



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Untold Stories of the Seventh Century Arab Woman: Voicing the Emancipated Arab Woman in Sherry Jones' Novels

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ABSTRACT

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This study on Arab woman in Sherry Jones' two novels, *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) and *The Sword of Medina* (2009), focuses on the emancipation and empowerment of Arab woman who lived in the seventh century in the Middle East. It is an articulation of the empowered woman and an expression of woman's voice that situates post-9/11 American novel and feminist voice in a globalized world. The two novels give a strong and effective voice for Aisha, the wife of prophet Mohammed. Analysis investigates the status of Arab Muslim woman, highlights her strong and resisting voice, and reflects the author's attitude toward the need for emancipating contemporary woman in the Middle East. Focusing on the feminist thought, the study details the ways in which post-9/11 novel attracts the minds and hearts of the reader to the strong character of Aisha through an admired and well-established feminist personality that exercises positive influence on other women in contemporary society.

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INTRODUCTION

No specific date has been as quite ubiquitous in the history of Islam-America cultural landscape as 9/11, 2001. From Dag Tuastad (2003), Mohammed Samiei (2010), Tugrul Keskin (2012), Jack Holland and Lee Jarvis (2014) and Tugrul Keskin (2018) to Khaled Al-Kassimi (2021), many in the field of 9/11 cultural aftermath have engaged in a thorough analysis of the construction of 9/11 as a cultural marker - primarily one of cultural hegemony, but as Toros (2017) argues, also one of temporal political determinant that "sustained policies of violent counter-terrorism the world over and undermined those working toward non-violent responses" (Toros 2017, 205). Post-9/11 American novel on Arab woman precisely present a feminist sense of Arab woman in the seventh century Middle East as one of cultural defining trends that should describe the drawn effect upon contemporary society and its culture. Therefore, a crucial aspect of the feminist voice in American

novel lies in its reconfiguration of the epistemological compatibility with the general logic of the novel genre in its literary form and context.

This study focuses on post-9/11 narratives' cultural concepts of liberal society, personal freedom, women's rights, and history of woman's rights in Islamic culture. The study takes Sherry Jones's *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) and its sequel *The Sword of Medina* (2009) as an example. The two novels make use of knowledge on Islamic culture established by classic orientalism to render legible the logic of feminist and liberal approach in representing woman in the Middle East. To speak of the Jones' novels with classic orientalist themes is to speak of the novel's subsumption by liberal feminist thought for post-9/11 historical novels that articulate themselves in relation to cultural contact and preoccupation with contemporary political crisis. So, what is the place of liberal feminist thought in post 9/11 novel? Critics who invested in the question give a range of answers exemplified in Jason Goldfarb's view that "literature thus reverts to a liberal politics of recognition" and "narratives inevitably play into the hands of late capitalism: no move is more characteristic of the liberal novel than the substitution of cultural difference for class difference" (2021, 3). Novel as a cultural discourse conceives of the relationship between its constitutive items in a way that allows us to identify the periodization of the subject matter not simply in terms of personal or impersonal determination but in terms of the complex interplay of the geo-political relations between cultural differences (Keskin 2012 & Al-Kassimi 2019). Jones' representation provides readers with concrete markers of representations after 9/11 that periodizes texts, cultural debates, and political rhetoric via both 9/11 events and their own recent history, thus avoiding both chronological factors and their markers like colonial history and Islam-west rivalry.

In neo-orientalism, as a cultural discourse, the concrete marker – liberalism- according to James Carr (2021) provides "clarity for the contemporary political economy setting" and "proclaims itself to be the liberating ideology of the civilized world" where "non-liberal states and belief systems are uncivilized" (2021, 91). Being the ideology of a cultural mode of dominance, liberals project their ideology as a set of norms that represents "not just highly desirable, but universal values" and claim to be "the ideology of freedom, dignity, and peace if it pinpoints and defines other ideologies as lacking these values" (Waikar 2018, 7). The liberals create a hierarchy of norms and ideologies with their ideology perched at the top. Liberalism exploits Islamic identity through exasperating historically existing division between Islam and the West in order to justify the liberalization of the Muslim world. Therefore, for liberalism to sustain, it always needs to claim to be a highly desirable ideology and define other ideologies as less valuable.

