

‘Ā’ISHA, MOTHER OF THE FAITHFUL The Prototype of Muslim Women Ulama

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Abstract

Having a unique intelligence and assertiveness, ‘Ā’isha has been regarded Islam’s ideal woman scholar. She was not only as one of the earliest reporters of the authentic sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad, but also a great source for conveying his private family life. The article seeks to show that ‘Ā’isha’s life in the 7th century Arabia is especially remarkable when examined through the lenses of contemporary times. Her main characteristic was her critical, ever-inquisitive, and curious mind. Through the questions she was able to ask, ‘Ā’isha became a bridge between the time of the Prophet and the contemporary Muslim life. The important role she played in the scholarly efforts of Muslim men and women in learning and teaching knowledge needs to be examined and properly emphasized. Her sound scholarship in Islamic disciplines include but was not necessarily be limited to hadith, tafsīr, fiqh, literature, and poetry. Today Muslim women may take ‘Ā’isha not only as a pious example, but follow her intelligence, curiosity, and reasoning.

[Dengan kecerdasan dan kepercayaan diri yang khas, ‘Ā’isha terkenal sebagai seorang ulama perempuan yang ideal. Tidak hanya dikenal sebagai perawi hadis, dia juga merupakan rujukan yang hebat mengenai masalah-masalah pribadi dan keluarga. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa kehidupan seorang ‘Ā’isha pada abad ke-7 di Arabia sangatlah luar biasa pada masanya, dengan karakternya yang kritis, penuh rasa ingin tahu, dan bersemangat untuk mempelajari apa saja. Melalui pertanyaan yang dapat diajukan, ‘Ā’isha mampu menjadi jembatan antara Nabi dan kehidupan umat masa itu. Peran penting yang dia mainkan dalam dunia keilmuan serta pembelajaran dan pengajaran sangat perlu diteliti dan digarisbawahi. Pandangan-pandangannya

mencakup --tetapi tidak sebatas-- hadis, tafsir, fikih, sastra, dan puisi. Perempuan Islam saat ini tidak hanya dapat mengikuti Ā'isha sebagai teladan kesalihan, tetapi juga mesti mengikuti kecerdasan, keingintahuan, dan penalarannya.]

Keywords: Ā'isha's biography, Prophet's life, woman in early Islam

A. Introduction

After the departure of the Prophet Muḥammad¹ from this world, many Muslim women, especially his wives were regarded as significant guardians of Islamic knowledge (*ilm*). Particularly, having a very keen intelligence and unique intuition, 'Ā'isha took her place among Muslim ulama, as a successful educator and scholar, who held both bold and firm views in all of the fundamental areas of major Islamic sciences, such as hadith and fiqh. The article maintains that by emphasizing that 'Ā'isha was a companion and participant in the Prophet's mission and intellectual efforts, she serves as a role model for the excellence that Muslim women scholars today can aspire to and attain.

To this day, 'Ā'isha remains a personality worthy of imitation for everyone, man and woman. Her place and prominence is imprinted in Islamic history as a figure of piety, outspokenness, eloquence, curiosity, and intelligence. In the words of Fida Hussain,

'Ā'isha alone by force of character and keenness of wit won for herself a place in the political and religious history of Islam.... From the time of emergence from her childhood till her death at the age of sixty six she exhibited a degree of ability which should earn her a place beside Agrippa [the Elder] and Elizabeth of history.²

The wives of the Prophet Muḥammad hold a special place in Islamic history. The Quran calls them *Ummahāt al-Mu'minīn* meaning "Mothers of the Faithful" (Quran, 33:6).³ As mother of the faithful, 'Ā'isha became one of the major students and pupils of the Prophet, and

¹ Muslims traditionally honor the Prophet Muḥammad when mentioning his name by adding '*alayh al-salāt wa al-salam* (peace and blessings be upon him) abbreviated PBUH. I acknowledge this use here and ask readers assume its presence throughout the paper.

² Fida Hussain Malik, *Wives of the Holy Prophet* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 1994), p. 124.

³ English quotations of the Quran are from Ali Ünal, *The Qur'an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (New Jersey: The Light, 2006).

through him, ‘Ā’isha’s skills and abilities were developed and perfected. Fethullah Gülen states that ‘Ā’isha’s life and services to the religion of Islam after her marriage prove that such an exceptional person was worthy to be the wife of the Prophet and mother of the faithful. When the time was right, she became one of the greatest authorities on the Prophetic tradition, an excellent interpreter on the sacred scripture of Islam, and a distinguished and knowledgeable expert in Islamic law. She truly represented the inward and outward characteristics of the Prophet through her unique intelligence and scholarship.⁴

B. Ā’isha, the Wife

‘Ā’isha was the daughter of the Prophet’s closest friend, devoted follower, and the first *khalīfah* (caliph) Abū Bakr. As one of the earliest Muslims, Abū Bakr had long hoped to strengthen the deep connection that existed between himself and the Prophet by marrying ‘Ā’isha to the Prophet. ‘Ā’isha’s age at the time she was married to the Prophet has been of interest since the earliest days of Islam, and references to her age by early historians are numerous.⁵ It was reported that the Prophet wanted to marry ‘Ā’isha after the Archangel Gabriel had shown him her picture in his dream.⁶ Therefore, Gülen affirms, Abū Bakr and his daughter ‘Ā’isha acquired the distinction of being spiritually and physically near to the Prophet. ‘Ā’isha’s marriage was the schooling through which she was prepared as a spiritual guide and teacher to the whole world.⁷

According to Muḥammad Siddiqi, ‘Ā’isha came from an accepted and pious Muslim family tradition and she knew no disbelief or polytheism since her birth.⁸ Being raised in a pure Islamic environment, ‘Ā’isha acquired a firm faith and sensitive consciousness at a very early age. Therefore, “by nurture and nature,” ‘Ā’isha undoubtedly became the most qualified woman to convey the legacy of Prophet’s knowledge and wisdom as being an authentic transmitter of the Prophetic message.

