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Abstract

Orientalists claim to have undertaken impartial and objective research on Islam. However, such assertions obscure a deeper entanglement with Western ideological frameworks and power structures. Muslim scholars argue that these works, far from being neutral, are shaped by entrenched preconceptions and culturally specific biases that perpetuate the asymmetrical dynamics of Western dominance over the East. A notable example is the Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān (EQ), celebrated in Western academia as a dispassionate and authoritative study but representative of a broader tradition that reinterprets Islamic knowledge through a Western-centric lens. This paper is an attempt to critically review and analyze the entry of "Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr" by Denise A. Spellberg and see if the presumptions and conclusions relied upon by Spellberg are reasonable and supported by reliable sources or otherwise. In this entry, the author discusses controversial issues, such as the accusation of adultery and leading the first civil war between Muslims, in relation to Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr, wife of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) apparently in an attempt to portray the persona of Ā'isha as a controversial and questionable one. In doing so, the author allegedly relies on Shi'ī view of her without proving it right. This paper argues that the author adheres to traditional Orientalist methodologies to undermine and discredit Ā'isha. By selectively utilizing sources that reinforce Orientalist biases, the author undermines the academic integrity necessary for conducting objective and impartial research.

Keywords: Orientalism, Cultural Biases 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr, Denise A. Spellberg, Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān

1. Introduction

The Brill *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (EQ)¹ is a renowned reference work comprising six volumes completed over thirteen years. As stated by the General Editor, Jane Dammen McAuliffe, in the opening of the preface, the primary objective was to produce a 'rigorous' and 'academic' work and to "make the world of Qur'ānic studies accessible to a broad range of academic scholars and educated readers."² Many Muslim scholars have

¹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006).

² Ibid., 1: x.

taken detailed notice of this 'rigorous' and 'academic' work.³ However, the Sirah of the Prophet has long been Orientalists' 'favourite' subject.⁴ Numerous aspects of the Sirah are also discussed in *EQ*, where the Orientalist approach is evident as daylight. Among the many facets of his life, the Prophet's marital life has received particular 'attention'. One prominent focus has been his beloved wife, Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr (may Allah be pleased with her), about whom Orientalists have written extensively.

The most potent and malicious tool to discredit individuals is exploiting their private lives. Orientalists have consistently adopted this approach in discussing the Sirah of the Prophet. The Orientalist literature is replete with derogatory commentary on the Prophet's multiple marriages. However, the aspect that has garnered the most attention is the Prophet's marriage to 'Ā'isha, which is the talk of the town in Orientalist literature. At the beginning of this encyclopaedia, starting with the letter 'A,' the entry⁵ on Ā'isha reflects the same Orientalist perspective. It begins with a scandalous title, "The Accusation of Adultery."

However, Edward W. Said's (d. 2003) approach is adopted here to understand Orientalism and critique certain aspects of this entry in the *EQ*. Said outlines three meanings of Orientalism: the first refers to the 'academic' meaning, the second pertains to the imaginative, and the third is a 'style of thought' tied to the general perception of Western white supremacy. Here, the most relevant meaning is the first one, the academic perspective.⁶ Adopting Said's framework, it is crucial to consider the Orientalist portrayal of 'Oriental Women' and their representation in popular literature. Said points to examples such as Kuchuk Hanem (d. 1870) of Egypt,⁷ whom Gustave Flaubert (d. 1880) depicted as an exotic figure.⁸ This portrayal highlights a broader tendency in Orientalist discourse to exoticize and dehumanize.⁹

In the case of the entry on 'Ā'isha, the author further seeks to scandalize the wives of the Prophet, reflecting a recurring and foundational attack within Orientalist narratives. The retelling of the *ifk* emphasizes sexual morality and "the ever-present threat of divorce in the lives of women," a trope reminiscent of orientalist depictions of Muslim women's lives as dominated by vulnerability and male control.

This study critiques the entry not only for its orientalist underpinnings but also for failing to adhere to rigorous and unbiased academic scholarship standards. Said's framework

³ For instance: Muzaffar Iqbal, "The Qur'ān, Orientalism, and the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*," *Journal of Qur'ānic Research and Studies* 3, no. 5 (2008): 5–45. In this article, Dr. Muzaffar Iqbal, a Canadian-based Pakistani scholar and the founder and president of the Center for Islam and Science in Canada, emphasized the need for Muslims to produce an accurate and authentic encyclopedia of the Qur'ān. In 2009, he initiated a project aimed at producing this resource.