Contemporary efforts to liberalize the Arab world along with neo-orientalism representations of many issues in the Muslim world have exposed the poor approach toward many issues like democracy, human rights, inclusion of women in all Arab states. The study suggests that the interrelationship among Islamism, democracy and liberal thought is more complicated than is understood. In the case of this Islamist movement in all Arab states, which are all Muslim nation-states and least democratic, the Islamist movement struggles to control the state using religion as an important part of the formation of modern Arab identity and as a tool to erase the influence of western modernism in the Islamic region. Rashid Alghanoushi, for example, the founder of Alnahda movement of Tunisia states: "Modernism has not achieved equality for women...women's freedom means rebellion against Islam and its values. Women were made to believe that they will not be free unless they distance themselves from Islam" (qtd. Faqir 1997, 170). Islamist movements seek an Islamic world that lives and functions according to its principles of religiosity and rejects the Western values of modern western life, further intensifying the East and West problematic relationship.

Aisha: soft as a woman and bold as a feminist

The *Jewel of Medina* is the absorption of the present into the past in the context of which the futurity becomes one of the tasks of feminist role the novel is made to play. The invocation of gender inequality and female vulnerability is a widely familiar topic of representation in post-9/11 novel. In *The Jewel of Medina's* Forward, Jones describes the situation of woman living in the Arab society: "Join me in a harsh, exotic world of saffron and sword fights, of desert nomads living in camel's-hair

tents...We are in seventh-century Hijaz...where Bedouin raiders fight for survival and women have few rights" (Jones 2008, VII). In an interview with Adnan Mahmutovic, Jones says: "I wanted to tell the story through their eyes, and explore the relationship of Muslim women to their religion by exploring Muhammad's relationship to his wives and concubines" (2011). The entire novel is about Aisha's struggle for freedom and better life. Aisha's personal identity becomes a social identity: the transformations in the life of Muslim women – or, simply, the struggle against patriarchy – the feminist characterization of the Muslim woman is thus a result of the need for liberalization to co-opt other cultures and ideologies, like Islamic culture, and twist them to achieve its ends: "A'isha emerged as the heroine by virtue of her personality – I love her sense of humor – and her inspiring story" (2011). As Jones puts it in her interviews, talks, and debates on the rights of the Muslim women, her distinctive identity of contemporary feminist thoughts is unchanging over time, irrespective of whether her religious statements contradict with her later views.

The harsh patriarchal past is presented through Aisha who fights for the rights of women in the seventh century Arabia. Jones offers her interpretation of Aisha's perspectives on woman's rights, their social role, and their struggle to survive the patriarchal dominance and gender discrimination of culture: **"In The Sword of Medina, I did leave out quite a bit of history...I was much more interested in exploring the personalities of the caliphs, and how they changed Islam to suit their own political and personal agendas" (Mahmutovic 2011).** Jones' liberal feminist approach speaks of the ways in which novel registers its epistemological compatibility with Aisha's feminist logic of liberalism in its form. As readers of post-9/11 American narratives, we notice that the terrorist attacks, the Islamic ideology and the Islamists are made to render visible the collapse and devastation of the women's rights in Islam in the liberal imagination. As a 9-year-old wife of the Prophet, Aisha criticizes the Islamic system of marriage that contains contradictions with the basic human rights: the lack of women's rights, within the Islamic context at least, is one of the agents in liberalizing the Muslim woman, a very important aspect of liberalism that The Jewel explores:

If they try to lock me away forever, I would escape. With the Bedouins, I'd be free to live my life the way I wanted, to run and yell and fight in battles and make my own choices. Because, in the desert, it didn't matter whether you were a woman or a man. In the desert, there were no walls...My parents had drummed the dangers into my very bones until I dreaded the gaze of any man not in my family. One illicit glance, it seemed, could pierce the veil of my virginity...I learned every stone in the floor, every crack in every wall of our Meccan home during my years in purdah.... I slumped onto my bed, feeling as though stones filled my body. Married to Muhammad! It couldn't be. He was older than my father... why was he allowed to visit me during my purdah, when all other men are forbidden? "Safwan"... "Come and rescue me. Hurry, before it's too late. (2008, 20-26)

