

Rings of Memory: “Writing Muslim Women” and the Question of Authorial Voice

Omaima Abou-Bakr

Cairo University

Are Muslim women in the classical Islamic eras to be considered “textually invisible”? Were they not authors of independent and complete texts in literature, religion, or philosophy? How do we develop a research agenda that both acknowledges the problems of authorship and the production of texts in relation to women’s compositions and, at the same time, releases new meanings from these male-documented histories to revive and re-create Muslim women’s voices? This article approaches the problem of documenting women’s words and presence in the tradition within male-authored texts and the related theoretical and methodological issues. It examines the effect of framing such experiences and utterances by male historians and biographers on considerations of women’s authorial control over their own verbal legacy. Do we consider these texts, then, valid records of women’s writings and compositions, or representations and constructions? In this article I propose to view them as “voices” or “verbal texts” by Muslim women, documented in a *first stage* by contemporaneous male writers, then in a *second stage* re-inscribed by early modern female history writers (like the Egyptian-Lebanese Zaynab Fawwāz in 1899 and the Egyptian-Turkish Qadriyya Ḥusayn in 1924), then in a *third stage* by the scholars and theorists of today. We can now be engaged in “writing” Muslim women who *could/would have* written their own works. Perhaps now we are in a position of liberating their words into independent textual productions in order to continue and keep alive the rings of cultural memory.

In considering the subject of the textuality of women’s legacy in the tradition and their authorial voices, I will take mainly a literary-critical approach that is also self-reflective, reflecting on this critical practice itself, while bringing a comparative dimension to the discussion by invoking some scholarly debates on medieval women in the European tradition.

The General Framework of Studying Medieval Women

One of the major debates about the extant material of women’s works from the Middle Ages concerns their perceived value and interpretation. From our contemporary vantage point, are we looking for factual records of an objective history of women’s lives

and social conditions, or do we consider these texts more as sites of social and cultural construction of gender and the feminine? Specifically, what is the role of interpretation of writings that purport to tell the stories and words of women in the past? In *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past*, Brian Stock tackles the issue of present approaches to and understanding of past experiences, but begins with analyzing the initial relationship between the objective recording of history and the "literary" use of language to do it, and so reminds us that history used to be a branch of rhetoric: "If we wish to understand what is said in old or new social narratives, literary analysis is still essential."¹ The objectivity of the events is affected by the "subjectivity of the records, perceptions, feelings and observations," then the following "conscious reliving of an earlier text constitutes a new version of the experience."² Hence, according to Stock, this later stage of interpretation and ascription of meaning to the past is made possible with the initial process of creating a historical text:

The speaker, in authoring a text in a written form, gives birth to an autonomous vehicle of exchange; the reader . . . receives it as an already coded message, independent of its author but not . . . of a context, since . . . context is supplied by a common group understanding. . . . And the text, once decontextualized from its original author, together with its social and historical mode of production, can appeal to any audience. The possibility is thereby opened for the consideration of an ontology of the text itself, describing the nature of reality it represents and the *sort of meaning it alone conveys*.³ [my emphasis]

This new significance we see in the texts about women and the "readings" we generate result from considering these medieval male-authored, scripted, or mediated works as textual representations of women which indirectly reflect either forms of inscribing/articulating gender or enfolded cites of resistance⁴. Both Leila Ahmed and Mohja Kahf have raised this issue of women's own (first-hand) texts in Islamic history where we can access their "true" voices. Whereas Ahmed maintains that women stopped being creators of texts,⁵ Kahf, through her excellent literary and rhetorical analysis of a medieval recording of women's conversations, considers such works as valid "discursive traces of women," and their significance in the Islamic historical tradition derives from "envisioning women as speaking subjects rather than silent submitters."⁶ Yet, the question remains about the legitimacy and intentions of these contemporary scholarly efforts.

¹ B. Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 11.

² B. Stock, *Listening*, 29.

³ B. Stock, *Listening*, 45.

⁴ O. Abou-Bakr, "Articulating Gender: Muslim Women Intellectuals in the Pre-modern Period," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 32, no. 3(2010), 127–44.

⁵ L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (Cairo: AUC Press, 1993), 82.

⁶ M. Kahf, "Braiding the Stories: Women's Eloquences in the Early Islamic Era," in *Windows of Faith*, ed. G. Webb (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 147–171: 159.