⁴ See for details: David S. Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905); Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841); John Davenport, *An Apology for Mohammed and the Koran* (London: J. Davy and Sons, 1869); William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1858); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

⁵ Denise Spellberg, "'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (England: Penguin Classics, 2003), 2–3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ Flaubert portrayed Kuchuk Hanem as the archetype of the exotic, sensual Oriental woman, her mystery, and sensuality. He reduced her to a symbol of eroticism and cultural otherness, which reflects 19th-century Orientalist stereotypes that romanticized and objectified Eastern women while ignoring their individuality and agency.

⁹ See: Hazel Simons, "Orientalism and the Representation of Muslim Women as 'Sexual Objects,'" *Al-Raida* 20, no. 99 (Fall 2002–2003): 23–32; F. Al Yahyai, A. Elsemari, N. Al Saadi, and A. Ismaili, "The Relationship between Orientalist Painters and Muslim Women: Between Imagination and Reality," *Art and Design Review* 12 (2024): 63–72.

offers a vital tool for deconstructing such representations and revealing their deeper implications in perpetuating stereotypes about Islamic history and figures. Throughout the article, one can easily notice how the writer attempts to show ʿĀʾisha, a complex character with no distinctiveness other than a disputed personality and who has always been a matter of conflict between Shiʿī and Sunnī schools of thought.

This paper examines Spellberg's views on ʿĀʾisha, as presented in the above-mentioned entry, through the lens of general Muslim perspectives. By doing so, it aims to shed light on aspects of ʿĀʾisha's life that Spellberg overlooks. Furthermore, Building upon the preceding discussion of Orientalist approaches, this analysis examines Spellberg's scholarship on ʿĀʾisha, revealing a clear manifestation of Said's critique. It is further substantiated by highlighting Spellberg's tendency to focus on controversial and provocative aspects of ʿĀʾisha's life while neglecting significant portions of her life. Moreover, it analyzes Spellberg's perspective within the broader context of Orientalist studies on the Sirah, particularly in the early stages when such studies often exhibited a polemical approach.

This paper critically analyzes the three topics discussed by the author, providing counterarguments supported by various sources. It concludes by examining the general Muslim perception of ʿĀʾisha, which differs significantly from the writer's portrayal.

2. The Accusation of Adultery

This entry is founded on a fundamental methodological flaw, where the author initially claims that the name of ʿĀʾisha is not mentioned in the Qurʾān. However, in the subsequent sentences, she critiques ʿĀʾisha by referencing the very Qurʾānic verses -33:6; 33: 32 that are generally interpreted as referring to her. It is noteworthy that even in these two verses, ʿĀʾisha's name is not explicitly mentioned. Yet, the author contradicts their own initial principle. In the first subheading of the entry, "The Accusation of Adultery," the author argues that the most prominent example of sectarian division (between Shiʿa and Sunnī) within the classical Islamic world is found in the interpretation of the Qurʾān concerning the accusation of adultery made against ʿĀʾisha. The author supports this claim by noting that ʿĀʾisha's name is not explicitly mentioned in the verses of slander (*ifk*),¹⁰ which, according to the author, leaves her position unclear regarding the accusations. Furthermore, the author contends that only Sunnī Muslims have interpreted these verses in her favour and claims that their interpretations lack a solid foundation.

She compares the interpretations of two eminent scholars from the Sunnī and Shiʿa schools of thought and preferred the Shiʿa interpretation by calling the Sunnī statement "unqualified words:"

"The famed Sunnī exegete al-Tabarī (d. 310/923) declared in his Qurʾānic commentary on these verses that the people of Islam as a religious community were unanimous on ʿĀʾisha's vindication (Tafsīr, xviii, 96). Even as he wrote these unqualified words about this position in his exegesis, he surely knew that Shiʿī commentators, like his fourth/tenth-century contemporary al-Qummi (fl. Fourth/tenth century), explicated the same verses quite differently. Al-Qummi stated

¹⁰ Spellberg, "'Āʾisha bint Abī Bakr," 56.

that they referred not to 'Ā'isha but to when the Prophet's Egyptian concubine *Mariyam* [sic: Māriyyah] was slandered."¹¹

Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 919), the Shī'a exegete, is the first Shī'a scholar who claimed that these verses are referred to Māriyyah al-Qibṭiyyah and not to 'Ā'isha. According to a report mentioned by him and some other Shī'a sources that, verses of *Ifk* were revealed when 'Ā'isha accused Māriyyah of having an illegitimate relationship with a person called Jurayḥ al-Qibṭī. The report says that 'Ā'isha told the Prophet (peace be upon him), who was sad because of losing his son Ibrahim, "why are you sad for the death of Ibrahim while he was not your son and was the son of Jurayḥ?" So, the Prophet (peace be upon him) sent 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib (d. 661) to kill Jurayḥ. However, when 'Alī found that he did not have the male organ, he withdrew from killing him. Thus, the accusation of Māriyyah al-Qibṭiyyah for having an illegitimate relationship was refuted. This report is mentioned in the Tafsīr of al-Qummī for the first time and relies on a hadīth attributed to Imam al-Baqir.¹²

Some contemporary Shī'a scholars, noting various historical flaws in the report, have rejected the association of the verses of *Ifk* with the accusation against Mariya al-Qibṭiyya. They have considered the most important problem for this interpretation, which is its disagreement with the content of verses that consider the accusers one group, while according to this story, 'Ā'isha was the only accuser. On the other hand, some other Shī'a sources accuse Abū Bakr (d. 634 CE) and 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644 CE), the closest companions of the Prophet, of slandering Mariya Al-Qibṭiyya.¹³ This contradiction in interpreting the verses by some Shī'a scholars deteriorates their point, while Sunnī scholarship has consistently agreed that these verses were revealed to vindicate 'Ā'isha.¹⁴

Historically, no sources appear to associate Māriyyah with the *Ifk* incident. According to the established chronology, Māriyyah arrived in Madinah approximately a year and a half to two years after the *Ifk* incident.¹⁵ Significant aspects of the timeline would need to be reconsidered for any plausible connection to be suggested.

Moreover, many eminent Shī'a exegetes like Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067 CE) and Aḥmad ibn Abī Tālib al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153CE) have not mentioned this report and have considered the verses of *Ifk* about 'Ā'isha, as Sunnī sources and scholars rely on. Al-Ṭūsī, in his exegesis *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, states:

"And the reason of *Ifk* is that 'Ā'isha lost her necklace in the Battle of Banū al-Muṣṭaliq, she went away from the army camps, and after finishing from the call of nature she returned to look for the necklace. [In the meanwhile] the people who used to carry her on her camel came and took her howdah and put it on the back of the camel on

¹¹ Spellberg, "'Ā'isha bint Abi Bakr," 57.

¹² Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, trans. Syed Athar Hussain S. H. Rizvi (Al-Jazaer: Darul Kitab Jazaeri, 3: 416-417).

¹³ Muḥammad bin Jarīr bin Rustam al-Ṭabarī, *Dalā'il al-Imāmah* (Najaf: al-Maṭba'ah al-Haydariyyah, 1949), 201-204.

¹⁴ For details, see: Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, vol. 19 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 102.

¹⁵ The incident of *Ifk* took place right after The Battle of Banī al-Muṣṭaliq, in Sha'ban, 5th A.H, according to the correct narration of Musa ibn 'Uqbah, who narrated it from al-Zuhri and from 'Urwah, and his followers Abu Ma'shar al-Sunni, al-Waqidi, and Ibn Sa'd, and from the later scholars Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Dhahabi. See: Akram Diyā' al-'Umari, *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (al-Madinah al-Munawwarah: Maktabat al-'Ulūm wa al-Ḥukm, 1415 A.H. / 1994), 2: 406. While the arrival of Māriyyah al-Qibṭiyyah in Madinah happened to be in Dhī al-Qa'dah, 6th A.H, according to Ibn Sa'd. See: Ibn Sa'd, *Muḥammad, al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 1: 134.

which she used to ride, as they considered that she was in it. When she arrived, she found that they had left her. Şafwān bin al-Mu‘aṭṭal as-Sulamī al-Dhakwānī was behind the army, so he passed by her; when he recognized her, he dismounted his camel and made it kneel down so that she could mount it. Then he set out leading the camel that was carrying her till they overtook the army in the extreme heat of midday while they were at a halt in this way, al-Zuhrī narrated it from ‘Ā’isha.”¹⁶

Al-Ṭabarsī also stated the same narration in more detail¹⁷; however, both have agreed upon the fact of revealing the verses of *Ifk* about ‘Ā’isha.

