



Courage & Commitment: The Femininity of Muslim Women

TAMARA GRAY

YAQVEEN[™]
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Tamara Gray is the founder of Rabata, an organization dedicated to promoting positive cultural change through creative educational experiences. She is an Islamic scholar and holds multiple ijazas in Islamic sacred texts and subject matters. Shaykha Dr. Tamara completed her doctorate in the Leadership, Policy and Administration program at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. She holds a master's degree in Curriculum Theory and Instruction, and worked for twenty-five years in the field of education, before moving into the nonprofit world.

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Introduction

The term ‘feminine’ conjures up images of flowers and pink fluffy fabrics, soft smiles, and sweetly spoken words. Years ago, girls in Minnesota who preferred soccer to sewing were called ‘tomboys’ because their hobbies were not feminine or ‘girly.’ Today, children are questioning their very biological sex because they do or do not identify with cultural norms around ‘being a girl’ or ‘being a boy.’ Muslims are often grappling with this disturbing tendency by grasping on to a binary definition of feminine and masculine behavior, applying these standards to all women and men, and claiming to do so based on religion.

Further to this problem, the “status of Muslim women” and “the role of women in Islam” are topics that have been tossed from one speaker to another like a large piece of pizza dough. Each ‘handler’ tosses the dough up into the air, making claims about Muslim women’s roles and responsibilities as wives and mothers; some tell women not to come to the mosque, while others call for women to forgo their God-given rights of financial independence and personal agency. Still other speakers may stray far from traditional values; e.g., denying the necessity for *hijab* and calling on Muslim women to defy religion and traditional *fiqh*. This binary thinking has caused confusion and confoundment—especially amongst women of faith. Who am I as a Muslim woman? What does it mean to be female and what role does femininity play in my life? These are questions playing on the minds of young and old alike.

In order to answer this question, we must find a way to break out of preconceived ideas around femininity and masculinity that we have adopted subconsciously. In the following pages, I first discuss Western myths around femininity. I then look to the women mentioned in the Qur’an and Muslim women throughout the centuries, in an attempt to propose a model of Muslim femininity that is rooted in Muslim women themselves.

The global June Cleaver

During colonialist rule, Western governments and missionary schools introduced their own beliefs about femininity to Muslim lands. Their concept of the delicate and fainting woman clashed strongly with the example of bravery in battle of Safiyya bint Abdul Muttalib رضي الله عنها but it began to permeate local cultures nonetheless. Eventually the ‘ideal woman’ who cooks, cleans, docilely serves her husband, and gently raises her children became part and parcel of *khutbas* and *halaqas*—all without questioning where that ideal came from in the first place.

The sexualization of women, and especially Muslim women, also became part of the feminine ethos. The harem became an orientalist trope while, in reality, it remained the *haram*—the place where women gathered to do laundry and cook without the need for *hijab* in a space where men were not allowed.

Images of traditional families come to us in television shows. We are taught that mom and dad and two and a half children make up an ideal family. Post-World War II, the US invented the suburb and social workers began to endorse “nuclear family separateness and looked suspiciously on active extended-family networks.”¹ For most women, this move to nuclear families separated from other supportive family members meant more housework and fewer support systems. Sitcoms in the 1950s showed so-called ‘ethnic’ men as unable to ‘control’ their wives, whereas the middle-class white housewife was well behaved. An image of ideal femininity attached to gentle and sweet housewifery was born and then exported across the world via movies and television for peoples of every culture to absorb. Suddenly, in Muslim societies, there was women’s work (housework) and men’s work (office work)—though our very Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم had never endorsed this distinction.

¹ Coontz, S. (1992). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. USA: Basic Books of Harper and Collins., p. 26. Coontz attributes this view to several sociologists including Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). See Coontz, p. 296, note 9. Coontz cites Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales, *Family, Socialization, and Interaction Process* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1955).

