

‘A’ishah: A Paragon of Islamic Activism

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‘A’ishah, the mother of the faithful, exemplifies the character of a Muslim nurtured from an early age in a pristine Islamic environment. Having been educated by the best of all teachers, the messenger of Allah, she serves as a role model for the perfection that Muslims can aspire for and attain.

It is actually a multifaceted role that the life of ‘A’ishah provides us with. They range from the private to the public and from the domestic to the scholarly. Among these roles was the ever important one of being a mother of the faithful and as such, she manifested the best of Islamic ideals as outlined in the Qur’an. Generosity, selflessness, honesty and the pursuit of justice and truth were among the ideals more prominent in ‘A’ishah’s character.

As a student, she rose from an intelligent youth, with a critical and probing mind to a highly effective and successful teacher, scholar and jurist, who held firm and bold views in all of the vital areas of Islamic knowledge such as *tafsir*, *hadith*, *fiqh*, Islamic history, nuances of Arabic language, etc. One of her hallmarks was being courageous and forthright in expressing these views. ‘A’ishah’s assertiveness, confidence and outspokenness for standing up for what she believed to be true and right explodes the stereotype prevailing even among Muslims today of the “rightful” role for Muslim women – that of being a silent witness prevented by her femininity from participating in the real life of the community.

Her unparalleled insight into the daily life of the messenger of Allah as well as the independence of her thought and character brought her life into sharp focus from other personalities of the time.

‘A’ishah’s Background

While ‘A’ishah’s full name was *‘A’ishah bint Abi Bakr al-siddiq*, she was more commonly known as *‘A’ishah bint al-Siddiq* as well as *al-Siddiqhah bint al-Siddiq*

(the truthful daughter of the truthful). The Prophet, peace be upon him, nicknamed her Umm Abd Allah because of her special care for her nephew Abd Alalh b. al-Zubayr.

She grew up in a pure Islamic environment as both her parents had embraced Islam early in the Prophet's mission. As she states, "since my age of discernment, I was conditioned on seeing my parents practising only Islam". The experiences of the early years of Islam left vivid impressions on her extremely sensitive consciousness and helped shape her character and personality. From a very young age she acquired a firm faith in Islam and a keen spirit of sacrifice for truth, as well as a deep revulsion for infidelity and pagan ways.

As a Mother of the Faithful

'A'ishah was the only virgin that the Prophet, peace be upon him, ever married. Her marriage to him was inspired by Allah, and took place at a very early age - not out of the ordinary according to the customs of the Arabs, Hebrews and other nations of that time. While there is a tendency to dwell on this fact, it would be amiss to judge the Prophet's marriage to 'A'ishah by our current cultural standards. The Prophet's marriages cannot be detached from his mission; they had the dual function of uniting the Arabs into a single nation, as well as transmitting legacy of his knowledge and wisdom to the posterity as stated in the Qur'an. 'A'ishah by both her nature and her nurture was the most qualified to fulfill this role of being an authentic transmitter of the Prophet's legacy—a fact confirmed by the statements of scholars, past and the present. And she did this by living her formative years at the Prophet's side.

'A'ishah's deep love for the Prophet, peace be upon him, caused her to be jealous of his other wives as her heart was singularly attached to him. The Prophet also reciprocated this love by showing towards her such intense feelings of love that it became legendary among the companions. Anas, a close companion of the Prophet, peace be upon him, remarked that "the first expression of love in Islam was the love of the Prophet towards his wife 'A'ishah!"

The Prophet's love for her was not purely based on his physical attractions to her which we have no reason to doubt, but even more so it was due to the role destined to her as an unbroken link in the chain of transmission of the Prophetic legacy. The unique signs of this role were expressed in the fact that while he received revelations

from Allah while he was with ‘A’ishah, this was not the case while he was with any of his other wives and, no other wives of the Prophet, peace be upon him, saw the Angel Jibreel as ‘A’ishah did. This was stated by the Prophet peace be upon him, as a sign of the divine honour bestowed on ‘A’ishah.

‘A’ishah was singularly known to have been a conduit of divine mercy as her trials and tribulations and her attitude of self-surrender merited the revelation of several verses. These verses are enshrined in the Quran to serve as inspiration for all generations to come. The *sahabah* (the Prophet’s companions) often recognized the divine grace manifested through her as some of them testified explaining the verse concerning *tayammum* (ablution with sand/dust) which had been revealed in connection with an ordeal faced by ‘A’ishah. It is significant that Allah extols her purity, modesty and piety for all to recite (see the verses in *surat al-nnoor* especially: 24: 23; 26).

‘A’ishah typified the best ideals expressed in the following verse: “Muslim men and women, believing men and women, obedient men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women, charity-giving men and women, and those men and women who remember Allah abundantly, for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and an immense reward.” (Qur’an: 33: 35).

Her Piety and Asceticism

While she was born into a highly respectable family with wealth, fame and status (as Abu Bakr was a man of abundant means) and in spite of being brought up with comfortable living conditions, ‘A’ishah bore patiently the hardships, simplicity and ascetic life-style of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Allah had given the Prophet’s wives the choice to bear patiently the harsh life-style they were accustomed to with the Prophet, peace be upon him, in preference for Allah and His Messenger and the Hereafter, or choose a life of this world and part their ways honourably with sufficient alimony. Each wife selected the former.

