

Muslim Women and the Science of Biography: An Overview

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In connection with the *Hadīth* literature, *Muhaddithīn* have developed various other branches of literature which are summarized in the works on the *‘Ulūm al-Hadīth*. A complete science has been developed consisting a number of interdisciplinary branches for checking the authenticity of *Hadīth*. They are more or less one hundred in number, and each of them is said to be important enough to be treated as an independent branch of knowledge¹. Some of them are connected only with the *Isnād* of the *Hadīth* and its criticism, some are related to their text (*Matan*) and some are related to both *Isnād* as well as the text. We will deal here with only one i.e. *Asma’ al-Rijāl* (the biographies of the narrators of *Hadīth*), and will discuss its evolution, importance and purpose in *Hadīth* literature in brief. Keeping in view its importance in *Hadīth* our prime concern will be the Muslim women, their place in it and to what extent their intellectual bent of mind has attracted the attention of the Muslim biographers.

The system of *Isnād* (i.e. to go back to the source and trace the line of authorities on whose authority a *hadīth* is being forwarded) which the *Muhaddithīn* have developed for checking the reliability of the *Hadīth* is an important development in *Hadīth* literature. The *Isnād* system which was originated in early period is considered as an indispensable part of *Hadīth*. It was tried to determine the relative value of the reliability of the *Isnāds* and their different classes, the lives of the *Ruwāt* (transmitters) were studied thoroughly, which in turn caused to produce a vast

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literature on the biographies of the transmitters and the system was developed into a science. In fact, biographical literature is one of the most important and the richest branches of literature, which originated and developed in connection with *Isnâd* in *Hadîth*.

If the main instrumental source of the biography i.e. the system of *Isnâd*, was also in vogue in rudimentary form in another traditions of the world² but the Muslims developed it a great deal, gave it a firm foundation by introducing to it the chronological method and collecting the biographies of the transmitters which served as a basis for the criticism of the narrators of *Hadîth*. Therefore, the origin and major purpose of the biographical genre in Islamic historiography was solely to identify transmitters of the words and deeds of the Prophet (SAW) and the biographical dictionaries were initially developed as an offshoot of especially Islamic field of learning³. The science is commonly known as *Asmâ' al-Rijâl*. It includes all the various works which deal with chronology, the biography and the criticism of the narrators of *Hadîth* or of any class of the narrators, or with any such aspect of their life as may be helpful in determining their identity, veracity and reliability. Thus chronology, biography and criticism having developed among the Muslim at an early period in the history of Islam were applied by *Muhaddithîn* to *Isnâd* in *Hadîth*- in order to check their genuineness and determine the reliability of their narrators. Safyân Thouri (d.161A.H.) a great authority of the second century says, "When narrators started to fabricate *ahâdîth* we employed the tool of *tarîkh* (i.e. critical evaluation of the character of reporters) against them".⁴

The earliest work on the subject of *Asmâ' al-Rijâl* was composed probably in the middle of the second century.⁵ The compilation of the biographers of the narrators of *Hadîth*, having begun in the second century of the *Hijrah* was continued with zeal

and vigour in the following centuries. In the third century not only various specialists in the subject but almost every *Muhaddith* of reputation compiled simultaneously with his collection of *Hadīth*, some biographies of their narrators also⁶. The works on the *Asmā' al-Rijāl* helped the growth of general biographical literature in Arabic language; the biographical literature in Arabic is, therefore, extremely rich.

Since the times of the Prophet (SAW), the transmission of *Hadīth* of the Prophet (SAW) as well as other material was an endeavour in which women played a prominent part. A large number of the *Sahābiyāt* were the primary sources of *Hadīth* from the Prophet (SAW)⁷ in strict sense, or they related information about themselves or others surrounding the Prophet (SAW). During the lifetime of the Prophet (SAW) many women had not only been the precursor for the evolution of many *ahādīth*, but were also their transmitters. The women appear as a crucial links in the chains of transmitters. We frequently meet in the *Isnāds* women as authorities of many *ahādīth*. It is not surprising that occasionally *ahādīth* which were preserved by female authorities are passed on again by women⁸. Even, there are *ahādīth* mentioned in seminal works of Islam e.g. in *Sahih* Muslim we find a *hadīth* narrated continuously by four women authorities.⁹ Moreover, there are certain issues of Islamic law whose edifice depends solely on the testimony of the women. It should be emphasized that women were not considered less reliable than men in transmitting information. Many *ahādīth* related by women deal with subjects specific to women, but other relate to general Islamic questions. Not only *Sahābiyāt*, but a large number of women of the succeeding ages were deemed trustworthy transmitters by later critics and compilers when the science of criticism of *Hadīth* an important branch of Islamic learning, was fully developed by Muslim intellectuals. What is absolutely clear is that women were not excluded from the transmission of *ahādīth*

of the Prophet (SAW) and later, from studying and teaching. Therefore, since Islam's earliest days, women have took a prominent part in the preservation and development of *Hadith*, and this function continued down the centuries. Thus, to the extent that the study of *Hadith* was primary stimulus for compiling biographical dictionaries, it was necessary to include woman. The biographical collections made it ample clear that women played a qualitatively and qualitatively significant role as primary transmitters of the *ahādīth* of the Prophet (SAW). Thus the legitimacy of women as transmitters of this crucial Islamic material was established.

