

Aisha, Viewed Through the Looking Glass
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When examining any religious figure, from Jesus to Siddhartha to Muhammad's wife, scholars must evaluate a plethora of information from both religious and historical texts in order to paint an accurate portrait of the individual. In researching Aisha, Muhammad's favored wife and arguably one of the most influential women in the Islamic tradition, I came across various perspectives in which she has been and continues to be depicted. These differing views of Aisha do not only appear when comparing religious and historical documents, but also when comparing different texts from within the Muslim community itself. This analysis of Aisha and her influence on the Islamic faith was a multi-tiered approach, comparing Sunni, Shia and non-Muslim interpretations on this religious figure and how each of these depictions have been used as a tool by the differing groups to bolster their own viewpoints.

Most of the hadiths in the Sunni tradition are in agreement that Aisha was around the age of 9 or 10 when she consummated her marriage with Muhammad. Historian Denise Spellberg argues that the large number of Muslim traditions that mention Aisha's age (one of the only cases in which age is repeatedly highlighted) reflects that her age held more meaning to many in the Muslim community than just a number.¹ Aisha's supporters may have stressed her young age to exemplify her purity and bolster her reputation in a time where she and her father were in a constant struggle against Fatima and Ali² for prestige and authority. Not only does her young age paint a picture of sexual purity, it also means she would have been born into a Muslim household and thus be inherently religious and pious as well. al Tabari, a notable Islamic historian and hadith expert, indicates in his work that she may have actually been born before the "coming of Islam"³ and this assertion that she was younger could be a reflection of her supporters over exaggerating her inherent religious piety, because if she was only 9 or 10 she would have not been exposed to other religious doctrine beside Islam. Her age is mentioned multiple times in early Islamic texts, especially around the time she and Abu Bakr were competing for authority within the Muslim community, but as the years passed, her age became less stressed and rarely mentioned.⁴ This drastic decrease in the importance placed on Aisha's age within the Muslim community further supports the argument that her age was a tool used by her advocates to assert her sexual and religious purity and gain support within a splintering community.⁵

Although the importance of her age diminished greatly after Islam splintered into Sunni and Shia sects, Aisha continued to influence the Muslim community throughout her life and she remains an important figure in Islam to this day. From the Shia perspective, Aisha is seen to be in direct contradiction with establishment of the tradition. She and Abu Bakr openly opposed Fatima and Ali's authority, and their movement away from the Sunni line of authority, leading most Shia Muslims to condemn Aisha as less-than exemplary Muslim woman and wife. Many Shia Muslims point to Aisha's outspoken demeanor and especially her participation in the Battle of the Camel as divergent from acceptable Muslim woman's behavior.⁶ On the other hand, the majority of Sunni Muslims revere Aisha for being one of the most beloved wives of the Prophet and a transmitter of many hadiths. She is so important within the Sunni community that many refer to her as "the Mother of Believers," highlighting her contribution to the establishment of the Sunni tradition. Among modern day Muslim feminists her importance is further asserted. Nabia Abbott and Zahia Qadura both wrote biographies on Aisha, in which they depict her as the example by which modern day Muslim women should model their lives.⁷ Both these women highlight Aisha's actions as Muhammad's wife and as a political/religious leader. Although Abbot focused mainly on Aisha's political activity and Qadura was more concerned with Aisha as a religious leader, both authors depict Aisha as a "strong, capable woman who positively

influenced her society and whose gender was not a determining issue”.⁸ They also were clear in their assertions that Aisha’s household and marital responsibility should be revered as well. Her work in the public arena represented what women were capable of beyond the realm of the home, but not in spite of it.

Whereas Abbott and Qadur praised Aisha’s activity in the political, religious and public spheres, other 20th century Muslim scholars asserted that Aisha overstepped her role as a woman in Muslim society. ‘Abbas Mahmoud Al-’Aqad, an Egyptian essayist, political columnist and biographer, wrote arguably one of the most influential biographies of Aishia in all of the Islamic tradition. In his depiction of Aisha, Al-’Aqad takes a clearly Sunni approach to interpreting the the events of her life, the foremost of which being that she should be revered for being the wife of the Prophet that he most cared for. Although Aqad asserts that Aisha is a template for which modern women should model their behavior, he makes it clear that this should only relate to Aisha’s activity at home and in caring for the Prophet and their children. In fact, his biography of Aisha focuses on the negative consequences of her political and public actions, using her follies as a warning to the growingly political active female population in Egypt at the time. Elsadda argues that Aqad’s opposition to the establishment and support for the Egyptian women’s union was the single greatest influence in his depiction of Aisha.⁹

Contrary to the Islamic texts (especially Sunni), many of the western works (scholarly and otherwise) concerning the life of Muhammad focus on his marriage to Aisha as a negative event.¹⁰ While some early scholars voiced their disapproval of Aisha’s age at time of consummation,¹¹ most note her age without much discussion, acknowledging that marriage at such a young age was not uncommon in Muhammad’s time. Rather, they attribute Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha as a turning point in which he went from a monogamous relationship to one of polygamy and “the unity of his family was broken and never again restored”.¹² This is problematic for most Western (Christian) authors, who view polygamy as abhorrent and primitive. These authors (who most openly oppose Islam) use Muhammad’s marriage of Aisha to paint a picture of a barbaric and backward Islam. An American clergyman, Harvey Newcomb’s, 1844 book, *The False Prophet, or, An account of the rise and progress of the Mohammedan religion: Comprising the history of the church* exemplifies the Western/ Christian perspective of Islam in the 19th and 20th centuries. From his perspective, Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha in particular and his overall polygamous approach to marriage provided evidence that Islam promoted sexual immorality and was the religion of heathens from the East.¹³ Washington Irving’s commentary in *Mahomet and his Successors*, uses Muhammad’s marriage to the young Aisha to illustrate Islam and its practices as “exotic” and fundamentally primitive. Irving’s work was not unique in this regard, rather it reflected the burgeoning mentality of Westerners that there are two types of people: us(Christians) and them (people who live in the desert).¹³ Although many Western scholars use Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha to question his character and Islamic traditions, there are a handful that attempt to remedy this. In *Islam: the Basics* Colin Turner makes a very conscious effort to convey that Aisha’s betrothal to Muhammad was completely common at the time (in both European and Middle Eastern societies). He even argues that although Aisha married Muhammad at such a young age he did not necessarily consummate their marriage when she was nine, rather he contests that she only moved in with him at that time and consummation took place when she was in her teens. Regardless of the little evidence that Turner’s assumptions are based on, his depiction of Aisha conveys the more tolerant side of Western evaluation of Muhammad’s life and how it relates to Islamic tradition. Similarly, Karen

