

# Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past The Legacy of A'ishah Bint Abi Baker

D.A. Spellberg  
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Do historians preserve the past, or do they reinvent the past to fit it into how they would have wanted it to be? The impact of the historian's biases on his/her writing of history has been investigated by many modern scholars. In her book, Spellberg uses the example of A'ishah Bint Abi Bakr to study the effect of gender and politics on Muslim historiography.

The author's choice of A'ishah is by no means an arbitrary one. In fact, A'ishah, who is one of the most prominent women in Islamic history, perfectly represents the case of a life in which femininity and politics are interwoven.

A'ishah's prominence stems from several important factors:

- Her marriage: She was not only one of the Prophet Muhammad's nine wives but was also believed to be his favorite. After his death, she became a widely acknowledged authority in the evolving science of reporting the Prophet's words (Hadith) and deeds (Sunna or Tradition).

- Her genealogy: A'ishah was the daughter of Abu Bakr who was reported by many early Muslim historians to be the Prophet's closest companion and who was chosen as the first Muslim Caliph after the death of the Prophet. Moreover, Abu Bakr's venerated character and his highly esteemed political career by *Sunni* scholars were the object of rejection and repudiation by *Shii* scholars who supported Ali Bin Abi Taleb's claim to the Caliphate.

- Most importantly, what distinguished A'ishah was her involvement in controversial if not scandalous events. At the age of fourteen she was accused of adultery; shortly thereafter her innocence was declared by a divine revelation received by the Prophet and recorded in the *Quran*. The other problematic involvement of A'ishah was of a political/military nature. After the killing of the third Muslim Caliph Uthman Ibn Affan, A'ishah took part in the conflict over political control over the Muslim community. She led an army and set out to wage war against Ali Bin Abi Taleb. A'ishah was defeated and the conflict escalated into the first civil war in Islamic history.

The meaning and implications of A'ishah's feminine, religious, and political persona which puzzled the early

Muslim scholars, are still forcing debate and disagreement among their modern successors. This controversial aspect of A'ishah's legacy is the focus of Spellberg's work.

Spellberg argues that disagreement between *Sunni* and *Shii* scholars prompted contradictory depictions and interpretations of A'ishah's legacy. Early *Sunni* scholars held A'ishah in high esteem by assuring her preference by the Prophet over his other wives, adopting a compassionate attitude towards her concerning the adultery accusations, and acknowledging her as an authority in the field of collecting the Prophet's Hadith and Tradition.

In contrast, *Shii* scholars undermined the character of A'ishah by refuting her preference by the Prophet, not acknowledging her divine vindication from adultery charges, suspecting her actions in promoting her father as the first Caliph, and by rejecting her authority in transmitting the Prophet's Hadith and Tradition.

Although *Sunni* and *Shii* scholars disagreed vehemently about many aspects of A'ishah's legacy, they concurred at the critical juncture of assessing her involvement in political life. Scholars from both sects used A'ishah's political activity as the perfect example of the capacity of women to destroy political order, which became the strongest argument for the exclusion of women from public life.

Male scholars refined and expanded, invented and denied aspects of A'ishah's historical personality in order to preserve the past so that it would fit their own political and the personal views and aspirations. They agreed and disagreed, but they all made sure that A'ishah, who was the first woman in Islamic history to assume a leading political role, would also be the last one to do so.

Spellberg's work is not the first book to explore the relationship between politics and Muslim historiography; most books on Muslim historiography have dealt with this issue. Nor is it the first to treat the subject of gender and Muslim historiography. Fatima Mernissi initiated this area of study with several valuable studies, such as *The Veil and The Male Elite*, (1975), and *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, (1993).

A'ishah's heavily charged life has interested many scholars. Several books about her have been written by Muslim and Arab scholars. Nevertheless, the first and only book on A'ishah prior to Spellberg's by a Western scholar, *i.e.*, *A'ishah the Beloved of Mohammad*, was published in 1942 by Nabia Abbott, the prolific writer on the subject of women and Islamic history. What distinguishes Spellberg's work is that, whereas previous scholars sought to establish A'ishah's biography, she endeavors to question the reliability of the original sources that preserved this biography.

*Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: the Legacy of A'ishah Bint Abi Baker* is very well written and documented. I recommend it for the fields of Women's Studies and Muslim Historiography.