Medievalists studying women in the European Middle Ages have raised the issue of interpretive models or applying certain reading strategies that in reality argue a present cause. It is a debate that investigates the legitimacy of a critical practice in which today's feminist medieval scholars are utilizing the women they study, and so questions whether the actual focus is on voices from the past or the present. I find this situation comparable in many ways to our work on Muslim women in the tradition, which in turn gives rise to questions such as: are we truly retrieving the lives and voices of these women or are we appropriating them to foreground our own present concerns and search for our own voices? Who is lending a voice to whom?

Methodologically, the answer lies between the two poles in studying the medieval past termed by the critics, "presentism" and "pastism." As explained by Juanita Ruys, the first is concerned "with what the study of medieval people can reveal to us of ourselves and our own cultural imperatives."⁷ Modern and contemporary scholars would look into the mirror of the Middle Ages largely in order to reflect back their present-day identities. It is a methodology that admits personal engagement with its subjects of study. On the other hand, "pastism" "reifies alterity, positing a fundamental gulf of understanding between ourselves and our medieval subjects,"⁸ and that past and present are definitive temporal categories that should be studied or analyzed through different tools and on their own terms. Elizabeth Dreyer, for example, cautions against the appropriation of medieval mysticism and denounces the retrieval of medieval women mystics by feminist scholars who do not pay much attention to historical context and focus on "projections or ideological constructs."⁹ According to her, this is not a responsible or respectful critical approach to past texts, when we are only interested in their works "in the light of contemporary needs and concerns."¹⁰ She urges an attention to the difference between exegesis and eisegesis, as there should be a limit to re-interpreting texts from our location and forcing new issues on them, that is, a clear distinction between "legitimate appropriation and illegitimate plunder."¹¹ To this strong rejection of what Dreyer considers unscholarly methods, Ruys responds by pointing to the gaps in medieval sources affecting more the history of women than men: "If scholars can say nothing about medieval women . . . beyond that extant in the texts produced and preserved by a mostly masculinist medieval textual culture, then modern scholarship remains limited to reproducing and re-enacting medieval androcentric interests and does not so much investigate medieval texts as gloss them."¹²

⁷ J. Ruys, "Playing Alterity: Heloise, Rhetoric, and *Memoria*," in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, eds. L. D'Arcens and J. Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2004), 211–235: 212.

⁸ J. Ruys, "Playing Alterity," 213.

⁹ E. Dreyer, "Whose Story Is It? The Appropriation of Medieval Mysticism," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 4, no. 2 (2004), 151–172: 151.

¹⁰ E. Dreyer, "Whose Story," 152.

¹¹ E. Dreyer, "Whose Story," 165.

¹² J. Ruys, "Playing Alterity," 222.

Between the concern that "presentism" sacrifices the historicized individuality and cultural specificities of medieval people in order to view them as prefiguring types, on one hand, and the exaggeration of otherness to the point of creating an unrecognizable fantasy world, on the other, Ruys suggests "the application of an informed scholarly imagination"¹³ that cultivates "a sense of reciprocity with medieval women."¹⁴ This can be done by invoking a very medieval idea — that of *memoria* — which Mary Carruthers studied extensively in her *The Book of Memory*¹⁵ and showed that the possession and application of memory was valued in the Middle Ages as part of the moral character and basis of ethics. Ruys, therefore, proposes an empathetic *memoria* as a way forward in medieval studies in the face of documentary silences: "It may even be that our medieval subjects, themselves highly conscious of a continuum from the ancient world to their own time, might have been pleased to think that they would continue to partake in the imaginative chain of memory, not only as remembering subjects in their own day, but as subjects remembered in ages to come."¹⁶

The production of meaning undertaken by medieval critics is also the subject of Diane Watt's engaged and empathetic reading of the fourteenth-century medieval text *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiography of a woman mystic in English. Watt offers "constructive and compassionate criticism" that she defines as a "sensitivity to and respect for its subject matter combined with an overt articulation of personal and political commitments,"¹⁷ and goes on to reflect on the relationship between critics and the intellectual communities they address, that is, the "location of meaning within a text in relation to the community of readers who will encounter *both* text and criticism."¹⁸ She sees value in a critical practice or readings which reflect the critics' personal positions and convictions, connecting the material with their own lives, and refers to Graham McCann's essay "Distant Voices, Real Lives: Authorship, Criticism, Responsibility," in which he argues against the claims of academic detachment: "there must be a movement away from the repressive extremes of critical distance and dispassionateness, a movement whereby academics neither muffle their own voices nor use them to despoil, but rather seek to make audible their personal stakes in the work that engages them."¹⁹ According to this view, the other side of appropriation of the medieval past is its silencing, along with the exclusion of interpretive communities and readers of this legacy.