Muslims care very much about family, and we were particularly susceptible to the image of perfect happiness, submission, and feminine ‘light.’ It was, however, only an image. The breaking up of the extended family and the locking in of one definition of femininity has had tragic consequences. Emotional needs cannot be met by so few people, same-sex networks have dissolved, and success outside of family has been defined as individual, strategic, and smart, while success inside families is described as sacrificing, selfless, and involving an intentional disregard for rationality.² The result has been unhappiness. In the sixties, many women tried to rectify their emptiness by throwing themselves into the workplace and demanding equal access and equal treatment. “The acquisitive, competitive values women adopted when they forsook domesticity led them to become ‘clones’ of men.”³ Feminine qualities then, without examination, became associated with being weak and a failure. A nostalgia grew for ‘the traditional family’ but most people had forgotten what that actually was (the original extended version).

If the image of the domesticated woman is a false ideal, what is the Muslim version of womanhood? We need to be careful not to adopt tropes that we did not define and that are not exemplified in our history. Instead we must look to the Qur’an and Sunnah to discover the characteristics of womanhood and femininity. The Qur’an is not void of women; in fact, there a number of examples of women in the Qur’an, believers and non-believers. Next, we will look at some of these examples.

Women in the Qur’an

The women mentioned or referred to in the Qur’an run the gamut of social roles. Single mother, barren woman, fertile woman, wife of a great man, wife of a terrible man, woman without evidence of a spouse, married woman seeking to have an affair, and a divorcee are all examples of women found in the Qur’an. Their social

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 151.

status is not the main story but it is interesting, nonetheless, to know that nearly every possibility is represented.

The single mother

The single mother is, of course, Maryam, Mother of Jesus عليهما السلام. Her femininity is expressed in the story of a woman with great confidence in her Lord. She gave a lesson to her uncle—a prophet—when he asked her where she got fruit that was out of season by responding, “...Indeed it is from God, God provides for whom He wills.”⁴ And her uncle listened carefully, returned to his Lord, and requested offspring. His prayer was answered when his wife, a woman who had passed her fertile years, became pregnant with Prophet Yahya عليه السلام. The mother of Jesus was very young (13 or 14 according to Christian scholars) and the mother of Yahya was very old (in her 80s according to Christian sources and God knows best)—the Qur’an presents them both as women of faith and confidence in their Lord.

The story of Maryam (may God be pleased with her) is one of struggle and difficulty. We are with her when she gives birth to Prophet ‘Isa عليه السلام. We watch as, alone and in agony, she is sent comfort from God in the form of angels and a tree full of fruit. We see her return to her people who are, not surprisingly, shocked. She does not run away or hide but rather relies on a miracle from the One who gave her this gift: the infant in her arms speaks. She has great courage on every step of this journey, and we also see her commitment to the path that Allah gave her. We see a courageous, confident, and committed woman.

Married

Āsiyya was married to one of the worst men ever—Pharaoh. He was an arrogant narcissist who said to his people, “I am your Lord, the Most High.”⁵ Āsiyya is presented as a woman of faith who was able to take a young Jewish boy from the

⁴ Qur’an 3:37.

⁵ Qur’an 79:24.

river and save his life at the very time that Pharaoh was killing male Jewish babies. She does not cower to a husband's wishes, nor is her later confidence in her Lord influenced by his cruelty. We learn that women have agency and must obey and worship God regardless of who their husband is. Then we meet the wives of Nuh and Lut عليهما السلام who refused to believe and were punished. This story is important as well because, without it, we might have concluded that womanhood on its own was saintly. But in reality, women (like men) must choose goodness and belief on their own, separate from the good or bad choices of their spouse. In the examples of Āsiyya and the wives of Lut and Nuh, womanhood is not special. We all, male and female, are engaged in the same human struggle to believe or failure to believe that everyone from the beginning of time to the end of time has engaged in and will continue to engage in.

