

A'isha: The Evolution of Her Interpretation

By Katherine Eisenberg

A'isha bint Abi Bakr presents as a complex and controversial historical character over the entirety of Islamic history because she has been the center of highly contentious debate over the example she set for women in different schools of Islam. However, the many varied interpretations and accounts of Aisha in Islamic scholarship provide a powerful opportunity to explore the character and circumstances of the debate she has inspired. Therefore, this paper will deal primarily with Aisha's controversial nature as it intersects with female seclusion, and will explore this topic primarily through the example of the Battle of the Camel. Furthermore, this paper will also utilize Aisha as a lens through which to examine the nature of the debate on early Islamic female figures as it has evolved from the medieval period.

Despite the controversy over the example her character set in early Islamic history, no major branch of Islam disputes Aisha's importance during the nascent years of Islam. As D.A. Spellberg argues, A'isha was central in the early Islamic community because she was the favorite wife of the Prophet Mohammed and the daughter of the first caliph Abu Bakr¹. In addition, A'isha could not be overlooked because, according to Islamic tradition, it is a generally accepted assumption that the occasion for the revelation in Qur'an XXIV: XXIII-XXIV was the false accusations of adultery leveled against Aisha². Importantly, the enmity between A'isha and Ali, the fourth caliph, appears to have begun with this defining moment in A'isha's life because Ali was one of those who accused her of adultery³. Therefore, even medieval Islamic scholars who argued for female seclusion, something A'isha actively defied, had to contend with the powerful figure A'isha presented, not only because of her connection to important male Islamic figures, but also because God had seen fit to protect her specifically as an example for the early Islamic community.

In this paper, the trend of increasing polarity in A'isha's scholarly depiction will be explored. Beginning at the turn of the tenth century with Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī, one of the foremost Sunni Islamic scholars of the first few centuries of Islam known for his well researched presentations of historic figures, this paper will first demonstrate how A'isha's character was depicted in the first few centuries after the inception of Islam. From there, the works of modern scholars such as Nabia Abbott, Fatima Mernissi, and Denise Spellberg will be utilized to illustrate how more modern scholarship on A'isha's character has tended to become more polemic in nature, as the issue of Islamic feminism has become a more heated and contentious topic.

However, some medieval scholars, such as al-Tabarī, relate remarkably varied interpretations of A'isha's story and character. For instance, al-Tabari offers a large amount of information on A'isha during the Battle of the Camel in his *The History of Prophets and*

¹ D. A. Spellberg, "One Approach to the Study of a Legacy: An Introduction," introduction to *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, n.d.), 2-3.

² Qur'an XXIV: XXIII-XXIV

³ Book 48, Number 829. Vol. 3 of *Sahih Bukhari*, 24.11.

*Kings*⁴. However, rather than al-Tabari's work standing as his personal interpretation of A'isha, al-Tabari's work illustrates the conflicting perspectives on A'isha prevalent during the times of his writing. Because al-Tabari held "unprecedented access to sources of information in Baghdad and throughout the Muslim world" while he was writing, he was able to complete a uniquely well researched history of Islam for his period, and was therefore able to provide scholars after him with a solid source of compiled Islamic history⁵. However, although al-Tabari at first appears to be a strict transmission of historical accounts free of personal agenda, no historical or literary work can be entirely objective and the notion of objectivity as a goal was not fully developed by al-Tabari's time anyhow. Thus, in the case of al-Tabari, the selection of his sources and the order of their presentation reveal some degree of subtle manipulation in his work⁶. For example, by including positive narratives of A'isha's story before less complimentary accounts of her, as shown below, al-Tabari steers his reader into placing more weight on the positive interpretations of her character. In this way, al-Tabari expresses his personal positive interpretations of A'isha in his overtly impartial work without obvious personal analysis of her character.

