

Unveiling the Intellectual and Spiritual Endeavours of Muslim Women in Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*

Akmaliza Abdullah*, Siti Norlina Muhammad, Adibah Muhtar, Nur Najwa Hanani Abd Rahman

*Academy of Islamic Civilisation, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM
Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia*

*Corresponding author: a_akmaliza@utm.my

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Abstract

This article explores the rich intellectual legacy of Muslim women, as documented in Ibn 'Asakir's renowned work *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq* to uncover their multifaceted contributions across diverse domains of scholarship. This study employs content analysis method to investigate biographical entries of Muslim women with a specific focus on Volume 80, which centres on *Tarajim al-Nisa'*. The study focuses on women's essential role in shaping the intellectual legacy, as well as their significant contributions to the intellectual endeavours, which encompassed the study of Quran, hadith transmission, Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic inheritance law, grammar, and others. Their scholarly activities extended beyond transcribing texts, thus depicting a broad range of their intellectual pursuits. Historical narratives illustrated Muslim women's intellectual journeys, which were often undertaken alongside male family members, highlighting their empowering commitment to knowledge and learning. The history of family-based learning had been emphasized in the Islamic intellectual legacy, with private households functioning as important educational institutions for women. The discussion within *Tarikh Ibn Asakir* also included prominent women who were actively involved in sufi teachings and practices. Finally, this paper sheds light on Muslim women's profound intellectual endeavours mentioned in *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*, highlighting their significant role in moulding the Muslim world's scholarly environment throughout history. It emphasized the Islamic tradition's long-standing devotion to knowledge and education, which includes women's vital contributions.

Keywords: Muslim prominent women, Intellectual endeavours, Islamic biographical dictionaries, *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Within the realm of Islamic historiography, *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq wa Dhikr Fadliha wa Tasmiyah man Hallaha min al-Amathil aw Ijyaz bi Nawabiba min Waridiba wa Ahliha* (henceforth, cited as *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*) emerges as a consequential biographical dictionary meticulously crafted by the esteemed hadith scholar and historian, Ibn ‘Asakir (499/1105-571/1176). The title inherently encapsulates the essence of the book as a historical account of Damascus City, paying tribute to its virtues, profiling noteworthy individuals among its residents and visitors, and elucidating their unique qualities and remarkable attributes.

Islamic biographical dictionaries, also known by few other names such as *tabaqat*, *siyar*, *tarajim*, *rijal*, *tarikb*, *wafayat*, *mu’jam* and *mashahir* are a uniquely indigenous product of the Islamic intellectual tradition. Modern historians have come out with different theories regarding the origin of this Islamic genre, some opt to relate it to hadith (Heffening 1987; Hafsi 1976; Roded 1994) and some to history (Gibb 1962, Rosenthal 1968). Some scholars trace the origins back to genealogy, or *al-ansab*, which was the expertise among the Arabs since the pre-Islamic period (Roded 1994). Biographical dictionaries which begin as an offshoot of the science of hadith, later on developed as a product of history. Yet, the writing of biographical dictionaries that developed into a different spectrum, still possessed strong influence of hadith elements, notably evident in the application of *isnad*. The early biographers' tendency to prioritize prominent religious scholars over other elite groups inevitably intertwined this genre with hadith and its sciences. Some biographical works, however, were not intended to serve the science of hadith and therefore do not include a complete *isnad*. As a historical genre, it is inevitable that the motive for writing biographical dictionaries is generally shared by most historian biographers, viz. to commemorate the people of the past who had excelled in their life. The preservation of their biographies is important to inspire the generations that come after with their moral and intellectual edification. It is noteworthy that biographical writing serves a popular need in a society, which loves to know stories of the Prophets, biographies of kings and rulers, life of scholars and those eminent of their time as well as of the past (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1992).