No evidence of a husband

The queen of Sheba, Bilqis, is presented in the Qur'an as a fair leader who consulted her advisors. Prophet Suleiman عليه السلام tested her by altering her throne. He asked her if it was her throne and she said, "It is as though it is the very same."⁶ Ibn Kathir says that this answer demonstrates her intelligence, strong resolve, and wisdom. The presentation of Bilqis in these verses is one of a capable leader and a woman who made her own decisions. The Qur'an says nothing about her marital status. It is irrelevant to the important aspects of her person—belief and good leadership. She was courageous in her interactions with Prophet Suleiman عليه السلام and confident in her discussion with her counsellors. When she becomes a believer, it is with great commitment and she brings her citizenry with her.

Seeking an affair

We are then introduced to the wife of Aziz who is a married woman but is tempted by the good looks of her slave Yusuf عليه السلام. She attempted to seduce him, then invited other women to her home so that she could prove to them his irresistible

⁶ Qur'an 27:42.

nature. They also desire him and he goes to jail. Later in the story she repents and identifies the source of her troubles, “Yet I claim not that my soul (*nafs*) was innocent—surely the soul of humankind incites to evil—except inasmuch as my Lord had Mercy; truly my Lord is All-Forgiving, All-Compassionate.”⁷ The Queen of Sheba is provided as an example of a woman who makes slow and deeply intelligent decisions. Zulaikha (the wife of Aziz) is passionate, pushed to make mistakes because of her desire but she is also brought to repentance and clarity at the end of the story. We learn that personality may influence how we act but it does not determine our ability to believe and do good deeds. Indeed, Zulaikha proves courageous in repentance and commitment to her Lord as she ultimately chooses God over a life of sin and following her desires.

Divorcée

The Qur’an also refers to the divorcée, Zaynab bint Jahsh رضي الله عنها to whom God granted the great gift of marriage to the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. Zaynab’s story is one of the instances of a woman whose very life is used as an example for other believers. The lesson was that divorce is not a sign of a bad Muslim, nor of a failed woman. Indeed God said, “We joined her in marriage to thee.”⁸

And more...

There are other women mentioned in the Qur’an: the woman who complained to God about her husband and was responded to in *Surat al Mujadila*; Hawa (or Eve) who was the first woman (20:117, 2:30-38); the daughters of Lut who stood ready to stand with their father against the sinful ways of the people of Sodom (15:71); Sarah, the believing wife of Ibrahim who is mentioned as pleased by the birth of her son Isaac (11:71-72); the mother of Moses who received direct instruction from God which she obeyed (God sent an inspiration to Moses’ mother that she should put Moses in a chest and throw the chest into the river, which would ultimately

⁷ Qur’an 12:53.

⁸ Qur’an 33:37.

wash up on the shore of God’s enemy and he would be taken in; Qur’an 28:7); and the sister of Moses who brought him back to his mother so that he would nurse (28:12-13). Both his mother and sister were part of the divine project to save Moses. Later Moses’ wife and her sister are mentioned in the Qur’an (28:26-27). Maryam’s mother, the wife of Imran, is also mentioned in the Qur’an as a woman devoted to God.⁹ The mothers of the believers are mentioned as a group (33: 28-29; 32-34) as are the Prophet’s daughters with the rest of believing women (33:59). And finally, the wife of Abu Lahab was mentioned in the Qur’an (111:4-4) as deserving of punishment for her harassment and abuse of the Prophet ﷺ.

Qur’anic definitions of femininity

If we were to define femininity according to the Qur’an, we could easily use words like confidence, courage, and commitment to promises. That confidence, courage and commitment was demonstrated in Maryam’s mother’s dedication of her child to the temple, in Maryam’s response to the Angel (*How could I bear a child when no man has touched me and I am not unchaste?*),¹⁰ and in Āsiyya’s response to Pharaoh (*And the wife of Pharaoh said: (He will be) a consolation for me and for thee. Kill him not. Perchance he may be of use to us, or we may choose him for a son. And they perceived not*).¹¹ The stories of women in the Qur’an narrate bravery and belief disconnected from their social or familial status.