⁴ M. Fethullah Gülen, *Questions and Answers About Islam*, vol. 1 (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2010), pp. 2–3.

⁵ For discussions on ‘Ā’isha age, see Aisha Geissinger, “‘Ā’isha bint Abi Bakr and her Contributions to the Formation of the Islamic Tradition”, *Religion Compass*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2011), pp. 37–49.

⁶ Mona Borhan Ghazal, *Virtuous Women In Mythology and Holy Books* (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2013), p. 164.

⁷ Gülen, *Questions*, 1: 132–3.

⁸ Muḥammad Saeed Şiddiqi, *The Blessed Women of Islam* (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1982), p. 162.

It was as if she was created to accomplish this mission in the Prophet's house.⁹ The unique sign of this role was the fact that the Prophet received revelations either while he was with 'Ā'isha or when he was alone in her room.¹⁰ Also, when the Prophet's sickness deteriorated before his death, with the permission of his other wives, he wanted to stay in 'Ā'isha's room from then on. 'Ā'isha was so valuable to the Prophet that he once said:

There are many men who attained spiritual perfection; however no women save 'Imran's daughter Mary, and Pharaoh's wife Asiyya, reached that point. Comparing 'Ā'isha's virtue to other women is like the superiority of meat *thaḥīd* to other meals.¹¹¹²

'Ā'isha was with the Prophet in places and occasions that is impossible for others to be present. She was the exclusive source for information about the family life of the Prophet and his private life. How he would sleep, when he would take a bath, his night prayers, and his romance, etc. are known to Muslims through 'Ā'isha. Behind closed doors she was able to ask the most intimate questions to the Prophet himself. Consequently, she became a bridge between the time of the Prophet and the contemporary Muslim life. Thus, 'Ā'isha had not been there, much knowledge about the private life of the Prophet would have been lost.

'Ā'isha's outspoken and courageous attitude can be seen in family relations with the Prophet. When Muslims in Madinah began to improve their economic status, the Prophet's wives asked him: "Could not we live a bit better, like other Muslims do?" The Prophet Muḥammad reacted by going into retreat and allowed his wives to choose his poor home or the world's luxury. If they chose the world, he would give them what he could afford to and then dissolve his marriage with them. If they chose God and His Prophet, then they had to be content with their lives. The Prophet Muḥammad first called 'Ā'isha and said: "I want to discuss something with you. You had better talk with your parents before making a decision."¹³ Then he recited the following verses:

⁹ Shaikh Ahmad Kutty, "Aishah, A Role Model for Muslim Women", *Ask The Scholar* (2014), <http://askthescholar.com/5-217-2--aishah-a-role-model-for-muslim-women-by-shaikh-ahmad-kutty.aspx>, accessed 4 Feb 2014.

¹⁰ Muḥammad ibn Sa'd, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Sādir), p. 30.

¹¹ Al-Bukhārī, "Aḥādīth al-Anbiyā", 33 (3230). *Tharīd* was the Prophet's favorite dish in the Arab cuisine.

¹² Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhārī*, vol. 9, trans. by Muḥammad Muhsin Khan (Riyāḍ: Dārussalām, 1997), no. 3230.

¹³ Ünal, *The Quran*, 65: 34 and 35

O Prophet! Say to your wives: “If you desire the present, worldly life and its charms, then come and let me make the necessary provision for you (in return for divorce), and release you with a handsome release. But if you desire God and His Messenger, and the abode of the Hereafter, then it is a fact that God has prepared a tremendous reward for those among you who act in a good manner, aware that God is seeing them.”¹⁴

‘Ā’isha’s response was: “Why do I need to talk with my parents? By God, I choose God and His Messenger.” Because of her firm belief in God and ongoing support for her husband, she immediately chose a life with the Messenger of God. Once she made her decision, the other wives did not express a different opinion.¹⁵

On the way back to Madinah from an expedition, Muslims stopped to rest. ‘Ā’isha had gone to look for her necklace that she dropped. Therefore, she was delayed in returning to the rest of the group. Her fidelity and honor was questioned mainly by *munāfiqūn* (the hypocrites). Being hurt by this scandal, ‘Ā’isha became ill and decided to stay at her parents’ house to recover. She had the greatest faith in God and realized that only God exonerate her from this heinous slander. Finally, the Prophet received the revelation and proclaimed it to his wife: “Rejoice ‘Ā’isha, Allah has revealed your innocence.”¹⁶ Later, according to tradition, ‘Ā’isha’s parents told her to thank the Prophet because of the good news. However, ‘Ā’isha responded that God was the one who had delivered her complete honor and innocence, not the Prophet himself.

