

Role of Muslim Women in the Development of Hadith Literature:

An Approach to Some Important Aspects

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Since the times of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), the transmission of *Hadith* as well as other types of Islamic knowledge was an endeavor in which women played qualitatively and quantitatively a significant role as primary transmitters. At every stage of the development of *Hadith* literature they took keen and lively interest in it. A large number of *Sahabiyât* were the primary source of transmission of *Hadith* from the Prophet (SAAS)¹ in strict sense, or they related the information about themselves or others surrounding the Prophet (SAAS). During the lifetime of the Prophet (SAAS) many women were not only the precursors for the evolution of the number of *ahadith* but were also their transmitters and careful interpreters. The women appeared as crucial links in the chains of transmission. We frequently find women in the *isnâds* as authorities of many *ahadith*. It is not surprising that occasionally *ahadith* which were preserved by female authorities were passed on again by women. Even, there are *ahadith* mentioned in seminal works of Islam² where in we find a *hadith* narrated successively by four women authorities before being transmitted to men. Infact, Islam produced a large number of outstanding female scholars on whose testimony and sound judgment much of the edifice of Islam depends. The reports of some of these women were essential to the formulation of early Islamic history and law. These women served as religious models and precedents for later generation of Muslims. The topic being multi-dimensional, it is very difficult to encompass the role of women *ruwat* in the development of various aspects of *Hadith*

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literature. We shall try to focus on some important facets of it.

Reliability of women in transmission and text narration of Hadith

The archetype of *muhaddithât* is H. 'Ā'ishah (RA). She is one of the most prominent *muhaddithah* among the companions of the Prophet (SAAS). Moreover, many women of first generation were source of *Hadith*, even by the strictest standards, though all of them were not relatives of the Prophet (SAAS). Many *ahadith* related by women deal with subjects specific to women but certain others relate to general Islamic issues. Not only the *Sahabiyat*, but a large number of women of the succeeding ages were deemed trustworthy transmitters by later critics and compilers of *Hadith* when the science of *Hadith* criticism³ was fully developed by the Muslim scholars. Thus it would be unequivocal to state that Muslim women were not excluded from transmission of *Hadith* and later from studying and teaching it. Since the earliest days of Prophet's mission, women had been taking a prominent part in preservation and development of *Hadith* and this role continued down the centuries. The *rawiyat* (women transmitters) of every age have been considered as authentic and have stood by the crystal test of *Hadith* criticism. Imam Dhahbi in the introduction of his work *Mizan al-I'tidal* has claimed that no one has ever uttered about any *rawiyah* (sig of *rawiyat*) that she has ever lied about *Hadith*⁴. But this is not true in case of men narrators. There are voluminous works containing the names of those men who have lied or who are accused of lying in *Hadith*. The eminent scholars of *Hadith* rigorously examined chains of transmission and authenticated only a minority of *ahadith* they had collected. They seem to have weighed the reliability of *ahadith* without regard to the gender of their transmitters. However, it is a matter of fact that the proportion of female narrations in *Hadith* literature in comparison to the male authorities is lesser, yet their narrations comprise a considerable

portion in the *Hadith* literature. The narrations by women are not only found in *Kutub al-Sittah*— a detailed account in this respect is found in the renowned work of Hafiz al-Mizzi (d.742 A.H.) *Tahfat-al Ashrâf bi Ma'rifat al-Atrâf*⁵. He has separately provided the breakup of the women narrations in the *Kutub al-Sittah* along with their narrators in the succeeding ages. But seven percent of *ahadith* in the earliest extant legal compendium *Al-Mu'watta'* by Imam Malik (d. 179 A.H) were transmitted by women. One of the oldest extant collections of *Hadith*, the *Musnad* of Imam Ahmad (d. 241 A.H.) included *ahadith* related in the first instance by 125 women out of 700 companions, approximating to eighteen percent⁶. Moreover, the narrations of women are not only scattered in above mentioned books but other great compilations of *Hadith* also contain their narrations. Only if we have a bird's eye view of Ibn Hajar's renowned work *Taqrib al-Tahdhib*, we have sufficient proof for our assertion. It is a biographical compilation where the author has enlisted the critical evaluation of the characters of narrators of *Kutub al-Sittah* along with the narrators found in the other works of the compilers of *Kutub al-Sittah*. These works are enumerated as 23 in number⁷. Amongst these books the women narrations appear in 14 books. The critical account of character of whom Ibn Hajar has placed in a separate section towards the end of his work under the title of *Kitab al-Nisa*⁸.