Ibn ‘Asakir's deep engagement with the fields of hadith and historical scholarship may have left an indelible mark on his work, *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*. Some contemporary historians, such as Heffening (1987) and Hafsi (1976), argued that biographical dictionaries can be viewed as a natural outgrowth of the science of hadith, while others, like Gibb (1962), suggested a close association between this genre and historical discourse. Gibb posits that they developed concurrently, inextricably linked with the craft of historical composition. Similarly, Rosenthal (1968) aligned with this perspective, asserting that biography constitutes an integral facet of historical literature within the Muslim historiographical tradition, an element that cannot be readily omitted when scrutinizing this corpus. Furthermore, some scholars have sought to trace the origins of these biographical dictionaries to the domain of genealogy, commonly referred to as *al-ansab* (Roded, 1994). This field had been a domain of expertise among the Arabs since the pre-Islamic era.

For the purposes of this study, our focus centres on the final volume of *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*, specifically Volume 80, denoted as *Tarajim al-Nisa'*. This volume is dedicated exclusively to women, comprising a comprehensive collection of 221 biographical entries out of a total of 10,226 entries in the entirety of the work. It encompasses a spectrum of eminent female scholars and notable women spanning from the pre-Islamic period through the Prophetic era to the time of Ibn ‘Asakir. These women garnered recognition for their contributions to the narration of hadith, their intellectual pursuits, their piety, physical beauty, their displays of courage, including their vocalization of grievances to ruling authorities, among other facets of their multifaceted lives. This is obvious in the introductory remarks to his *Tarajim al-Nisa'* as he says “This is a reminiscence that had reached me, of free women and slaves, who either have narration [of hadith] or poetry” (Ibn Asakir, 1998). Ibn ‘Asakir did not limit his selections to women who lived in Damascus, but he extended them to include those women who lived nearby and those who were known to have visited or pass through the city. Thus, his inclusion of ‘Arib al-Ma’muniyyah despite the fact that she was not born in Damascus and never resided there. Nevertheless, the information pertaining to her visit to the city with Caliph al-Ma’mun, qualified her to be inserted in Ibn ‘Asakir's *Tarajim al-Nisa'*.

However, this study exclusively focuses on women's intellectual and spiritual endeavours illuminating their vital contributions to the Islamic scholarly landscape. The enduring commitment to knowledge and education within the Islamic tradition, especially in the context of women's participation, is highlighted. This research underscores the central role women have played in shaping the intellectual heritage of the Muslim world and their substantial contributions to various scholarly fields.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs content analysis method to investigate biographical entries of Muslim women found in Ibn 'Asakir's renowned work, *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*, with a specific focus on Volume 80, which centers on *Tarajim al-Nisa'* (Ibn 'Asakir, 1982). Ibn 'Asakir divided the female notices into three categories or subheadings. First, biographees with proper names; second, biographies known by patronymics (*dbiker man dbukirat minhunna bi kunyatiba duna al-ta'rif laha bi tasmiyatiba*) and third the unknown biographees, with neither name nor patronymic (*wa min majbulat, ghayr al-musammiyat wa al-mukniyyat*). Except for the third category, Ibn 'Asakir adopted a consistent alphabetical organization throughout his *Tarajim al-Nisa'*. This method extends not only to the given names of individuals but also to the names of their fathers.

The entries themselves adhere to typical biographical formats, containing essential personal details such as full names including *kunyah*, *nisbah*, and *laqab*, along with a brief genealogy. Additionally, information regarding the subject's father, husband, and children is provided, along with philological notes on the correct forms of their names. Other details include the location of the subject's residence, date and place of birth, as well as date and place of death. Some entries also include Ibn 'Asakir's assessments of moral qualities, descriptions of the biographees' physical features, and remarks made about them by other prominent figures.

For the entries of scholars, he usually added informations on their education; teachers under whom they studies; hadith they transmitted; the status of hadith; their intellectual travels; persons who accompanied them during the travels; names of students who learned from them; the sciences in which they mastered; the places either the name of cities; mosques or private houses, where they gave and heard lectures; their intellectual qualities; the methodology they used to transmit the knowledge and the merit given by other great scholars.

Notably, within the original manuscript of Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarajim al-Nisa'*, there exist several blank pages, spanning from the biography of Buthaynah to that of Ramlah Bint Abi Sufyan, totaling 25 entries. To address this absence in the records, we also consulted Ibn Manzur's *Mukhtasar Tarikh Dimashq li Ibn 'Asakir* (1984) as a supplementary source.