Many Muslims accept that when the Prophet died, ‘Ā’isha was at the age of eighteen. Nonetheless, “her maturity, intelligence, general disposition” was beyond her age.¹⁷ As mother of the faithful, ‘Ā’isha played a multi-dimensional role in the lives of Muslims; from domestic to scholarly and from private to public. ‘Ā’isha was not only a passive student in understanding and learning the religion of Islam from the Prophet. Her main characteristic was her critical, inquisitive and questioning mind. She never quit asking until she fully understood.

¹⁴ Ünal, *The Quran*, 33: 28-9.

¹⁵ Suraiya Nawab, “The Contribution of Women to Muslim Society: A Study of Selected Autobiographical and Bibliographical Literature”, MA Thesis (Afrika: Rand Afrikaans University, 1997), p. 87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

C. ‘Ā’isha, the Student

Unquestionably, ‘Ā’isha had a unique place among the companions of the Prophet. From the very beginning, she analyzed everything that occurred, assimilated new information, clarified ambiguous issues by asking questions, and learned intimate details that others could not witness by directly asking the Prophet Muḥammad. The Prophet was at the center of her life, and she dedicated herself to his message by all means. Haylamaz writes that since her room was next to the Mosque of the Prophet, ‘Ā’isha not only listened to the sermons delivered and speeches given in the Mosque, but could ask about anything and everything, even intimate things that other people could not ask out of modesty, and always received an answer from the Prophet himself. Whenever something stuck in her mind and bothered her, she resolved it by asking when the Prophet came back to her room.¹⁸

She loved questioning and contemplation and never believed anything she heard until she learned the facts behind matters. Describing this aspect of ‘Ā’isha’s nature, Ibn Abī Mulayka made the following statement: “When she was faced with something that she did not know, ‘Ā’isha was not able to stand without learning more.”¹⁹

Her inquisitive character did not change since the day she married the Prophet. As an Arab proverb states, knowledge is a very deep well, and its bucket is the question. She recognized the fact that only by asking questions, she would be able to fill her bucket with water, and thus asked the Messenger of God about every matter that came to her mind. She compared and contrasted the brand new information with her previous knowledge and asked her husband about if there any inconsistency. ‘Ā’isha’s supremacy in knowledge was so great that in later years, there were books written, like *Al-Ijābah* by Zarkashī²⁰, concentrating solely on her intellectual capacity. Her immense depth of knowledge was unequalled; she never felt comfortable until she learned information from whoever possessed it.

¹⁸ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Musnad*, vol. VI (Egypt: Mu’assasah al-Qurtuba), p. 75., no. 24507, 24511, 24514; Reşit Haylamaz, *Aisha: The Wife, The Companion, The Scholar* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2014), pp. 165–6.

¹⁹ Abū Muḥammad Badruddīn Mahmud b. Ahmad b. Musa al-Hanafī Al-‘Aynī, *Umdah al-Qārī Sharh Şahīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol.2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001), p. 136.

²⁰ Badruddīn Muḥammad bin Bahadır Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Ijābah li Irādī Ma Istadrakathu ‘Ā’isha ‘ala al-Şahāba* (Syria: Al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1939).

D. Ā’isha, the Scholar

‘Ā’isha contributed to the spread of the message of Islam and served the Muslim community for 44 years after the Prophet’s death.²¹ ‘Ā’isha, as a scholar, was widely acknowledged and respected by both men and women. Many companions of the Prophet including *al-Khulafā’ al-Rashidūn* (the Rightly-Guided Caliphs) frequently visited ‘Ā’isha to learn Islamic knowledge. She was the source of knowledge for every individual. Those who were not able to visit ‘Ā’isha in person sent either envoys or letters, explaining their inquiries. Regarding the exceptional knowledge of ‘Ā’isha, Muḥammad ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī, said:

She was the most knowledgeable of people. For this reason, the most prominent companions of the Messenger of God learned Islamic issues by asking her...²² if the knowledge of ‘Ā’isha was put on the right scale, and the knowledge of all the women, even including the Prophet’s other wives was put on the left scale, ‘Ā’isha’s knowledge would be heavier.²³

Whenever the companions came across a complicated issue, they brought it to ‘Ā’isha because she always had the information that could solve a problem.²⁴ She was the most intelligent, scholarly person, and the one who had the best thoughts and opinions among people.²⁵ Doi claims that in a list of Muslim women and their contribution to education, ‘Ā’isha indisputably takes the first place. She provided, Doi writes, immeasurable guidance to the first Muslim community and remained a shining light of knowledge even after the Prophet.²⁶

‘Ā’isha had a special talent for passing what she knew to the others. With no child of her own to raise and educate, she was the mother of all the faithful. She found orphans and needy people; thus overcoming class barriers in access to education, and fought to educate useful members of society. The leading scholar of the city of Madina,

²¹ Shamim Aleem, *Prophet Muhammad (S) and His Family: A Sociological Perspective* (Bloomington: Author House, 2007), p. 130.

²² Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 2:374.

²³ al-Hākīm al-Naysabūrī, *Al-Mustadrak ‘ala al-Ṣaḥīḥain*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1411), p. 12; ‘Alī ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Al-Isāba fi Tamayyuz al-Ṣaḥāba*, vol.4 (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1412), p. 349.