In addition, as asserted by Marshall Hodgson, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago in the mid 20th century, al-Tabari also splits the accounts he includes in his text into two groups: Type A and type B⁷. The accounts in type A include works transmitted by al-Waqidi and other early transmitters of Islamic history who directly corroborate or refute al-Waqidi's accounts. These anecdotal descriptions, as stated by Hodgson, "present a realistically ambiguous picture of the moral responsibilities of the various parties in what was a rather complex affair". The accounts categorized as type B, on the other hand, are all transmitted by Sayf b. Umar who had a poor reputation for transmitting accounts, and include no accounts that might support or refute his claims⁸. This type of narrative is presented as blocks of text interrupting the narratives already started by the type A accounts. They also juxtapose the "good guys' who defended Uthman, against the 'bad guys' who fought him". By interrupting the type A narratives with the block impositions of type B narratives, which invariably retell the same sequence of events, al-Tabari allows the reader to choose which set of narratives he wishes to believe. Type B allowed al-Tabari's Sunni associates view the Companions of the Prophet as the "good

⁴ Thomas, David. "Al-Ṭabarī." Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. General Editor David Thomas. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. Tufts University. 11 November 2014

<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/christian-muslim-relations/al-t-abari-COM_24778>

⁵ "Al Tabari: A Life Dedicated to History and Law." Gulf News, Feb 21, 2014,

<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/docview/1500576309?accountid=14434> (accessed November 24, 2014).

⁶"Tabari, Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam.*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2292> (accessed 05-Dec-2014).

⁷ "Guide to the Marshall G. S. Hodgson Papers 1940-1971," The University of Chicago Library, last modified 2010, accessed December 10, 2014,

<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.HODGSONMGS.>; Marshall Hodgson, "Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians: Pitfalls and Opportunities in Presenting Them to Moderns," *Towards World Community*, 1968, 53-58, PDF.

⁸ Hodgson, "Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians," 56.

guys” and those who stood against Uthman as the “bad guys”. Type A presented a more complex narrative including, in the case of the murder of Uthman, first and last accounts that suggest “the fault [for his murder] lay in basic dilemmas of power, which evoked honest differences of opinion” and “even hint at something of al-Tabari’s own solutions” for these dilemmas⁹. However, type B narratives recount most of the discussion on A’isha during the murder of Uthman and at the Battle of the Camel. Therefore, further analysis of al-Tabari will focus on accounts transmitted by Sayf b. Umar.

The Battle of the Camel, through which al-Tabari presents much of his characterization of A’isha’s figure, was a battle precipitated by the murder of the third caliph Uthman which pitted the party of Ali (the fourth caliph) against A’isha¹⁰. Named for the armored camel that A’isha rode into battle, the Battle of the Camel proved integral not only for Islam because it splintered the early Islamic community, but also vital for women through the example that A’isha set because of the conflicting way her contemporaries characterized her character during the battle and in the events leading up to the final confrontation.

For example, al-Tabari presents two accounts of A’isha’s involvement in the event leading to the Battle of the Camel, namely A’isha receiving the news of Uthman’s (the third caliph’s) murder. In the two depictions included, one, recounted through Talhah, a supporter of A’isha as well as a member of her extended family, was significantly more positive and glossed over details related by the other account. In Talhah’s version, A’isha is portrayed as waiting for news of Uthman and the revolt against him and meeting the messenger sent to her by asking, “What news? [...] Is it bad for us or good?” with good meaning the overthrow of Uthman in favor of a member of A’isha’s family¹¹. However, when A’isha heard of Uthman’s murder and Ali’s subsequent election, she is said to have “returned to Mecca and said not a word” until she arrived at the mosque and subsequently delivered a speech denouncing the murder publically because, although A’isha had wanted Uthman to be overthrown, she had not wished for his murder. A’isha is reported to have condemned the men who murdered Uthman as a mob, and to have charged them with having “spilled forbidden blood, [...] violated the sacred city, [...] appropriated sacred money, and [...] profaned the sacred month”. Furthermore, A’isha asserted that “one of Uthman’s fingers [was] better than a whole world of their type”¹² meaning both the murders, as well as those who would not punish them and avenge Uthman: Specifically Ali who had accepted the murderers’ aid in his election to the caliphate. This perspective given by Talhah, one of A’isha’s family members, paints a picture of A’isha being spurred to action by genuine anger at the murder of Uthman. Furthermore, this version of events represents one view of A’isha’s character still prevalent at the time al-Tabai wrote, almost three hundred years after the murder of Uthman had taken place.