For this study, we have specifically focused on a subset of 221 female biographical entries, selecting only those that pertain to their intellectual and spiritual pursuits. Utilizing thematic analysis, we have categorized these entries into seven distinct themes: the participation of Muslim women in the narration, transmission, and teaching of hadith; their engagement in fiqh and Islamic jurisprudence; their involvement in other branches of knowledge; their journeys undertaken in pursuit of knowledge; learning within the family context; the role of private residences as educational institutions for women; and their participation in sufism.

3.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The profound emphasis within Islam on the imperative pursuit of knowledge, a mandate applied universally to both men and women, has significantly fostered active female involvement within the domain of intellectual pursuits. While women in the Western world were grappling with the struggle for their right to education, Muslim women not only benefited from comprehensive educational opportunities but also ascended to esteemed positions as prominent educators, having a noteworthy impact on the scholarship of numerous renowned Muslim scholars. These women, in parallel with their male counterparts, channelled their intellectual energies into the scholarly domain, thereby demonstrating their substantial contributions.

3.1 The Intellectual Legacy of Muslim Women in Hadith

The historical record reflects few scholarly fields in which women have participated actively and significantly alongside men, particularly prior to modern time. However, the science of hadith represents a notable exception. In terms of Muslim women's areas of expertise, it is evident that hadith held a prominent place among the subjects of study and instruction for these female scholars (Nadvi, 2007). Throughout Islamic history, numerous eminent female traditionists have made significant contributions to this discipline. These women were esteemed and respected by their male counterparts, highlighting the inclusive nature of hadith scholarship. Biographical dictionaries of hadith transmitters and scholars extensively document the lives and contributions of these female scholars, elucidating their integral role in the preservation and transmission of hadith. This widespread inclusion of women in hadith scholarship illustrates a unique aspect of Islamic intellectual history, where gender did not preclude participation or recognition in the pursuit of religious knowledge. Siddiqi (1993) wrote,

History records few scholarly enterprises, at least before modern times, in which women have played an important and active role side by side with men. The science of hadith forms an outstanding exception in

this respect... At every period in Muslim history, there lived numerous eminent women-traditionists, treated by their brethren with reverence and respect. Biographical notices on very large numbers of them are to be found in the biographical dictionaries ...

Hadith, in fact, emerged as the prevailing field of choice for nearly all of the women scholars documented in *Tarajim al-Nisa'*. They involved themselves in the narration and teaching of hadith. Ibn 'Asakir's work presents biographies of around fifty women renowned as transmitters during the initial two centuries, with only two mentioned in the subsequent third and fourth centuries, and fifteen documented in the fifth and sixth centuries (Sayeed, 2013). Renowned figures such as 'Ammat al-'Aziz bint Muhammad bin al-Hasan al-Daylamiyyah, Umm Ahmad al-Ansariyyah, Sammanah bint Hamdan al-Anbariyyah, Ammat al-Salam Bint al-Qadi bin Kamil, and Umm Salamah bint Abi Bakr 'Abd'l-Lah bin Abi Dawud al-Sijistani were known for their noteworthy contributions to the narration and transmission of hadith. Asma' bint Abi Bakr for example, taught hadith and lessons on marriage to her son 'Abd'l-Lah bin al-Zubayr, 'Abd'l-Lah bin Mulaykah, 'Abd'l-Lah bin Kaysan, Fatimah bint al-Mundhir, Safiyyah bint al-Shaybah and Umm Kulthum (a *mamlah* or a slave girl of al-Hajabah) (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.).

3.2 The Engagement of Muslim Women in the Islamic Jurisprudence and Other Knowledge

The contributions of Muslim women to scholarly pursuits have often been overlooked. However, a closer examination reveals a rich tapestry of female involvement in various fields of Islamic knowledge, including *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), Quranic studies, and other disciplines. They achieved remarkable level of expertise and contribute substantially to the development of intellectual endeavours of their time. This depicts the multifaceted engagement of Muslim women in scholarly endeavors, drawing upon historical accounts to shed light on their achievements and the educational inclusivity fostered within Islamic societies.