²⁴ Abū ‘Īsā Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. by Muḥammad Fu’ad ‘Abd al-Baqī and Ibrahim Atwa Awd (Beirut: Dār ‘Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī), p. 53. (3883).

²⁵ Al-Naisabūrī, *Al-Mustadrak*, p. 4:15. (6748).

²⁶ A.R.. Doi, *Muslim Women: The Cornerstone of the Islamic Ummah* (Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University, 1988), pp. 21–4.

‘Ā’isha, was visited frequently by one and all who sought information. And when she came to Makka to perform the pilgrimage, a tent was set up between the mountains of Hira and Sabir, and people visited her and returned being educated.²⁷

Her door was open to everyone; from free men to slaves, from close to distant relatives, with the condition that each must observe the essentials of the religion of Islam. Due to her source of knowledge and passion for learning, people across the known world in the Arabia came to ask questions to ‘Ā’isha. They came into her presence and listened to her lessons and speeches with great attention, and left with the intention to pass it to those who were not present.²⁸

During her entire life, ‘Ā’isha was a strong advocate for the education of Muslim men and women in all the Islamic sciences. Attending ‘Ā’isha’s classes were various family relatives and orphaned children. ‘Ā’isha never had any children of her own. Nevertheless, she had affection for children, especially her nephew ‘Abdullah. It is for this reason that she was sometimes called *’Umm ‘Abdullah*, Mother of ‘Abdullah.²⁹ She was known for establishing the first school for women in her own home.³⁰ Muslims men also attended her classes, with a simple curtain segregating the male and female students.³¹ A broad range of Muslims; masters and servants, children and women, young and old, Arabs and non-Arabs, frequently visited her school.

‘Ā’isha’s school was frequently visited by ‘Umar, his son Ibn ‘Umar, Abū Hurayra, Abū Musa al-‘Asharī, Ibn Abbas, and Ibn Zubayr. The scholars of the next generation of Muslims competed with each other to benefit from ‘Ā’isha. It is reported that the number of scholars who attended ‘Ā’isha’s lectures and listened to her teachings was around one hundred and fifty. In the meetings, there were prominent women as well, such as ‘Ā’isha’s sister ‘Umm Kulthūm, ‘Amra bint ‘Abdurrahman, Barīra, Sayyiba, Marjāna and Hasan al-Basri’s mother, Hayra. The total number of women who attended her lectures was around fifty.³²

It is noteworthy that ‘Ā’isha’s genius did not only benefit those who

²⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Musnad*, VI: 6:40; Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 5:595; 8:68.

²⁸ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, p. 191.

²⁹ Nawab, “The Contribution of Women to Muslim Society”, p. 90.

³⁰ Jawed Anwar, “History Shows the Importance of Women in Muslim Life”, *themuslimweek.com* (4 May 2005), <http://www.blackelectorate.com/articles.asp?ID=1344>, accessed 4 Feb 2014.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Haylamaz, *Aisha*, p. 192.

lived during her lifetime, but continued to shed light on those who came after her until the End Time. For instance, among those who appreciated the value of knowledge, ‘Umar b. Abd al-Azīz, the Umayyad caliph who reigned during the years 717-720, occasionally sent letters to Muḥammad b. Amr b. Hazm and in these letters, he wrote:

Explore and search around yourself very well. If you find a hadith of the Messenger of God, a Sunna that remained after him or a statement belonging to ‘Amra, let me know. During the times when the ulama are leaving us one by one, I am afraid that some knowledge may get lost.”³³

Being a hadith scholar and jurist of the second generation of Muslims, ‘Amra was also an exceptional student of ‘Ā’isha. The same ‘Umar bin Abdul Azīz once said, “No one remains alive who is more learned in the hadith of ‘Ā’isha than Amra.”³⁴

‘Ā’isha became a scholar-intellectual in Madina, correcting people who were teaching in the Mosque and answering those who sought her rulings, advice and opinions based on her expert knowledge. Her intellect and expertise in various subjects, including literature, were highly praised by early personalities such as al-Zuhrī and her student ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr.³⁵ Hakim al-Nishabūrī said that one-fourth of the body of Islamic knowledge was transferred to Muslims through ‘Ā’isha.³⁶ Her sound scholarship in Islamic disciplines include but was not necessarily be limited to hadith, tafsīr, fiqh, literature, and poetry.

1. *Hadith*

‘Ā’isha was known to be a famous source of hadiths, due to her matchless qualities of intelligence, memory and reliability.³⁷ She had a photographic memory as well. She never forgot what she had heard, and could always recall it in the right place at the right time. She conveyed

³³ Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 8:480.

³⁴ Imam Zaid Shakir, “The Best of Women”, *EMEL - The Muslim Lifestyle Magazine*, no. 90 (2012), http://www.emel.com/article?id=95&a_id=2640, accessed 4 Feb 2014. is an influential U.K.-based magazine circulated in more than 30 countries. emel - the muslim lifestyle magazine

³⁵ Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 27–9..

³⁶ ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Maḥmūd Tahmaz, *al-Sayyida ‘Ā’isha* (Syria: Dār al-Qalam, 1999), p. 174.