⁹ Hodgson, “Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians,” 57.

¹⁰ Haider, Najam I. “Camel, Battle of the.” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, THREE. Edited by: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. Tufts University. 11 November 2014 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/camel-battle-of-the-COM_25465>

¹¹ Adrian Brocket, trans., *The Community Divided*, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater, vol. XVI, *The History of al-Tabari an Annotated Translation* (Albany, NY: State of New York Press, 1997), 38.

¹² Brocket, *The Community Divided*, 38.

Contrastingly, al-Tabari, in an effort to present all available perspectives on the events and people on which he wrote, also includes a less flattering perspective on A'isha's motives for calling for vengeance for Uthman and for precipitating the Battle of the Camel. As transmitted by Suhaym, a poet and contemporary of A'isha¹³, A'isha was not as surprised by Uthman's murder as she was depicted as having been in the previous account because "A'isha had left Medina while Uthman was being besieged" and had, therefore, left the conflict behind her while knowing full well that Uthman was in danger¹⁴. Therefore, she, like Ali, played a passive role in Uthman's murder, and she may be viewed as hypocritical in blaming Ali for Uthman's fate. In addition, according to al-Sha'bi, a Successor to the Companions and a transmitter of *hadith* who was close to the caliphs following Ali, when A'isha heard that Uthman had been murdered and Ali elected, she retorted, "I don't think this is over yet"¹⁵. Thus, A'isha is presented as being outraged, not over Uthman's murder, but by Ali's election to the caliphate over the election of a member of her family, such as Talhah. Consequently, al-Tabari presents multiple perspectives on A'isha's motives in his history concerning the events leading up to the first Islamic civil war and, therefore, allows his readers to judge for themselves which evaluation of her motives is the most compelling.

Similarly, al-Tabari presents opposing views on A'isha's character in his transmission of the Battle of the Camel through her intersection with the issue of seclusion. First, the argument that A'isha had disregarded the commands of the Prophet was presented when Jariyah b. Qudamah al-Sa'di told A'isha "the killing of Uthman b. Affan was a lesser matter than your coming out from your house. [...] Allah curtained you off and gave you sanctity. You have torn down the curtain and profaned your sanctity"¹⁶. Jariyah, a staunch supporter of Ali here voiced one version of the criticism against A'isha by the party of Ali: That A'isha's offense in disobeying the Prophet was worse than any passive part that Ali might have played in the murder of Uthman¹⁷. This portrayal of A'isha might be expected from a medieval scholar because it condemns her for violating the practices enforced by most medieval Islamic societies with respect to women's seclusion. However, al-Tabari does not complete his representation of A'isha with the close of the above interlude. Instead, he also portrays a counter stance to the argument presented, remarkably, by another group in Ali's party that censured A'isha for cowardice: The antithesis of Jariyah b. Qudamah al-Sa'di's complaint. As transmitted by al-Tabari, Hakim b. Jabalah proclaimed before the Battle of the Camel that, because A'isha would not initiate combat with him, "her cowardice and indecision [would] certainly destroy her"¹⁸. Here, Hakim appears to blame A'isha for not being more forceful. Therefore, al-Tabari not only

¹³ Arazi, A.. "Suḥaym." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. Tufts University. 28 November 2014

¹⁴ Brocket, The Community Divided, 39.

¹⁵ Juynboll, G.H.A.. "al-Ṣha'bi." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. Tufts University. 28 November 2014; Brocket, The Community Divided, 39.

¹⁶ Brocket, The Community Divided, 61.

