



# The Wives of Prophet Muhammad

Tamam Kahn

**T**hese poems are drawn from an unpublished manuscript with the working title *Uncovered: The Wives of Prophet Muhammad*. Through poetry linked by storytelling, these nearly unknown women are brought to life. I am fortunate to have good resources: my love of history and the craft of poetry; rudimentary Qu'ranic Arabic study; scholarly guidance; three decades as a seeker on the path of Sufism, and partnership as the wife of Pir Shabda Kahn of the Sufi Ruhaniat International. The responsibility and gratitude I feel toward these women continues to grow with each passing day. I am learning to trust in Allah, and mindfully "tie my camel."

The project was conceived after an inspired time with Moroccan Sufi women, sharing their bold, joyful dhikrs. I began to research the Prophet's wives, and was drawn into historically-based poems. The Odyssey is an example. How many ways is Penelope portrayed waiting for Odysseus by poets past and present? There is a European precedent for entering the psyche of a famous figure within a historical landscape. Not so with Islamic history. The traditional way to step into a Wife of the Prophet's narrative is to follow the hadith (the sayings or lineage from authenticated oral historians of Muhammad's time). No intuitive imagination is allowed. Nothing can be added, nothing taken away. I respectfully endeavor to move this further along, to glimpse and share the lives of these amazing and powerful women who witnessed Muhammad's daily life at a time when "Islam" meant peaceful surrender of one's heart to God. Bismillah...

In dialogue with my good friend Arthur Buehler, Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, he gave his vantage point, which recognized what I had hoped to express in these poems.

*Tamam has created a new genre of Islamic literature. Through her poetry she draws us to the Wives of the Prophet by illustrating, exemplifying, and embodying living human beings. It recalls the night Khadija consoled Muhammad after he had his first revelation; we are alongside the brave-but-stranded Aisha in the desert; and we experience the subtleties of Muhammad drinking honey with Zaynab. As these mothers escape from their textual imprisonment, radiant, empowered human faces and hearts appear — with their hopes, jealousies, and earthly frailties intact. Immediately the Muslim puritan depiction of deficient, threatening, and subservient women collapses in its own falsehood. What clearly emerges is women actively involved in the socio-political life of the early community, urging, even demanding, many of the qur'anic reforms that eventually came about. Tamam's vibrant words provide a doorway to feel with the Mothers of Islam. In this fashion, Wives of the Prophet is about healing from the heart — one is invited to read it with reverence and joy.*

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## Muhammad comes to collect his salary

This is how history begins: lightning,  
a shawl of cloud, perfume.

Fresh split  
and burning like a green date-palm,  
Khadija waits in wood smoke  
as if grazed by lightning. The man  
is standing before her, she sees him  
outlined by a blue and white alphabet.

He says, *good morning*,  
she waits as the Names open, to hear them  
cool the air.

Amin. Ahmad. Hamid. Mahmood.  
*Muhammad, the Mercy to the Worlds<sup>1</sup>*

The man is speaking.  
He waits quietly for her reply.

*Khadija! Answer him. Love him well.  
You will be to him the one white shade  
cloud overhead at noon.*

Khadija places the silver coins  
in the *hudah's* hand.

Her fingers quiver, he notices that  
she smells delicious and faintly of smoke.

*Amin... Mahmood – names of Muhammad  
hudah – leader of the caravan  
“faintly of smoke” – In Arabia, at that time, women used  
to perfume themselves with incense.*

*Khadija was the only wife of Muhammad for twenty-five  
years. She was there before Revelation, and supported  
his spiritual work. She ran a very successful business,  
as well as raising four daughters. Khadija hired Muham-  
mad, when he was a young man, to take her merchan-  
dise to Syria. After the business trip, she proposed to  
him.*

## It's late but everything comes next

(title from Naomi Shihab Nye's poem: Jerusalem)

Fatima can't believe her eyes.  
Above the beekeeper  
pulses a crown of bees. Signs are everywhere;  
camel tracks, even the flies  
that trail them - iridescent.  
Well water silvers like a splash of minnows into  
every pail.  
No one seems to notice.  
Her father's smile is whiter than his turban.  
He straps on his pack and water skin, and  
lifts her goodbye, then bends to set her down.  
He turns to leave. *It's late. I have a long trek to the  
cave. It will be dark soon.*

*Be helpful to your mother.*

She inhales in little sniffs to keep his  
smell.

She wants to run after him – as if  
a dash of speed right then  
might make him stay.

She's staying put, and exhales.

His long shadow  
is being rubbed away by light.

His sandals twinkle,  
as if it's all a joke on her, perception's trick.  
She grabs Khadija's hand.