³⁷ Hoda Elsadda, “Discourses on Women’s Biographies and Cultural Identity: Twentieth-Century Representations of the Life of ‘Ā’isha bint Abi Bakr”, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2001), pp. 37–64.

ideas especially expressing the *Sunna*, the way Prophet lived his life. As she was the Prophet's wife and a close companion, soon after his death Muslims began consulting 'Ā'isha on the Prophet's sayings and deeds. Her verification of the Prophet's ways of worship and his human interaction allowed for development of knowledge of his Sunna of praying, worshipping, and ethical matters.³⁸

'Ā'isha is one of the pioneers in the whole history of Hadith tradition, not only as one of the earliest transmitters of the largest number of hadith reports, but also as one of the most cautious interpreters of them.³⁹ Besides the Prophet, 'Ā'isha was the most knowledgeable Muslim and had the best opinion in public affairs. She is known for narrating approximately 2,210 hadiths, not only on matters related to the Prophet's private life, but also on topics such inheritance, medicine, and literature.⁴⁰ Many of these hadiths have been approved as authentic by later major Muslim scholars. Imam Bukharī and Imam Muslim included many of her sayings in their hadith collections.⁴¹

In the hadith literature, some prominent figures including Abū Hurayra, Anas ibn Malik, and Abdullah b. Amr b. al-As narrated countless hadiths from the Prophet so that these companions were called "*mukthirūn*" (those who reported numerous hadiths). 'Ā'isha's position among the *mukthirūn* was unique since there are so many hadiths transmitted only by her. As mentioned above, the number of hadiths that 'Ā'isha narrated directly from the Prophet was so many. If she had attended every meeting or journey where the Prophet was present, and if she had not spent most of her time being a housewife, the hadiths narrated by her would have been much more.

She was given the title *al-Ṣiddiqah*, meaning "the one who affirms the truth." She corrected Abū Hurayra in several occasions, saying, "May God bestow mercy on Abū Hurayra, he narrated you only a part of the hadith." One day, two visitors came to mention a hadith to 'Ā'isha: "Bad omens are to be found in a woman, a house and a horse." And they asked her, "What do you think of that?" These words made 'Ā'isha very angry. Looking around, she said: "I swear to the One who revealed

³⁸ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 51.

³⁹ Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development and Special Features* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), pp. 142–53.

⁴⁰ Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission*, pp. 27–9.

⁴¹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 47; Ghazal, *Virtuous Women*, p. 168.

the Quran to Abū Qāsim⁴² that this matter is not like what Abū Hurayra said. While the Messenger of God was talking, Abū Hurayra entered. At that moment, the Messenger was stating: “During *Jāhiliyya*, the Age of Ignorance, people used to say, ‘Bad omens are to be found in a woman, a house and a horse!’” Abū Hurayra had heard the end of the hadith but not the beginning. After explaining it, ‘Ā’isha recited the following verse, “No affliction occurs on the earth, or in your own persons, but it is recorded in a Book before We bring it into existence..” [Quran, 57:22].⁴³

When having a final decision, the true reason behind the matters should be clarified. ‘Ā’isha always learned the reason behind the judgment, either by witnessing what happened or directly asking the main character in the incident. While some companions thought that the Prophet’s favorite meat was the shoulder meat of lamb, ‘Ā’isha explained the main reason behind such a statement:

The lamb’s shoulder meat was not the portion that the Prophet enjoyed most. In those days, meat was so scarce that when Muslims had it, they rushed to offer it to the Prophet. And the shoulder of the animal was the part that could be cooked easily and quickly.⁴⁴

2. *Tafsīr (Exegesis)*

The major interpreter of the Quran, the very word of God was the Prophet Muḥammad. ‘Ā’isha closely followed the Prophet’s explanations related to the Quran and learned the ambiguous points directly. She gained the ability to understand the purpose of the Quran, and to infer general principles within the framework of Islam. Therefore, ‘Ā’isha was not simply a narrator who transmitted what she had heard and seen, but also an commentator of its meaning. That is why when we look at the tafsīr collection in Muslim tradition, we will find that narratives on the meanings and explanations of the Quranic passages generally passed through either Abdullah ibn Abbas or ‘Ā’isha.

‘Ā’isha’s exceptionality in interpreting the Quran was also due to her closeness to the Prophet. Some of the companions concluded that the middle prayer expressed in the verse: “Be ever mindful and protective of the prescribed prayers, and the middle prayer, and stand in the presence of God in utmost devotion and obedience”,⁴⁵ was the morning prayer,

⁴² An attributive name of the Prophet Muḥammad

⁴³ al-Bukhārī, *The Translation*. book 62, hadīth 32

⁴⁴ Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, p. 4. (1511)

⁴⁵ The Quran, 2:238

while other companions asserted it to be the noon prayer. But ‘Ā’isha said the ‘*asr* (late afternoon) prayer was intended, based on what the Prophet himself had said.⁴⁶

‘Ā’isha never had the patience for an understanding of religious statement that was unreasonable or inconsistent with the teachings and preaching of the Quran. She had a principle firmly established in her mind that the teachings of Islam cannot be absurd or illogical. That is why ‘Ā’isha rejected Ibn ‘Umar’s interpretation reported from the Prophet, “A person will be punished for his or her family’s lamenting (wailing) over his or her death!” The Mother of the faithful rejected it openly saying, “How would the Prophet have a statement such this when God declares in the Quran, “No soul shall bear the burden of another!” [6:164]. ‘Ā’isha denied and ruled that the narrator had made a mistake or forgotten, and then she went on to clarify what she thought was the context of the Prophet’s saying. She said, “May God bless Ibn ‘Umar that he heard something but could not retain it well.” Actually, the funeral of a Jewish man passed by the Prophet and the member of his family were wailing over him. Upon this he said: “You wail and he is being tormented.”⁴⁷