¹⁷ Kister, M.J.. "Djāriya b. Ḳudāma." Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. 11 November 2014

¹⁸ Brocket, The Community Divided, 63.

presents both positive and negative views of A'isha by her contemporaries during the Battle of the Camel, as will be demonstrated below, but also illuminated the nuances of the negative depictions of her character so that all interpretations of her, as were available in his time period, would be given a voice.

In contrast to the views of A'isha's detractors voiced above, al-Tabari also provided several accounts of the Battle of the Camel that illustrated far more favorable perspectives on A'isha. For example, in many versions of the Battle of the Camel compiled by al-Tabari, A'isha is referred to as the "Mother of the Faithful": A term which indicates the high esteem in which A'isha was held both during her own lifetime and during the time in which al-Tabari was writing¹⁹. In addition, al-Tabari includes a significant interlude between Hakim b. Jabalah and the followers of A'isha the morning before the Battle at Dar al-Rizq. Here, al-Tabari communicates how Hakim bint Jabalah walked through the camp of A'isha's followers that morning cursing A'isha and how he was stopped twice and reprimanded by two separate people. Al-Tabari recounts that Hakim was asked, "At whom are you swearing and saying what I hear?" by a man from 'Abd al-Qays and when Hakim replied "A'ishah", he was called a "son of a slut" for cursing the "Mother of the Faithful"²⁰. Then, Hakim continued through camp cursing A'isha, and a woman defending A'isha repeated the interlude²¹. Here, al-Tabari not only illustrates the esteem in which A'isha's companions held her, but also illustrates that A'isha had women with her army and was revered by them.

Al-Tabari then includes a letter written by A'isha to the Kufans in which she personally explains her stance against Ali and his followers. She writes "these men were not satisfied with what they did to [the third caliph] and with splitting the togetherness of the community and going against the Book and the *sunnah*: they [went further and] even accused us of unbelief over our commands and our encouragements to them to uphold the Book of Allah and carry out His punishments"²². With the inclusion of this letter, al-Tabari gives A'isha an opportunity to defend her actions and speak on her own account thereby counterbalancing the portrayal of her by her enemies. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to recognize the fact that, although much medieval Islamic interpretation of A'isha and of the issue of female seclusion may be biased in favor of supporting female seclusion and, hence, against A'isha's behavior, not all medieval Islamic literature promotes female seclusion as consistently as might be expected. In fact, in some cases, al-Tabari might present more judicious narratives on historical figures than even many modern scholars provide.

Some modern scholarship, as opposed to some medieval history that focused mainly on the transmission of sources, leans more towards the polemic in general. To illustrate this trend, this paper will analyze depictions of A'isha by three modern scholars: Nabia Abbott, the first female faculty member at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago who wrote in the 1940's, Denise A. Spellberg, an associate professor of History and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and Fatima Mernissi, a well known and prolific Moroccan feminist and retired faculty member from the Mohammed V University of

¹⁹ Brocket, *The Community Divided*, 52-95.

²⁰ Brocket, *The Community Divided*, 64.

²¹ Brocket, *The Community Divided*, 64.

²² Brocket, *The Community Divided*, 75.

Rabat who wrote primarily from the 1970's onward²³. Although Mernissi was trained as a sociologist, and not as a historian, she still offers an interesting and informative perspective on A'isha's character in her writing.

Nabia Abbott began her analysis of the intersection between feminism and Islam before the advent of what might be considered distinct modern feminism. Feminism, in the time that Abbott wrote, though controversial, had not become as polarized and contentious an issue as it came to be during and after the 1960's. Therefore, Nabia Abbott was not compelled to overemphasize certain key aspects of A'isha's character and the circumstances surrounding the first Islamic civil war in order to support her version of feminism and, instead, was free to illustrate A'isha as a complex character with multilayered motivations. For example, in Abbott's work *A'isha the Beloved of Mohammed*, Abbott, drawing heavily from al-Tabari as a source material, portrays A'isha as a shrewd political mind, rather than as a purely moral figure, when she wrote on A'isha's actions following the death of Uthman. During Uthman's rule, A'isha had been outspoken against many of his policies, such as his punishment of the Companions who disagreed with him, but, once Uthman was murdered and Ali elected, A'isha soon became outraged over the murder of the caliph, whom she painted a martyr in her rhetoric against Ali²⁴.