The example of our foremothers was neither that of the Western myth of “Leave it to Beaver,” nor a modern desire to throw off traditional dress or worship rituals. Rather, we find women with a sense of purpose, a commitment to the betterment of society, and a devout relationship to God and His Prophet ﷺ. “Feminine” begins to look different in this light. In fact, it begins to look strong and powerful in its connection to God.

⁹ Qur’an 3:35

¹⁰ Qur’an 19:21.

¹¹ Qur’an 28:9.

Historical roles

The lived realities of historical Muslim women are complicated and valuable. They give richness and pragmatic examples to theoretical and theological concepts of womanhood and personhood. The past is a legitimizing force and the present is a dissipative example of the fractal of our early history. Even as the chaos of Western “civilization” attempts to erase us, Muslim women demonstrate our regenerative force and again and again come into our own space of faith and power.

The case of Aisha رضي الله عنها

Aisha رضي الله عنها was a historical anomaly. Her contribution to Islamic law and thought became part of the foundational canon of Islamic epistemology and legal tradition. She lived for nearly 50 years after the death of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and left a legacy of leadership and teaching in her wake. Such a role for a woman as an intellectual founder was unheard of in other faiths, philosophies, and social theories. But Aisha, known for her outspoken frankness and her commitment to carrying on and carrying forth the teachings of Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم, broke with historical trends and began a new line of female scholarship and leadership amongst Muslim women.

She, along with the other wives of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, was granted the status of *ummahat al mumineen* by God: “The Prophet is worthier of the believers than themselves, and his wives are their mothers...”¹² The word *umm* or *mother* in Arabic is related to the words *ummah* (community) and *imam* (leader). As such, it contains the meanings of both leadership and community. In Western thinking, the

¹² Qur’an 33:6.

Great Mother is an archetype for individuals and societies.¹³ She is a giver and a key to transformative mysteries. She is fundamental to spiritual transformation. The archetype of mother is symbolic of growth, change, and development. It is deeply connected to religion because it is a directional force. Indeed, the Arabic term *imam* means to stand in front of and *ummahat*—or mothers—stand in front of the next generation in leadership.

As our early mothers led us to good action, leadership, and a deep understanding of our role in society, so did their descendants. Throughout history, there have been women—as individuals and as groups—who have taken up the mantle of faith and community as they lived the legacy of leadership in their lives.

Early spiritual and religious leaders

In the first century after the *hijra*, ‘Amra bint Abdur Rahman began the chain of female scholarship. She was a direct student of our Mother Aisha, may God be well pleased with her, and a confident jurist. At one point, upon hearing of an unjust ruling, she sent a messenger to object. Her opinion was considered stronger than that of the judge and the ruling was corrected.¹⁴

In the second century, Nafisa al-Tahira, *hafitha*, jurist, *mufasssira*, *muhadditha*, lived in Egypt. She set an example of Muslim womanhood in her worship vigils, her teaching, and her commitment to her faith. Imam Shafi’ was a student of Nafisa al Tahira, as were many, many others. She was a descendant of the Prophet ﷺ and lived his example. The people of Egypt loved her deeply. They would throng to her house to learn from her and to receive her blessing.¹⁵

¹³ A classic study is Erich Neumann’s *Die große Mutter. Der Archetyp des grossen Weiblichen*. The work was published in English translation as *The great mother: An analysis of the archetype* in 1955 and recently re-printed in 2015. See Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ For more on ‘Amra, see Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67-69.

¹⁵ Bewley, A. (2004). *Muslim women: A biographical dictionary* London: Ta-Ha Publishers.

The third century brought us a woman who devoted her money to the Muslim community. Fatima al-Fihri (800-880 CE), using her inheritance, founded the oldest academic degree-granting institution still in existence: the University of Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco. She began the project fasting, and so continued to fast for the full three years until it was complete. She demonstrated initiative, confidence in her ability to contribute, and devotion to worship practices in her decision to fast for the duration of the project.