With her choice to live a life of utter simplicity and asceticism, ‘A’ishah ate little and drank little, and preferred to wear tattered clothes her whole life, giving away in charity virtually everything that came to her in terms of money and wealth. The charitable nature of ‘A’ishah exemplified the Prophet’s dictum, “spending in such a way that the left hand does not know what right hand had given.” Her legendary

generosity and trait of selfless giving – forgetting her own urgent needs – also brought to life the Qur’anic ideal, “they prefer others over their own selves even though they themselves are faced with dire need.” Urwah b. al-Zubayr, who was one of the great scholars taught by ‘A’ishah, said of her, “I saw ‘A’ishah giving away seventy thousand *dirhams* (silver coins) in charity while she was wearing a garment which had so many patches sewn into it!”

It was due to her loyalty to Allah and her devotion to the Prophet and his cause that ‘A’ishah gave up the comforts of the lifestyle of her own household and chose the simple life-style of the Prophet, peace be upon him – bearing all the harshness of it in spite of her young age. After the death of the Prophet, peace be upon him, ‘A’ishah continued to live an ascetic existence dedicated to fasting, prayers, charities, and to the care of orphans and the destitute.

Her Intellect and Scholarship

‘A’ishah was endowed with an extraordinary intelligence that very few had been endowed with. She was not merely a passive student in understanding and learning religion even from the best and noblest of teachers, the Prophet, peace be upon him. Her trademark was her critical, ever-inquisitive and probing mind. There are numerous examples of her further questioning the Prophet’s answers. Once when he found out she had followed him in disguise on his trip to the graveyard to pray for the departed companions in the middle of night, the Prophet asked her, “Why did you do this? Did your Devil visit you?” ‘A’ishah asked back, “Does every person have a devil following him or her around?” When he replied to the affirmative, she asked, “Are you included in this?” He answered, “Yes. I am included in this; but my Lord has helped me against him. Thanks to this he has become a Muslim (i.e he has surrendered and thus does not command anything but good!)”

Another example of her questioning the Prophet minutely was when the Prophet said that following resurrection people will rise up from their graves as Allah had created them and ‘A’ishah asked, “Then they will all be naked and they will see one another?” He replied, “The issues confronting them will be far too grave for them to be looking at each other.”

It was thanks to her intelligence that she never had the patience for an understanding of religion that was irrational and inconsistent with the correct understanding of the Qur'an. She had a principle firmly entrenched in her mind that the teachings of Islam cannot be irrational and incoherent – how can it be otherwise when Allah says of the Qur'an, "you will never find any incoherence in it!" Accordingly she rejected Ibn Umar's narration from the Prophet, peace be upon him, "A person will be punished for his or her family's crying (lamenting) over his or her death!" 'A'ishah rejected it outright saying, "How would the Prophet say something like this when Allah says, 'No soul shall bear the burden of another!'" Then she went on to clarify what she thought was the context of the Prophet's statement.

Another example of the same critical understanding is her response to the so called report that "Three things that invalidate one's prayer are a dog, a donkey and a woman." When 'A'ishah heard this narration, she asked, "how dare you compare us women with dogs and donkeys when I myself did lie down to sleep and the Prophet having woken up from sleep would pray in front of me, and when it was time for him to prostrate he would push my legs gently to the side!" She also dismissed Ibn Umar's order to the women of his household mandating them to undo their hair while making *ghusl* (ritual bathing) saying, "Why can't he then order them to shave their heads? I used to bathe with the Prophet from a single container and yet I did not do more than pouring water on my head three times!"

Her Assertiveness

'A'ishah's character is no where best expressed than in her firm and resolute attitude in facing one of the greatest of all trials she ever faced in her life: the false accusation of adultery. When confronted with the situation she became extremely saddened and depressed and yet she never cowered or stooped low. Instead, she firmly stood her ground trusting in Allah alone until she was vindicated. While she had full confidence that Allah would reveal her innocence, she never considered herself so great as to be worthy of being vindicated by a direct revelation. When finally an entire surah was revealed, numerous verses of which were directly related to her story and extolled her purity, modesty and piety, she refused to rise up and thank Allah's Messenger and instead simply said, "I thank only Allah!" By this she did not mean to be rude to the

Prophet, rather she meant never to attribute the source of her relief to any other than the Source itself, which is Allah and Allah alone! This should serve as a perfect example for all Muslims, men and women, that they should not fear anyone but Allah and if they do this they will be not cower themselves before anyone but Allah, no matter how great that worldly power facing them may be! In fact this is the ultimate freedom that many of the early Muslims enjoyed within themselves.

Thanks to her assertiveness, 'A'ishah always stood up to what she thought was unjust, unethical and false. When she heard that some individuals were finding faults with Abu Bakr after his death, she gathered them all and spoke to them about his achievements as everyone would readily recognize and then asked them plainly which one of his actions they were critical of. None of his detractors had anything to say.