Abbott did not set out to make A'isha appear an ideal of Muslim womanhood, but rather used her work to demonstrate that A'isha was an example to women, not because she was perfect, but because she, as an ordinary person capable of some less than exemplary behavior, strove to make the best of her circumstances and to lead her family after the deaths of her father and husband. For example, Abbott includes in her text that Uthman had sent men to "plead with her not to leave the city" when he was surrounded by the mob in Medina so that "Allah might use her and her presence" in his defense, but that A'isha would not be swayed to help him and instead left the city so as to avoid the conflict entirely²⁵. In this way, A'isha avoided publicly taking a stand for or against Uthman's rule and left the opportunity open for her kinsmen to attempt to take power if Uthman happened to be deposed. Then, drawing from al-Tabari, Abbott includes that, when A'isha learned of Uthman's murder and Ali's subsequent election, A'isha said that the affair was not yet over and called for "revenge for the blood of Uthman" and for the restoration of the strength of Islam, hence starting the first Islamic civil war²⁶.

Although Abbott tries to give a realistic portrayal of A'isha in the biography she writes of her, Abbott still attempts to make a statement; it simply is not as sweeping as the assertions later feminist authors would argue. In her work, Nabia Abbott attempts to show that early Islam did not ban women from politics, although women in political power were still rare. For example, the Qur'an gives an example of a woman "exercising supreme political power in her own right" through the character of the Queen of Sheba, and the only

²³ Muhsin Mahdi, "Nabia Abbott," n.d., PDF; Denise A. Spellberg, "Biography," Denise A. Spellberg, last modified 2014, accessed December 8, 2014, <http://denisespellberg.com/bio-pages/biography/>; Rassam, Amal and Lisa Worthington. "Mernissi, Fatima." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*,

²⁴ Nabia Abbott, *A'ishah The Beloved of Mohammed* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1943), 105-131.

²⁵ Abbott, *A'ishah The Beloved of Mohammed*, 123-125.

²⁶ Abbott, *A'ishah The Beloved of Mohammed*, 130.

fault that the Qur'an finds with her is the queen's "false faith"²⁷. Therefore, because the Qur'an finds no fault with a woman in political power, and because the story of A'isha leading her army into the Battle of the Camel illustrates the fact that many in the early Islamic community were ready to follow a female political leader, Abbott uses A'isha to prove some *hadith* aimed against the political inclusion of women false. For example, Abbott argues that the *hadith* attributed to Mohammed advising that, "people who place a woman over their affairs are "unfortunate or unhappy or do not prosper" was a fabrication formed by supporters of Ali in order to detract from A'isha²⁸. Therefore, Nabia Abbott, although writing to prove a point similar to many other, more modern scholars, felt free to present a more realistic characterization of A'isha than many of her successors because she was not pushed to write more obviously polemic works by the polarized nature of feminism in the decades following her work.

For example, Fatima Mernissi, a feminist and sociologist writing primarily during and after the 1970's, uses A'isha's character in her polemic against the seclusion of women. As Mernissi asserts, the argument that the seclusion of women was part of Islam from the beginning was a way in which authoritarianism was entrenched in evolving Islamic societies because "all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimized by religion"²⁹. If it could be proven that the *hijab* was meant for all women, then women might be barred from politics and certain men might gain further power. Therefore, "political factions and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false hadith"³⁰ in order to make it seem as if the seclusion of women had been an integral aspect of Islam from its inception. In fact, Mernissi further asserts that the seclusion of all women in Islam was, and is, supported only by the "manipulation of sacred texts"³¹ by people such as Muhammad Afra and Sa'id al-Afghani, who are prominent conservative Islamic scholars, among others and that such exploitations have been a "structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies" since the 7th century^{32,33}. Authors such as al-Afghani use forthright polemic in their interpretation of A'isha's character as, for example, al-Afghani explicitly states in the introduction and Conclusion to his book *A'isha and Politics*, that women have no place in politics³⁴. Afra and al-Afghani contend that women were barred from politics from the inception of Islam except for A'isha who finally "regretted her [actions]" after the Battle of the Camel, and, therefore, both al-Afghani and Afra use A'isha in order to support their arguments for female seclusion³⁵. In addition, to support his arguments, al-Afghani

²⁷ Nabia Abbott, "Women and the State in Early Islam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 1942): 120, accessed November 28, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/542352>.