*There's something with him, Mama. Something  
that isn't us.*



*Fatima was a child when her father, Muhammad, went  
on retreat. There he was squeezed and forced to recite  
by Angel Gabriel. This was the beginning of the voice  
of God pouring through him, the first moments of the  
Qur'an. Fatima was very close to him, known much  
later as “the Mother of Her Father.”*

## Aisha and the invisible fire

*I had scarcely noticed her in the doorway of my room...  
when I knew he would see her as I did.*

Ibn Ishaq Sira<sup>2</sup>

She has the look of—by Allah!—  
a woman to rescue,  
this battle captive with *Rasoul*,  
and when they meet I'm here to see  
her shimmer, to feel her steal  
my time with him.  
She wets her lips, speaks legalese,  
the syllables are running water;  
gold bracelets on her arms move  
like heat lightning. He offers  
marriage and a name: *to save you  
from tragedy*, he says.<sup>3</sup> *Juwayriya*, he says.

I've learned to sit through jealousy,  
wrapped in tact, while fire scorches  
every tender part that claims him. He  
sends her out, sees what I feel,  
eyes are kind. He asks,  
*Humaira, did you burn the meal?*

*Humaira* – little reddish one (Muhammad's nickname  
for Aisha).

*ar-Rasoul* – Messenger of God.

*The Story of Juwayriya.* "This tradition was given to us by  
Ziyad b. 'Abdullah al-Bakkai from Muhammad b. Ishaq  
from Muhammad b. Ja'far b. al-Zubayr from 'Urwa  
from Aisha."

After Khadija's death, Muhammad moved from Mecca  
to Medina and began to marry other women for reasons  
of alliance-making and sometimes for love. This poem is  
very close to the hadith (mentioned in the notes), and  
tells how Juwayriya pleaded her case to be ransomed  
and freed, as daughter of the leader of the conquered  
people. The sentiment speaks to the difficulties Aisha  
suffered from sharing her husband.

## Zaynab and the honey

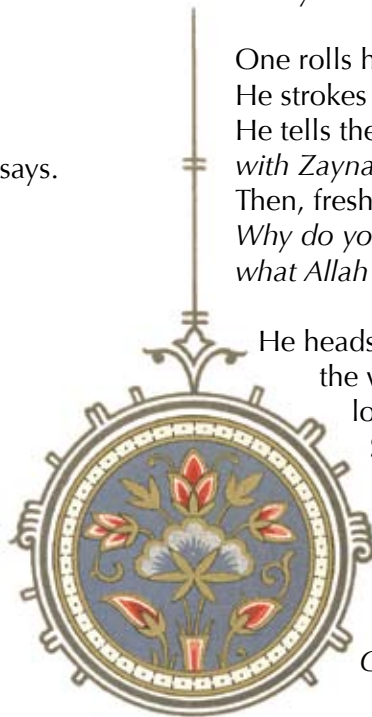
He utters *oh*, with his  
eyes closed, then starts to laugh.  
She sits across from him and pours.  
The cup is small.  
Whoever heard of drinking honey straight?

The door ajar, a blur of skirts and whispers.  
the taller one pulls the other girl away.  
*Forget them. Just say —*  
Husband, your breath stinks of manna gum.  
*I'll say it too.*

One rolls her eyes, the other holds her nose.  
He strokes his beard and his beard is sticky. Oh.  
He tells them: *I have drunk honey  
with Zaynab bint Jahsh. I won't do it again.*<sup>4</sup>  
Then, fresh from God:  
*Why do you make forbidden  
what Allah has made lawful for you?*<sup>5</sup>

He heads back to Zaynab's.  
the word *delicious* sounds better spoken  
loudly.

She asks if he'd like to sip from her  
cupped hands.  
Her wide smile. The perfect, straight  
white teeth. The words:  
*Messenger of Allah, may this sweeten  
our days and nights.*  
*Oh.*



When Muhammad fell in love with Zaynab, his cousin  
and a married woman, he was seen at his most vulner-  
able. He was saved from scandal when her husband  
left and Revelation told Muhammad to marry her, but  
the other wives were anything but pleased. So young  
wives, Aisha and Hafsa, pulled a prank which was  
successful – until Revelation once again supported his  
connection with Zaynab.

## Safiyyah's fall

They run alongside the camel, hungry  
for Muhammad home from the rout;  
townspeople, his family, all shouting,  
as-salaam alaykum! When his animal stumbles,

the woman rolls out of the Prophet's mantle,  
her head and shoulders in the gray dirt.  
What they see of his new Jewish wife is meant  
for his eyes. They keep on looking at the uncon-  
cealed

woman, spilled out, bruised. They stare at her  
ankle, cheek,  
leg, shoulder, arm, neck, all the shock of luxurious  
curls,  
at the trickle of blood down her arm. Safiyyah will  
spend the rest of her life dusting herself off, getting  
up,

again and again as if tripped by the shadow –  
Sarah's words to Hagar – I'll stay, you have to go.



