, my loved ones, and for those who supported me..." (294).

Two observations are to be registered. Firstly, in that introductory passage, A'isha states: "This is a poem produced by one with a *veil* (a metonymy for woman), a poem that testifies to a good temperament, polished in its style, based on the fear of God and [hope] in pleasing Him, *revealing/unveiling* aspects of good rhetoric..." (293). The two words draw attention to their contrast: "*qina*" and "*safirah*." Secondly, Fawwaz comments in praise of some of her verses that they "demolished (i.e. outdid) a great deal of other verses uttered by *fuhul al-shu'ara'* (master male poets)" (293), also using the same cliché of "able stallions." Both author and biographical figure reveal in their texts an unmistakable sense of gender identity.

Fawwaz's portrait ends with an astonishing segment, absent from Ghuzzi's version, which can be interpreted on more than one level. A'isha was asked—in poetry—about a specific *fiqhi* problem and its *fatwa*: a woman who had sexual intercourse while asleep with a man whom she mistook for her husband. On finding out he's not, she regrets it and wants to repent, but asks about the legal judgment on her case: has she committed a sin (*athimah*)? The four-line verse passage is in the form of a question beginning with an address to A'isha: "*Ma qawluki ya-sittuna al-'alimah...*" (What do you say, our Lady-Scholar...) (302). A'isha's reply comes in imitative verse of the rhythmical pattern and rhyme of the original piece in seven lines. She begins by: "Your Lady-Scholar (*sittukum al-'alimah*) says to you...." Then she gives four different juristic opinions on this case according to the four *fiqhi* schools. Shafi'i would say since the woman did not know, she will get a reward for this (*laha ajruha*). Maliki would say that she is definitely rewarded not sinful. Hanafi would also say that this is an unexpected blessing that came to her in the darkness of night. As for Hanbali, he would say that the woman has been sinful (*athimah*) because if she hadn't enjoyed it, she would have jumped up from under the man (!)

Despite the fact that the segment reads more like an explicit joke, it is presented by Fawwaz in a straightforward, ordinary manner with the comment that this instance is an example of A'isha's *fiqhi* erudition and her quick, witty responses (302). The verses are then followed by an abrupt ending of the biography, the accustomed conclusion of the date of A'isha's death. On the immediate surface level, the elements of humor and playful, sexual frankness can be considered an example of medieval pre-modern casual attitudes to literary treatments of sex topics. (Does this demonstrate a different norm of social propriety, other than our modern post-Victorian sensibilities and prudishness? Is this flirtation?) On a deeper level, the specific factor of context cannot be ignored: first, the presumed factual and historical context of a respected religious scholar (*shaykhah*) and mystical poet having this humorous, explicit exchange with someone, and second, the context of Fawwaz (end of the nineteenth century) including this piece and concluding with it her biography of A'isha.

For the first consideration, the question arises as to the ironic implication of this peculiar exchange. A group of male figures are supposedly testing A'isha's learning of *fatawa*, yet the dubious address "Our Lady-Scholar" and the ridiculously hypothetical problem itself are meant to embarrass and challenge the respected *shaykhah* into an answer. The assumed situation is a reminder of the other side of femaleness—being a mere object of sex. This is definitely an ironic fall from being a "Lady-Scholar." Yet, A'isha engages fully in the game. First, she reinforces the fact she *is indeed* their "Lady-Scholar" by repeating it at the beginning. Second, she demonstrates her usual poetic ability by answering in verses that imitate the rhythm and rhyme of the question. Third, in the spirit of playful irony, she states that she is a mere "servant of people of learning and knowledge," and so will only "transmit what they said." In other words, the answer is not *her own fatwa*, but that of the great four scholars of the four schools of jurisprudence. The effect of this disclaimer or seeming humility is transforming the "ridiculousness" of the question (an instance of male challenge in the guise of humor and playfulness) to the answers of the four great male scholars themselves, thus turning the tables—so to speak—on the opposite challenging side. The comic, obscene problem is treated by A'isha as if it is for real, and she parodies four *fatwas* in her response. It reads like a mock-imitation of the frequent frivolity and shallowness of *fiqh*, especially in issues related to women. Ironically as well, the hypothetical question that had typically put the female in the center of a problem, making her the passive "object" of *fiqh*, is efficiently answered by a female-*faqihah* with an active role as "subject." Through a game of playful irony, an underlying tension of male-female power relations in the field of religious learning can be detected.

As for the irony in Fawwaz's using this piece in her grand Dictionary, it is an indirect comment on the current situation of the end of the nineteenth century when women of the urban middle and upper classes in Arab Muslim societies suffered from rigid segregation and seclusion from the public sphere. (Fawwaz even alludes to the difficulty of her own gender-based public exclusion: *man kanit mithli dhat hijab*) (5). Here is an author and intellectual (i.e. A'isha al-Ba'uniyah), both religious and worldly, who had a strong presence among her peers in a mixed environment, who may have even engaged in "shocking" exchanges according to the norms of early modern conservatism. Fawwaz was very much aware of the social implications of her "gendered" project and explained in her introduction that her intent was to restore balance to biased history that focused on male pioneers and achievers and ignored "half of humanity" (5). It is because of this that she felt a kind of jealousy and enthusiasm for her gender (*hamiyah wa-ghirah naw'iyyah*) and decided to devote this collection to eminent women as well (6). Hence, this gender awareness, this struggle for recognition, is interestingly mirrored in A'isha's narrative and through this particular instance. Both are struggling with resisting

either early modern marginalization and seclusion or medieval pre-modern constant challenges to women's abilities. A'isha al-Ba'uniyah, with her "discursive legacy," survives twice, once through the eyes of her male contemporary historians, and once through an early modern female historian and author like herself.