Apart from that *Al-Fahâris*⁹ is a great source to know about the contribution of women in *Hadith*. It not only highlights the names of female narrators — interspersed alphabetically according to their names among male authorities, but also it gives a detailed account of books and chapters containing their narrations. The books include *Kutub al-Sittah*, *Musnad al-Darimi*, *Mu'watta* of Imam Malik and *Musnad* of Ahmad bin Hanbal¹⁰. Among them are the women who relate information directly from the Prophet (SAAS) and also those who are subsequent transmitters. The above quoted scholarly

works substantiate the assertion that narrations by *Rawiyât* comprise the great compilations of *Hadith*.

Even after the compilation of the classical works of *Hadith* women scholars occupy eminent place in the history of transmission of the text. One of the most famous source of the text of *Bukhari* is a women named Karimah bint Ahmad al-Marwaziyyah (d. 462 A.H) in Makkah. She was considered as one of the best authorities on *Sahih Bukhari* in her own times and the reputed scholars relayed the text of *Bukhari* from her. Her version of *Bukhari* was considered as one of the reliable versions. Ibn Hajar (d. 852 A.H) ,who produced one of the best exegesis on *Sahih Bukhari* and whose strict standards of accepting authorities is highly acknowledged by the scholars, collected the authentic versions of *Sahih Bukhari* of his times for his work. He commented in brief about their authorities in the preface of *Fath al- Bâri*. The Karima's version has got a specific place and an equal status among the other trustworthy versions of *Sahih Bukhari*¹¹.

Aside from Karima, a number of other *muhaddithât* have played significant roles in the narration of the text of *Sahih Bukhari*. Among them is Sitta al-Wuzarâ' bint Muhammad bin Manja al-Tanukhiyah of 7th century *Hijrah*. In one more version of *Sahih Bukhari* — collected by Ibn Hajar, which is the best version near him so for the number of its transmitters is concerned — *Riwayat al-Darawardi* (version of Abd al-'Aziz al-Darawardi), Sittah al-Wuzarâ' occupies a specific position being immediate source of three scholars out of four who narrated the version of Darawadi to Ibn Hajar¹². Both of the women thus figure as a crucial authorities in transmission of this seminal text of Islam.

Some Issues solely based on women's testimony of Hadith

Hadith literature bears witness that some *ahadith* and *Sunan* are only narrated by women. Henceforth, the *Sahabiyat*

who narrated these *ahadith* became authorities on the issues deduced from their reportage. Their narrated material was consulted for devising rules, formulating laws and for jurisprudential argumentation. Infact, a number of *sunans* followed by the *ummah* are based on testimony by women.

Among the *ahadith* solely narrated by women is the *hadith* narrated by Fari'ah bint Malik (R.A) about 'iddah (Probationary period) of a widow. She was herself the subject of this command by the Prophet (SAAS). Her husband was killed and she was directed by the Prophet (SAAS) to stay at the house in which she was living earlier with her husband until the completion of her 'Iddah, though her husband had not left any house of his own neither any means of maintenance for her¹³. Caliph 'Uthman (R.A) was confronted with a same case and he sent a person to Fari'ah to know about decision of the Prophet (SAAS). She related the episode and 'Uthman (R.A) followed and decided accordingly. Zainab bint Ka'ab bin 'Ujrah is again the only women of second generation who forwarded this *hadith* from Fari'ah. Further, many jurist belonging to the different provinces of Islamic world adhered to this decision of the Prophet (SAAS), narrated by Fari'ah alone¹⁴. Henceforth, Fari'ah became the only authoritative reference for *Sahâbah* and *Tabi'ûn* in this chapter of Islamic law.