¹³ J. Ruys, "Playing Alterity," 221.

¹⁴ J. Ruys, "Playing Alterity," 225.

¹⁵ M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ J. Ruys, "Playing Alterity," 230.

¹⁷ D. Watt, "Critics, Communities, Compassionate Criticism: Learning from *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Maistresse of My Wit*, 191–210: 191.

¹⁸ D. Watt, 196.

¹⁹ Quoted in D. Watt, 209.

The Textuality of the Spoken Word

Unearthing and examining different kinds of verbal compositions by early Muslim women as recorded in diverse sources in order to re-frame, re-produce, and “write” these compositions anew constitute the long-term goal, but in this essay I am selecting samples from three different types of texts for analytical exploration. The fact that these works are generically variant supports the view that, within the extensive range of the Islamic tradition, no single text or group of texts or genre uniformly reflects gender issues and women’s presence. A multiplicity of discourses and nuances should be taken into consideration as we seek out, not necessarily the obvious traditionally defined works, but also texts-within-texts. I would agree with Julie Meisami’s warning against reductionism in the face of this complexity: “What the texts . . . reveal is not a univocal narrative of Islamic misogyny, reiterated down the ages by “male Muslim scribes,” far less a “flight from the female” which informs a putative “Arabo-Islamic discourse” concerned solely with gender politics.” Rather, diverse texts demonstrate “a multiplicity both of experiential realities and of modes of textual representation of women.”²⁰ For example, she mentions that the existence of women as authorities and transmitters of *ḥadīth* is a fact that should not be ignored and “precludes the silencing of women’s voices”²¹ detected in other texts and contexts.

The first text here is the biographical dictionary of Sufi women, entitled *Dbikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt al-sūfiyyāt* (Mention of worshipping mystic women),²² by Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (936–1021), who is known for several works that recorded the history of Sufi figures; the second consists of anecdotes culled from *tafsīr* works (Qurʾānic commentaries); the third is a Sufi poem by one Umm Hanīʾ from al-Madīna. While these samples share the documentation of women’s words, it is only the third text that is available separately without the context of a larger male-authored work.

I. Women’s Pious Words and Self-Authorization

Initially, it is interesting to note that Islamic historical records (such as *Tarīkh Baghdād* / The History of Baghdad by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī) make mention of another treatise by al-Sulamī entitled “*Al-Ikbwa wa-al-akbawāt min al-sūfiyya*” (Brothers and Sisters of *Sufism*), which is to this day unknown and unpublished.²³ As for the published biographical work under consideration (*Dbikr al-niswa*), I want to begin with three women Sufis, in particular, whose biographies also recur in *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* by Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī (1114–1201) — who mentions his predecessor al-Sulamī — and

²⁰ J. Meisami, “Writing medieval women: Representations and misrepresentations,” in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam*, ed. Julia Bray (New York: Routledge, 2006), 47–87: 73.

²¹ J. Meisami, 73.

²² Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Dbikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt al-sūfiyyāt*, [Mention of worshipping mystic women], ed. M. M. al-Ṭanāḥī (Cairo: al-Ḥaiʾa al-miṣriyya al-ʿamma lil-kitāb, 1999).

²³ M. M. al-Ṭanāḥī, 10.

examine their exchanges with their male interlocutors to highlight their expressiveness and subliminal awareness of gender-based tensions. A common theme in their utterances is the juxtaposition between silence and speaking, accompanied by a de-stabilization of their association with authority. Their treatment of the silence-speaking duality seems to be two-sided: on one hand, from a traditional Sufi perspective they extol the virtues of a silent, true worshipper concentrating on relations with the Divine not with worldly contacts, and, on the other hand, they are quite vocal in responding to their male Sufi peers.

One of the key statements uttered by al-Wahāṭiyya Umm al-Faḍl (from Yemen), who was described as "distinguished in her time in speech and knowledge," is: "True love is when a Lover keeps silent (*yakbras*) except regarding his Beloved. . . ." She also emphasizes the value of inner, not necessarily visible or apparent, worshipping: "Putting [mystical] knowledge to practice is not through a lot of fasting, charity, and praying, but through sincerity to God in work, by means of sound intention . . ." ²⁴ The biography mentions that al-Wahāṭiyya, far from being a secluded mystic, was usually in company with several of her contemporaneous Sufi *shaykhs*, who used "to meet with her and listen to her words."