*Safiyyah was from a Jewish family in the neighboring city of Khybar, and the wife and daughter of Muhammad's enemies. She had a powerful dream of Muhammad while still married to Khybar's general, and was happy to convert and marry the Prophet when the city fell to his soldiers. Here was the daughter of Sarah's side of Abraham's family, marrying Hagar's descendent, Muhammad.<sup>6</sup>*

## Hafsa's Qur'an

Marwan, governor of Medina... sent a courier to Hafsa  
asking for the folios but she refused him...

Anas ibn Malik<sup>7</sup>

*Hold on. I accept no command, bribe  
or persuasion  
I do not vacillate. Tell The Governor I say no, and  
you can leave now.*

I am the Prophet's librarian.  
And this is the book: *al-Kitab*.  
The only set of Abu Bakr's folios –  
the first copy of God's kiss.

The ink hums against my very skin.  
I am *the Mother Who Reads*. I'm the Prophet's  
librarian. Blessed by *al-Kitab*  
which, after the last companion's gone,  
may still wash believers in Word-of-God Arabic,  
a printed alembic architecture of light.

Written on palm stalk, shoulder-bone-of-camel,  
and memory; then copied to parchment  
and swaddled with a length of  
green cloth, this first *Qur'an* was passed  
from my father Umar, to Uthman,  
to me. Between the leaves - Revelation.

How little you fathom this,  
Marwan. You, who'll distinguish  
yourself  
as the one to grab and shred  
and burn the first *Qur'an*  
(may the copies rise and multiply),  
as I'm shrouded with a clean sheet and  
lowered into the earth.

*al-kitab* – the (a) book, any book.

*This was a wonderful poem to write! It takes place after Muhammad died, when those who knew the Qur'an by heart were becoming fewer, and Umar (the second Caliph) suggested to Abu Bakr, (the First Caliph) the collecting of Qur'anic words from "camel shoulder bones" etc. Armed with the hadith, I began to imagine what Hafsa might have said. She was Umar's daughter and Muhammad's wife. Her father had made sure she knew how to read and write, which was a valuable and rare asset in this group of people. Uthman, the Third Caliph, was her uncle. He entrusted her with the book and luckily she had it copied, since Marwan really did have it burned when she died.*

## Calamity (Umm Salama's nightmare)

The Prophet unwraps his turban  
and throws dirt on his head.<sup>8</sup>

She's shaken, waking from this.  
It's just a dream, for God's sake.  
Husband, Allah's Messenger,  
dead for fifty years, and all,  
her mattress screaming: *al-qari'ah* - calamity!  
She knows that verse:

*What can tell you of the qari'ah?  
A day people are like scattered moths,  
and mountains - fluffed carded wool*

She makes ablution, *salat*, and says to herself:

*Daylight now, the mountains look fine  
and people around here,  
most of them lack the sense of moths,  
don't know fire and light from darkness.*

*There should be messengers from Persia  
coming,  
with five days of hard riding  
unless I dreamed the whole thing up.*

She tells her mattress to shut up,  
invokes the Protector,  
but *al-qar'iah's* alarm goes on.  
Karbala bleeds, she feels it is true.  
The heads on lances, a slew of them,  
Husain's own tossed in his daughter's lap-  
The girl, Ruqiyya, a little thing,  
the shock must have killed her. She mutters:

*Don't let them see you like this.  
Pull a cloth over your head, old woman.  
Dress in black. This is your family.  
One day soon, millions of them.  
It's a time of idiots  
who kill the Prophet's family in his name.  
No one gets over it.*

*Karbala, the place Husain, grandson of the Prophet was  
martyred.<sup>9</sup>  
al-qar'ia means, "the calamity."*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Qur'an 21:102.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Ishraq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Guillaume, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2003, p. 793.

<sup>3</sup> Fida Hussain Malik, *Wives of the Prophet*, (Delhi: Taj Company Publishers), 1997, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Sa'd, *Muhammad, The Women of Medina*, (London: Taha Publishers, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Qur'an 66:3. The story came from *The Alim* on CD-ROM, (Microsoft Windows Internet Edition, ISL Software), 2000, al-Bukhari, 6:434.

<sup>6</sup> The hadith of the "falling story" from *The Alim*, al-Bukhari, originally from Anas bin Malik, 8:204.

<sup>7</sup> The hadith from *The Alim*, al-Bukhari, Anas ibn Malik, 6:183-184.

<sup>8</sup> Fida Hussain Malik, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Qur'an 101:1-5.



**Tamam Kahn**, on the Sufi path since 1975, is married to Pir Shabda Kahn, head of the Sufi Ruhaniat International. She is a poet and writer and editor-in-chief of *The Sound*, a Sufi Newsletter for the West. She has taught poetry for a decade. Tamam and Shabda have taken groups to Morocco, Damascus, and India, visiting dargahs of Sufi saints and sharing zikrs with local Sufis of various lineages. At present, Tamam is completing her book, *The Wives of the Prophet*. <http://www.completeword.com>