²⁸ Abbott, "Women and the State," 120-126.

²⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), 9.

³⁰ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male*, 9.

³¹ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 133.

³² Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 133.

³³ Fatima Mernissi, "Unearthing the Present," *Gender Watch* 1, no. 3 (November 1990): 75, accessed November 24, 2014

³⁴ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1996), 93.

³⁵ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male*, 4-7.

has exaggerated his portrayal of A'isha so far as to argue that A'isha has been "responsible for all blood spilled in the Muslim world since December 4, 656"³⁶.

In contrast, Mernissi considers the active roles that all of Mohammed's wives, such as A'isha, took while married to the Prophet in order to show that women were involved in the early Islamic community. They travelled on campaign with Mohammed, strategized with him, and took other active roles in the society for a large portion of Mohammed's life. Mernissi also uses A'isha's leadership at the Battle of the Camel to illustrate the active roles that Mohammed's wives took early on.

However, unlike al-Tabari and Abbott who present A'isha as a complex figure through the exploration of A'isha's the background and motivations at the Battle of the Camel, Mernissi takes a less in depth approach to A'isha's involvement. Although this level of analysis may be due to her writing as a sociologist and reformer in favor of women's rights and not as a historian, this tendency towards one-dimensional views illustrated through Mernissi's work applies well to certain modern historical scholarship as well, such as to the works of the scholars that she works to disprove³⁷. Instead of demonstrating A'isha's potential personal culpability in the murder of Uthman or her personal reasons for wanting to depose Ali and elect one of her family members as caliph, Mernissi presents A'isha as a shrewd political mind, but leaves her motivations unexplored. For instance, Mernissi explains A'isha's motives through A'isha's own speeches where she reproaches Ali "for not having brought the murders of 'Uthman [...] to justice"³⁸. However, Mernissi leaves A'isha's ulterior motivations out of her analysis and does not fully demonstrate the complexity of the situation surrounding the Battle of the Camel. In addition, Mernissi writes of the "respect that the people, whatever their position toward the war, showed to A'isha," and includes how the occasions of disrespect for A'isha were "very rare" and "never by one of the political leaders"³⁹. However, this assertion discounts insults leveled at A'isha that were recorded in al-Tabari's work, such as the contempt shown for A'isha by Hakim b. Jabalah as he led forces in opposition to her at the Battle of the Camel.

Therefore, although it can be argued that Fatima Mernissi takes a less in-depth and altogether positive approach to A'isha's character at times, her writing must be viewed as a product of its time just as al-Tabari's writing must be viewed in light of his own circumstances. Mernissi wrote at a time when feminism, her overarching topic, was highly politicized and polarized. Instead of writing to express new ideas about historical figures, Mernissi's writing seems to be consumed by the refutation of arguments made by writers such as Muhammad Afra and Sa'id al-Afghani who took wholly negative views of feminism and A'isha in particular. Because feminism became such a highly contentious issue in regard to Islam, there came to be little middle ground for complex characters such as A'isha to stand on in the minds of some scholars.

However, it would be incorrect to generalize the entirety of modern scholarship based on the works of three scholars: Fatima Mernissi, Muhammad Afra and Sa'id al-Afghani. Some modern scholars such as Denise A. Spellberg, who wrote from the 1980's onward, attempt to take a less hyperbolic view of A'isha and her impact on history. For

³⁶ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male*, 75.

³⁷ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male*, 51-58.

³⁸ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male*, 54.