The Quran declares, “whether you reveal what is within yourselves or keep it secret, God will call you to account for it” [2:284]. Prominent scholar companions, such as Ibn Abbas and Ibn ‘Umar stated that this verse was abrogated by the verse: “God burdens no soul except within its capacity” [2:286]. ‘Ā’isha, on the other hand, asserted that the interpretation of the aforementioned companions was not correct and continued:

No one has ever asked me about the verse since I asked the Prophet himself. He said, ‘It is for those who have a high fever or illness, or any kind of disaster or wealth that he was afraid to lose after possessing it, which is bestowed on a servant by God. By the cause of those things, a servant can be purified of his sins like gold is purified from dust and rust.’⁴⁸

3. *Kalām (Islamic Theology)*

‘Ā’isha was very sensitive to information that contradicted the core teachings of the Quran. After the Ascension (*Mi’rāj*) of the Prophet to heavenly dimensions, some companions, such as Ibn Abbas, had the

⁴⁶ Abū al-Husain al-Hajjāj al-Naisābūrī Muslim, *Sahīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ad Abd al-Baqī, vols. I-V (Beirut: Dār ‘Ihya al-Turāth al-Arabī), p. 207. (629).

⁴⁷ Al-Bukhārī, 1292; Muslim, 927.

⁴⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, *Tafsīr*, 3: 2990-2992.

opinion that the Prophet had seen God. They asserted some evidences and claimed that the following verses truly proved this: “Indeed, he saw him on the clear horizon” [Quran 81:23], “Assuredly he saw him during a second descent, by the lote-tree of the utmost boundary,” [Quran 53:13-14], “Indeed, he saw one among the greater revelations of his Lord” [Quran 53:18].

Obviously, not everyone agreed with Ibn Abbas and leaders such as ‘Ā’isha, Ubayy ibn Ka’b, and Ibn Mas‘ud said that the one who the Messenger had seen was the Archangel Gabriel and that the hadith about the Ascension should be considered from this perspective. Hearing this interpretation, Ibn Abbas ran to speak with ‘Ā’isha and asked: “O my dear mother, did Prophet Muḥammad see his Lord?” ‘Ā’isha answered:

“When I heard your words, I felt as if my blood froze. There are three points. First, whoever tells you ‘Muḥammad saw his Lord,’ does not tell the truth, ‘Eyes comprehend Him not, but He comprehends all eyes. He is the Subtle (Latif), the Aware’ [6:103] and ‘And it is not for any mortal that God should speak to him unless it be by revelation or from behind a veil...’ [42:51]. Second, whoever tells you ‘the Messenger knows what will happen tomorrow’ is lying,⁴⁹ because God the Almighty says, ‘No soul knows what it will reap tomorrow’ [31:34]. Third, whoever says, ‘Muḥammad concealed some parts of revelation,’ you should know this person is lying, because God the Almighty clearly orders His Messenger: ‘Convey and make known in the clearest way all that has sent down to you from your Lord...’ [5:67]. However, he saw the Angel Gabriel twice in his angelic form.⁵⁰

4. *Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence)*

Islamic jurisprudence depends on comprehending the reasoning and justification for judgments. The real cause known as *‘illah* in *fiqh* explains the principal aim in religious judgments. ‘Ā’isha’s comprehensive mastery of *fiqh* enabled her to exercise independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in matters of Islamic law, and she used to offer rulings based on her reasoning during the time of the first three caliphs, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman as well as after them until she passed away.

⁴⁹ If God Almighty wills, He may let His messengers know about events to happen in the future. Otherwise, they have no ability to know anything about the future as they wish.

⁵⁰ Concerning this “seeing,” see Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, “Bad al-Khalq”, 7: 3062; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Musnad*, VI: 6:241; Haylamaz, *Aisha*.

‘Ā’isha was one of the few Muslim scholars who could make original rulings based on the previous knowledge of the Quran and the Sunna. If there is no clear statement either in the Quran or in the Sunna, a ruling could be made by reasoning. When a matter was brought before ‘Ā’isha, she first resorted to the Quran and the Sunna and searched for a similar judgment. On matters where she could not find any support, ‘Ā’isha would interpret it according to her own logic. For instance, when she was asked whether the animals slaughtered by Zoroastrians could be eaten, ‘Ā’isha reminded them of the Quranic prohibition on consuming the animals that were not slaughtered in the name of God. She indicated that since the Persians slaughtered their animals without mentioning the name of God, their meat should be acknowledged as *haram* (forbidden).⁵¹

Many appreciated ‘Ā’isha’s knowledge of fiqh as well. Scholars like Abū Salama ibn Abdurrahman,⁵² one of the seven famous jurists of the city of Madina, expressed that they never saw someone more knowledgeable than ‘Ā’isha. While people like Abū ‘Umar ibn Abdubarr thought that ‘Ā’isha was a unique product of her era,⁵³ others like Qāsim ibn Muḥammad said she had become like a self-governing *fatwa* (legal opinion) office during the caliphs.⁵⁴ In those days, people from Basra to Damascus, from Kufa to Egypt, were surging in crowds to Madina to ask ‘Ā’isha questions about religion. Those who were unable to attend the gatherings sent their questions in the letters.⁵⁵