## Conclusion

This has been a demonstrative and analytical article meant to highlight the public presence of women intellectuals and authors in the pre-modern period of Muslim societies, elite scholarly women whose histories show that aside from leading a life of social acclaim they also expressed an awareness of gender identity. Different biographical representations manifest a culture that did not ignore or neutralize gender, but acknowledged it, dealt with its tensions, and inscribed its multiple levels and implications. Whereas in the case of Fatima Kamal al-Din the biography ends with a healing and a reconciliation of dichotomies based on "negotiating" rights and Divine justice, the narrative of A'isha al-Ba'uniyah uncovers subliminal tensions and challenges. In either case, an articulation of gender is manifest, and the "textual legacy" of Muslim women in pre-modern times is re-discovered. As in the case with other histories of women, careful and meticulous readings and re-readings are the means of researchers to rescuing women from the fate of marginalization in the cultural memory and to re-establishing their visibility. In the case of Muslim women in particular lies the double task of resisting patriarchal exclusion on one hand and external orientalist stereotyping on the other.

## Notes

1. See also in Arabic: O. Abou-Bakr, "*Al-muhaddithat fi al-tarikh al-islami*," *Hagar* 5/6 (1998), 125-140; and "*Qira'ah fi tarikh 'abidat al-islam*," in Hoda Elsadda, ed., *Zaman al-nisa'* (Cairo: Al-mar'ah wa-al-dhakirah, 1998); also Hoda Elsa'dy and O. Abou-Bakr, *Al-mar'ah wa-al-hayah al-diniyah fi al-'usur al-wusta byn al-islam wa-al-gharb* (Cairo: Al-mar'ah wa-al-dhakirah, 2001). In English see O. Abou-Bakr, "Teaching the Words of the Prophet," *HAWWA: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 1:3 (2003), 306-328.
2. Examples include: O. Abou-Bakr and Hoda Elsa'dy, *Al-nisa' wa-mihnat al-tibb* (Cairo: Al-mar'ah wa-al-dhakirah, 1999); O. Abou-Bakr and Hoda Elsa'dy, *Al-nashat al-iqtisadi al-hadari fi misr al-islamiyah* (Cairo: Al-mar'ah wa-al-dhakirah, 2007); also Maya Shatzmiller, "Women and Wage Labour in the Medieval Islamic West," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 39:4 (1997), 1-33, and "Aspects of Women's Participation in the Economic Life of Later Medieval Islam," *Arabica* 35 (1988), 36-58.
3. These landmark explorations that have changed the way we look at the conditions of women in pre-modern Muslim societies appear in the works of pioneers in this field such as Amira Sonbol, Afaf Lutfi-Marsot, Nelly Hanna, and Judith Tucker.
4. For a survey study of this topic see Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections* (Boulder, CO, 1994). See also Asma Afsaruddin, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: 11th to 15th century," in Su'ad Joseph, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures*, vol. I (Leiden, Boston:

- Brill, 2003), and "Reconstituting Women's Lives: Gender and the Poetics of Narrative in Medieval Biographical Collections," *Muslim World* 92 (2002), 461-480.
5. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*.
  6. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (Cairo: AUC press, 1993), p. 82.
  7. Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 21.
  8. Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (1991), 776.
  9. Susan Mosher Stuard, *Women in Medieval History and Historiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), xv.
  10. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1977), 3.
  11. On this latter notion see Carolyne Bynum, *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
  12. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, eds., *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.
  13. Evans and Johnson, *Feminist Readings*, 4. The italicized phrases will be shown to be quite relevant to the present cases under study.
  14. Mohja Kahf, "Braiding the Stories: Women's Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era," in Gisela Webb, ed., *Windows of Faith* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 159.
  15. Muhammad Shams al-din al-Sakhawi, *Al-Daw' al-Lami'*, vol. 12 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsi, 1934), 107-112.
  16. *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).
  17. Najm al-Din al-Ghuzzi, *Al-Kawakib al-sa'irah*, vol. I (Beirut: Al-matba'ah al-amrikaniya, 1945). Zeinab Fawwaz, *Al-Durr al-manthur* (Kuwait: Maktabt ibn Qutaybah, 1896).
  18. These verses are worth translating fully in a separate study: pages 288-290.
  19. We can recall here the poetry of great Sufi masters such as Ibn Arabi and Jalal Al-Din Rumi, which reveal a significant "feminine" aspect of the Divine as the Beloved and as the manifestation of Eternal Beauty, but not necessarily in its "maternal" dimension. See Jamal Ilias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism," *The Muslim World* 78 (1988), 209-224. Also Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman* (Cairo: AUC Press, 1998).
  20. For a comprehensive study of this genre and its historical and cultural contexts, see Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).