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A Legacy of Love:

From Early Muslim Women to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya

Aisha Subhan
Research Fellow



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The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization
1050 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036
T (202) 429-1690
E cfg@rumiforum.org

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A Legacy of Love:

From Early Muslim Women to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya

Aisha Subhan

Abstract

This paper explores the examples and lessons of early Muslim women namely Khadija, Fatima, and Aisha. These women fostered a legacy of love, Islamic spirituality, and knowledge that proved pivotal to Islam's founding and growth and continued to inspire generations to come. In the hopes of tracing this legacy, this paper also evaluates the spiritual and devotional practices and insight of the early Sufi figure Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. This evaluation seeks to highlight and identify the formulation of a female-inspired spirituality established by early Muslim women from the Prophet's circle and onwards. Through an exploration of the following themes—knowledge, ethics, and spirituality—this paper contemplates the examples of Khadija, Fatima, Aisha, and Rabi'a and their contributions to Islamic spirituality and ethics as well as the many lessons they left behind.

Keywords: *Khadija, Fatima, Aisha, Rabi'a, Sufi Women, Female-Inspired Spirituality*

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1. Introduction

Prophet Muhammad arrived as *rahmatun lil 'alamin* meaning “a mercy unto the worlds.”¹ (Quran 21:107) His reality both physically and spiritually extended the qualities of mercy and love into the universe. In arriving as a beautiful example, the Prophet serves as a model for emulation and a beacon of light and guidance. Calling his people to the pathway of love, mercy, and engaged surrender², the Prophet reminds his people, “If you love God, follow me.”³ (Quran 3:31) In following him, one is bound to encounter further mercies along the path including the examples of those that were close to the Prophet—the women in his life. Just as Prophet Muhammad was *a mercy unto the worlds*, the women in his life were both mercies for him and for the community, the *ummah*, both past and present. The women in the Prophet’s life, like Khadija, Fatima, and Aisha, were inspiring personalities who expressed leadership, intelligence, spirituality, and love. This legacy certainly carried its way onward. The pious and luminous figure Rabi’a al-’Adawiyya also exemplified great faith, devotion, and intimacy with the Divine furthering this legacy of love. From these women, these wells of wisdom, various lessons, and models are left behind waiting to be retrieved.

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, First Edition, (HarperOne, 2015), 1473.

² Amina Wadud, “Engaged Surrender,” in *The Women’s Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from around the World*, Edited by: Sa’adiyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 20-24.

³ Nasr, Dagli, Dakake, Lumbard and Rustom, *The Study Quran*, 268.

“The women in the Prophet’s life, like Khadija, Fatima, and Aisha, were inspiring personalities who expressed leadership, intelligence, spirituality, and love.”

1.1 Early Women in Islam

Many scholars of gender in Islam point to the prophetic community as embracing modes for gender equality. Social factors to come and patriarchal interpretations later limited egalitarian readings and women’s religious authority in public life.⁴

“...Many of the Prophet’s companions were women who followed and supported him, assisted in the building of mosques, and even engaged in battle.

The Prophet’s circle, however, witnessed the active involvement of women both socially and communally. Many of the Prophet’s companions were women who followed and supported him, assisted in the building of mosques, and even engaged in battle.⁵ Moreover, “the original prophetic community was beckoned to a gender-inclusive vision of religious subjectivity and moral agency which included full participation of women in communal congregations in

the mosque.”⁶ During the Prophet’s time, women actively engaged in religious life and practice and even contributed to religious debate and social critique.

⁴ Sa’adiyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat, *The Women’s Khutbah Book, Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice From Around the World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 2-3.

⁵ Camille Adams Helminski, *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure*, (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2013), 57.

⁶ Shaikh and Seedat, *The Women’s Khutbah Book*, 210.

For example, several women like Khalwah and Umm Salamah raised their voices and brought their concerns to the Prophet. For contesting gender norms and injustices of her day and within her own lived experience, Khalwah approached the Prophet with her disputes and questioning. In revealing Chapter 58, *al-Mujadila*, meaning “she who disputes”, God responded in favor of Khalwah’s questioning and resolve.

Similarly, Umm Salamah critiqued gendered language in the Quran. In doing so, “Her intervention invites a divine response which explicitly clarifies that women are essential in the audience of the Quran.”⁷ These women did not wait for others to speak for them but instead raised their voices as they recognized the urgency and moral obligation of their pleas. In aiding the Prophet, they too contributed to the formulations of faith and to the well-being of the community. Incidentally, many of these courageous and bold women included the Prophet’s wives and his daughters.

“These women did not wait for others to speak for them but instead raised their voices as they recognized the urgency and moral obligation of their pleas. In aiding the Prophet, they too contributed to the formulations of faith and to the well-being of the community.”