If we relate these simple Sufi precepts to the exchanges of two other Sufi women regarding the same subject, they gain more significance as these statements occur in the context of instructing other male Sufis, hence ironically establishing their own authorial voice of repudiation. Fāṭima al-Dimashqīyya is introduced as one who "used to snub the *shaykhs*," ²⁵ meaning to rebuke strongly. It is related that once in the Damascus Mosque after listening to the Sufi Abu al-Husayn al-Malki, she said to him, "You have talked well, for you do well in talking; can you also do well in being silent/*taskut*?" ²⁶ It is said that he "kept silent and did not speak after that." A similar exchange occurs in Qurayshīyya al-Nasawīyya's biography, for she said to al-Naṣrābādhī (prominent imām, *muhaddith*, and preacher in Khurāsān): "How good your sayings are, and how bad your morals/*akblaquka*." In another instance, it is mentioned that he once said to her, "Be quiet," so she retorted, "*You* be silent, so that I can be silent/*uskut batta askut*." ²⁷ Another time, he said to her, "don't come" [to attend his sessions], to which she replied, "Don't invite me so that I don't come." One of her statements is as follows: "If I reach certainty about something, I quiet down and be silent to receive the blessing of this certainty." Such utterances reveal a certain awareness, on a deeper level, of the social ramifications of the authority vested in speaking and verbalizing piety. They problematize the issue of authoritative voice in a general context of traditional patriarchal domination over the legitimacy of articulating piety and religious knowledge.

²⁴ Al-Sulamī, 107.

²⁵ Al-Sulamī, 94.

²⁶ Al-Sulamī, 94.

²⁷ Al-Sulamī, 105.

In other words, the contestation or competition over the authority of piety is played out on the ground of gender. The biography of Fāṭima al-Nīsābūriyya embodies all the tensions and contradictions related to the questions of authoritative voice and women. In response to the refusal of the distinguished male Sufi Dhū'l-Nūn al-Maṣrī some undefined provision (*rifq*) that she had sent him by uttering the statement — “There is humiliation and discredit/demeaning in accepting women’s provisions” — , she says, “There isn’t any lower or more despicable than a Sufi who can only see the immediate reason or most direct means of matters.”²⁸ The implication is that Dhū'l-Nūn cannot claim that he is a true or authentic Sufi since he is “spiritually short-sighted” or limited in his perception of the conspicuous reason and unaware of more supreme causes — namely the Divine as the real ultimate Giver/Provider. This chiding utilizes the incident and Dhū'l-Nūn’s comment to criticize his superficiality and hence shakes the gender-based confidence in spiritual authority. It also has the effect of shaming and the significance of countering the statement’s inferiorizing of women. Within the same report, she also directs another spiritual and moral advice to Dhū'l-Nūn (responding to his request “advise me/*‘izīnī*” when they met once in Jerusalem): “Abide by truth and strive against yourself in your deeds and sayings, because God said: ‘And when a matter is resolved on, it would be best for them if they were true to Allah.’ ” (Sūrā 47:21).

She also said: “He who does not mind God, transgresses in every way and speaks in every manner/with every tongue. He who minds God, will be silent (*akbrasabū*) except in truth, will abide by shyness/ *haya*’ of Him and sincerity.”²⁹

Interestingly, this story, also related in *Nafabāt al-Uns* by ‘Abdel Raḥmān Jāmī (15th cent.), (in addition to other portraits of her in *Tadḥkirāt al-awliya*’ by Farīd al-Din ‘Aṭṭār in the 13th century and *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* by al-Jawzī in the 12th century), not only documents Fatima’s utterances regarding the silence-speaking polarity for both returning the authority of piety back to its divine source and establishing her own intervention, but also registers another dynamic. There is a sub-text of a tension between two kinds of perceptions: a noted divergence between how the biographers and Sufi *shaykhs* speak about the *sufiyyāt*, and how these *sufiyyāt* speak of themselves. Whereas male perception and representation are strongly gendered, meaning their awareness of the gender difference and its implications as revealed through their *formal* authorial pen and in the reported conversations with the women, the women’s own self-understanding and self-presentation, on the other hand, manifest resistance to this implicit conception of gender hierarchy in the social sphere. From within the depicted picture, the words and behaviors of the *sufiyyāt* directed at their male associates emphasize neutralizing or transcending gender vis-à-vis the Divine. For example, whereas the statements of Dhū'l-Nūn (such as the above) and others (“the most exalted woman I saw is Fatima” — “she spoke of the Qur’ān with admirable understanding” — “she is a *waliyya* [the

²⁸ Al-Sulamī, 61.

