Review Essay

Muslim Women's Studies: Two Contributions

Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of Aisha bint Abi Bakr. By D. A. Spellberg. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 243 pp.

Qur'an and Woman. By Amina Wadud-Muhsin. Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1992, 118 pp.

Denise Spellberg's survey of the legacy of 'Ā'ishah and Amina Wadud-Muhsin's exegesis of the Qur'anic exposition of gender are forays in the field of Muslim women's studies. Both works study the place of Muslim women in the textual heritage of the community, but their points of departure are different. Spellberg proposes that 'Ā'ishah's legacy, a product of exclusively male writings in texts from the classical Islamic centuries, is a reflection of Muslim men's interpretations of early Islamic history and their opinions about the proper place of women in their own time. Such interpretations, Spellberg shows, are charged with the political tensions of their contemporary societies. Yet 'Ā'ishah's "legacy alone defied idealization as completely as it denied comfortable categorization" by the Muslim men whose texts represent and construct her, Spellberg asserts (p. 190).

Wadud-Muhsin acknowledges the way in which another copious Islamic scholarship emerged, motivated by the need to understand the Qur'anic utterances about women. Her focus is not, however, on those interpretive texts of men that form an authoritative tradition explaining the meaning of the Qur'an. Wadud-Muhsin argues that the question of woman in the Qur'an must be reconnected directly to the primary text. She proposes approaching the Qur'anic text without the assumptions about gender of the classical interpreters, whose work constitutes the Islamic tradition of exegesis, but also without the assumptions that undergird contemporary feminist readings of the Qur'an. She offers a hermeneutical method for understanding the place and meaning of gender in the Qur'an, based on the consistencies of the Qur'an itself: its contexts, language, and the worldview of its texts as a whole. The effect of this, Wadud-Muhsin suggests, would be to transcend the gender biases of narrower reading methods and arrive at a fuller appreciation of the text's guidance for men and women.

Both works began as dissertations, Spellberg's in history, Wadud-Muhsin's in religious studies. Each brings to Muslim women's studies a node of questions about the process of textual interpretation. The differ-

ences in their approaches reflect not only disciplinary diversity, but a fundamental divergence in purpose. Spellberg's scholarship lies within the tradition of Western academic discourse about Islam. It aspires to the best within that tradition, a fair-minded humanism, to be sure. But as Spellberg herself points out, 'Ā'ishah's "legacy is too important to allow Western scholarship to dictate the last word to those for whom her meaning is more than an academic pursuit" (p. 195). Wadud-Muhsin, without compromising scholarly standards, is among those for whom the legacy of the Qur'an is far more than an academic pursuit. She is engaged in reading the Qur'an as a living text for the community of Muslims, and it is both as a Muslim—a part of the community whose text she studies—and as a scholar that she is thus engaged.

Spellberg sifts through the earliest hadith collections, histories, and biographical dictionaries, beginning with Ibn Ṣa'd's (d. 230 A.H./845 C.E.) *Ṭabaqāt* and ending with Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728 A.H./1328 C.E.). She identifies major themes common to Sunni descriptions of 'Ā'ishah as unique among the Mothers of the Believers (the group of women who were married to the Prophet): 'Ā'ishah's genealogy, marriage, familiarity with the Prophet's actions, presence at his deathbed, and, especially, divine intervention in her life. Spellberg next examines Sunni and Shi'i chronicles and polemical treatises covering roughly the first seven centuries of Islam.