2. Women and the Prophet

The Prophet’s wives and daughters maintained a privileged status within the Islamic tradition as they are often celebrated for their piety, knowledge, and example. They were gifts for those around them as “they each shared deeply with others of the Spirit that nourished and sustained them.”⁸ Moreover, not only did these women utilize their gifts to express their agency and sub-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 457.

jectivity, but they also hoped these gifts would carry on and rejuvenate others. The examples of Khadija, Fatima, and Aisha, to be explored in the following sections, provide lessons on character, spirituality, and compassion. First, we turn to the example of Khadija as she is often noted as being the first among numerous things—the first wife of the Prophet, the first believer, and the first to comfort him after receiving revelation.

2.1 Khadija: A Cloak of Compassion

Khadija's role in early Islam is beautifully captured following the moments of the first revelation. Seeking solitude and renewal, the Prophet Muhammad retreated to a cave in Mount Hira. Amid such isolation, the Prophet encountered the Angel Gabriel who commanded him to read. The Prophet replied, "I do not know how to read!" It was at this moment the Angel Gabriel embraced the Prophet tightly and commanded again, "Read!" The Prophet replied, "I do not know how to read, tell me what I should read."⁹

After the third time, the Angel Gabriel shares the first revelation with the Prophet which he then recites back to Gabriel. After this shocking and otherworldly encounter, the Prophet Muhammad rushed home to seek the comfort of his wife Khadija.

In returning home, Prophet Muhammad shivered and trembled with fear and exclaimed to his wife,

"Cover me! Cover me!"¹⁰ In a great act of concern and care, Khadija embraced him and cloaked him in a blanket.¹¹

“...Khadija...is often noted as being the first among numerous things—the first wife of the Prophet, the first believer, and the first to comfort him after receiving revelation.”

⁹ Mustafa Erdogan, *The Age of Bliss: Prophet Muhammad*, (Clifton, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2017), 45-46.

¹⁰ Ma‘mar ibn Rāshid, *The Expeditions: An Early Biography of Muḥammad*, Edited and translated by Sean W. Anthony, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 15.

¹¹ Ibn Rashid, *The Expeditions*, 15.

This image of the cloak or cloaking is a powerful symbol of protection and compassion. Khadija adorned herself with such a cloak, provided it to her husband, and safeguarded it for the *ummah* both past and present. At this moment, the Prophet was blanketed with Khadija's compassion and enfolded in her merciful embrace. The Prophet often gained comfort in drawing close to Khadija, finding tenderness in her physical touch.

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In addition to expressing a love language of physical touch, Khadija also provided words of affirmation. During a similar encounter in which the Prophet grew fearful, Khadija offered him comfort and reassurance easing his worries and doubts. Khadija once remarked: “God would not treat you thus since he knows your truthfulness, your great trustworthiness, your fine character, and your kindness. This cannot be, my dear.”¹² Khadija's sincere words stemmed from the heart and came to ease and strengthen the Prophet's heart.

Khadija's support and protection also stemmed from her intelligence and determination. Immediately after consoling and comforting the Prophet, “she (Khadija) rose (to her feet) and gathered her garments about her.”¹³ This Arabic expression, *gathered her garments about her*, conveys a sense of determination and purpose.¹⁴ This cloak of compassion is transformed into a cape of sorts as Khadija intended to rescue the Prophet from his distress.

¹² Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 106-107.

¹³ Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 107.

¹⁴ Hossein Kamaly, *A History of Islam in 21 Women*, (London: One World Publications, 2020), 14.

“This Arabic expression...conveys a sense of determination and purpose. This cloak of compassion is transformed into a cape of sorts as Khadija intended to rescue the Prophet from his distress.”

Khadija set out poised and determined, knowing just where to turn for advice and wisdom—her cousin Waraqa bin Naufal, a well-read Christian of sincere faith. After hearing Khadija recount what had occurred to Muhammad, Waraqa exclaimed, “Holy! Holy! He must be the awaited Prophet.”¹⁵ While deeply thrilled, Waraqa also knew of the approaching hardship that often marked prophecy and urged Khadija to support and stand with her husband amid these forthcoming trials. Forewarned by her cousin Waraqa about the dangers Prophet Muhammad would face and “knowing Meccan society well, she resolved to protect her husband and keep him safe.”¹⁶ Many tribulations and trials awaited the Prophet and his kin. Amid these challenges, “Khadija was Muhammad’s shield.”¹⁷ From this moment onwards, Khadija devoted herself and her resources to Messenger’s mission.

One important and pivotal way Khadija spread her mercy was through her status in society and her wealth. Khadija was a powerful businesswoman who managed trade caravans across the region. It is said that her caravans in Mecca attracted the poor and the orphans as Khadija would often give to those in need.¹⁸ Khadija continued these charitable acts when she became the wife of the Prophet and utilized her status and wealth as much as she could. To protect the *ummah* from the various hardships and trials they faced in Mecca and when they were pushed out of Mecca and were left without food and necessities, Khadija gave all that she could.

¹⁵ Kamaly, *A History of Islam*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Mehmet Buyuksahin, *The Age of Bliss: Khadija Bint Khuwaylid*, (Clifton, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2017), 15.