Furthermore, beyond their engagement with hadith, there existed accomplished individuals who delved into the field of Islamic jurisprudence to such an extent that they earned recognition as *muftiyyah*, or jurist consults. Ibn 'Asakir recorded Umm 'Isa, as one of female scholars, whose depth of knowledge qualified her to edict authoritative fatwas in the field of *fiqh*. Another compelling illustration is provided by Ammat al-Wahid, also known as Bint al-Muhamili, who garnered recognition as one of the most erudite scholars, particularly within the framework of the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. Bint al-Muhamili's expertise elevated her to a position where she could issue fatwas alongside esteemed figures like Abi 'Ali bin Abi Hurayrah (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). It is reported that as an expertise, were there was no other scholar, she alone was adequate for the local women of her time, who needed consultation. She used to give lecture on *fiqh* to the veiled women (*al-nisa' al-mukhaddarat*) at her house (al-Khatib al-'Umri, 1987). Additionally, a select few women attained the esteemed status of *muftiyyah*, imparting authoritative fatwas in the field of Islamic jurisprudence.

Evidently, women's participation in the pursuit of knowledge transcended the boundaries of hadith and Islamic jurisprudence. Women had access to a wide range of intellectual activities, such as memorizing verses from the Quran, studying Islamic inheritance law and its complex calculation, and immersing in other subjects like grammar. The experiences of people like Bint al-Muhamili served as examples of this inclusiveness in education and intellectual activities. Furthermore, women like Zamrud actively participated in Quranic studies under the direction of Abi Muhammad bin Taws and Abu Bakr al-Qurtubi, in addition to learning from renowned jurists such as Abu al-Hasan bin Qays, Abi al-Fath Nasr'l-Lah bin Muhammad, and Abi Talib bin 'Uqayl al-Suri. Notably, Zamrud's scholarly pursuits encompassed transcribing of texts, depicting her all-encompassing participation in intellectual endeavours (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.).

3.3 Muslim Women's Travel in Pursuit of Knowledge

Apparently, historical accounts provide compelling instances of women in the past who traveled to various centers of Islamic learning, motivated by their passion to pursue knowledge and to impart the knowledge to others. Typically, these women undertook their intellectual ventures in the company of their male family members, mainly their husbands and fathers.

To illustrate this point, we had Fatimah bint Sa'd al-Khayr bin Muhammad bin Sahl al-Ansari al-Andalusi whose intellectual journey, took her to three significant centers of learning namely, Isfahan, Baghdad, and Damascus. Hailing from her home in Bahrain, she set out on her intellectual journey with the full support of her father. He, who recognized his daughter's ability, aided her learning journey by bringing her first to Isfahan, where she had the opportunity to attend lectures led by Fatimah bint 'Abd'l-Lah al-Juzdaniyyah. Later, she continued her educational pursuits in Baghdad, immersing herself in the study of hadith under the supervision of numerous notable scholars

including Hibat'l-Lah bin Ahmad al-Hariri (the father of Ibn 'Asakir), Ibn al-Samarqandi, Abi Bakr Ibn Sahr Hibah, Abi al-Ghalib bin al-Banna, Abi al-Barakat al-Anmati, Abi al-Faraj bin Yusuf, Abi al-Qasim Zahir bin Tahir, Abi Sa'd al-Baghdadi, Abi al-Fadl bin Nasir, Abi Mansur bin Khayrun, and Abi Mansur bin al-Jawaliqi, among others. Accompanied by her husband, 'Ali bin Naja al-Hanbali, later she travelled to Damascus (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). Another illustration of women's scholarly journeys is exemplified by Umm al-'Izz, Fatimah bint 'Abd al-'Aziz Abi Hasan al-Qadi bin 'Abd al-Rahman, who resided in Şūr. She started pursuing knowledge by learning hadith from Abi al-Husayn bin 'Ali al-Jawhari al-Mawsili in Tripoli and al-Qadi Abi al-Fadl Muhammad bin Ahmad bin 'Isa al-Sa 'di in Egypt (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.).

These accounts indicate women's profound commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, emphasizing their remarkable role in shaping the Islamic scholarly landscape. They contradict Ahmad Shalabi's argument that challenges of travel have hindered women's knowledge acquisition in the past. Shalabi's claim sought to reconcile between Islamic teachings, which do not place gender limits on knowledge acquisition, and the historical reality of fewer number of educated women compared to men. Munir-ud-Din Ahmed (1968) likewise said that the majority of women's travel was for pilgrimage purposes.