She also stood up to Caliphs such as Mu'awiyah and vocally criticized their policies which she though was unjust and therefore un-Islamic.

Another example of her forthrightness is her answer to those who forbade women from visiting cemeteries. On her visit to Makkah, when she stopped by the grave of her brother, someone objected to her and asked how come she was visiting his grave when the Prophet had forbidden women to do so, she replied, "The Prophet had forbidden both men and women from visiting graves in the early years of Islam, and then he lifted that prohibition later." In other words, in her sound understanding the lifting of the ban was applicable to both men and women, for there is no evidence to suggest that it was only applicable to men.

It was because of her strength of character that she made the Caliph implement the will of Safiyyah, the mother of the faithful, who had stipulated one third of her estate to her Jewish brother. When the Caliph thought it was against the dictum of the Prophet, peace be upon him, 'A'ishah rejected that and obliged him to fulfil the wishes of Safiyyah.

Her confidence in the inherent justice of Islam enabled her to exercise many other interjections into commonly held assumptions about women's roles in the Muslim community. One such interjection was her wish not to be left out of performing *janazah* (funeral) prayers (often reserved for men only in the minds of many Muslims - even today). She often sent orders to bring the *janazah* and place it inside the Mosque itself so that the wives of the Prophet, peace be upon him, could also offer the prayers,

at a time when ordinarily *janazah* was performed outside the precincts of the mosque itself.

An Active Participant in All Aspects of Islamic Life

‘A’ishah serves as the best role model for women’s activism in Islam for she never was held back from full participation in any aspect of Islamic life even after the death of the Prophet, peace be upon him. During his life she accompanied the Prophet even to the battle fields to perform essential duties.

She led the war against Ali because of her mistaken judgement; although at the time she thought she was going out to exact justice for the caliph ‘Uthman who had been martyred unjustly and she thought that Ali was harbouring his murderers. Later on, she regretted her choice to have waged the war but the point is that according to her, the role of women in Islam was not confined to the home and instead, that they play an active role in Islamic life. Due to her own sound faith and Islamic character, she recanted not her activism but her stand against Ali and it was because of this that she thought she had become less worthy of being buried beside the Prophet, peace be upon him, and preferred to join her own sisters (i.e. other wives of the Prophet, peace be upon him) in *Jannat al-baqi*’ (public cemetery of Madinah).

Her Legacy of Scholarship

‘A’ishah’s sound scholarship in Islamic disciplines such as *tafsir*, *hadith*, *fiqh*, history of Arabs and Islam, Arabic language and medicine was proverbial among companions and successors as numerous testimonials bear witness. We know that even the great companions of the Prophet such as Abu Bakr and Umar as well as other wives of the Prophet, peace be upon him, would refer to her as the final resource person in all such matters.

Abu Salamah b Abd al-Rahman, one of the seven famous jurists of Madinah, said, “I never knew of anyone-- who had such thorough knowledge of the traditions of the Prophet, peace be upon, nor sound understanding of *fiqh* in any issue that Muslims would need to know nor of any verse and when and where it was revealed or of rules of inheritance --who can surpass ‘A’ishah.”

‘A’ishah served as a teacher of teachers after the Prophet, peace be upon him. She would correct those who were teaching in the Prophet’s mosque and answer the many who came to her seeking rulings, advice and opinions based on her expert knowledge. Furthermore, among the numerous men and women who graduated under her tutorship were Abd Allah, Qasim, Urwah, and Umrah bint Abd al-Rahman al-Ansariyyah.

Her thorough mastery of *fiqh* enabled her to exercise independent *ijtihad* in matters of fiqh and she used to offer rulings based on her *ijtihad* as testified by al-Qasim during the time of Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman as well as after them until she died.

As indicated earlier, ‘A’ishah’s *ijtihad* was governed strictly by her deep knowledge of the Qur’an. One of the many examples of this was when someone asked her about celibacy and she answered, “Do not resort to it for did you not hear Allah say in the Qur’an, ‘We have sent before you messengers and appointed for them spouses and children’ (*Surah al-R’ad: 38*) thus do not resort to celibacy.”

The independence of her *ijtihad* meant that she sometimes confidently held views contradicting the views of other companions and scholars. When someone asked her if it was always necessary for a woman to have a *mahram* to travel, ‘A’ishah asked rhetorically, “Can everyone find a *mahram*?”

Conclusion

‘A’ishah’s life is especially remarkable when examined with the lenses of contemporary times. Surrounded by current examples of Muslim women around the world not permitted to fully actualize their God-given potentials, ‘A’ishah’s life in the 6th and 7th century is a beacon to the inherent justice in Islam. She was reared with authentic Islam from her earliest memories and yet she grew up to be a woman who was confident, assertive and an active participant and leader of her society.

Simply put, ‘A’ishah lived a life outstanding in its dedication to the cause of Allah and His Messenger. We can end with her own advice, “Whoever seeks to please people by displeasing Allah, Allah will abandon him/her to people and whoever seeks to please Allah, Allah will be sufficient for him/her.”