Khadija did not hesitate to spread her wealth even in difficult and uncertain times. In fact, Khadija desired to give all that she had to her community in a time of trial and hardship and felt her wealth would be best spent towards the Prophet's purpose and those who supported him. In doing so, Khadija had a keen awareness that her wealth spent well in this life would increase her riches in the hereafter. The Prophet later affirms this aspiration through a vision in which he saw the house of Khadija in Paradise embedded with jewels and reeds of pearls.¹⁹ Khadija is an apt example of using one's resources and privileges for good. Moreover, "she is a guide and role model to all who aspire to active service with their lives and property on the path of God and the Prophet."²⁰

"Khadija did not hesitate to spread her wealth even in difficult and uncertain times. In fact, Khadija desired to give all that she had to her community in a time of trial and hardship and felt her wealth would be best spent towards the Prophet's purpose and those who supported him."

Khadija continued to support the Prophet until her death. Having a deep love for him, Khadija's compassion never wavered. The Prophet had much love and gratitude for his wife Khadija and thus his love for Khadija lasted a lifetime. Speaking about his wife Khadija, the Prophet said "She embraced Islam when people disbelieved me, and she helped me in person and her wealth where was no one else to lend me a helping hand. I had children from her."²¹ Throughout the Prophet's life, he intended to carry the compassion of Khadija with him. He spoke of her often and continued to support her loved ones. When asked why he extended such hospitality to Khadija's relatives, he responded "I also love the ones she loved."²²

¹⁹ Ibn Rashid, *The Expeditions*, 17.

²⁰ Resit Haylamaz, *Khadija: The First Muslim and the Wife of the Prophet Muhammad*, (Somerset, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2009), x.

²¹ Musnad Ahmad (6:117, 118), as quoted in Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 30.

²² Resit Haylamaz, *Khadija*, 56.

“It was such reciprocal love and tenderness that nourished their relationship and their family. And it was through such love that they weaved this cloak of compassion together and adorned each other with it providing both mercy and protection.”

It was such reciprocal love and tenderness that nourished their relationship and their family. And it was through such love that they weaved this cloak of compassion together and adorned each other with it providing both mercy and protection. Such is reminiscent of the Prophet bringing Ali, Hasan, Hussein, and Fatima (the People of the Cloak) under a cloak remarking “O Allah! These are my *Ahl al-Bayt* (People of the House) so keep impurity away from them and totally purify them.”²³ It was Khadija who first gave life to this legacy of the *People of the House*, and it was Fatima that linked all the members together.²⁴

2.2 Fatima: The Radiant Light

Fatima, the daughter of Khadija and the Prophet Muhammad was known by many nicknames, especially, *al-Zahra*, meaning “the radiant or splendid one.” This nickname beautifully encapsulates Fatima’s being both in a material and mystical sense as her devoted faith and generous nature touched others and the spiritual realm. Fatima’s light and radiance defined her relationship with her father, her marriage with Ali, the community, and even the worlds beyond.

Fatima was a shining light for her father as an extension of his own primordial light. According to a hadith within the Shi’i tradition, the Prophet pronounced:

Surely, my daughter Fatima is the Mistress of all women from the beginning to the end. She is part of me, and the light of my eyes, She is the flower of my heart and is my soul. ...Whenever she stands in prayers in the presence of Her Lord (Exalted is His Name),

²³ Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Virtues of Sayyedah Fatima*, (Lahore: Minhaj ul-Quran Publications, 2005), 18.

²⁴ Hassan Abbas, *The Prophet’s Heir: The Life of Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

“Like the Prophet’s character was the Quran, Fatima’s character was like that of the Prophet.”

her light illuminates the skies for the angels like stars shine to people on Earth.²⁵

This hadith showcases how the Prophet recognized that Fatima was not only a light in his eyes, but that her light had both a celestial affinity reminiscent of the skies and a groundedness for people on Earth.

The Prophet was graced by her light as she was a precious gift to him. She was known as *Umm Abiha*, meaning “her father’s mother.” an endearing nickname that captured her deep love and care for her father.

As an act of love, Fatima often observed her father and was his perfect pupil. Serving as a light for her father, Fatima also received light from the Prophet. Like the Prophet’s character was the Quran, Fatima’s character was like that of the Prophet. She emulated his example and assimilated his character traits.

Speaking of Fatima, Aisha stated, “I have not seen anyone who resembled the Holy Prophet more in manners, habits, character, and in the method of sitting and standing than Fatima, the daughter of the Messenger of Allah.”²⁶ Incidentally, Fatima’s husband, Ali, also exemplified a beautiful character. Together they reflected their light onto each other like two polished mirrors illuminating the other.

Fatima’s radiant and warm face and presence were said to offer much comfort to Ali. Speaking of his beloved Fatima, Ali stated, “When I look at her, all my worries and sadness disappear.”²⁷ Fatima and Ali’s marriage was a beautiful union with both earthly and spiritual significance. It is reported that the Prophet Muhammad received the following message from the Angel Gabriel: “O messenger of God, God sends you greetings and conveys that, ‘I have married Fatima

²⁵ Muhammad Ordoni, *Fatima The Gracious*, (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1992).