However, a closer examination, as presented in Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarajim al-Nisa'* (n.d.), reveals a more insightful picture. Women did not only perform pilgrimage multiple times in their lifetimes but also participated in battles and traveled to visit family members. Such journeys often included stops at intellectual centers along the way, as exemplified by 'Ammat al-'Aziz bint Muhammad bin Hasan al-Daylamiyyah's visit to Damascus during her hajj pilgrimage in 421/1030. Likewise, Zamrad bint Jawli bin 'Abd'l-Lah al-Khatun, sister of al-Malik al-Daqqaq Taj al-Dawlah, traveled from Baghdad to Mecca and back before settling in Mecca. These instances challenge the notion that travel served as a hindrance to the education of Muslim women, instead highlighting their proactive engagement with intellectual pursuits even during their journeys.

3.4 Family-Based Learning and Knowledge Transmission

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, a prevalent and noteworthy practice was the inter-family transmission of knowledge, particularly within the households of scholars. In fact, their homes served as the early institutions (Shoti, 2021) for imparting intellectual training to their progeny, many of whom would subsequently rise to prominence as scholars in the Islamic world. A wealth of evidence underscores the profound commitment of both male and female family members to educate their children and instil in them a passion for scholarship and learning.

For instance, 'Ammat al-'Aziz learned hadith from her father, Abi al-Faraj al-Asfirayini (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). Aminah and Asmā', the daughters of Muhammad bin al-Hasan bin Tahir al-Qurashiyah, received their initial education from their grandfather and later became educators themselves, teaching their own sons. The dedication to scholarship extended to fathers copying essential texts for their daughters, as exemplified by Aminah's father, who transcribed Kitab Sunan Abi Dawud for her (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.).

Fatimah bint al-Husayn bin 'Ali bin Abi Talib embarked on her scholarly journey by learning from her grandmother, father, aunt, and brother. She then passed down the hadith she had acquired to her sons, namely 'Abd'l-Lah al-Hasan, Ibrahim, and Muhammad (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). In several instances, both parents played pivotal roles in the education of their children, a collaborative effort clearly demonstrated by Umm al-Yaman al-'Ajaliyyah, who learned hadith from both of her parents and later assumed the responsibility of teaching her son, Abi al-Hasan bin al-Hinna'i (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). Ibn 'Asakir's wife engaged in teaching their children at home, and sometimes they shared this responsibility together. Al-Qasim, Ibn 'Asakir's son, attested to this harmonious parental effort, recollecting that "My parents - may Allah have mercy on them - narrated to me that Fatimah bint 'Ali bin al-Husayn bin Jidda said Abu al-Ghana'im Muhammad bin 'Ali narrated to us..." (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.).

This tradition of family-based education extended to grandparent-grandchild relationships as well. For instance, Umm Muhammad bin Sulayman bin Abi Darda' imbibed hadith knowledge from her grandmother, Umm al-Darda', and subsequently passed on this knowledge to her son, Muhammad. Likewise, Sitt al-'Ashirah bint 'Abd'l-Lah bin al-Hasan bin Ahmad al-Sulamiyyah received knowledge from her own grandfather, al-Qadi al-Khatib Abi 'Abd'l-Lah (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). These examples depicted the important role played by the Muslim scholars' households in inculcating the passion and devotion towards knowledge from generation to generation.

Inter-family education is a prominent and established practice in the intellectual tradition of Islam, particularly in the households of scholars. Ample historical evidences clearly portrayed that their own homes were early educational institutions for imparting knowledge to their offspring, many of whom went on to become renowned intellectuals of their time. Their enthusiasm and commitment to knowledge mastery extended across generations, with male and female family members alike, actively involved in educating their children. From fathers transcribing essential literary works for their daughters to grandparents transmitting hadith to their grandchildren, the home setting was

seen crucial in shaping the intellectual growth of future scholars. This multi-generational commitment emphasized the great and long-lasting impact of familial contexts on the transmission and preservation of knowledge within Islamic intellectual settings.