‘Ā’isha one day asked a question to the Prophet whether the *Hatim*, a crescent-shaped place adjacent to the Ka’ba, would be considered a part of the Ka’ba and if so, “Why isn’t it included?” The Messenger replied: “Certainly, during those days, your people were in financial difficulties. Thinking of their own means of support did not let them to do that.” She asked: “Why is the door of the Ka’ba so high?” He said: “Your people did so in order to allow those people they wanted to enter, and to prevent those people they did not want.”⁵⁶ She asked: “O Messenger of God, don’t you think you should reconstruct it on the foundation of Prophet Abraham?” God’s Messenger said: “If your people had not

⁵¹ The Quran, 2:173.

⁵² Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 2:375.

⁵³ Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Ijābah*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 2:375.

⁵⁵ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Musnad*, 6:93, 95. (24667); Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, “Adab al-Mufrad”, 1:382 (1118).

⁵⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, “Ḥajj”, 405 (1333); Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Ṭīm”, 48 (126).

recently been saved from paganism, I would have done it.”⁵⁷ Obviously, the Prophet was referring to a matter that Muslims would not be able to accept before the right time and place, and that it was sensible to delay some issues for later years or even ages.

‘Ā’isha, in addition, warned Muslims not to get caught up in the physical aspects of *ḥajj*, the pilgrimage and stated that rituals such as circumambulating the Ka’ba, running back-and-forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa and throwing pebbles at the devil are means to remember God.⁵⁸

Some companions of the Prophet regarded separation as a type of divorce. ‘Ā’isha, on the other hand, insisted that it should not be considered a divorce. She supported this view with her own experience. To Muslims who wondered at her reasoning, she elaborated the matter as mentioned above, “God’s Messenger gave us [the wives] the choice to leave or stay and we preferred to stay with him. He never considered this as a divorce.”⁵⁹

One day, Sa’d ibn Hishām asked ‘Ā’isha, “I wanted to ask you about celibacy. What do you say about leading a celibate life?” She, without hesitation, replied: “Do not do it! Did not you hear God the Almighty say, ‘...We sent Messengers before you, and [like every other man] appointed wives and children for them’ [Quran 13:38]. Keep away from celibacy.”⁶⁰

‘Ā’isha was among those who understood the essential point that judgments may change according to the time and circumstances. For instance, she believed that the ruling encouraging women to attend the congregational Friday prayers at the mosque had changed in later years. She said the conditions had changed, and the purity and innocence of the time of the Prophet was not maintained. Consequently, the judgment should be reconsidered according to current circumstances and a new decision should be made.⁶¹

Her confidence in Islamic jurisprudence enabled her to pass new judgments regarding commonly held norms about women’s roles in the Muslim community. One such decision was her wish not to be left out of performing *ṣalāt al-janāzah* (funeral prayers). As a collective obligation upon Muslims, this specific type of prayer was performed in congregation and often reserved for men only in the minds of many Muslims, even in

⁵⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “‘Ilm”, 48 (126).

⁵⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, *Al-Jāmi’*; “Sawm”, 64 (902).

⁵⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Talāq”, 4 (4962, 4963).

⁶⁰ Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 6:97 (24702).

⁶¹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Sifat al-Salat”, 79, (831).

today's world. 'Ā'isha frequently sent orders to bring the deceased and place it inside the precincts of the Mosque itself, so that the wives of the Prophet could also perform the prayers.⁶²

5. *Poetry and Literature:*

Arabs generally express themselves in poetic language. Haylamaz underlines the fact that the Bedouin culture of the 7th century Arabia, with its emphasis on oral tradition, poetry and storytelling had a great impact on 'Ā'isha's aptitude for poetry and literature. The most valued product in the market was poetry at the time; they noted history in poetry, explained themselves through poetry, and energized up their gatherings with poetry. 'Ā'isha was born in a time when her father Abū Bakr was able to recite poetry for days without stopping. 'Ā'isha passed on the poems that had belonged to Abū Bakr.⁶³ She also witnessed Muslim poets who came to Madina from other places. She once said: "Feed your children poetry so that their tongues shall be sweet." She always thought that it was crucial to teach poetry to children to help them speak more fluently and cultivate the skill of expressing themselves well.⁶⁴

Growing up under the guidance of the Prophet and under the protection of Abū Bakr made 'Ā'isha unique in the area of poetry and literature. She learned the sciences of history and genealogy from her father, Abū Bakr. Her sense of eloquence, rhetoric, and poetry came from the same source.⁶⁵ Besides the superior literacy of her father, 'Ā'isha's outstanding eloquence was due to her knowledge of the Quran, attendance of the sermons of the Prophet, and willingness and ability for understanding and memorizing the statements of the Messenger.

Poetry can be used for both good and evil. That is why 'Ā'isha recommended: "Leave the bad and ugly [face of poetry] and be in search of goodness and beauty." She had heard this statement directly from the Prophet.⁶⁶ She believed that the right thing to do for believers is always to use language in good and useful ways. Aisha explained that language could be used to hurt people.