On the issue that a divorcee who has been divorced thrice has no right to receive maintenance allowance (*nafaqah*) and residential facilities during her probationary period from her husband i.e. in case of *al-talâq al-bâ'in*, Fatimah bint Qais is the only authority¹⁵. The juristic issues based on this *Hadith* of Fatimah have remained a point of discussion among the scholars and jurists. They hold different views about it and in this diversity of opinion Fatimah bint Qais is the only source for them. Similarly a number of *ahâdith* dealing particularly with the judgments regarding women have been transmitted by the *Sahabiyat* themselves and the verdicts of the Prophet (SAAS)

were diffused only by their reportage.

Apart from the women's issues, the *Sahabiyât* have also solely narrated *ahâdith* having different subject matter. We again have Fatimah bint Qais narrating the lengthy *hadith* of *Jassâsah*¹⁶. She narrates the details of the signs near the emergence of *Dajjâl* (Anti-Christ), as stated by the Prophet (SAAS) in his prediction. She also narrates the description of appearance of *Dajjâl* and his spy. The Prophet (SAAS) has stated these details in a *masjid* in front of a huge gathering of *Sahâbah*. The discourse was lengthy and strange in its subject matter and its transmission required a great deal of sagacity and carefulness. Bestowed with perspicacity, the *Hadith* reached to us by the reportage of Fatima bint Qais all alone¹⁷. We can further quote a good number of *ahadith* in this context, even if we only make mention of narrations of the *Ummhat al-Mu'minin*.

Some *usûl* narrated by the women

In *Hadith* literature we come across with issues which we can't claim that they have been narrated only by the women. But the versions of certain reports by the women are considered as the basic and main authority in the related chapters. In technical terms these reports have the status of *usûl*. The *muhaddithîn* after the comparison of different versions of a *hadith* have laid the foundation of a chapter on such a thorough and perfect version of a *hadith* called *asal* (plu. *usûl*). This is indicative of fact that the *Sahabiyât* had earned authoritative confidence and reliance of their brethren in a number of cases, where besides *Sahâbah*, the *Sahabiyât* are treated as main authority. Let's take an example regarding ceremonial wash of a dead body (*gusul al-mayyit*), narrated by 'Umm 'Atiyyah (R.A). Her reportage in this chapter is famous in the classical works of *Hadith*. Imam Bukhari, at least has derived ten issues from the reporting of 'Umm 'Atiyyah in *Kitab al-Janâ'iz* of his

Sahih. The great *Sahâbah* and *Tabi'ûn* have consulted her on the subject because of the excellence she earned in understanding its principles and in narrating its details in an elaborative way¹⁵.

Infact, there are great number of such type of *ahadith* scattered in the *Hadith* works and it is not difficult to collect them. These *ahadith* are transmitted by the *ruwât* in every age and are relied upon by the *Ummah*. These *ahadith*, no doubt, provide the witness to negate the superficial thought that *Hadith* studies is a domain specialized by male authorities alone.

The women in other areas of *Hadith* studies

Among the sciences that were developed for the preservation of the *Hadith* is the science of *al-Jarah wa'l ta'dil* (checking the reliability of narrators of a *Hadith*). In *Hadith* methodological works, a principle has been laid down by the authorities that the judgment of a women regarding the declaration of reliability of a narrator is accepted; e.g., Khatib Baghdadi has entitled a chapter in his work, *Kitab al-Kifâyah*. Title of the chapter reads, "What has been related regarding a woman being an authority to conform the reliability of a narrator."¹⁹

The field of *dirâyat al-hadith* (Textual study of *Hadith*) needs profound knowledge of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, besides high critical capability. The persons having high sensitivity in understanding the essence of things and those who could compare the different principles at a time can only enter this field. Here also woman have performed well. 'Â'isha (RA), through her close association with the Prophet (SAAS) and her critical attitude, has been recognized as a master of this field. Many times she made rectifications in the reportage or the opinion of *Sahâbah*. In *dirâyat al-Hadith* it is known as *istidrâk* — the higher criticism of *Hadith*. Her critique has been compiled by more than one Scholar. The most well known studies are by

