

Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Imami Shi'i Islam

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This seemingly modest volume is in fact the first comprehensive study of women in the Twelver Shi'i scriptural sources. While studies on women abound, the vast majority are implicitly or explicitly grounded in the Sunni tradition; the infrequent Shi'i expositions on women tend to be politicized, arcane, or even erroneous. In contrast, this groundbreaking work solidly introduces what the core Twelver Shi'i sources say about women and integrates contemporary views.

The sources of hadith and *tafsīr* used in this work represent mainstream historical currents of Shi'i thought. For hadith, the author uses the Four Books, which were compiled in the tenth and eleventh centuries. While not considered infallible, they are treated as the most influential and reliable Shi'i hadith collections and have had a formative impact on Shi'i thought. Of course, this selection is not exhaustive; an even greater diversity of hadith appears in earlier as well as later compilations, especially the seventeenth-century encyclopaedic work *Bihār al-Anwār*. In addition, the possibility exists that the Four Books' treatment of women differs from that in other works. Therefore, this book should be seen as foundational and an invitation for further study, rather than as the final word on the subject. Note that this is not a criticism: Since many sections could easily be expanded into their own volume, it would not have been feasible to survey all extant Shi'i hadith in a volume this size. Authors are, after all, only human.

For *tafsīr*, the author uses Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi's *Tafsīr al-Qummi* (tenth century), al-Tusi's *Tibyān* (eleventh century), al-Tabrisi's *Majma' al-Bayān* (twelfth century), al-Huwayzi's *Nūr al-Thaqalayn* (twelfth century), and Allamah Tabataba'i's *Tafsīr al-Mizān* (twentieth century). This solid selection represents different time periods and approaches – the old and the new, the narrative and the analytical – but, again, is not absolutely comprehensive. In particular it omits mystical *tafsīr*, which might be expected to take a less earthly approach to gender.

Additionally, the author gives her work a modern twist by considering ideas from contemporary writers on women in Islam who do not engage with the Shi'i tradition, such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Asma Barlas. She also frequently engages with the views of the Lebanese scholars Sayyid

Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah (d. 2010), who was known for his progressive views on women while remaining (more or less, depending upon whom one asks) within the fold of traditional jurisprudence, and Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din (d. 2001), the late head of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council in Lebanon.

One strength of the book is that the author gives equal consideration to these diverse ideas, rather than searching for material to fulfil an ideological agenda, as often happens in such works. Throughout the book, one develops a mental picture of the author as a sincere observer trying to distill a rational conclusion from sometimes conflicting sources. At the same time, she avoids ivory tower syndrome and instead writes in the voice of someone who is acutely aware of the real-life ramifications of these ideas on the lived experiences of Muslim women.

The structure and approach of the first two sections resembles that of Barbara Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press: 1996). Like Stowasser, Osman begins with Eve, continues with women in ancient sacred history, and then proceeds to the wives of the Prophet – with the main difference, of course, that Stowasser's book explores the Sunni scriptural sources. The first section, "Women in creation," is dedicated to Eve and the overarching question of whether woman was created from man or whether women and men are partners in creation and the ramifications of these beliefs on our perspectives of gender. From a Shi'i perspective, the answer is not straightforward since Shi'i hadith collections argue both for and against the belief that Eve was created from Adam. This section includes a detailed exploration of Q 4:1, a verse about the creation of woman and man that can be taken to mean that either woman was created from man or that women and men were created similarly.

The next section, "Female personalities in the Qur'an," features other Qur'anic women in ancient sacred history, such as the Queen of Sheba, Sarah, Hajar, Zulaykha, the women in the story of Moses, and the Virgin Mary. This section is a particularly valuable contribution insofar as discussions on women in Shi'ism almost invariably focus on Fatimah al-Zahra' and Zaynab bint Ali rather than ancient women. Asiyah and the Virgin Mary are traditionally extolled (as per the hadith on the four perfect women, also shared with Sunni texts), but they are rarely analyzed and certainly not in a manner suggesting freedom of thought or action for women.

The author pinpoints significant themes in contemporary Shi'i discourse. She muses over different interpretations of potentially "controversial" Qur'anic verses, such as "the male is not like the female" (Q. 3:36, said by the mother of Mary after unexpectedly giving birth to a girl) and "surely your

guile (feminine plural) is great” (Q. 12:28, said by Zulaykha’s husband after she admits to trying to entrap Yusuf in adultery), and also considers the portrayal of intellect in the Queen of Sheba. Do these verses belittle or elevate the feminine? Are women truly, as some ideologues say, lacking in intellect? And should the Virgin Mary be considered a prophet? These are the types of questions considered here.

The latter part of this section discusses women during the Prophet’s time. Osman maintains, as does the Qur’an, that the Prophet’s wives were “not like other women” (Q. 33:32) and proposes that the restrictions on them (e.g., remaining at home) exemplify individual sacrifice for the common good (in this case, because some of his enemies attempted to defame him through his wives). Thus they should not be taken as ideals for normal women, even though this is often the case.