²⁶ Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Virtues of Sayyedah Fatima*, 41.

²⁷ Abbas, *The Prophet’s Heir*, 56.

to Ali in the high heaven, so you marry her to him on the earth.”²⁸ Ali and Fatima were truly a match made in heaven.

During this time, it is said that Ali came to visit the Prophet. When the Prophet asked Ali for the reason for his visit, he answered in a heartfelt manner, “I remembered Fatima.” On hearing Ali’s response, “the Prophet Muhammad’s face lit up with a smile at his simple words. ‘Congratulations!’ he exclaimed. ‘God has ordered me to marry my daughter to you.’”²⁹ This divinely ordained marriage transferred divine blessings into the world and allowed for the Prophet’s legacy of light and love to continue. Together, Ali and Fatima spread their light and goodness to others.

One instance of Fatima and Ali’s generosity occurred during a period when their children fell terribly ill. Recognizing the parents’ unrest, Prophet Muhammad recommended that they fast and pray. Fatima and Ali did just that. Moments before breaking their first fast, someone came knocking at their door; a man who had gone hungry requested food from them. In an act of great selflessness, Fatima and Ali gave him their food. On the second night, they were met with a similar occurrence. An orphan this time came requesting food. Yet again, Fatima and Ali gave the

“Aisha’s tree of knowledge flourished because it was planted with love. This profound quest for knowledge showed Aisha’s love of truth, love of the Prophet, and love of God. This love allowed Aisha to garner deep and intimate knowledge of the Prophet, religion, and life.”

orphan the food they had prepared. On the third night, a newly released captive appeared at their door and Fatima and Ali shared their food once again. Hearing about this sequence of events, the Prophet was both proud of their generosity and also concerned about their physical well-being. It was at that moment that the Prophet received the following revelation:

²⁸ Ibid, 55.

²⁹ Ibid, 56.

“...Fatima had access to...divine favor—her charity and purity granted her alignment with the heavens while embracing humility grounded her in the world below.

They fulfill their vows and fear a day whose evil is widespread, and give food, despite loving it, to the indigent, the orphan, and the captive, (saying): “We feed you only for the Face of God. We desire from you no recompense or thanks. Truly we fear from our Lord a grim, calamitous day.” So God has shielded them from the evil of that Day, bestowed upon them radiance and joy, and rewarded them, for having been patient, with a Garden and with silk.³⁰ (Quran 76:7-12)

Hasan Abbas describes this story as follows:

Fatima and Ali were truly a spiritual pair, unrivaled in their kindness and generosity. They were the go-to solution for the city’s most hungry and heartbroken. Their names were synonymous with mercy and love. Even when it meant they were to starve or suffer,

“Aisha’s quest for the deep meaning of things served a profound purpose. Moreover, her hopes of fully understanding revelation were not merely for satisfying her curiosity but rather for the purposes of imparting such knowledge to others so she could convey and adhere to their deeper pearls of wisdom and purposes.”

helping others was the core of their being. It was their hands that fed the poor and comforted the orphans, their lips that sang the praises of God and spoke no evil, and their eyes that carried light and love for humanity.³¹

³⁰ Nasr, Dagli, Dakake, Lumbard and Rustom, *The Study Quran*, 2654.

³¹ Abbas, *The Prophet’s Heir*, 62.

“Fatima and Ali were truly a spiritual pair, unrivaled in their kindness and generosity. They were the go-to solution for the city’s most hungry and heartbroken. Their names were synonymous with mercy and love.”

This light and love did not only extend to humanity but also found its way to the spiritual realm. Fatima’s spiritual status often garnered inspiring stories and depictions alluding to her mystical and celestial aura. One tale depicts Fatima just before her wedding day. A woman approached Fatima and informed her that she is to wed soon but does not have a dress to wear for her special day. Fatima quickly went to retrieve her own wedding dress to give it to the woman in need. Moved by Fatima’s selfless and altruistic act, God gave Fatima a gift of His own—garments from the heavens that Angel Gabriel brought along with 70,000 angels that accompanied her.³² As Bridget Blomfield and Zayn Kassam note, “This heavenly clothing can be interpreted as a mantle that concealed and enveloped her mystical powers. Her robes of light shield and protect anyone that turns towards her in need.”³³ This interpretation illustrates Fatima’s affinity to spiritual lights and mystical heights. It also reveals how Fatima had access to such divine favor—her charity and purity granted her alignment with the heavens while embracing humility grounded her in the world below. Aisha, too, leveled this soil of humility in which she planted a tree of knowledge.

2.3 Aisha: A Tree of Knowledge

Aisha and her legacy cultivated intellect and wisdom for the community. She was a curious soul planting seeds of knowledge throughout her life as her “inner nature enjoyed questioning and

³² Bridget Blomfield and Zayn Kassam, “Remembering Fatima and Zaynab: Gender in Perspective,” in *The Sh’i World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity*, Edited by: F. Daftary, S. Jiwa, and A. Sajoo, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 214.