²⁹ Al-Sulamī, 62.

feminine form] among God’s *awliyā’* and she is my master/*ustadhī* [masculine form]) and of Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī (“I haven’t seen throughout all my life except one man and one woman; the woman is Fatima”), anchor their admiration of her in the fact that she is a woman, her own responses clearly ignore this gender identity and concentrates on the Divine. In other instances, however, we may see that some of their mystical poetry and utterances addressed to God reveal a discernible female subjectivity that is kept private and “affective,” such as Rabīʿa al-ʿAdawiyya. The variance can possibly be explained by the distinction in context and mode of speech: when God alone is addressed, a woman mystic is truly free to be *herself*, but when it is the public social circle of male authorities, a resort to a non-gendered identity may be a counter-strategy to imply equality.

In relation to this motif of subliminal gender resistance through the assertion of the authority of piety, we note a significant exchange by Ḥakīma al-Dimashqiyya. She enquires from one of her female companions if indeed that woman’s husband has married another co-wife (*tazawwaj ʿalayki*), and the woman answers with yes he has. Ḥakīma criticizes: “Though I’ve heard that he is a man of good reason, how can he accept this diversion of his heart away from God by being occupied with two women? Hasn’t he heard of this verse’s interpretation: ‘Those who come to God with a sound heart?’”³⁰ Once again, the report demonstrates the voice of reproach or chiding, of establishing authority in interpreting a Qur’ānic verse and relating it to a specific problem in women’s lives — taking another wife.

II. Tafsīr Anecdotes — Speaking Up

These are gendered anecdotes/*riwayāt* used by exegetes within the context of explaining a certain verse, and though we get similar narratives in other genres (such as the occasions of revelations/ *asbāb al-nuzūl*, Sufi biographies, or others . . .), these anecdotes derive their significance from the fact that they are embedded in a religious source that presents itself as mainly interpreting God’s words. The inclusion of women’s protesting or resistant voices in a *tafsīr* work ought to be noted as an interweaving or inclusion of their gendered perspectives — even if not seen by the exegetes themselves as such. One such example occurs in the major Qur’ānic commentary *Al-Kashshāf* by Mahmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144) in the context of expounding on verse 128 of *Sūrat al-Nisā’*, specifically discussing a husband’s *nushūz* (boycott and harm) towards the wife. Zamakhshari concludes his explanation by urging men to avoid this *nushūz* that leads to dispute, harm, and bad companionship, for it is better that they endure, be patient, and aim for reconciliation or settlement (*sullḥ*). Then he inserts the following marital anecdote:

ʿImrān bin Ḥittān al-Khārijī had the most beautiful woman of the tribe as his wife. One day, she gazed at his face and said: *al-ḥamdu li-llāh*. He asked her: what is it? She said: I am thankful to God that we will both to be of the people of Paradise.

³⁰ Al-Sulamī, 53.

He asked: how? She said: Because you were granted *me* by God and thanked Him for it (*shakarta*), and I was granted *you* and was patient about it (*ṣabirtu*), and God has promised Paradise to his thankful and patient servants.³¹

This referencing of a Qur'ānic verse in order to verbalize a particular view of the marital relationship attests to a rhetoric of witty articulateness with regards to gender. Even if the context of this narrative points to the exegete's intention of giving an example of the kind of wifely aggressiveness that husbands should endure, he, ironically, documented and preserved for us the woman's words to be evaluated differently from another vantage point. Hence, such anecdote inscribes a woman's verbal sub-text that registers an oppositional mode.

Similar anecdotes occur in the commentary, *Al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'an*, by Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Faraj al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273). Two short narratives are given in the context of explaining marital discord (*shiqāq*) mentioned in 4:35 by way of examples. The first tells the incident of Fāṭima bint 'Utba ibn Rabī'a, who was not happy with a marriage beneath her tribe to 'Uqayl bin Abī Ṭālib, and so kept reminding him of the social gap between their two tribes/families moaning repeatedly: "O, where are you, noble 'Utba [her father]?" One day, her husband 'Uqayl lost his temper with a retort: "To your left in hell as you enter." She immediately left the house and went to the Caliph 'Uthmān to protest this insult. The rest of the narrative describes the efforts by community leaders to deal with this quarrel according to the two options presented by the Qur'ānic verse, either reconciliation or agreed separation.³² This may be simply a recording of a marital squabble, mainly intended by the exegete to demonstrate an instance of *shiqāq* and the response of the community addressed in the verse, but what it also reveals is a pattern of outspokenness on the part of women, directly quoted and inscribed in these works. The second example tells the story of a married couple who went to the Caliph 'Ali to arbitrate their differences. The woman says: "I am content with whatever in God's Book regarding what's incumbent upon me or what I am entitled to." The husband says: "No to separating!" Ali scolds the man: "How wrong you are; you will not leave here until you similarly acknowledge what she did."³³ The anecdote illustrates the husband's stubbornness and rashness in taking an autocratic decision concerning the marriage as opposed to the woman's rational, lucid response, articulating her trust in God's justice regarding rights and duties.