She contrasts the strictures on the Prophet’s wives against the Qur’anic discussion of other contemporaneous women such as “the woman who complains” (*al-mujādilah*) and the “women’s allegiance” (*bay‘at al-nisā’*), which empower women and reflect divine compassion for the difficulties they face. Was the “women’s allegiance” gender-specific or similar to the men’s oath of allegiance? While Osman answers this question, sadly, it becomes a moot point since, as she observes in a later section, after the Prophet’s time their allegiance was no longer even considered.

There is also a brief discussion of the women of Paradise (*ḥūrīs*), including an interesting observation that al-Qummi (tenth century) understood “restrained gazes” to mean that men could not gaze at the *ḥūrīs* because they were so luminescent, whereas later commentators understood “restrained glances” to mean that the *ḥūrīs* themselves restrained their gazes. She suggests that like other aspects of Paradise, such as lush gardens and exquisite food, the promise of untouched, secluded women plays into a primal (and, in this case, male) fantasy; however, it becomes a problem when converted into a social expectation for normal, living women.

The next section, “Female personalities in the Sunna,” is a more typical treatment of women in Shi‘ism and contains discussions on Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, Fatimah al-Zahra’, and Zaynab bint Ali. This section contains familiar topics, among them Fatimah’s speech to Abu Bakr in defense of her right to Fadak, the names of Fatimah al-Zahra’, and Zaynab’s public speeches after the massacre in Karbala’. While this section employs a broader use of sources, one curiosity is that the author chose a Sunni narrative of the Prophet seeking comfort in Khadijah after his first revelation due to his fear that he was possessed, for Shi‘is generally feel that this view impinges upon his in-

fallibility. As before, the author highlights pertinent issues such as the ascription of amenorrhea and virginity to Fatimah al-Zahra' (who bore four children) and integrates a diversity of views, such as Sayyid Fadlullah's suggestion that Fatimah al-Zahra' was the "first author" in Islam because she dictated *Muṣḥaf Fāṭimah* (p. 112).

One valuable aspect in this section is the author's acknowledgment that Shi'i religious culture contains multiple portrayals and understandings of these women, ranging from a traditional one that uses them to promote restrictions on women to a dynamic one that uses them to promote women's public participation. She observes that Zaynab's public speeches and participation in the events at Karbala' while her husband remained at home present a problem for traditionally minded thinkers. Due to this essential conflict, Fatimah al-Zahra' and Zaynab are often portrayed as passive, lamenting victims instead as knowledgeable, powerful, and inspirational personalities in their own right. She also cites Sayyid Fadlullah's criticism that hadith transmitters ought to have emphasized Fatimah's "religious, social, and political activities" instead of "metaphysical stories of Fatimah's creation of celestial light" (p. 127-28).

In practice, both traditional and dynamic portrayals co-exist today, and Osman reflects that

[T]here might be a need to be wary for what cause women sacrifice themselves, and which understanding of Zaynab they accept. Self-sacrifice merely for the sake of other members of the family or the preservation of traditional patriarchal values might prove destructive to women, whereas self-sacrifice for an understanding of Ḥusayn's vision as one of freedom from tyranny and oppression might prove constructive. (p. 135)

The last section addresses hadith on women as a group, including misogynistic *aḥādīth* in *Nahj al-Balāghah*, such as "women are deficient in intellect" and "woman is wholly evil." While Osman observes that Shi'i hadith collections also contain narrations favorable to women as a group, such as "the most goodness is in women," she questions how such conflicting ideas could arise from the same sources. Osman analyses these hadith on a content basis. For instance, in discussing an exhortation in *Nahj al-Balāghah* for women to be secluded, she cites Shams al-Din's observation that this practice is not a requirement of Islamic jurisprudence and another hadith that someone who is isolated from society is unlikely to be competent in his/her religion. One valuable contribution is her comparison of these narrations about women against the portrayal of actual women in the Qur'an and Sunnah (as discussed in the previous sections). She concludes that the

latter are praised for their independent actions and piety, whereas these narrations betray a suspicion toward women and encourage them to be isolated, submissive, and feared.

The book closes with two major – and, to some, potentially unsettling – conclusions. First, women in the Qur’an and Sunnah are not cookie-cutter copies of one another. That is, despite the contemporary polemical urge to define woman’s “nature” and “role” in Islam, these two sources do not provide a single portrayal in this regard. Each woman has her own unique personality and character arc and makes her own choices, for good or ill, rather than acting under the yoke of a male guardian. Second, the portrayal of female personalities in the Qur’an and Sunna are “in diametric opposition to what [the] *aḥādīth* demand and expect of women.” However the hadith tradition tends to “either subjugate or elevate women as a group, and attempts to project a monolithic personality on women...[W]omen are ‘not normally defined by men, as traditions would have us believe’” (p. 181).

This, of course, brings up the gargantuan elephant in the room, namely, the question of these hadiths’ authenticity. While Osman does not directly address this question, apart from noting contradictions between certain hadith and the Qur’an, she does leave room for further study. One of her parting observations is that “[i]f one were to look into Islamic law for equality between men and women, this may be hard to find ... However, if one looks into the narrative literature, the stories provided in the authentic sources, one finds a praise of the feminine” (p. 184).

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