Spellberg further concludes this difference of interpretation between Shī’a and Muslim scholars by suspecting the sustainability of Islam and its position being a true monolithic religion. She states:

“Historicizing such internal debates undermined Islam’s claim, articulated by Muslim scholars, to be a monolithic and static truth. Their divisive, co-existent religious interpretations may assume an exclusive right to clarify an eternal and timeless Islam, but these same assertions of exclusivity are undermined by their attachment to a time-bound, very human struggle for definitional control over a shared faith and its political applications. Such fissures, once found, suggest the possibility that the history of an ostensibly religious discourse may reveal precedents for a multiplicity of present-day ideological interpretations of Islam by Muslim women as well as Men.”¹⁸

Despite the diverse interpretations of the Qur’ān, Islam remains a unified religion grounded in a shared core of beliefs and values. The world’s 1.6 billion Muslims are united in their belief in Allah Almighty as the sole deity and Muhammad (peace be upon him) as His Prophet. They are also bound together by fundamental practices such as praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, giving charity, and performing Hajj.

While differences in interpretation exist between Sunnī and Shī’a scholars, these variations do not invalidate Islam’s claim to be a true religion. Instead, they demonstrate the dynamic nature of the Islamic tradition. That being said, the majority of Shī’a scholars agree that the verses of *ifk* were revealed to vindicate ‘Ā’isha from false accusations, as previously discussed.

3. Battle of the Camel¹⁹

Continuing to defame the character of ‘Ā’isha, the writer further comes to the in the second part, “The Battle of the Camel.” After briefly outlining the historical context of the battle of the camel, she asserts that ‘Ā’isha’s participation in the conflict serves as a

¹⁶ Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 7 (al-Najaf: al-Maṭba’ah al-‘Ilmiyah, 1957–63), 415.

¹⁷ Al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma’ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 2006), vol. 7, 165–169.

¹⁸ Spellberg, “‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr,” 57.

¹⁹ ‘Ā’isha confronted Ali ibn Abi Talib’s army, along with Zubayr ibn al-Awwam and Talha ibn Ubayd Allah, with the intention to avenge Uthman’s murder and re-establish the system that had fallen apart. In 656, Ali assembled his allies and battled ‘Ā’isha’s army near Basra. The conflict is known as the Battle of the Camel because ‘Ā’isha led her on the back of a huge group of camels.

cautionary tale. It is argued that her involvement contributed to societal chaos for Muslim women and jeopardized their position in political matters. The author states:

“Through ‘Ā’isha’s example, all Muslim women were warned not to leave home or involve themselves in political matters. Traditional lessons derived from the first civil war and the example of the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’isha proved a memorable warning against the future participation of any Muslim woman in politics”.²⁰

This claim is highly exaggerated and overly generalized. The author fails to define what is meant by “political matters” and does not provide evidence to support the assertion that Islam imposes restrictions or grants permissions to women after ‘Ā’isha’s participation in the war. The lack of distinction between these aspects results in an unsubstantiated and uniform treatment of the subject. Moreover, the assertion that such restrictions were imposed due to ‘Ā’isha’s participation in the Battle of the Camel is factually inaccurate. The principles of Islamic law were firmly established well before this event. It is also crucial to acknowledge that specific rulings were uniquely applicable to the wives of the Prophet and were not intended as general principles for all Muslim women. The principles of Shari‘a were not formulated as a consequence of ‘Ā’isha’s actions; rather, her actions were evaluated within the framework of these preexisting principles. This incident bears no direct relevance to the broader societal roles of Muslim women, as the permissions granted by Shari‘a remained consistent both before and after the event.

The author’s claim gives the impression that ‘Ā’isha participated in the Battle of the Camel with the intent of becoming a ruler. This assertion is historically flawed. ‘Ā’isha took to the battlefield solely to demand retribution for the blood of Uthman, not for any political ambitions. However, this action was an *ijtihadi* error, for which she expressed regret on multiple occasions. For instance, when Aisha recited the Qur’ānic verse “and remain in your homes”, she would weep so profusely that her shawl would become drenched in tears.²¹

The claim that the writer has made is unsubstantiated, asserting that the consequences of ‘Ā’isha’s participation in the battle of the camel have prohibited (all) Muslim women from leaving home for any political activity and that it has become a warning against (any) Muslim woman to take part in politics cannot be held true due to its collision with role of Muslim women as taking part in building and growing societies before the First Civil war linked to ‘Ā’isha, and after it, by many years.