3.5 Knowledge Transmission to Muslim Women in Private Homes and Mosques

In Islamic intellectual tradition, private homes had always served as the main place where women get education. This customary practice highlights the fundamental role that domestic environment played in helping Muslim women shared knowledge with one another. It clarified the continued relevance of domestic spaces as important arenas for promoting intellectual development and knowledge dissemination by examining the importance of home-based learning in modern situations.

Notably, the house of Umm al-Darda' was known as one of the early institutions for women's education. Female students gathered to study Quran, hadith, reading, and writing. These learning activities were guided by Umm al-Darda' herself along with other scholars such as Abu Hurayrah al-Dawsi (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). Karimah bint Hashā al-Muzaniyyah, who lived in the seventh century recounted, "Abū Hurayrah al-Dawṣī taught us hadith in the house of this woman [Umm al-Darda']" (Kahhalah, n.d.). Moreover, Umm al-Darda's students participated in the *mudhakarah* sessions that Umm al-Darda's arranged, where scholars discussed hadith. It is noteworthy that these classes were not exclusive to women; as a matter of fact male students, such as Isma'il bin 'Ubayd'Lah bin Abi al-Muhajir, also participated.

It is narrated by Malik bin al-Huwayrith: We young men went to the Prophet to learn some blessed principles of din and stayed with him for 20 days. When we thought of returning (to our homes), the Prophet said, "Go back to your wives and children. Live with them, teach them and order them to practise their knowledge.

(Sahih Bukhari)

In accordance with the hadith tradition that encourages men to educate the female members of their families, Ibn 'Asakir extended an invitation to Fatimah bint 'Ali bin al-Husayn bin Jada, asking her to teach his wife within their home (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). He himself, on the other hand, had also learned from Fatimah bint 'Ali in her house (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.).

This intergenerational learning tradition within the Islamic intellectual heritage underscores the significance of private homes as the most vital educational institutions for women. It is worth noting that mosques also played a role in Muslim women's intellectual activities, as exemplified by Sitt al-'Ajam, Fatimah bint Sahl bin Bishr al-Asfara'īnī, who conducted sermons for women at the mosque in al-A'iziyah (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.). Nevertheless, there is no evidence in *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq* to suggest that female students were sent to *kuttub* or *madrasah*. The concept of home education is not new to the traditional Islamic learning. As a matter of fact, in the past, home was accepted as a more appropriate learning institutions for women, for it might accommodate them with space and time, to perform their responsibility towards family.

The striking point is that an equal opportunity was also given to jariyah in the matter of seeking knowledge.

The Prophet SAW says: He who has a slavegirl and teaches her manners and etiquette in the best possible way, then sets her free and marries her himself will get a double reward. (Sahih Bukhari)

This is obvious in the case of Hawā who was described as a *jariyah adibah*, and when she was asked by 'Ali bin Abī Tālib with regard to her quality, she answered: "I read Quran and I recite poetry" (Ibn 'Asakir, n.d.).

Through an analysis of Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarajim al-Nisa'*, we found the dynamics of women's education in traditional Islamic societies. It elucidates the inherent ethos of equal opportunity within the pursuit of knowledge, irrespective of gender and social hierarchies.

3.6 Women's Engagement in Sufi Tradition

Biographical dictionaries like *Tarikh Ibn 'Asakir* serve as pivotal sources revealing the significant contributions of women to sufism across the expanse of Islamic history. His work highlights the complex roles that women in the Sufi tradition play, highlighting their significant influence and involvement in intellectual and spiritual pursuits. While the female hadith transmitters and scholars had a significant place in Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarajim al-Nisa'*, it is evident that pious women and their inspiring stories had not been overlooked. Therefore, biographical dictionaries become vital sources of knowledge on female *sufis*, including their life stories, tenets, and the specifics of their spiritual practices. These texts, in particular, highlight the importance of private homes and *ribats* as significant establishments where *sufi* women gathered to participate in collective spiritual practices. Such spaces served as focal points for the cultivation

of devotion, communal solidarity, and the perpetuation of *ṣūfī* teachings among women, indicating their indispensable role within the broader *ṣūfī* tradition.