She arranges her study of these materials around three issues: the accusation of adultery leveled against 'Ā'ishah, 'Ā'ishah's role in the political conflict over leadership of the Muslims, and the idealization of 'Ā'ishah as an exemplary woman. Regarding the accusation of adultery, Spellberg discusses 'Ā'ishah's vindication through Qur'anic revelation in relation to the similar story of Susannah in the Christian Apocrypha to the Bible, highlighting the powerlessness of both women against their male accusers. "Only God, acting through his male agents of Earth" could vindicate them, she says, "but ultimately reserving the highest accolades, not for the women whose innocence he had confirmed, but for his most exalted male servants: Daniel and Muhammad" (p. 78). She shows how Shi'i polemics manipulate this incident, which does not end in 'Ā'ishah's vindication in the Shi'i version, to taint authority with dishonor and shame. Returning to the Sunni texts, Spellberg maintains that in their defense of 'Ā'ishah, the woman is "transformed into a Sunni symbol of their collective identity and honor." They are more concerned, in other words, with upholding the authenticity of their understanding of history than with 'Ā'ishah as a living subject (p. 94).

The same limitation operates on the Sunni defense of 'Ā'ishah's role in the Battle of the Camel: In order to defend her against the Shi'i charge that her participation in the battle between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah was a deliberate transgression against Islamic roles for women and specific Qur'anic injunctions for the wives of the Prophet, an act of personal ambition, Sunni authors portray her as coerced into her role in that conflict and subse-

quently repentant for it. Neither side, Spellberg intimates, allows for the legitimacy of 'Ā'ishah's political activity, and both extend that judgment to a normative position denouncing any such role for women. Here, too, she stresses the passivity of 'Ā'ishah as a cultural object bandied about by men preoccupied with their own political and social agendas.

Finally, Spellberg surveys the ways in which 'Ā'ishah is idealized as an exemplary woman of Islam in texts ranging from hadith to Ottoman manuscript illustrations, showing that while the Shi'i community is unequivocal in declaring the superiority of Fāṭimah and reviling 'Ā'ishah, the Sunni community does not maintain the superiority of 'Ā'ishah. Rather, 'Ā'ishah's exact rank remains ambiguous, although she is associated with the other ideal female figures from the early community, Khadījah and Fāṭimah, as well as the ideal women mentioned in the Qur'an, Maryam and the Pharaoh's wife. Once again, the men who engage in these debates are unconcerned with 'Ā'ishah as an autonomous subject whose life may have its own integrity, logic, and motives.

Spellberg's historiography has weak points here and there in its method, specifically in the use of sources. For example, in her analysis of Shi'i writers' use of the adultery accusation to undermine Sunni authority, Spellberg brings in anthropological studies of honor and shame in Mediterranean societies (including, for example, Leila Abu Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments*, a study of contemporary bedouins in Upper Egypt), without connecting them rigorously to the varied periods and cultures whose texts she describes in that section. More importantly, she throws a few modern texts at random into a study that is otherwise very carefully limited to a group of core texts. That core consists mainly of Arabic prose works from the third century A.H./ninth century C.E. to the eighth A.H./fourteenth century C.E.; she extends it by adding manuscript illustrations ca. 1004 A.H./1595 C.E. However, she adds into the mix a narration from a contemporary Iranian village woman (from an Erika Friedl interview), a recent Turkish movie poster, and Salman Rushdie's two-cents' worth from *The Satanic Verses*, without integrating them into her analysis in any systematic way. If contemporary Sunni and Shi'i versions of 'Ā'ishah's legacy are to be included, there are innumerable sources more telling than these.

Apart from these limitations, this is a very competent history. The main drawback to Spellberg's study of 'Ā'ishah, however, is that it is ultimately uninspired and uninspiring. It is difficult from reading this account to get a sense of why so many people from the beginning of Islam to the present have had so much at stake in representing this woman. Spellberg shows adequately how male authors deployed consummate skill in constructing the legacy of 'Ā'ishah through the lenses of their own concerns, emphasizing that 'Ā'ishah becomes a passive object of their discourse. Nor does she fail to acknowledge dutifully her own role herein in reconstructing the men's constructions of 'Ā'ishah's legacy. Spellberg seems to realize (p. 190) that 'Ā'ishah's story is too thick with meaning to stay within those constructs but

is unable to convey the excitement generated by the possibilities of this "difficult woman," as she calls her in the preface. Human texts are interpretative, yes, and the texts of Sunni and Shi'i Muslim men have many reasons to interpret and reinterpret 'Ā'ishah; but 'Ā'ishah is more than a text. 'Ā'ishah's plenitude spills out, ultimately, of the attempted packaging of her as a Sunni symbol or a Shi'i counterideal. Yet by the end of Spellberg's text, she is a dry husk blown off the page.