³³ Ibid.

contemplation.”³⁴ Aisha’s deep curiosity and love of knowledge did not merely inspire her to seek simple answers; she craved a level of understanding that captured the true meaning of things—the intention, symbolism, and wisdom that lay within the answers. Ibn Abu Malayka commented on Aisha’s pursuit of truth: “When she was faced with something that she did not know, she was not able to stand it without learning more.”³⁵ Throughout her life, Aisha kept this thirst for knowledge alive that came to benefit the lives of others as well.

Aisha’s tree of knowledge flourished because it was planted with love. This profound quest for knowledge showed Aisha’s love of truth, love of the Prophet, and love of God. This love allowed Aisha to garner deep and intimate knowledge of the Prophet, religion, and life. Aisha’s tree of knowledge took root within the Prophet’s home, the *House of Felicity*. Aisha knew very well the significance of her husband’s wisdom, his revelation, and his interactions taking full advantage of her position and intimacy with the Prophet to further discern and illuminate such knowledge and to safeguard and protect it. For example, Aisha “used the advantage of having a room which was adjacent to the Prophet’s Mosque and was able to follow the Messenger of God’s sermons”³⁶ and would often ask the Prophet questions directly pertaining to revelation and his own conduct.³⁷

“Sometimes a tree bows down to the earth; other times its branches reach for the sky. All the while, it remains grounded yet humbly aware of the life it too brings and nourishes. ”

³⁴ Resit Haylamaz, *Aisha: The Wife, the Companion, the Scholar*, (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2014), 178.

³⁵ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, 177.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 178.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

As noted above, Aisha was often sought for her knowledge as her expansive mastery moved across disciplines and demanded authentic answers. Aisha's tree of knowledge produced several branches ranging from poetry, medicine, legal rulings, prophetic tradition, and theology.³⁸ Aisha's findings followed a unique methodology as she "closely followed the explanations of God's Messenger related to the Quran and learned the obscure points directly. She acquired the ability to understand the purpose of the Quran, and to interpret general principles within the framework of Islam."³⁹ Aisha's quest for the deep meaning of things served a profound purpose. Moreover, her hopes of fully understanding revelation were not merely for satisfying her curiosity but rather for the purposes of imparting such knowledge to others so she could convey and adhere to their deeper pearls of wisdom and purposes.

For example, Aisha often used this knowledge to assist others in time of need utilizing her position and access to knowledge and the Prophet. Aisha spread this knowledge to other women and often opened her home to them. In sharing knowledge and meeting with regular women of society, Aisha hoped to remedy their situations and provide solutions to the various injustices they faced. Incidentally, Aisha's engagement with these real-life women coincided with the coming of revelation.⁴⁰ After meeting with these women, Aisha often turned to the Prophet to express their realities which sometimes spurred divine revelation. Arriving as mercies, these revelations came in response to the difficulties and trials of women that surfaced during Aisha's exchanges with them. The following revelation came in light of one woman's marital dilemma: "Divorce must be pronounced twice and then (a woman) must be retained in honor or released in kindness."⁴¹ (Quran 2:229) Aisha's mercy in opening her door to others, listening to their grievances, and desiring to support them was met with further mercies from above.

³⁸ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, 179.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 180.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 30.

⁴¹ Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Holy Quran*, English translation, (Islamabad: Shalimar Recording Co. Ltd., 1975).

Revelation and knowledge followed Aisha wherever she turned. In explaining why the Prophet had such profound love towards Aisha, he remarked that “she was the only one from his family who was with him when he received a revelation.”⁴² Based on Aisha’s instrumental role in the coming down of certain revelations, it appeared that just as the Prophet loved Aisha very much, so did the Divine. For example, the revelation was sometimes disclosed because of Aisha. One day, while traveling, Aisha lost a necklace given to her by her sister. In search of her necklace across the desert sand, the Prophet and others were without water to perform ablutions. Many companions grew anxious in such a situation, especially Abu Bakr, Aisha’s father. Suddenly, a miraculous event occurred. Revelation descended instructing the Prophet that when without water, one may utilize pure earth to perform ablutions. This practice called others to recognize the sanctity and purity of nature informing the Prophet and his followers they could cleanse their

“Based on Aisha’s instrumental role in the coming down of certain revelations, it appeared that just as the Prophet loved Aisha very much, so did the Divine.

skin with earth, an element from which they too are derived. After the arrival of this revelation, Abu Bakr turned to her daughter and exclaimed, “What a blessed person you are! Look, because of the delay that you caused, Allah bestowed blessings and ease on people.”⁴³

On this same journey, Aisha had slipped away to replenish within and among nature. Her necklace had yet again fallen from her neck. Aisha’s necklace kept her from continuing the voyage and called her back to nature and to the earth.⁴⁴ Luckily a young man,

Safwan ibn Muattal, who traveled behind the caravan found Aisha and helped her return safely.⁴⁵ Opponents of the Prophet made slanders and conspiracies against Aisha. After much heartache

⁴² Omer Yilmaz, *The Age of Bliss: Aisha bint Abu Bakr*, (Clifton, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2017), 24.

