

**Muhammad Akram Nadwi:** *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam*  
 London and Oxford: Interface Publications; 2007, xxii+314 pp;  
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Originally conceived as the *muqaddimah* [Introduction] to a yet-to-be-published forty-volume biographical dictionary of Muslim women who studied and taught ḥadīth, *al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam* is an unusual book. It started as a translation of the *muqaddimah* of that yet-to-be-published biographical dictionary, but in the process of its translation, the author tells us, he realized that the material had to be adapted, not simply translated, for two reasons: (i) the main text was not available to the readers, and (ii) even if it were a real *muqaddimah*, its publication in English would still require adaptation because the expectations as well as the requisite preparedness of an English readership are different from the Arabic readership. The singularity of this book, however, goes much deeper than the aforementioned aspects.

*Al-Muḥaddithāt* brings to English readership the flavor of Islamic scholarship of the pre-modern age—a rarity in our times. It is a refreshing and unique work that demolishes many stereotypes about Muslim women, yet without this being its goal. It provides solid textual evidence for a high level participation of Muslim women in the making of classical Islamic heritage, but that, too, is not its main concern. It brings into sharp relief many strands of Islamic intellectual tradition, but that is not its main concern. Nadwi has brought to life a centuries-old milieu pulsating with spiritual and intellectual energy of the highest order, a cultural and social norm of a bygone era in which the main thrust of life was the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. This is a milieu in which lives are consumed by the supreme love for knowledge that binds the learner to the Creator and leads to facility in the Hereafter. It is a work that demands full attention, because it provides insights into the past in a manner that transcends usual demarcations of social and intellectual history. It is a book populated by men and women who travel thousands of miles to hear from a living narrator the word of the Prophet of Islam which they had themselves heard from another living person, who, in turn, had heard them from someone who had heard them from a Companion who had been in the company of the Prophet when he stated those words. This celebrated passion for verified knowledge, this intense concern for accuracy, this creative participation in the making of Islamic tradition comes fully

alive in this work which defies classification. It is not a preface, nor is it a fully executive and well-planned thesis of any sort. It is a work that creates a foretaste of what is to come.

Written by a fellow of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, trained at one of the most well-respected schools of traditional Islamic studies, the Nadwatul ‘Ulamā’, *al-Muḥaddithāt* is steeped in Islamic tradition but written in a refreshingly contemporary English that one associates with native speakers of England. It presents uncontested evidence of large-scale scholarly activity among women, but it does not attempt to defend Islam from attacks which conceive it as a misogynist social order, for “scholarly corrective will not suffice to end that vilification since it is not based upon truth, but upon aversion to Islam as such, perpetuating itself by seeking, and soon finding, instances of abuse of women (and other negatives like misgovernment, etc.) among Muslim communities (xii).”

A multitude of women and men populate this narrative. They discuss, interpret, argue, disagree, evaluate, and preserve the words of their beloved Prophet displaying mutual respect of the first order. Divided into ten chapters, *al-Muḥaddithāt* provides glimpses into the overall framework of scholarly tradition concerned with the study and transmission of the sayings of the Prophet. The first chapter deals with the legal conditions for narrating ḥadīth, the second is devoted to specific issues concerning women seekers and students of ḥadīth, the third is a superb reconstruction of the social and cultural milieu in which women studied. It is a vivid reconstruction of occasions, travels, and venues for ḥadīth studies. The fourth chapter describes teachers who taught women while the fifth discusses, in a chronological order, reading material. The sixth, seventh, and the eighth chapters specifically deal with the role of women in diffusion of knowledge concerned with ḥadīth literature. The ninth chapter is a chronological and geographical overview of ḥadīth studies, while the last chapter deals with the *fiqh* and *‘amal* of women scholars.

This rare account of traditional Islamic learning is a feast of the first order. What becomes abundantly clear through Nadwi’s reconstruction of the classical era of Islamic scholarship and learning is not only the apparent fact that women were very active participants in the creation and dissemination of knowledge, but also the not-so-obvious (at least to many contemporary critics of Islam) respect, prestige, and influence these women scholars enjoyed.

The book also provides numerous insights into the links that existed

between learning and action. In traditional Islamic societies, acquisition of knowledge is integrally linked with its function, which is to provide a solid foundation for action that facilitates one's entrance into the realm of Divine Mercy:

Qāsim ibn Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī said: 'We were at the door of Bishr ibn al-Ḥārith, he came [out] to us. We said: O Abū Naṣr, narrate ḥadīth to us. He said: Do you pay the zakāh [that is due] on ḥadīth? I said to him: O Abū Naṣr, is there zakāh [that is due] on ḥadīth? He said; Yes. When you hear ḥadīth or remembrance of God you should apply it.' (285-6)

The book would have benefited from greater editorial attention to ensure consistency and accuracy in transliteration and other matters of style.

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