Moreover, 'Ā'ishah is a woman with copious direct discourse of her own. It may have been transmitted, edited, and arranged by male historians, but one could also argue that she herself is the narrator and reporter of the doings of men, a constructor of male legacies. Spellberg mentions that "Aishah's unique proximity to the Prophet and reliable memory made her an unavoidable point of reference for the male companions of the Prophet." But 'Ā'ishah was not just a seventh-century tape recorder. In her reporting about one particular man, the Prophet of Islam, she took part in shaping the Muslim community's very understanding of the faith. Although her dissertation expands this issue to a whole chapter, in the book version, Spellberg eliminates this chapter and downplays 'Ā'ishah's role as a source of religious knowledge and its potential for other women. She writes:

> Just as Aisha could not control the preservation or selection of her words by those who transmitted from her, neither could those women who continued to preserve traditions in the medieval period hope to define or apply the meanings of such memory within Islamic society. (pp. 57-58)

She maintains that while many women took part in hadith transmission, none took part in the other Islamic fields that interpreted that information (p. 59), and she voices an assertion, also made by Fedwa Malti-Douglas in *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender in Arabo-Islamic Discourse*, that there is "no evidence of female Muslim scriptors in the medieval period" (p. 11). Yet, we know that there were women who did take part in other Islamic sciences; biographical dictionaries mention women who got licenses (*ijāzah*) in jurisprudence (*fiqh*),[1] issued religious rulings (*fatāwā*),[2] and are said to have published books, although none are extant. Surely, clues such as these call for meticulous research into the ways in which the literary presence of Muslim women has been erased from cultural memory and the ways in which it can be retrieved—but it begins with recognition that this presence exists. Rather than find in 'Ā'ishah's legacy clues toward the reconstruction of the roles she and other Muslim women must have played in shaping religious discourse, Spellberg reaffirms and repeats the silencing of 'Ā'ishah in male-authored texts.

Wadud-Muhsin contributes to this tradition of Muslim women in the Islamic sciences. She begins by explaining her approach to reading

the Qur'an, based on three aspects of the text: the context in which it was revealed, its grammar and syntax, and the basic principles of its worldview (p. 3). She grounds her approach to context on Fazlur Rahman's idea that to understand the Qur'an, one must first understand the implication of a particular verse in the immediate context in which it was revealed, then determine how the universal implication of the verse can be manifested in the new environment in which it is read. With regard to the grammar and syntax of the Qur'an, Wadud-Muhsin begins by noting that, in view of the lack of a neuter in the Arabic language, the masculine plural form includes males and females equally unless the surrounding text specifically excludes females. This reaffirms that, overall, the Qur'an addresses women equally with men and exceptions must be specified, a seemingly obvious point but one which both traditional male exegetes and contemporary feminist critics of the Qur'an often overlook. As for language, Wadud-Muhsin points out that the meaning of a word in the Qur'an is determined by how it is used throughout the text as a whole and "in light of overriding Qur'anic principles" (p. 5). Thus, for example, the word *faddala* (past tense masculine singular of "to prefer") in the verse which has been translated as "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, [on the basis] of what Allah has preferred some of them over others" (Qur'an 4:34), cannot be understood without a review of how the word *faddala* is used in other verses, nor can it be interpreted in a manner that contradicts the overriding Qur'anic principle of the equality of souls in the original basis of their relationship to God.