Investigating the feminist role of Aisha in her society in this study designates an analysis of the historical situation in which her freedom, lifestyle and rights which are looked upon by Aisha as ethics and determinants of human life and dignity: "I'd known it would happen someday, but not when I was six. Only very few girls were engaged at birth, as I had been, but they were never confined until they began their monthly bleeding. To begin *purdah* at my age was unheard of" (20). Aisha's struggle for freedom aims at bringing a radical change in the life of woman and her role in society: "If they try to lock me away forever, I would escape...I'd be free to live my life the way I wanted, to run and yell and fight in battles and make my own choices" (25). Jones' focus on the constitutive relation of religion between man and woman helps us understand the possible means and paradigms for liberalizing Arab woman in contemporary society. Aisha struggles to bridge the huge gap between her and the male counterpart by rejecting oppression and gender discrimination: "Being female meant being helpless. Powerless. They [women] weren't supposed to plan, but to let others plan for them. They weren't supposed to live, only to serve" (70). Aisha, as the youngest wife who enjoys little freedom, exercises all her power for the sake of emancipating of women with fewer rights in the society. The amplification of Aisha's positive role in society, her thoughts, her lifestyle, and her choices situates her in the larger framework of the feminist frame in a globalized world.

Aisha is developed as a model that represents the accurate relation between contemporary liberalism and its social dimensions. For Aisha as a liberal woman, religion reduces the social to what it tells us about the individual by placing personal freedom within the divine institution as the relationships within a family are restricted and governed by oppressive norms: "You know al-Lah ordered your hijab, A'isha, he (Prophet Muhammed) said. "You witnessed His revelations to me in the courtyard" (31). Aisha who is concerned with the development of the social freedom of women in society opens up good opportunities for feminist social resistance and struggle as she comments on Muhammed's divine revelation: "How his revelation, in essence confining us all to the harim, had closed in upon me like the dark, cold walls of a tomb..." "Yes, I witnessed it," I said. "I saw everything including your transformation from a liberator of women into an oppressor of them. Yaa Prophet, was that also the work of al-Lah?" (32). The revitalization of Aisha's feminist thought and liberal ideology in the two novels is thus not only neo-orientalist project of encouraging Muslim women to struggle for freedom and ever-evolving liberal ideas, but also importantly a geopolitical project that uses the struggle for freedom to enable liberal ideology for collective action.

Aisha: leadership and anti-patriarchy

The *Sword of Medina* is the sequel to *The Jewel of Medina* which is an extension to the description of Aisha's character as a strong and emancipated woman. It introduces the Islamic history and details on Islam as unfamiliar to the Americans. *The Sword of Medina* presents the position of women in Islamic culture through the narration of Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's youngest wife: "Her courage and strength inspired me and continue to do so...Muhammad loved women. Was he too soft on women? But if, as the Qur'an says, we are all created from the same soul, then why would women not be the same as men in God's eyes?" (Jones 2011). In *The Sword of Medina*, Jones directly addresses the role of the Muslim woman in Islamic system and points towards the immanent contradiction within Islam as a religion that emerged to liberate women: "Umar placed new restrictions on women every day. Now, for instance, every woman had to wear a veil. He boasted about upholding Muhammad's vision for Islam, but my husband had given women more rights, while Umar took them away" (Jones 2009, 110). *The Sword of Medina* covers the tragic lives of Muslim women through conflating cultural practices with the dominant patriarchy on the one hand and refashioning young Aisha into an energetic Western feminist who fights for the emancipation of her sister-wives and women and challenges the norms of Islamic culture on the other: "The battle for my freedom and the freedoms of my sisters was what I needed to fight now, and for respect for women" (110). These feminist features are developed and refined in Aisha who looks inward at her own disagreements with Khalifah Ali and fights with him. She describes her patterns of thinking and lifestyle as 'independent'; she rejects Ali's inability to recognize women's rights and the conceptual freedom she owns as an independent woman:

There were eleven of us wives and concubines...We sister-wives lived ascetic lives, for Muhammad had always given all his possessions to the poor..."How dare you speak Muhammad's name with the dirt from his illegitimate grave still under your fingernails?" I spat into his face. My spittle landed in his beard and stuck there. With the back of his free hand, he wiped away my insult. "By al-Lah, it is not I who blasphemes the Prophet's memory, but your father. By seizing the khalifa, Abu Bakr mocks everything Muhammad achieved, and all he would have wanted." "My father seized nothing." I lifted my chin. "He was chosen by the people." (17-18)

Aisha is an 'empowered victim' girl and a 'liberal feminist' who resists and fights against the social and familial traditions of her religion and society: "I would never, ever live the way my mother did...I 'd show her with one sharp sentence who was quicker of the tongue. If she hit me, I'd either kill her or make her wish for death" (30). Aisha denounces the Muslims' practice of polygamy, male guardianship, and the Islamic views of women as disempowered with the spirit of a twenty-first-century feminist: "...our futures now held loneliness and, with no husbands to provide for us, poverty, until we joined Muhammad in Paradise. Of course, with my husband's body freshly buried in my room, I cared little about male companionship" (21). This interpretation of Aisha's personality particularly her determination to overcome the immensely harsh practices, provides critical insights

into the notion of 'liberalizing' the Muslim society and reflects how empowering the Muslim woman becomes easily intelligible as an actor that helps liberalizing the Muslim society.

Aisha's liberal thoughts capture two distinct humanitarian trajectories: one focusing on correcting the misconceptions and misinterpretations of Islam through enhancing human rights; and another which is based on liberal reforms and gender equality: "Islam had taken some disturbing turns away from its original path...Orphans, slaves, and women, the people Muhammad had helped, were forgotten as men strove for wealth and military honors...we had to begin now—before it was too late" (127). Aisha's thoughts ultimately prioritizes offering freedom for her sisters in society and suggest similar feminist strategies when considering her struggle for freedom: "I couldn't be his *hatun*, since he already had a first-wife in Sawdah; I'd be the *durra*, the parrot, serving her every whim. Would Sawdah make me her slave, giving me the basket of chores?" (66). Aisha's personality signifies the uncommon practice in the seventh century. She challenged and criticized the culturally dominant practice of polygamy in Arabia and advised men to focus on the improving the quality of life for women at home: "We were hungry, we were threadbare, and, worst of all we were bored...In Muhammad's *harim*, there were no babies, only children from previous marriages-and most of them older. We sister-wives spent our days in idleness, magnifying our few problems and grumbling at one another" (100). In the two novels, Aisha has a positive role in the seventh century Arab society, gives creative comments on the rights of the Muslim women, and motivates other women to act contrary to the oppressive cultural norms and values.

CONCLUSION

Representation of Aisha's attitude towards issues related to woman, in both *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) and *The Sword of Medina* (2009), does not only represent the progress in feminist thought of an Arab woman, but also reflects on how feminist attitude within a woman can consolidate and improve understanding of oneself perspectives on life. This amplification of Arab woman representation situates Arab woman, her thoughts, her lifestyle, and her choices in the larger framework of the liberal agendas of the orientalist discourse in a globalized world. The implication here is that contemporary American writers, with neo-orientalist scholarship, hold the keys to unlocking the ways to Arab woman emancipation and empowerment. In a cultural context distinct from the Middle East-American relationship, Jones' discourse strikes the reader as eerily familiar. We are reminded always reminded of American talks, debates, and rhetoric on Arab woman's rights and the need for empowerment. Therefore, from Jones' perspective, readers can make the relation between neo-orientalism and liberal discourse and understand the liberal mobility of narratives to serve a cultural context by motivating a woman to liberate herself from the misogynist lifestyle and the grotesque male practices.

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