'Ā'isha spoke distinctly and clearly, as she had witnessed in the

⁶² Kutty, "Aishah".

⁶³ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, "Fadāil al-Madina", 12 (1889); "Manāqib al-Ansar", 46 (3926). See also, Haylamaz, *Aisha*, pp. 184–6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Musnad*, 6:67. (24425).

⁶⁶ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, "Adab al-Mufrad", 1:299 (865).

speeches of the Prophet. Her manner of speaking had significance particularly when crowds were addressed. According to Haylamaz, “when minds were puzzled or bewildered by conflicting information, one must speak with authority, and perhaps even repeat some phrases to convey what needed to be understood.”⁶⁷ ‘Ā’isha objected to those who spoke hurriedly. She taught Muslims about the Prophet’s general manner of speaking and how a hadith should be reported. Someone had asked ‘Ā’isha about the speaking style of the Prophet, and she answered, “He used to speak so slowly and distinctly that whoever wanted to count his words could do so easily.”⁶⁸

At another time, while she was performing prayer, ‘Ā’isha heard someone outside narrating a hadith from the Prophet. He passed on the statements, but was speaking very quickly and almost none of his sayings were understood. ‘Ā’isha, unsurprisingly, was bothered by the way the hadith narrated close by her house. She said:

A man came and narrated hadith from God’s Messenger in front of my room in a way that I could hear, and then disappeared instantly. I was busy with reciting my invocations, and he finished the hadith before I finished my invocations. If I had been able to catch him, I would have told him, ‘God’s Messenger would have never put forward a hadith like you did!’⁶⁹

Although ‘Ā’isha was a small woman in terms of stature, she had a resounding voice. She lessened the tension of the crowd by increasing her volume. ‘Ā’isha used her skills of expression on the battlefields. Not satisfied to use everyday expressions, ‘Ā’isha was poetic and had the ability to persuade. Her power of description was strong, and her words conveyed a depth of meaning.⁷⁰

Traditional and contemporary scholars say that ‘Ā’isha was the most fluent and eloquent of her time.⁷¹ Musa ibn Talha, an important scholar and student of ‘Ā’isha, said: “I saw no one better than ‘Ā’isha in eloquence or clarity of speech.”⁷² Another leading scholar, Ahnaf ibn Qays said: “I heard the sermons of Abū Bakr, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, ‘Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib and all other caliphs, yet from

⁶⁷ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, pp. 184–6.

⁶⁸ Al-Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Manaqib”, 20 (3374). Haylamaz, *Aisha*, p. 184.

⁶⁹ Al-Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Manaqib”, 20 (3375).

⁷⁰ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, p. 188.

⁷¹ Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Ijābah*, p. 57; Muḥammad Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *‘Ā’isha: Umm al-Mu’minīn* (Damascus: Dār al-Farab li’l-Ma‘ārif, 1997), p. 79.

⁷² Al-Tirmidhī, *Al-Jāmi‘*, “Manaqib”, 62 (3884).

them I did not hear such fluent and beautiful utterances as I heard from ‘Ā’isha.”⁷³ While visiting ‘Ā’isha, Muawiya leaned over to Zakwan who was with him and said: “I swear to God, except for the Messenger of God, I have never seen anyone more eloquent than ‘Ā’isha!”⁷⁴

Suraiya Nawab asserts that ‘Ā’isha remained the undisputed spokeswoman who approached the Prophet on behalf of the two other wives: Hafsa and Sawdah. ‘Ā’isha remained close to Hafsa bint ‘Umar as both were daughters of the two closest friends of the Prophet. She was also popular with Sawdah, who fortified her turn to be with the Prophet in favor of ‘Ā’isha.⁷⁵

E. Concluding Remarks

‘Ā’isha always stood up to what she believed was unfair and immoral. ‘Ā’isha’s outspokenness, confidence, and for standing up for what she thought to be true and right explodes the stereotype prevailing both among Muslims and non-Muslims today of role for Muslim women.⁷⁶ ‘Ā’isha’s life in the 7th century Arabia is remarkable when examined through the lenses of contemporary times. The important role she played in the scholarly efforts of Muslim women in learning and teaching knowledge needs to be examined and properly emphasized. Today Muslim women may take Aisha not only as a pious example, but follow her intelligence, curiosity and reasoning.

‘Ā’isha taught the Muslim community and educated both Muslim men and women. She laid the ground of scholarship for today’s world. She showed Muslims that a woman could have a role in society as a scholar or teacher and maintain her modesty at the same time. As ‘Ā’isha did, contemporary Muslim woman does not need to do anything immodest to hold her scholarly position. She can maintain her modesty, and at the same time shine in every single aspect of life. According to ‘Ā’isha, the role of women in Islam should not be confined to home and instead, they should play an active role in Islamic life. A wife, student, scholar, jurist, and poet, ‘Ā’isha, the mother of the faithful definitely combined her activism with scholarship and spirituality and remains a role model for many contemporary Muslim women scholars

⁷³ Al-Naisabūrī, *Al-Mustadrak*, 4:12 (6732).

⁷⁴ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, p. 182.

⁷⁵ Nawab, “The Contribution of Women to Muslim Society”, p. 88.

⁷⁶ Kutty, “Aishah”.

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