In fact, equality and justice figure prominently in women's inquiries as recorded in the explanations of the context and occasion of some revelations. Ṭabarī (d. 923) in his *tafsīr* work includes what has become the established anecdotal background of verse 32

³¹ Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhshari, *Al-Kashshāf* [The revealer], 3 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-bābī al-ḥalabī, 1948), I:428.

³² Muḥammad ibn Ahmad ibn Faraj al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'an* [Collected rulings of the Qur'an], 20 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-kutub al-miṣriyah, 1967), 5/6: 176.

³³ Al-Qurṭubī, 177.

in *Sūrat al-Nisā'*: "Do not covet what God has bestowed to some of you over others; unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned; ask God of His bounty, for God is All-Knowing." Umm Salama had complained to the Prophet that it is only men who go to warfare (thus women being deprived of both its material booties and its *jibād* reward), while women get a half inheritance share.³⁴ It is also recorded that when the men demanded that they obtain a double spiritual reward for the good they do in accordance with the double inheritance shares, women of the community — in defense of justice and equal rights — requested in return to partake of the reward of *jibād* that they feared will privilege men in God's eyes.³⁵ As a divine response to women's concern over their equal status in the eyes of God and over the male community's biased interpretation of inheritance distribution, the verse was revealed to forbid *both men and women* from envy and ambition for more-than-deserved privileges or fortune. It emphasizes the principle of each obtaining their due according to what is "earned."

A similar cause of the revelation of verse 35 of *Sūrat al-Abzāb* can be found in al-Nisābūrī's *Asbāb al-nuzūl* [The occasions of the revelations] in which he mentions the woman Companion Asma' bint 'Umayy. She had just returned from Abyssinia (Ethiopia) being among the group who initially migrated there and inquired if verses have been revealed concerning them. She then went to the Prophet to voice her discontent: "O God's Messenger, women are indeed in loss and defeat." When the Prophet asked her for the reason, she replied: "Because they are not mentioned or their good deeds as men are."³⁶ This particular anecdote or occasion for verse 35 of *al-Abzāb* occurs in several *tafsīr* works with some slight variations, such as attributing the complaint to Umm Salama or unnamed groups of women Companions, and also further details, such as a more direct questioning of why God does not mention women in the Qur'ān. In al-Rāzī's (d. 1209) *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, "a woman goes to the Prophet asking: 'the God of men and women is one, and you are the Messenger to them and to us, and our common father is Adam and our mother is Hawwa/Eve. So what is the reason that God only mentions men and not us?'"³⁷ This instance in the tradition clearly documents early Muslim women's outspokenness in their demands for equality, inscribes and textualizes their verbal interventions, and signifies the Revelation's response to their queries about fairness and inclusion.

³⁴ Abu-Ja'far b. Jarir al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' al-bayān 'anta'wil 'ay al-qur'ān* [Collected elucidation about the interpretation of the Qur'an's verses], 15 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-fikr, 1999), 4: 67.

³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, 4: 68.

³⁶ Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī al-Nisābūrī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* [The occasions of the revelations] (Cairo: Maktabāt al-mutanabbī, n.d.), 268.

³⁷ Muḥammad b. 'Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* [The Grand Interpretation], 32 vols., (Cairo: al-Maṭba'at al-bahīya al-miṣriya, n.d.), 10: 80.