Armstrong, a notable religious scholar, has written multiple biographies on Aisha, with the intention of discrediting the claims circulating around American media that Muhammad was a pedophile and his marriage with Aisha was proof that Islam was a primitive religion. Unlike Turner, Armstrong's research was sound and her conclusions were based on scholarly interpretations of primary source. Armstrong predominantly used the work of Tabari to cite her claims. She asserted that Aisha and Muhammad did not consummate their marriage until she was in her teens and that it was even recognized at the time of marriage that "she was young, unfit for intercourse."¹⁴

Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, is both a historic and religious figure who has been depicted in many hues. She was the Prophet's most beloved wife and is acknowledged in Sunni, Shi'a and Western scholarly communities as such. Although there is agreement on this facet of Aisha's life, this is where the agreement seems to end. The dispute does not come down to the historical validity of Aisha's actions during her life, rather how those actions should be viewed. Most Muslims who adhere to the Sunni faith revere Aisha and depict her as the example by which modern Muslim women should model their life. Feminist Muslim scholars praise Aisha's activity in the public sphere and use her life's work to rally Muslim women to become politically/socially active within their communities. More conservative Sunnis take another approach in depicting her venturing into the public realm: they highlight her mistakes and use them as a warning to modern Muslim women who are becoming more politically active. Even with this negative view of Aisha's public activity, conservative Sunnis still praise Aisha for her fulfillment of her duties to the prophet. The Shi'a perspective of Aisha is even more negative than that of conservative Sunnis. In the Shi'a community, Aisha represents a direct opposition to their tradition and their established line of religious authority. With this being the case, most Shi'a depict Aisha as the anathema of a good wife, a woman who neglected her spousal/maternal duties to pursue men's work (political and religious...anything outside the home). The majority of Western scholars have depicted Aisha in a negative light as well, but with very different implications. In the 19th and 20th centuries most Western scholarly work on Muhammad and Islam focused on his marriage to Aisha. In doing so, scholars used this marriage to portray Islam as a backward and primitive religion.¹⁵

Not only can many differences be found when comparing the varying perspectives of Aisha between Muslim and Western scholars, but also when comparing the depictions of Aisha within the Muslim community itself. From being deemed, the model that modern women should follow, to being deemed a victim of the barbaric practices Islam condones, Aisha has been depicted by the full spectrum of perspectives. Regardless of the vast differences in perspectives in which she has been viewed by various groups, there is a commonality between the groups that highlights Aisha's influence over the development of Islam. That commonality is that each perspective of Aisha is used as a tool by the differing groups to further their beliefs. The Sunni feminists assert their perspective of Aisha in order to gain support for women's rights in the modern era, Shi'a argue their view of Aisha to diminish the purity of the Sunni faith and establish the role of women in Islam, and most Western scholars depict Aisha from their perspective in order to paint Islam as a primitive religion. Although Aisha was very politically and religiously active during her life and contributed much to the Islamic faith, it is not so much her actions that have influenced Islam and continue to do so today. It is rather the myriad of ways in which she has been depicted that has shaped Islam.

Notes

1. Ali, K.. (2014). *The Lives of Muhammad*. Harvard University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qdtbz>
2. Fatima(Muhammad's youngest daughter) and Ali, her husband and one of Muhammad's most faithful companions, were the two vital figures in the construction of the Shia sect of Islam. After the death of Muhammad, Ali and his supporters believed he was the rightful leader of the faith and he became the first Imam of the Shia sect.
3. Spellberg, D. (1996). *Politics, gender, and the Islamic past: The Legacy of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr*. New York: Columbia University Press.
4. Ali, 157.
5. Ali, 158.
6. Elsadda, H.. (2001). Discourses on Women's Biographies and Cultural Identity: Twentieth-Century Representations of the Life of 'A'isha Bint Abi Bakr. *Feminist Studies*, 27(1), 37–64. <http://doi.org/10.2307/3178448>
7. Nabia Abbott, *Aishah: The Beloved of Mohammed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942); 'Abbas Mahmud Al-'Aqad, *Al-Siddiqa Bint Al-Siddiq* (Cairo: Matba'it Al-Misr, 1947)
8. Elsadda, 47.
9. Elsadda, 50.
10. Ali, 164.
11. Irving, Washington. *Mahomet and His Successors*. Eds. Henry A. Pochman and E. N. Feltskog. The Complete Works of Washington Irving. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1970.
12. Muir, W. (1894). *The life of Mahomet: From original sources* (3d ed.). London: Smith, Elder.
13. Ali, 165.
14. Armstrong, K. (2006). *Muhammad: A prophet for our time*. New York: Atlas Books/HarperCollins.; Turner, C. (2006). *Islam: The basics*. London: Routledge.
15. Ali, 165.

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