In setting up these criteria, Wadud-Muhsin deliberately moves away from a position of relativity and affirms that human interpretations can achieve meaningful understanding of the text. At the same time, she points out that Qur'anic interpretation is a process that never arrives at a stopping-point; as long as human history unfolds, ongoing interpretation is required to understand how the goals of the Qur'an can be manifested in each given set of historical circumstances.

Wadud-Muhsin then addresses the Qur'anic treatment of the creation and purpose of human beings, studying the vocabulary of creation verses in detail to show that the language of the Qur'an is gender neutral and gender egalitarian in its exposition of these issues. The Qur'an, she asserts, does not establish a hierarchical order between genders; it "does not consider woman a type of man in the presentation of its major themes" (p. 15). Rather than man as the human norm and woman as the secondary, less perfect form, "Man and woman are two categories of the human species given the same or equal consideration and endowed with the same or equal potential" (p. 15). The Qur'anic creation texts contain the overarching principles of its *Weltanschauung*, she says: These are "tawhid, guidance, individual moral responsibility and equality" (p. 25).

Wadud-Muhsin then surveys the Qur'anic utterances that mention women specifically and suggests that the Qur'an does not "propose a sin-

gle uniform role that women should play" (p. 29). There are many women mentioned in passing in the Qur'an who function within the traditional female roles of their own societies; the Qur'an does not offer them as normative, universal examples. Moreover, there are exemplary women in the Qur'an (such as Maryam and Pharaoh's wife in *Sūrat al Taḥrīm*) who are introduced as models for all "those who believe," including men as well as women. At the same time, the Qur'an does not negate difference between men and women, Wadud-Muhsin says; it is just that this difference as put forth in the Qur'anic text is neither a determinant of place in any hierarchy of worth, nor a justification for limiting women to one narrowly conceived role in life. Here she reflects on three women who are the subject of extended Qur'anic narrative: Maryam, the Queen of Sheba, and the mother of Moses. Wadud-Muhsin's reading allows one to see the Qur'anic text as producing moments of subjectivity for these women characters, moments in which the story of the prophet with whom they are associated is suspended for direct empathy with the woman. While it may take a scholarship informed by a gender studies approach to point out such remarkable richness in the Qur'an, the scope of the reader is ultimately enlarged beyond the confines of gender by this interpretation.

Wadud-Muhsin goes on to argue that there is no essential distinction between women and men in the Qur'an's account of judgment, the hereafter, and recompense—despite the houris. The houris, who are mentioned only in the Makkan verses, are part of the Qur'anic strategy for addressing the stubborn Qurayshī pagans who held critical power in seventh-century Makkah, merely one culturally specific manifestation of the beauty of paradise that constitutes the overarching spirit of these descriptions, she maintains. Neither is hell a place of gender distinction in the Qur'anic exposition, she says.

Next, Wadud-Muhsin devotes a chapter to several Qur'anic verses that traditionally have been interpreted as mandating female subordination to men in the earthly realm. She argues that a careful and unbiased review of the syntax and grammar of the vocabulary, and of the Qur'an's overarching principles giving order and harmony to human life on earth, does not justify these traditional interpretations. Wadud-Muhsin argues for "a more integrated communal perspective" that would account for differences in male and female roles and acknowledge the greater biological contribution of women, without hierarchalizing those roles and without making biology the sole determinant of women's lives (p. 63). Here, she addresses at length the crucial verses dealing with marital relationships, including the verse beginning *al rijāl qawwamūna 'alā al nisā'* (4:34, translated in Yusuf Ali as "men are the protectors and maintainers of women."). As do many Muslim women *dā'iyah*s (preachers) working at the level of the community *ḥalaqah* (study circle) today, she interprets this to mean a nonauthoritarian, noncompetitive male responsibility to assist women, rather than male authority over women. That male assis-

tance helps to balance the greater contribution of women (as a whole, regardless of whether each individual woman bears children) to the preservation of the human species, a contribution, Wadud-Muhsin does not fail to note, that "requires a great deal of physical strength, stamina, intelligence, and deep personal commitment" (p. 73). Here also Wadud-Muhsin studies the *wa daribuhunna* clause (translated in Yusuf Ali as "beat them") of 4:34, asserting that, based on linguistic and holistic analysis, the verse does not mean "that a woman *must* obey her husband and if she does not, he can beat her" (p. 74). In addition, she examines here Qur'anic texts on polygamy, inheritance, witness, and child care, using the elements of the method she proposes to validate the authenticity of her reading.