Badr al-Din Zarkashi (d 794 A.H.), under the title, *Al- Ijabah li Iyrad ma Istadrakathu 'Â'isha 'Ala al- Sahabah* and by Jalal al-Din Sayuti under the title, *'Aynal Isâbah fi ma Istadrakuathu 'A'isha 'Ala al- Sahâbah*. Prior to both of them Abu Mansur Baghdadi (d.489 A.H) had worked on 'Â'ishah's critique²⁰. These scholars have tried to bring together those events where 'A'isha (RA) has criticized other *Sahabah* for their misunderstanding or committing a mistake in forwarding a *Hadith* or corrected their *fatâwa*, justifying her stand by *Qur'an* or *Hadith* or any other accepted rule of reason. Zarkashi has collected more or less forty such incidents. Her critique has also got place in the classical *Hadith* works²¹.

It is evident from this brief discussion that the woman have played a prominent role in preserving, propagating and developing the *Hadith* literature. In every period of Muslim history, there lived numerous eminent *muhadithat*, who were treated by their brethren with reverence and respect. Life accounts of these women are found in biographical dictionaries. In short, from the earlier times women have played vital role in transmitting and explaining the Islamic commandments and sciences.

References and End Notes

1. About 1000 *Sahabiyat* related *ahadith* See Ibn Hajar. *Al- Isabah*, Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi Cairo, 4th vol. 1939 A.D.
2. For example in *Sahih Muslim in Kitab al-Fitan wa Ishrat al-Sa'ah Bab min Ishrat Sa'ati Khuruj Yajuj wa Majuj*.
3. An important branch of Islamic learning.
4. Shamsdin Dhahbi: *Maqaddimah Mizan al- Itidal*, Reviewed by Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim.
5. Hafiz al-Mizzi: *Tahfat al-Ashraf bi Ma'rifat al- Atráf* with Ibn Hajar's *Al-Nukat al-Ziráf*, *Al- Dar al- Qayyimah* 1982, 13 Vols.
6. Ruth Roded: *Women In Islamic Biographical collections*, Lynne kiener Publishers, Boulder and London, p. 19.
7. Ibn Hajar: *Taqrib al-Tahdhib*, Dar al-Rashid, Syria, Halb, 4th edition 1994, pp. 10-11.
8. *Ibid*, pp.743-765.
9. Index of the last volume of *Hadith Dictionary, Al- Mu'jam al-Mufahras*, prepared by a number of Orientalists, under the editorship of a renowned Scholar Arent Jan wensinck in the early 20th Century.
10. Wensinck et al: *Al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras*, Maktabah Barail, London, 1936 A.D. 8th volume [*Al-Faharis*].
11. Ibn Hajar: *Fath al-Bari*, Maktabah al-Shaikh al-Hind Deoband, 2006, Vol. 1, pp. 5-6.
12. *Ibid*: p. 5.
13. Abu Dawud: *Kitab al-Talaq Bab fi al- Mutawaffa 'Anha Tunqalu....*172.
14. Ibn Abd al-Barr: *Al-Isti'ab*, Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, Cairo, Vol. 4, 1939 A.D., p. 375.
15. Muslim: *Kitab al- Talaq*.
16. *Jassasah* means spy. the *hadith* is named as *hadith Jassasah* because it mentions the spy of *Dajjal* (anti-Christ).
17. Muslim: *Kitab al- Fitan wa Ishrat al-Sa'ah, Bab Qissat al- Jassasah*.
18. Ibn Hajar: *Al-Isabah*. Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, Cairo, Vol. 4, 1939 A.H. p. 373.
19. Khatib Baghdadi: *Kitab al- Kifayah*, Da'irah al- Ma'arif al-'Uthmaniyah, Hyderabad Daccan, 1357A.H, pp. 97-98.
20. Al-Zarkashi: *Ijābah*, Al-Maktabah al- Islami, Beirut, 4th edition, 2000, p. 15.
22. For example see Bukhari: *Kitab al- Jana'iz* and *Kitāb al-Salah*.