The biographies of women, especially of the early ages i.e. - *Sahābiyāt, Tābi'āt and Tabā' Tabi'āt*, served the cause of testing the reliability of their narrations, however, the biographical literature produced on women, in the succeeding ages of the Muslim history, was deemed worthy of being immortalized by the Muslim biographers for their literary value. Because afterwards the *Hadith* was compiled in the classical form, [after the compilation of *Sihah Sittah*] the system of *Isnād*, was a sign of scholarship, which should be acknowledged by the reputed scholars of the time, without which no person could enter in this field of Islamic scholarship. The names of Muslim women in Islamic biographical collections reveals some specific features of women history in Islam i.e. the women in every age proved themselves according to the standards of the Muslim scholarship of their times. The phenomenon of memorializing the women of an idealized period in the past was continued but we have information about the contemporaries of the biographer, including his teachers, relatives and friends.

The huge mass of *Hadith* literature along with the great bulk of biographical material is no doubt a great source before Muslim scholars to construct the positive history of Muslim women. The biographical literature alone is not a sufficient source

for Muslim women history; by studying both of them closely, we gather that there is no indication that women were ignored in any age. Unlike other traditions, the sources of history of Muslim women were present in Islamic culture from its incipient period to the present. In other words Muslim scholars had a plethora of source material that has not been still touched in an interpretative way which would have lead to conclusion of some solid results for the guidance of Muslim women today. These sources seem to provide a unique instrument for quantitative and comparative analysis of some of the roles played by women in Islamic society and culture through the centuries. The main thrust of these classical biographies was to include the women whose endeavours were pertinent to the religio-cultural tradition of Islam.

Up to the tenth Islamic century A.H. (A.D. sixteenth century), compilers of the biographical dictionaries seem to have commonly included a section on women at the end of their works or to have interspersed a number of biographies of women among those of men, infact, one is amazed at the diligence of Muslim scholars in collecting and sometimes debating details in the biographies of women, to the extent that sources – *Qur'ân*, *Hadîth*, legal compendia and histories – have been consulted. There is little indication that women were ignored. Among the biographers are the persons who are considered as the pillars of Muslim scholarship- like Ibn Hajr, Dhahbi, Ibn Athîr, Ibn Abdul Barr, Khatîb Baghdâdi and others. The number and proportion of women included, the selection of women deemed worthy of inclusion, and the roles played by women whom these biographers included in their works, reflect the view of male authors who documented the great traditions and values of Islamic society and culture. While compiling the biographies of many women some of the biographers readily admit that they

themselves were among 'her' students¹⁰, some say that their teachers were among 'her' students¹¹.

In Islamic culture the biographical genre developed into a major and variegated literary form. Some of the biographies were devoted to specific categories of individuals¹² (*Tabaqât*) whereas others were more general. Many were retrospective — dealing with people who lived from the advent of Islam to the authors' time. A few focused only on a distant historical period¹³, and others documented the lives of individuals who were the authors' contemporaries or near contemporaries¹⁴. Another important development was the advent of the biographical dictionary devoted to a certain region¹⁵. This style was followed by the centenary collections¹⁶.

There is also a varying method of the inclusion of women entries in the classical biographical literature. Some of the compilers placed women in a separate section at the end of their works by the name of "*Kitâb al-Nisâ'*" like Ibn Sa'd in *Tabaqât*, Mizzi in *Tahdhib al-Kamâl*, Ibn Hajar in both of his works *Al-Isâbah* and *Tahdîb al-Tahdhîb*, Ibn Athir in *Usad al-Ghâbah*, Al-Qaisarani in *Al-Jam'u Bain Rijâl al-Sahihain*, Ibn Hibban in *Al-Thiqât*, Abu Na'im Isbahani in *Hilyat al-Awliyâ'*, Khafîb Bagdâdi in *Tarîkh Baghdâd* Ibn Asakir in *Tarîkh Dimashq*, Ibn Jawzi in *Sifat al-Safwah*, Sakhawi in *Al-Daw' al-Lami'* have done.

Some of the biographers interspersed the women entries among the men which made it too difficult to locate their biographies, but it implies that they are integral to the concept of prominent personalities, like Dhahbi in both of his works *Tadhkirat al-Huftâz & Siyar 'Alam al-Nubalâ'*, Safadi in *Al-Wafî bil Wafayât*, Ibn Hajar in *Al-Durar al-Kâminah*, Sayuti in *Nazam al-'Iqyân fi 'Ayan al-'Ayan* Ibn al-'Imad Hanbali in *Shadhrât al-Dhahab* have done.