This slim book sets out to do an enormous task. It is hampered by a writing style that is dense in places and imprecise in others, making it critically vulnerable to misreading. Also, Wadud-Muhsin chooses not to review the traditional Muslim exegetical literature. She sets up a theoretical framework for criticizing this literature and aims specific criticisms at a handful of exegetical works, without providing a systematic follow-through. This is a conscious choice to move directly into the primary text, namely, the Qur'an. However, it remains a gap begging address in the work. This is a problem because, while she seems to be contesting the narrow gender biases of some traditional exegesis, she does not object to using other analyses from that exegesis. For example, she draws on the Qur'anic interpretations of twentieth-century Islamic thinkers Syed Quṭb and Mawdudi, not just the "modernist" Rahman. She finds Quṭb's and Mawdudi's analyses valuable when they do not speak directly about women. It is as if Wadud-Muhsin, rather than contesting the exegetical tradition, is extending its scope to include women in as fully human terms as men. This at once affirms the value of the tradition and redresses the poverty of its gender analysis. However, a more thorough explanation of this relationship between what Wadud-Muhsin proposes and the existing literature is lacking.

Another serious objection that may be raised is that the second primary source of Islam, the hadith, is completely absent from Wadud-Muhsin's book. Again, this is part of her decision to investigate gender exclusively within the Qur'an, rather than in Islam as a whole. However, it is difficult to keep hadith out of a study of the Qur'an. When, for example, she states that there is absolutely no distinction in gender in Qur'anic descriptions of hell, hadiths which imply that there are more women than men in hell will come to the reader's mind. What is the relationship between the treatment of gender in the Qur'an and in the hadith literature? The question is not explicitly addressed in Wadud-Muhsin's framework.

Qur'an and Woman, despite such limitations, is a brave undertaking. Guardians of established Islamic thought will think it goes too far; supporters of Western and Third World feminisms will think it does not go far

enough. But these are not Wadud-Muhsin's starting points. Her starting point is the Qur'an and a Muslim woman's relationship to it. Few texts in Islamic studies begin there. Its scholarship brings out the breathtaking possibilities of understanding the Qur'anic text as addressed not to man, but to humanity.

From their various disciplines, Spellberg's and Wadud-Muhsin's works lend themselves usefully to the graduate Islamic studies and women's studies classrooms, addressing an emerging area properly called Muslim women's studies. With careful preparation, selections may be used in an upper-level undergraduate syllabus as well. Wadud-Muhsin's book, however, is indispensable for Islamic studies, and not just for academic reasons.

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Endnotes:

1. In just one of the five volumes of 'Umar Riḍā Kahhāla's biographical dictionary, ten women *faqīhah* (jurists) are listed. See his *A'lām al-Nisā'* (Beirut: Mu'assassat al-Risālah, 1959; 10th rpt., 1991, vol. 4). While Kahhāla is a modern source, all of his entries from the early Islamic centuries are cross-referenced to classical biographical lists and chronicles.

2. Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Samarqāndī is called an *'ālimah, muḥaddithah*, and a *faqīhah*, routinely wrote *fatāwā* in response to particular questions, and is said to have published books in hadith as well as fiqh. The Ayyūbid Sulṭān al-Mālik al-'Ādil Nūr al-Dīn is said to have appointed her to counsel his family on juristic matters. Kahhāla, *A'lām al-Nisā'*, 4:94-95.