III. A Sufi Poetess and a Paradoxical Identity

The third case under consideration is a Sufi poem, in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), by Umm Hanī' al-Madaniyya, which I found in the microfilm records of Sufi manuscripts in the Egyptian Archives in Cairo, *Dar al-kutub al-miṣriyya* (Sufism index, *magāmiʿ*/rolls478, microfilm no. 10127), and of which I have no knowledge of its publication in any other source. I have not been able to date it, as it was scripted among a collection of other varied manuscripts of different periods. As for the identity of Umm Hanī', the historical sources point to Fakhita bint Abu Ṭālib, sister of ʿAlī ibn Abū Ṭālib, the Prophet's cousin who died around 40 H.³⁸ During the victorious return of the Prophet to Mecca, she is known to have granted protection or sanctuary to two prominent idolaters (*mushrikūn*) who attempted to flee the village — one of them is said to have been al-Ḥārith ibn Hishām. It is reported that the Prophet said, "We extend our protection and refuge to whom Umm Hanī' has granted safety." The short biography also reports that she transmitted 46 *aḥādīth*.³⁹

The poem is in the classical mono-rhyme *qaṣīda* form, consisting of twenty-two lines, two hemistiches each. It is addressed to the Prophet — "the best of all humanity and God's messengers" (*kbayr al-khalq wa-al-rusul*), appealing to his blessed intercession (*shafaʿa*) for God's forgiveness, mercy, and relief from this world's sorrows. Its themes and images reflect the literary genre of the "veneration" of the Prophet, especially the idea of intercession that began as early as Muḥammad's (PBUH) contemporaneous poet and eulogist, Ḥassan ibn Thābit.⁴⁰ The extant text of the poem, in its complete transcribed form, is a puzzle. The identity of its ascribed author is clearly legible on top of the text: "This is the *qaṣīda*/ Poem by Umm Hanī' al-madaniyya, *raḍya Allahu ʿanhā*/ may God be pleased with her." However, adjectives used in reference to the speaker/persona are in the masculine form, e.g.: "*innī ḍaʿīf, kbāʿif, wajil* . . . /Verily, I am weak, fearful, anxious. . . ." The contradiction between an ostensibly masculine speaker and the named female identity of the author, followed by the traditional epithet of holy and pious figures in feminine form, calls attention to the poetic achievement itself: producing a text in perfect emulation of the literary model of poetical panegyrics of the Prophet — complete with the use of a "humble" (*miskīn*) Sufi "poetic persona." Hence, the shifting position highlights the deliberate literary crossing to the other gender, as a way of

³⁸ Two other figures occur in Kaḥḥāla's encyclopedia under the name of "Umm Hanī' " who may be considered as possible candidates: Umm Hanī' al-Ansariyya, mentioned as a *ḥadīth* transmitter but no dates or any other information are given, and Umm Hanī' al-Ḥarawini, a scribe and a *ḥadīth* scholar/teacher, born in 1376, and well-learned in the Qur'ān, Arabic grammar, and *fiqh*. However, the epithet "raḍya Allah ʿanhā" in the manuscript leads me to favor that she is from the household of the Prophet (PBUH), i.e. his cousin.

³⁹ U. R. Kaḥḥāla, *Aʿlam al-nisāʾ fī ʿālamay al-arab waʾl-islām* [Women figures in the Arab and Islamic worlds], 5 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-risāla, 1991), 4: 15, 16.

⁴⁰ A. Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 84.

de-stabilizing difference. The original authorial voice, nevertheless, belonged to Umm Hanī', whose female identity remains preserved as a trace of other probable, unknown manuscripts of texts by women.

Stringing Voices

In an essay by the medievalist Catherine Brown entitled "In the Middle," she reflects on the relation between modern critics reading and interacting with medieval material, aware of the past's "otherness" and the distance they have to traverse to truly know their subject matter. Seeking a model for a relationship to past texts that encourages interaction between two historical moments, between the two extremes of "antiquarianism" and "modernizing projection," she analyzes her own experience of reading a manuscript of Augustine's *Confessions* and noting another medieval reader who had marked passages and made short notes in the margins.⁴¹ A similar experience would be our tracking later women's works beginning from the early modern period and examining *their interaction* with this previous history of medieval Muslim women. In 1895, Zaynab Fawwāz, a Lebanese/Egyptian raised writer, was the first to author a modern biographical encyclopedia of women that she named *Al-Durr al-mantbūr* (Scattered Pearls). She writes in the introduction how she noticed that men dominated the cultural memory of most nations, whereas "half of humanity" was ignored and absent.⁴² Hence, she considers this work a service to "*banāt naw'ī*" (my gender).⁴³ In compiling, reframing, and re-documenting early and medieval Muslim women's lives and words with this pronounced intention of restoring visibility and voice, she is basically engaging in stringing those "scattered" voices of the past and re-inscribing them for later women writers and historians.