Islam has always been very sensitive about women’s rights. The Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and the caliphate era are filled with tremendous examples of women being given the right to participate in political activities as per their capabilities. For instance, Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) allowed women to join the war; there were some women, such as (Ummu Athiyah), and (Rubayyi’ binti Mu’awwidh) who participated in the battle. As stated by the latter, mentioned in *Sahih al-Bukhari*:

²⁰ Spellberg, “‘Ā’isha bint Abi Bakr,” 59.

²¹ Ibn Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, 8: 81.

“We used to take part in holy battles with the Prophet by providing the people with water and serving them and bringing the killed and the wounded back to Medina (from the battlefield).”²²

While the former one narrated, mentioned in Sahih Muslim:

“I took part with the Messenger of Allah in seven battles. I would stay behind in the camp of men, cook their food, treat the wounded and nurse the sick.”²³

These examples demonstrate how women were involved in public affairs, especially the most significant and courageous ones, in the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).²⁴

Besides that, the historical existence of the likes of Samra bint Nuhaik and Shifa bint Abdullah also imply on Women’s political rights in Islam. The former was appointed by the Prophet (peace be upon him) to take care of the markets of Makkah, and the latter was appointed by ‘Omar bin al-Khattab as *Muhasibah* (market magistrate/superintendent) in Madinah.²⁵ At the time, this position was more of a political than a business office, as the Market was not only a centre for trading but also a focal point for political activities.²⁶

The writer's assertion that ‘Ā’isha's example served as a warning against women's political participation is a misinterpretation of historical events. While ‘Ā’isha did participate in political affairs, her involvement was not a general warning to all Muslim women. Instead, her role was specific to the historical context of the first civil war, as named by many, and the unique circumstances that led her towards that war and its crucial consequences.

To claim that her actions were a universal prohibition on women's political engagement is to oversimplify a complex historical event and ignore the diverse experiences and contributions of Muslim women throughout history. It is essential to consider the broader historical context and the nuanced interpretations of ‘Ā’isha's role in order to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islamic teachings regarding women's rights and responsibilities.

Moreover, the history of Islamic societies offers numerous examples of remarkable Muslim women who played significant roles in building and growing their communities, both politically and socially. Raziya Sultana, for instance, served as the first female ruler of India from 1236 to 1239. Despite facing opposition and challenges, she demonstrated exceptional political skills and administrative abilities, leading the army in several wars and proving herself to be a wise and effective leader. Her example, along with countless

²² Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, Book of Jihad, Chapter on “The Bringing Back of the Wounded and the Killed, by the Women,” Hadith No. 134.

²³ Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj, *Sahīh Muslim*, Book of Jihad and Expeditions, Chapter on “Women Who Take Part in Military Expeditions Are to Be Given a Reward but Not a Regular Share; and the Prohibition of Killing Children of the Enemy,” Hadith No. 4462.

²⁴ Zunyla Nadia, “Women’s Political Participation in the Era of Prophet Muhammad,” *Al-ALBAB*, June 2017, 56.

²⁵ Mohammad Farid Ali Al-Fijawi, Zulqernain Haider Subhani, and Mek Wok Binti Mahmud, “Women’s Political Rights in Islam: A Review of Arguments from the Qur’an and Sunnah by the Opponents and the Proponents,” *AFKAR: Journal of Islamic & Religious Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2024): 1–16, at 5. Last accessed October 14, 2024.

²⁶ Moh. Fauzi, “Women’s Political Rights in Islamic Law Perspective,” *SAWWA*, vol. 10, no. 1 (October 2014): 27.

others, highlights the diverse and influential roles that Muslim women have played throughout history, challenging the notion that 'Ā'isha's participation in political affairs was a universal prohibition.

She proved to be a wise and excellent administrator, a skilful hunter who led the Army in many wars during her reign.²⁷

Another significant figure, who served as a female political leader, is Zaynab bint. Ishāq al-Nafzāwīyah, who was the wife of the great Almoravid leader Abu Bakr Ben Omar, followed by and his cousin, Youssef Ben Tachfine. As a political advisor to both her husbands, historians describe her as the queen of the Almoravid Empire, one of the biggest empires in Moroccan history.²⁸

As far as the role of 'Ā'isha is concerned, during the Prophet Muhammad's (Peace be upon him) lifetime, 'Ā'isha participated in the early battles fought by the new Muslim converts against the Arab pagans who persecuted members of the fledgling faith community. For example, she distributed water bags to the Muslim combatants on the battlefield during the Battle of Uhud.