These works belong to the different epochs of Muslim history. The biographical collections contain the prominent

personalities of certain times and places only. The individuals included are by definition elite women in the sense that they are the most outstanding in qualities deemed important by the authors. Some are members of the governing elite, the economic upper class, or the most prestigious social stratum. Others, however, are slave women or from other humble origin who lived in poverty and seem to be totally detached from political power¹⁷. Muslim authors of the biographical collections of the classical period did not ignore women. On the contrary, the voluminous amount of information on women contained in this material will occupy volumes.

A few classical biographies devoted solely to women were even produced by the scholars but except one of them they are extinct now and only their references are found in authentic sources. Special mention goes to *Tarîkh al-Nisâ'* of Ibn Mundah (d. 395 A.H.)¹⁸ and *Tarîkh al-Nisâ'* of Abu Musa (d. 581)¹⁹. The only existing work *Tarîkh Mashâhîr al-Nisâ'* compiled by the scholar namely Muhammad Ibn 'Ali al-Ma'afiri who was an Andalusian scholar and compiled his work in Damascus in 581 A.H.²⁰

The scholars in the later centuries have also devoted their attention to the compilation of the biographies of famous women only. In the mid-twentieth century, the famous work devoted to the Muslim women *A'alâm al-Nisâ' fi 'Âlamay al-'Arab wa'l Islâm* compiled by Umar Rada Kahalah in five volumes²¹ is worth mentioning, she has brought together the biographies of the famous women belonging to the different ages of Muslim history till her time.

To conclude the discussion unlike the other traditions, the rich and massive body of biographical literature produced through centuries along with the *Hadîth* literature is a rich compilation of data on the role of women in Islamic society and culture, in fact there is hardly any age for which Muslims don't have any biographical dictionary. A sincere study and analysis of

both will negate the allegation that Islamic limits of *Hijâb* prevent women from engaging in a variety of endeavours that can give expression to her potentialities and capabilities. No doubt from the advent of the Islamic message till our period, hundreds and thousands of Muslim women, abiding by the rules of *Sharî'ah* have participated in every field of Muslim life and have positively and commendably played their roles in building the Muslim society and culture.

References and End Notes

- ¹ Sayuti, *Muqaddimah Tadrīb al-Riwayah*, 2nd Edition, 1966, Dar al-Kutub al-Hadīthiyah, Saudi Arabia, p. 53.
- ² M. Z. Siddiqi, *Hadīth Literature – Its Origin, Development, Special Features and Criticism*, Calcutta University Press, 1961, p. 129.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp 164-165.
- ⁴ Khatib Baghdad, *Kitāb al-Kifāyah fī ‘Ilm al-Riwayah*, Da'wat al-Ma'arif at 'Uthmaniyyah, Hyderabad, Deccan, 1357A.H., p. 119.
- ⁵ M. Z. Siddiqi, *op.cit.*, p.168.
- ⁶ For example Imam Bukhari's *Tarīkh al-Kabīr*.
- ⁷ About 1000 *Sahābiyyāt* related *ahādīth* see Ibn Hajar *Al-Isābah*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Cairo, 1939A.D. Vol. 4.
- ⁸ See for some details Ibn Hajar, *Taqrīb al-Tahdhīb*, Dar al-Rashid, Syria Halab, 4th Edition, 1994, pp. 764-765 and only in some portions of *Sahīh Bukharis: Kitāb al-'Ilm and Kitāb Wadū'*, I found these examples see Ibn *Kitāb al-'Ilm Bab al-Hayā' fī al-'Ilm* 51 and *Kitāb Wadū' Bab Man Lam YataWadda'...* 38
- ⁹ Muslim, *Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ishrāt al-Sa'ah Bab min Ishrat Sa'ati Khurūj Yajūj wa Majūj*.
- ¹⁰ See for example Khatib Baghdadi, *Tarīkh Baghdād*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. 14, n.d. pp. 445-446.
- ¹¹ Ibn Hajar, *Al-Durar al-Kaminah*, Dair'ah al-Ma'arif al 'Uthmaniyyah, Hyderabad, Deccan, India, 1st Edition, 1348 A.H., vol.i, pp. 544-545.
- ¹² Like Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqāt*.
- ¹³ Like Ibn Hajar's *Al-Isābah* and Ibn Abdul Barr's *Al-Isti'āb*.
- ¹⁴ Like Ibn Hajar's *Al-Durar al-Kamināh*.
- ¹⁵ Like Khatib Baghdadi's, *Tarīkh Baghdad* and Ibn Asakir's *Tarīkh Dimasq*.
- ¹⁶ Like Sakhawi's, *Al-Daw' al-Lāmi'*.
- ¹⁷ Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder & London, 1994, p. 8.
- ¹⁸ See Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, Al-Maktabah al-Shaikh al-Hind, deoband, India, Vol. 7, p. 179.
- ¹⁹ Ibn Athīr, *Usad al-Gābah*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st Edition, 1994, vol. 7, p. 138.
- ²⁰ C. Waddy, *Women In Muslim History*, Longman, London and New York, 1980, End notes, pp. 196, 4.

²¹ Umar Rada Kahalah, *A'alâm al-Nisâ', Muassat al-Risalah*, Damascus, 10th edition, 1991, 5 vols.