Indeed, in 1924 Qadriyya Ḥusayn, a Turkish/Egyptian elite woman writer, composed her *Shabirāt al-nisā' fī al-ālam al-islāmī* (Famous women in the Islamic world) — in two parts — in which she selected the lives of a few significant women — or foremothers — from Islamic history and re-told their stories, accompanied by her own reflections on the meaning of their lives — forgotten behind the "screens of negligence."⁴⁴ In her introduction to the second part, she states that she is writing about "heroines of the past" for the women of today,⁴⁵ wanting to be another "linking ring" along the path of memory.⁴⁶ Interestingly, she uses Fawwāz's encyclopedia as a major reference. More than simply reviving the memory of "heroines" in Islamic history,

⁴¹ C. Brown, "In the Middle," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30, no. 3 (2000), 547–574: 550.

⁴² Zaynab Fawwāz, *Al-Durr al-Mantbūr* [Scattered Pearls] (Kuwait: Maktabat ibn qutayba, 1896), 5.

⁴³ Z. Fawwāz, 6.

⁴⁴ Qadriyya Ḥusayn, *Shabirāt al-nisā' fī al-ālam al-islāmī* [Famous women in the Islamic world] (Cairo: Matba'āt al-sa'ada, 1924), II: 12.

⁴⁵ Q. Ḥusayn, II: 3.

⁴⁶ Q. Ḥusayn, II: 4.

Ḥusayn, from within most of the biographies, manages to create space for her own voice, through selectiveness of certain accounts interspersed with her comments. In the chapters of Sayyida ʿAʿisha’s (the Prophet’s wife) biography, she includes an account in which ʿAʿisha again loses her necklace while accompanying the Prophet in travelling. The whole caravan had to stop in the middle of the desert, so that she could look for her necklace. It was an arid spot without any water, and when it was prayer time, they found no water for ablutions. According to Ḥusayn’s narrative, this second incident involving ʿAʿisha’s necklace was the occasion for the divine license of *tayammum* (substituting washing with symbolic rubbing of one’s hands against clay or sand and passing them over the face and arms), when no water is available. Ḥusayn stops at this incident and uses it to attribute historical agency to ʿAʿisha, a causal intervention in the course of the history of Islamic worshipping and cleansing rituals.⁴⁷ Though her historical source for this particular instance is vague and so cannot be accurately authenticated, the significance lies in her narrative strategy of its inclusion following the first, more notorious necklace incident — known as the *ifk*. Hence, in the context of the book, this short, unknown narrative counters the preceding major one and presents a more positive historical intervention of ʿAʿisha.

This last example of researching and re-reading “women reading earlier women,” embodies what I called in the title of this paper the “rings of memory” that should continue, each ring larger and more clear than the one before, as we re-inscribe and “write” Muslim women’s authorial voices — compositions or verbal texts — and in so doing, as Paul Zumthor puts it, to be ourselves in the process produced by these medieval texts as we traverse two historical distances, going and coming back.⁴⁸

Conclusion

This paper explores generative areas of research on women in the Islamic tradition, noting the diverse genres where an interlocked structure of both patriarchal exclusion and female resistance exists. It is an attempt, therefore, to recover their authorial voices, turning the extant works from texts *about* women to texts *by* women. By classifying, translating, re-framing, and critically analyzing these compositions, we can create the space for the “textual visibility” of Muslim women in history and re-affirm our present authority — as contemporary Muslim women scholars — in researching the tradition and in knowledge production. Textualizing Muslim women’s words and verbal productions can hopefully be more than just an academic exercise, namely also related to present contestations over the lives and authority of Muslim women. In the words of Graham McCann: “A truly constructive and compassionate critic . . . is someone who earns authority . . . by arguing with his or her fellow citizens — someone who, angrily and

⁴⁷ Q. Ḥusayn, I: 62–63.

⁴⁸ P. Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 66.

insistently, . . . objects, protests, persuades, and remonstrates."⁴⁹ An interactive, two-way critical practice concerning women's historical presence characterizes a relationship with the past articulated by Stock: "If earlier ages still have a hold on us, it is through our thoughts about them."⁵⁰ And if finding the "authentic" import of women's words in the context of their time, or what the male scribes understood them to be, is a historian's task preserving the past's essential "difference" (pastism), a feminist critic of cultural history is more interested in the empowering meanings we can derive now, for us, from our new vantage point (presentism).

⁴⁹ Quoted in D. Watt, 200.

⁵⁰ B. Stock, 29.