⁴³ Yilmaz, *Aisha bint Abu Bakr*, 46.

⁴⁴ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, 96.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and sickness following these events, one day revelation came in Aisha's defense: "And as for those who accuse chaste women, but then do not bring four witnesses, flog them eighty lashes, and never accept any testimony from them. And it is they who are the iniquitous."⁴⁶ (Quran 24:4)

Devoted to the pursuit of truth and knowledge, Aisha was proven innocent as a word of truth descended from above. This revelation supported Aisha and her reality as the Divine intervened in her defense. The Prophet too was convinced of Aisha's innocence, and she returned to him though Aisha thanked the Almighty and praised Him alone for this mercy.⁴⁷ In the following years, Aisha continued her life of service and support of the Prophet and his message. Aisha was present with the Prophet at the time of his death, drew near to him, and consoled him with tender strokes and recitations. The Prophet spent his last moments with his head on Aisha's chest.

After the Prophet's death, Aisha's role as the mother of the believers took different forms. She was often sought for both her knowledge and political matters. Despite Aisha's cultivation of ethics and humility, she still was capable of mistakes. During the last twenty years of her life, Aisha's pursuit of truth and knowledge mirrored a path of repentance and ascetic practices. It is said that Aisha's last words expressed her wish "that she was a tree uttering praises and so fulfilling its obligation; or that she was a plant of the plants of the earth and not anything remembered."⁴⁸ These last words are sometimes attributed to her remorse for participating in the Battle of Camel or indicative of her cultivated ascetic practices. It may be a combination of the two. As someone always devoted to the truth and knowledge, it may be that Aisha realized the only way to live was to repent and return to one's Lord. In this vein, such a statement was not intended to convey a sense of unworthiness or self-deprecation but perhaps rather reveal Aisha's deep understanding of life. As Resit Haylamaz describes, Aisha "considered the life of the world like the shade under a tree where people rest for a while, and then continue on their way."⁴⁹ This

⁴⁶ Nasr, Dagli, Dakake, Lumbard and Rustom, *The Study Quran*, 1590.

⁴⁷ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, 107.

⁴⁸ Nabia Abbot, *The Beloved of Mohammed*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 216-217.

⁴⁹ Haylamaz, *Aisha*, 67.

“...Rabi’a engaged in ascetic mysticism, practiced celibacy, taught others her spiritual path, and devoted her life to the love of God.

image of a tree offers much wisdom. A tree within nature wholeheartedly surrenders to the Divine and is completely subservient to the Divine will. Aisha’s desire to be like a barren tree signifies the importance of transformation just as a tree sheds its leaves only to come alive once more. Sometimes a tree bows down to the earth; other times its branches reach for the sky. All the while, it remains grounded yet humbly aware of the life it too brings and nourishes.

In Aisha’s last breath, it may be that Aisha recognized the wisdom found within nature and wishes only to be remembered as a surrendered tree. Incidentally, these ascetic teachings influenced Basra’s cultural and spiritual tapestry in subsequent years. It is likely that Rabi’a was among those influenced by Aisha’s teachings.

3. Rabi’a Al-’Adawiyya: Her Life and Legacy

While much of what is known about Rabi’a al-’Adawiyya is shrouded in legend, the narratives surrounding her still continue to resonate and hold power today. In navigating through Rabi’a’s life and example, one must keep in mind the biased hagiographical accounts attached to her name and the presence of myths and misquotes that may be attributed to her. In other words, learning about the “real” Rabi’a is a difficult feat. Certain assumptions however can be gathered about what we do know about this figure who is partly historical and partly mythical.⁵⁰

Rabi’a (714-801 CE) is said to have been born into poverty, stolen as a child, and sold into slavery. As a result of her perceived spiritual merit, it is said Rabi’a was eventually freed. In the subsequent years of her life, Rabi’a engaged in ascetic mysticism, practiced celibacy, taught others her spiritual path, and devoted her life to the love of God.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Rkia Cornell, *Rabi’a From Narrative to Myth*, (England: Oneworld Publications, 2019).

⁵¹ Margaret Smith-[Ch. Pellat], “Rabi’a al-Adawiyya al-Kaysiyya”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition (Online), Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, 2012.

In many respects, Rabi'a continued this legacy of love through her teachings of God's love and mercy, her direct knowledge of the Divine, and the light she brought to humankind. Rabi'a mirrored Aisha in her ascetic practices, upheld the legacy of Fatima through her mystical affinity and attraction to divine light, and carried teachings that were mercies for others mirroring Khadija's mercy and generosity. Rabi'a conveyed such mercies through her teachings as a spiritual trainer (*mu'addiba*), her proximity to divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*), and her testimonies on divine love (*mahabba*).

3.1 *Mu'addiba*: Spiritual Training and Refinement

Throughout Rabi'a's life, she conformed to a set of ascetic practices and engaged in spiritual training. The practice of *ta'dib* as a spiritual and ethical practice was common during the time of Rabi'a. Following in the footsteps of Aisha, Rabi'a practiced asceticism and imparted such teachings to others.