³⁹ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male*, 58.

example, Spellberg acknowledges A'isha as influential during the split in the Islamic community at the Battle of the Camel, and finds the depiction of her character useful as it "[reflects] the crystallization of Islamic definitions of gender and politics"⁴⁰. However, Spellberg argues that A'isha is merely representative of the general trend of decreasing female power after the death of Mohammed because "although after the first civil war A'isha never again joined in the struggle over political succession, it is unlikely that her defeat alone blocked the access of all other Muslim women"⁴¹. In fact, Spellberg, though she argues for A'isha's importance as a central figure in the nascent years of Islam, also asserts that her power and importance was "not achieved, but ascribed" through her marriage to Mohammed and her status as the daughter of Abu Bakr, the first caliph⁴². Therefore, A'isha at the Battle of the Camel stood not so much as a symbol of female power, but rather as "representative of political marriage alliances" as means to religious power⁴³. Thus, D.A. Spellberg does not tie early Islamic female power to Aisha's personal character, but rather uses her to illustrate a general trend of early female power as women were essential for the transmission and connection of religious power. Spellberg does not try to undermine female power in Islam because she of her own personal feminist views. However, Spellberg's work clearly illustrates the fact that some modern Islamic historians do not exaggerate the character and political ramifications of A'isha's figure in the historical record. Instead, they are able to utilize her character to explore the religious and social structure of the Islamic community following Mohammed's death. Therein lies the difference between the works of D.A. Spellberg and Fatima Mernissi, both modern feminist scholars who use A'isha's character as a lens to view the early Islamic community. Mernissi, as a reformer and sociologist places emphasis on Aisha's character, and the power she was able to personally amass, to prove that female power was not excluded from the early Islamic community. Though A'isha's character and motivations are discussed at length in Spellberg's *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past*, Spellberg's central thesis appears to be that A'isha's figure is less important for its complexity as an example to women than it is because she represented the importance of marital ties to the Prophet Mohammed. Therefore, A'isha's character's significance lies in her illustration of the religious and social structure of the early Islamic community and not in her being a special exception to the rule early female limitation.

The many varied interpretations and accounts of A'isha as recorded in Islamic scholarship provide a powerful opportunity to explore the character and circumstances of that scholarship over the centuries as A'isha's historical identity evolved. As a woman who helped shape the nascent years of Islam through her marriage to Mohammed and her involvement at the Battle of the Camel, A'isha's legacy has been widely interpreted and looked to both as a positive and negative example over the entirety of Islamic history. Some medieval scholars, such as al-Tabari, responded to the need for consolidated information on A'isha and other early Islamic figures by presenting all of the reliable accounts of these characters in their multi-volume historic works, and by presenting their

⁴⁰ Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: the Legacy of A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 101.

⁴¹ Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic*, 104.

⁴² Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic*, 102.

⁴³ Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic*, 103.

own opinions only through the selection and order of presentation of his sources. In this manner, authors such as al-Tabari allowed their readers to engage directly with the sources without coloring their interpretations overmuch with the author's own perspectives. However, in the more modern era, such as in the early to mid twentieth century, such objectivity without explicit argument tended to be viewed as less crucial by authors such as Nabia Abbott. Abbott, while still attempting to portray A'isha as a multi-dimensional character, focused far more on advocating a specific idea through her work than previous authors such as al-Tabari had found necessary. Going further, later authors such as Fatima Mernissi have tended to concentrate on certain characteristics of their subject's natures, as a general trend, due to the increased controversial nature of feminism and their resulting need for a more polarized and aggressive rhetoric. On the other hand, not all of modern scholarship has been subject to this trend, as shown through the work of Denise Spellberg. However, although no historic analysis can ever be entirely objective, in general, the trend of increasing subjectivity in historical investigation may be illustrated through the works of such authors as al-Tabari, Nabia Abbott and Fatima Mernissi. In the past century, as some scholars have abandoned their portrayal of historical entities as multi-dimensional, the increasingly incendiary nature of such topics as Islamic feminism has polarized the nature of scholarly debate over such historic figures as A'isha.

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