Malika bint Dawud ibn Muhammad al Qurtaki was a profound scholar who lived in Egypt during the fourth century. She gave an *ijaza* to the great spiritualist and scholar Ibn Asakir.¹⁶

In the fifth century, Karima bint Ahmad al Marwaziyya demonstrated how the spread of Islam included devoted women. Originally from Turkmenistan, Karima became a renowned scholar of *hadith* who was known for her precision and exactness. She lived and taught in Mecca and became known as the “Shaykha of Mecca.”¹⁷

Fatima bint Sa’d al Khair traveled across lands seeking teachers and *hadith*. She settled in Damascus and then Cairo, teaching in both cities and growing a long list of devoted students. In the sixth century, she was born in today’s China to parents who had traveled there from Spain.¹⁸

Inheritance of Aisha

Six centuries and six women. None of them questioned their womanhood; rather, they asked how they could best serve their faith. Each found a way to teach or work for the betterment of their community. This is the inheritance of our Mother Aisha. This is the femininity of commitment and courage.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Nadwi, M. A. (2007.) *Al-Muhaddithāt: The women scholars in Islam*. Oxford: Interface Publications.

¹⁸ Ibid.

We continue to find examples of strong women, political women, and women of faith, throughout the centuries, women who rooted their work and power in their religion. Women like Razia Sultan, leader of the Delhi Sultanate in the 7th century, Queen Al Adar al Karima, leader of her people and philanthropist of Yemen in the 8th century, Bibi Raji a social activist who built mosques, schools, retreats, and bridges in India in the 9th century, and Queen Aminatu of Zaria—a military genius who ruled her African nation for 34 years in the 10th century. For five centuries, women across Muslim lands continued to stand up and carry political and social responsibility—without any doubt that they could and should take on the mantle of their communities.

In the 11th century, Mumtaz Mahal demonstrated to future generations the devotion of a wife and mother. She was deeply religious and gave birth to 14 children, dying during the birth of her last. Her husband so deeply mourned her that he built one of the seven wonders of the world in order to honor her greatness—the Taj Mahal.

The 12th century of *hijra* gave us the artist Asma Ibre—whose first major work was a commissioned description of the Prophet ﷺ, which she did in her own artistic calligraphic style. She was only fifteen years old at the time. She was paid for her work by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and her last work, completed when she was only 28 years old, was a scripted and decorated *mushaf* of the Qur'an.¹⁹ (Kazan, 2010).

And in the 13th century, Nana Asma'u of the Sokoto Caliphate was a scholar, poet, activist, and educationalist who used brilliant and creative techniques to ensure the stability of Islam in her country.²⁰ Generation after generation has seen women who devoted their lives to religion, scholarship, service and education. Islam raised these women, but they were not alone nor were they the exception to the rule.

¹⁹ Kazan, H. (2010). *Female calligraphers: Past and present*. Istanbul: Cultural Co.

²⁰ Boyd, J. (1989). *The Caliph's sister: Nana Asma'u 1793-1865 teacher, poet, and Islamic leader*. London: Frank Cass Publishers.

Communities of women

In Uzbekistan, there was a little-known category of Muslim women religious leaders called *Otines*. These women worked for centuries as female scholars, teachers, and cultural caretakers of faith. The Otines safeguarded Islam and maintained tradition in the face of Soviet policies meant to disrupt it. These women lived in a political climate that stood against their religion but their religion was the foundation of their work. As the communist system spread and they lost space for teaching and influencing, they sought out new places to teach in and continued to uphold the religious tradition.²¹ The Otines began to learn as children, then at twenty were allowed to commit to a rigorous series of courses and training. At forty, they were given the status of teacher. This system of women teachers preserved outlawed books, traditional knowledge, and moral authority.²² It also embodied the concept of the femininity of commitment and courage that the women in the Qur'an and our early founders demonstrated.