One of Rabi'a's students and a prominent religious figure, Sufyan al-Thwari, is said to have called Rabi'a *mu'addiba* and called upon her often.⁵² The term, *mu'addiba* referred to "a personal mentor and specialist in *ta'dib*, ethical training, and character formation."⁵³

This cultivation of ethics was very much influenced and modeled after the Prophet. It required certain cultivation of character traits that combined "justice, forbearance, and dignity"⁵⁴ towards the goal of attaining practical wisdom (*hilm*).⁵⁵ For Rabi'a the goal of asceticism was to cultivate purity within and to undergo both transformation and spiritual refinement.

Rabi'a's strategy for character formation coincided with her practice of asceticism. Rkia Cornell describes Rabi'a's asceticism as essential asceticism that worked to limit worldly distractions and focus solely on the Divine. While this asceticism in practice limited one's interaction

⁵² Cornell, *Rabi'a From Narrative to Myth*, 60.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 76.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 77.

“...the goals and fruits of asceticism and spiritual knowledge are to profess and experience the love of the Divine.”

and indulgences with the worldly, its purpose was not to simply renounce the world. In contrast, Rabi'a's asceticism aimed to instill a deep understanding of *tawhid*, the Oneness of God. When one limits one's time with the worldly, one begins to see the sole Creator of such creation and the true Owner of all things.

“When one limits one's time with the worldly, one begins to see the sole Creator of such creation and the true Owner of all things.”

Commenting on how she achieved such heightened spiritual states, Rabi'a explained “by leaving aside all that does not concern me and by cleaving to the One that always is.”⁵⁶ In this vein, Rabi'a did not merely renounce the world for its own sake but did so as to remove distractions and attachments that separated her from her Beloved. In practicing humility and avoiding worldly pleasures, Rabi'a gained closer proximity to the Divine. In leaving all else, Rabi'a learns to put her complete trust in God (*tawwakul*)⁵⁷ and grew content-

ment in all matters of His will (*rida*)⁵⁸.

This concept of spiritual refinement and ascetic practice sought a deeper, more profound end: divine presence and intimacy. Moreover, these practices were not goals in and of themselves but rather to awaken the servant to a new understanding of oneself and of God. In cultivating such an inner state, Rabi'a allowed for the incoming of spiritual knowledge and unveiling.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 153.

⁵⁷ Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 154.

⁵⁸ Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 154.

“Love of the Divine then becomes synonymous with recognizing the oneness of God. Living this love becomes all-consuming, intoxicating, and marked with passion.”

3.2 *Ma’rifa*: Spiritual Knowledge and Mystical Experience

Ra’bia’s spiritual refinement granted her access to *ma’rifa*, spiritual knowledge. This concept of *ma’rifa* is intimately tied to the prophetic saying, “he who knows himself knows his Lord.” As a result of Rabi’a’s ascetic practices, that is practicing both sincerity and humility, she came to understand herself and her world in relation to the Divine. In recognizing her true nature as something that is both dependent on God yet also attached to His will, Rabi’a comes to also know God.

Rabi’a was well aware of the veils that permeate the world—that several distractions lie therein clouding God’s true reality. These veils include worship of God out of fear or for something in return. On this matter, Rabi’a famously stated:

O’ Lord, If I worship you for fear of hell burn me in that hell

If I worship you hoping for paradise, make it forbidden for me

But if I worship you only for your own sake

Do not withhold from me your everlasting beauty.⁵⁹

For Rabi’a, such approaches to worship do not convey a proper understanding of the Divine and the Divine-human relationship. Deep within her heart, Rabi’a knows that it is God alone that deserves concern, devotion, and love. Instead of giving way to fear or the promise of reward, Rabi’a

⁵⁹ Omid Safi, *Radical Love*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 53.

“In recognizing her true nature as something that is both dependent on God yet also attached to His will, Rabi’a comes to also know God.

clings to True Reality alone. This purification and emptying of the heart that results from character and spiritual refinement allow for the unveiling (*kashf*), a rupturing of the worldly veils that obstruct one’s vision of the Divine, and witnessing of His beauty.

In witnessing His Beauty and experiencing divine intimacy, Rabi’a recognized such knowledge and beatific vision appeared to her within her spiritual heart. Rabi’a once overheard a man’s prayer to God:

“O God
at long last
open a door for me.”

Rabi’a was there:

“*You fool!*
The door’s
never been closed.”⁶⁰

Rabi’a recognized that access to the Divine permeates the world and remains close to a cleansed heart. This privileged vision and knowledge via unveiling arrive intimately and suddenly to those hearts that remain open. As Rabi’a declared, “I am a doorkeeper of the Heart, not a lump of wet clay.”⁶¹ Rabi’a knew of the great possibility that could occur within her center.⁶² In her own heart,

⁶⁰ Safi, *Radical Love*, 62.

⁶¹ Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 57.