Most of the time, Ibn ‘Asakir employed the terminologies *abl al-‘ibadah* and *al-muta‘abbidah* to signify women who devoted their life to piety and asceticism. *Abl al-‘ibadah* and *al-muta‘abbidah* might slightly differ in terms of meaning as stated by Abū ‘Alī al-Daqqāq, a master of al-Qushayrī: “Servitude (*‘ubudīyyah*) is more perfect than worship (*‘ibadah*), so first comes worship then servitude, and finally adoration (*‘ubudah*).” He added, “Worship is for one who possesses the knowledge of certainty, servitude is for one who possesses the eye of certainty, and adoration is for one who possesses the truth of certainty.” (Al-Qushayrī, 1990).

However, in Ibn ‘Asakir’s *Tarājīm al-Nisā’*, there is also an indication to the term *ṣūfīyyah*, for example in the case of Umm Harun al-Khurasaniyyah, the teacher of Abu Sulayman al-Darani. She was depicted as wearing *jubbah* and *kebīmar*, that was made of *ṣūf* (coarse and undyed wool) and holding a *musabbahah* (Ibn ‘Asakir, n.d.). There are different views pertaining to the etymology of the term *ṣūfī* including the one who says that it comes from the word *ṣūf* or wool, which the *ṣūfīs* used to wear. Yet, one must note that, the outlook appearance can never be an accurate depiction in describing who is a *ṣūfī*. In fact, it contains a symbolic meaning of whiteness that signifies *ṣafā* or purity, which is another view as to the derivation of the term *ṣūfī* (Al-Qushayrī, 1990).

Within the Islamic tradition, equal opportunities are extended to both men and women in matters concerning religious and intellectual pursuits. Ibn ‘Asakir’s *Tarājīm al-Nisā’* provides us with ample evidence that in the path to attain spiritual happiness, men and women were equal. At times, men were the *ṣūfī* masters for the women and at another, vice versa. They helped and advised each other to reach the same goal. Umm Harun al-Khurasaniyyah was regarded as an *ustadhah*, or master of Abu Sulayman al-Darani (Ibn ‘Asakir, n.d.). Sulayman, Abu Sulayman’s son said that his aunt ‘Abdah was more reclused (*aṣḥab*) than his father (Ibn ‘Asakir, n.d.).

In *Tarīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, numerous anecdotes shed light on the doctrines and practices followed by female *ṣūfīs*. Among them were individuals characterized as devout worshippers deeply consumed by fear of hell and death. Al-Qushayrī (1990) defines *khawf*, or fear of Allah, as the apprehension of His punishment either in this life or the hereafter. Abu Sulayman (Ibn ‘Asakir, n.d.), narrated:

I recounted to my sister ‘Abdah the description of ‘Abdah, one of the bridges of Hell. Her reaction was immediate and intense; she screamed continuously for an entire day and night. Eventually, her screams subsided, but whenever the story was revisited, her terror would resurface, leading to renewed screams. When Ibn Abi al-Hawari inquired about the reason behind her distress, Abu Sulayman explained that she envisioned herself on the bridge, experiencing the terrifying sensation of it collapsing beneath her.

Abu Sulayman once asked Umm Harun: “Do you desire death?” “No”, she answered. “Why do you abhor the meeting with Allah?”. Then her tears flowed as she sobbed. She replied: “If I made mistakes to human being, I would not want to encounter him.” In another narration, “If I made mistakes to human being, I would not want to meet him, so how could I desire to encounter Allah when I am sinful?” (Ibn Asakir, n.d.; Ibn ‘Asakir, 1998; Ibn ‘Asakir, 2001).

As regards *tawakkal* or trust in Allah, Abu ‘Alī al-Hasan bin Habib al-Imam narrates a story about a devout woman who lived at Bab al-Jabiyyah in Dimashq. Being trustful in Allah, she continued her prayers though her house was on fire. When the husband complained that he was worried and asked her to pray against Ibn Ra’iq and his troop who started the burning of the city, she replied: “How could I pray against these people who will make me enjoin the rank of poor?” (Ibn ‘Asakir, n.d.)