The Aisyiyah Organization in Indonesia has been preserving Islam for over 100 years. This wing of the Muhammadiyah movement was begun in 1917 by Muslim women in order to educate women and fight backwardness and the negative effects of the Dutch on Islam in Indonesia. It brought a balance of piety and contemporary attitudes toward faith. The women teachers persevered and ensured the continuation of Islam on the islands.²³ In their work we again see the femininity of courage and commitment to serve Islam and Muslims.

China was another place of women's leadership and agency. In the 15th century CE, a system of female teachers called *jingshis*²⁴ was established and, for the next

²¹ Fathi, H. (1997). Otines: The unknown women clerics of Central Asian Islam. *Central Asian Survey*, 16(1), 27-43. doi: [10.1080/02634939708400967](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939708400967)

²² Ibid.

²³ Aryanti, T. (2013) A claim to space: Debating female religious leadership in a Muhammadiyah mosque in Indonesia. *The Muslim World*, 103(3). 375-388.

²⁴ Jaschok, M. & Jingjun, S. (2015). *The history of women's mosques in Chinese Islam: A mosque of their own*. Oxford, UK: Routledge Press.

four hundred years, Islamic education for girls helped to preserve and protect Islamic knowledge during the Qing dynasty (1616-1911). The schools were called Nuxue and Nusi. They had different origins but a singular goal: the education of women in Islamic sciences.²⁵ There were other women concerned with the preservation of Islam in their communities as well: the *ahong*—a committee of female elders. Their job was to address the challenges faced by the community at the hands of the communist party and state interventions. They gained political legitimacy and legal entitlements in their roles as community leaders.²⁶ Again, we see commitment and courage.

Femininity redefined

Women throughout history, as individuals and as organizations, have taken part in the perpetuation of religious tradition. Devout, successful, and energized, these women were committed to their personal goals. What is the Islamic framework that these women worked in and might that help modern women understand our role in life?

First and foremost, the women mentioned did not see themselves as women first, but rather as servants of The Merciful. They saw themselves as inheritors of the Prophet’s message, with the duty to propagate and support it in their geographical places and historical eras.

Dr. Zainab Alwani, in *Muslim Women and Global Challenges*, said, “... nurturing the role of women in society is critical; they are the eyes of society that pinpoint the problem and help provide effective solutions... having this understanding will enable Muslim communities to realize the significance of Muslim women’s role in establishing a healthy and peaceful human culture and society.”²⁷ Muslim women

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jaschok, M. (2012). Sources of authority: Female *ahong* and Qingzhen Nüsi (women’s mosques) in China. In M. Bano & H. Kalmbach (Eds.), *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority*. Leiden: Brill, 37-58.

²⁷ Alwani, Z. (2012). *Muslim women and global challenges: Seeking change through a Quranic textual approach and the prophetic model*. New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, p. 4.

in the past understood this. They recognized the importance of their spiritual and religious contributions to society and did not shirk their duties. Indeed, the creation of men and women together is indicative of our mutual work. Allah (swt) says in the Qur'an, "Believers, men and women, are each other's reliable friends. They enjoin right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give *zakah* and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those—Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise."²⁸ This attitude of working together for the betterment of society is the framework within which Muslim women worked and succeeded in early generations.

But there is also the framework of "mothering"—the feeling of obligation to a child is not unlike the feeling that Muslim women demonstrated to their community. The women in the examples here did not pause to ask if they should serve but, like mothers of infants, woke up at night and toiled during the day to do what was necessary in order to keep their child, Islam, alive. This definition of mothering—courage and commitment—is quite different from the Western tropes of docility and obedience.

The question 'What is women's role in society' is a question resulting from the globalization of Western thought. Instead, Muslim women have been asking, "What does society need from me?" and then responding with power, agency, and commitment that welled from their spiritual and religious resources. As we look to the Qur'an and our past and see individual women in every century as well as groups of communities of teachers across geographical borders, we can find a wellspring of hope and strength. Muslim women today must stand in the shade of their legacy and look outside of the pettiness of modern life. We must engulf our communities with the commitment, courage, and service that is our very own.

²⁸ Qur'an 9:71.