⁶² *Ibid.*

“Rabi’a knew of the great possibility that could occur within her center. In her own heart, she saved her Beloved.

she saved her Beloved. As Rabi’a came to recognize the inner depths of her heart, she also came to recognize the Divine. Luckily, for Rabi’a the blessings only continued as this recognition also bore fruits. Another famous quote attributed to Rabi’a is the following: “Everything has a fruit, and the fruit of recognition is coming forward to God.”⁶³ Spiritual knowledge produces further blessings; it allows one to enjoy the fruits of divine intimacy and love. This “coming forward to God” (*iqbal*) becomes an all-totalizing reality

for the mystic. In coming forward, they come to embrace and enter into a new reality, one completely absorbed in divine love.

3.2 Mahabba: Divine Love and the Oneness of God

As noted above, the goals and fruits of asceticism and spiritual knowledge are to profess and experience the love of the Divine. This poem, commonly attributed to Rabi’a, illustrates her deep love of God and its connection to divine intimacy:

I have loved Thee with two loves, a selfish love and a love that is worthy (of Thee).

As for the love which is selfish, I occupy myself therein with the remembrance of Thee to the exclusion of all others,

As for that which is worthy of Thee, therein Thou raises the veil that I may see Thee.

Yet is there no praise to me in this or that,

But the praise is to Thee, whether in that or this.⁶⁴

⁶³ Sachiko Murata, *Women of Light in Sufism*, Sacred Web, Vol. 12, (Vancouver: Sacred Web Publishing, 2003), 25-34.

⁶⁴ Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabi’a*, (Oxford: Onworld Publications, 2001), 126.

Rabi'a's love of the Divine reflected her desire to draw near and witness Him. As follows, this declaration of love also conveys a powerful testament of *tawhid*. The love worthy of the Divine is worthy of Him because it recognizes that all praise belongs to the Divine alone. Through Rabi'a's discussion on love, "the central Islamic doctrine of affirmation of unity (*tawhid*) is given its Sufi moral and relational emphasis: unity for Rabi'a means that there is only one object of desire, of interest, of concern—the Divine beloved."⁶⁵ In recognizing and witnessing the Divine, Rabi'a devoted her life to embracing this One reality and there remains no better praise and surrender than the path of love.

Love of the Divine then becomes synonymous with recognizing the oneness of God. Living this love becomes all-consuming, intoxicating, and marked with passion. The following poem depicts the nature of this love:

Rabi'a was staggering one morning, like one who was drunk.

She was asked:

"What makes you stagger?"

She said:

"I got intoxicated

from the love of God last night.

His love is making me tipsy."⁶⁶

Rabi'a however does not stagger without purpose; it is this very disorienting force that guides one towards the Beloved. In other words, one must, in a sense, lose oneself, to love God truly. The story of Rabi'a reminds one to be transformed through love in order to recognize the

⁶⁵ Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 154.

⁶⁶ Safi, *Radical Love*, 144.

one Beloved. She is a reminder to cultivate proper character and seek out this knowledge to discover the Beloved hidden within.

Conclusion

The legacies of love from these Muslim women pioneers carry several lessons. Khadija teaches us the power of compassion and how to use status and intelligence for good. She reminds us to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and what we believe in. Through the example of Fatima, we learn how to be a light for others as a charity in action and purity through example serve as light-houses and mercies for humanity. Fatima also teaches us how to be a spiritual light; mystical experience becomes possible through a purified and cleansed heart. Our generosity in this life is met with more extraordinary grace granting us access to divine light. From the example of Aisha, one learns how to seek knowledge and answers. One also learns to contemplate the inner meaning of things and of life and how these may be gifts and blessings for others.

These legacies surely carried on. The life and example of Rabi'a share in this legacy of love. In effect, Rabi'a combines many of the teachings of her foremothers. Modeling Aisha, Rabi'a engages in asceticism and becomes a teacher in her own right. Rabi'a also sought knowledge, *ma'rifa*, to be exact, to know God directly and intimately. Like Fatima, Rabi'a's humility and purity of heart granted her access to divine light and mystical possibility. Rabi'a also continues to be a light for others. Following in the footsteps of Khadija, Rabi'a's words and teachings are mercies to others that also capture the compassion and love of the Divine. This legacy of love leaves behind blessings for us as well. May God enable us to access them, allow these lessons to shine within our own being, and move us to spread them generously.

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About the Author

Aisha Subhan is a Ph.D. candidate at the Chicago Theological Seminary in Islamic and Interreligious Studies. Her work largely engages mysticism within her tradition of Islam and others with special consideration of female mystics, the feminine element/divine feminine, and ways in which feminism(s)/womanism(s) may contribute to this study and in fostering peace and healing within and into the world. Previously, Aisha attended Bayan Islamic Graduate School where she received her Master's of Arts in Islamic Studies, and the University of California, San Diego where she received her Bachelor's of Arts in Political Science and the Study of Religion. Aisha enjoys traveling, writing poetry, and walking by the lake. In the future, Aisha hopes to become a professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies.

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