In fact, 'Ā'isha's life represents a powerful model for Muslim women's excellence in scholarship, Political engagement, and even Military leadership. She excelled in public speaking, commanded an army on the battlefield, and instructed both men and women in Islamic jurisprudence.²⁹

She always enjoyed questioning and contemplation and never believed anything she saw or heard until she learnt its reality. Perceptive scholars, such as Hakim, have said that one-fourth of the body of religious knowledge was transferred to us through 'Ā'isha.³⁰

In her time, people came to her for guidance about their problems; today, she is still the source of much authentic information.

Whenever the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) came across a complicated issue, they used to take it to her because she always had the information that could solve a difficult question, Abu Musa al-Ashari said:

"Never was a Hadith unclear to us - the Companions of the Messenger of Allah - and we asked 'Ā'isha, except that we found some knowledge concerning it with her."³¹

Whole books, such as *Al-Ijaba* by Zarkashi, were written about just the superiority of her knowledge. Her intellectual curiosity was unequalled.

She was one of the few who could make novel rulings based on her previous knowledge of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Fiqh depends on comprehending the reasoning and

²⁷ Satish Chandra, *History of Medieval India: 800-1700* (India-Telangana: Orient Black Swan Limited, 2007), 78-80.

²⁸ Osire Glacier, "Zaynab al-Nafzawīyah," *ResearchGate*, accessed September 9, 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339226165_Zaynab_al-Nafzawīyah.

²⁹ Engy Abdelkader, "Using the Legacy of Muslim Women Leaders to Empower," *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU)*, February 12, 2012, <https://ispu.org/using-the-legacy-of-muslim-women-leaders-to-empower/>.

³⁰ Reşit Haylamaz, *'Ā'isha: The Wife, the Companion, the Scholar* (Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, 2013), 184.

³¹ Al-Tirmidhī, Muḥammad ibn 'Īsā, *Jamī' at-Tirmidhi*, Chapter on The Virtue Of 'Ā'ishah, Hadith No. 3883.

justification for judgments called *illa* (real cause) in jurisprudence, and it explains the principal aim in religious judgments. When there is no clear statement, a ruling could only be made by reasoning, and 'Ā'isha's knowledge is advanced compared to her peers.³²

Contrary to the writer's claims, she is a remarkable figure who inspires women globally, in general, and Muslim Women, specifically, serving as a positive role model for women.

4. The Definition of Islamic Female Ideals

In the last subheading of her entry: *The definition of Islamic female ideals*, the writer negates the concept of comparison of 'Ā'isha with Mariam, the mother of Jesus (peace be upon them), and her position being the ideal Islamic female. She constantly disproves the status of 'Ā'isha being a chaste woman and highlights the issue of accusations attached to her by the enemies of Islam. She says:

"In the hadīth and Qur'ānic exegesis, 'Ā'isha was often associated with Mary, but never with the latter's divine selection, obedience and chastity. Indeed, references to her tended to underscore the particularly vexed aspects of her historical persona, especially those attached to the accusation of adultery and the First Civil War. Although ultimately exonerated according to the Sunnī interpretation of the affair of the lie, 'Ā'isha's chastity remained a point of sectarian confrontation".³³

As discussed earlier, 'Ā'isha's chastity has never been a point of dispute among Muslims, including both Sunnī and Shī'a scholars, with a few exceptions that cannot be considered due to lack of evidence to support their claims, the revelation of the verses of "*ifk*" (slander) is widely accepted as evidence of her innocence and acquittal. Furthermore, comparing 'Ā'isha with Maryam (peace be upon her), both of whom were divinely vindicated and cleared of accusations, is a valid approach. Allah Almighty has revealed verses supporting both, providing definitive answers to those who doubted their chastity and virtue.