It is worth to note that the female *ṣūfīs* did not only devote their life merely to spiritual practices but also they actively involved as transmitters of hadīths and jurists as it is evident in the case of Umm al-Darda’ al-Sughra. She was one of female leaders of *tabi‘īn* (*sayyidat al-tabi‘īn*) (Ahmad, 2023). The House of Umm al-Darda’ became an institution of learning as well as a place of worship, whence a group of devoted women and her companions would stay up at night and perform long prayears which resulted into the swelling of their feet. Umm al-Darda used to hold *majlis al-dhikr* in which she and a group of men and women would perform *dhikr* to Allah as a spiritual exercise that never bored her (Ibn ‘Asakir, n.d. Ibn ‘Asakir, 1998; Ibn ‘Asakir, 2001).

An illustrative account describes an anonymous devout woman who attended a *ṣūfī* gathering led by Ahmad b. Abi al-Hawari at a shrine in Syria. This shrine lacked a door and was instead enclosed by a curtain. From behind this veil, the woman introduced herself to Ibn al-Hawari, describing herself as lost. A series of spiritual inquiries and responses ensued between them, culminating in the woman collapsing. Ibn Abi al-Hawari then instructed a devout slave girl to ascertain her condition. Upon investigation, the slave girl reported that the woman had died. Found in her pocket was a patch inscribed with the words, "Shroud me in my clothes. If Allah deems me virtuous, He will replace them with a finer garment. If not, He will punish me." (Ibn ‘Asakir, n.d.; Ibn ‘Asakir, 1987)

In addition to intellectual pursuits, the path of sufism exemplifies the absence of inherent superiority based on gender. Within *ṣūfī* traditions, there are instances where men ascend to the role of spiritual masters, while at other times, women assume this esteemed position. Indeed, it is intriguing to note that some female *ṣūfīs* were not as secluded or isolated as commonly perceived. Despite the prevalent stereotype of *ṣūfī* women leading solitary and reclusive lives, historical records reveal instances where they actively engaged with society, participating in various public spheres beyond the confines of their enclosed environments. As a matter of fact, identifying as *ṣūfīs* did not necessarily entail an exclusive dedication to *ṣūfī* practices throughout their entire lives. Many *ṣūfīs* balanced their spiritual attainments with daily activities, engaging in roles beyond the realm of sufism. Some of them were not only devoted to the life of sufism per se, but they were also regarded as hadith transmitters and jurists. This finding contradicts common notion about female *ṣūfīs'* lifestyles that mostly focus on the spiritual aspect with little emphasis given to other roles within their community.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Historical circumstances found in biographical dictionaries provide rich information pertaining to various aspects of women in the Islamic history. Augmented sources and extant writings written by Muslim scholars of the past specifically on the subject of women, would furnish us with a clearer picture and enhance the understanding of their role and achievements particularly in the intellectual as well as *ṣūfī* realm. These documents could be perceived as important sources for ongoing research on Muslim women.

Taking Ibn 'Asakir's *Tarajim al-Nisā'*, a chapter dedicated to eminent Damascus women, as a focus of analysis, delineates their devotion to the Islamic scholarship and learning including their involvement both as students as well as teachers of famous scholars, not to mention held position as *muftīyyah*. Evidently, they excelled in various disciplines, such as Quranic studies, hadith transmission, Islamic jurisprudence, and grammar. In addition to that, we found the inclusion of a number of female *ṣūfīs* who devoted their life to piety and asceticism. Their diverse roles reflect Islam's strong emphasis on knowledge and education, as well as sufism, which is open to both men and women alike without any form of discrimination.

Furthermore, the article emphasizes Muslim women's dedication to knowledge and learning, which is demonstrated by their regular visits to Islamic scholarship centers. These intellectual travels, which are often done with male family members, demonstrate their dedication to learning and sharing knowledge. Furthermore, the history of family-based learning highlights the significance of private homes as primary educational institutions for women, conserving knowledge between generations. To recapitulate, Muslim women's intellectual contributions, as documented in *Tarikh Madinah Dimashq*, bear witness to the rich and inclusive intellectual history of the Islamic tradition, emphasizing women's critical role in shaping the scholarly landscape of Muslim history.

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