She further adds a very repulsive statement regarding 'Ā'isha by comparing her to the wives of Prophet Lut and Prophet Noah (peace be upon them), both of whom were being mentioned as an example of wicked women in the Holy Qur'ān. She says:

"Finally, 'Ā'isha alone would be compared to the most negative female figures in the Qur'ān, the wives of the prophets Lot (q.v.) and Noah (q.v.), who are characterized in q 66:10 as examples for unbelievers".³⁴

This is a personal opinion presented by the writer, not supported by any evidence from any source, and the comparison is baseless since, in the former cases, there are explicit instances of rebellion and disloyalty, but in the case of 'Ā'isha nothing of that sort is seen. She adds:

³² Haylamaz, 'Ā'isha, 187-188. .

³³ Spellberg, *Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr*, 59.

³⁴ Ibid.

"Their refusal to obey their husbands became a Shī'ī criticism directed at 'Ā'isha, their disobedient equivalent in her refusal to follow the instructions of q 33:33".³⁵

The argument provided by the writer can be responded to in two ways:

First: The verse ﴿وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَى﴾ can be interpreted in various ways. Both parts of the verse, "وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ" and "وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَى" must be considered together. In the context of leading a war, there was no adornment or immodesty. Therefore, the argument based on this verse is not valid.

Second: The question of whether participating in war and leading troops is inherently correct or incorrect is a separate debate that does not establish a clear violation of any explicit command.

Also, some scholars have opined that the whole context in which this verse is revealed is an indirect response to the hypocrites of Madinah who would try to disturb the Muslims, the wives of the Prophet and the Prophet (Peace be upon them) himself. So, this verse does not imply that at any point of time, the wives of the Prophet used to display their bodies as the women used to do in the days of ignorance. Thus, Allah asked them to stay at home; rather, the Qur'ān addressed indirectly those women from the community of hypocrites who used to display their bodies in an ignorant style and would try to provoke the wives of the Prophet for being so simple and modest. Hence, this verse does not support the opinion that women are not permitted to take any part in serving public and legal positions.³⁶ A famous Exegete al- Ālusī has responded to such accusations by stating that:

"The command to remain in one's home and the prohibition against going out is not absolute, otherwise the Prophet (peace be upon him) would not have taken them out after the verse was revealed for Hajj and Umrah, nor would he have taken them with him on campaigns, nor would he have permitted them to visit their parents, the sick, and to console relatives. And all of this has occurred as the news attests".³⁷

Moreover, if the journey involves both religious and worldly benefits, such as jihad, Hajj, or Umrah, then it is permissible (for ladies to get out of their homes). The journey of 'Ā'isha falls under this category, as she departed to reconcile differences among the Muslims and seek justice for the unjust killing of Uthman. Such an action does not constitute an immodest display.³⁸ Nor does it negate going out for Hajj or for what has a religious benefit, with modesty and avoiding promiscuity".³⁹

Conclusion

Although the tone and style of the scholarly work produced in the West might have changed and transformed, it is apparent that pejorative ideas are still prevalent in their

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Muhammad Enayatullah Subhani, *Ima'an Fi Mushkil al-Quran* (Majallah al-Jamia, 2012), 20–32.

³⁷ Shihāb ad-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ālusī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm wa Sab' al-Mathānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1415 AH), 11:190–191.

³⁸ 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Dihlawī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Tuhfah al-Ithnā 'Ashariyyah*, trans. Shaykh Ghulam Ahmad al-Aslami (Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-Salafiyyah, 1382 AH), 269.

³⁹ al-Ālusī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*, 191.

works. Moreover, perceptions and notions concerning the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) can be observed in recent works, of which the *EQ* is not an exception. The entry of “*Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr*” by Denise A. Spellberg, is clearly part of the evidence to suggest that no matter what sources and texts are presented, the lens is defamatory and biased towards Islam.

Though the editors claim to have done rigorous and objective work in the field of Qur’ānic studies through this Encyclopedia, their work does not convey the same message. They no longer openly call the noblest Messenger of Allah an imposter and the Qur’ān a forgery, as they used to two hundred years ago. However, they are saying the same thing in a slightly refined language, superficially attractive and acceptable manner revolving around the life and history of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in one way or another.

‘Ā’isha, one of the most significant personalities in the history of Islam, was more than “the favourite wife” of the Prophet (peace be upon him). She was an expert on the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his leading Companions, reflecting on his life in various aspects based on reliable reports. She has played a critical role in establishing the Islamic teaching, with particular reference to her role in the transmission of private matters concerning women and marital relations, as well as recording the authentic sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him). This and much more about her are lacking in the entry.

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