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Author(s): Boutheina Khaldi

Affiliation(s): American University of Sharjah, UAE.

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Modern Salafism in Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’s Journey to the Ḥijᾱz

Boutheina Khaldi∗
Department of Arabic and Translation Studies.
American University of Sharjah, UAE

Abstract

In 1972, the Egyptian literary scholar and Islamic thinker, ’Āʾisha ’Abd al-Rahmān (known by the epithet Bint al-Shāṭiʾ), published a highly informative account of her pilgrimage journeys, ’Umra and Ḥajj, respectively, under the title, Arḍ al-mu ḥāṣaf: rihla fī jazīrat al- ’Arab (Land of Miracles: Journey in the Arabian Peninsula, 1951 and 1972). The article argues that Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’s pilgrimage account should be read in light of the political and economic changes that the Arab and Islamic world was undergoing at that time. Western Imperialism, and the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and its aftermath, gave more impetus to Islamic revivalism, and Bint al-Shāṭiʾ was one of its proponents. Her œuvre on Islam and anti-Zionism attests to her revivalist project. As a Salafist thinker well versed in history, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ advocates a return to the original Islam. Only through that return to the Qurān and Sunna and strong devotion to the umma can Muslims regain their strength and defeat the State of Israel. Bint al-Shāṭiʾ uses the communal aspect of pilgrimage to readdress the concept of Jihād that should not only be confined to Ḥajj and ’Umra, but equally performed against social and political injustices, such as the marginalization of women and the Israeli aggression against Palestinians. The article thus contends that Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’s pilgrimage narrative is a key component of her commitment literature.

Keywords: Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, pilgrimage, Jihād, Salafism, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, women’s education, Zionism

Introduction

Notwithstanding the ongoing burgeoning interest in the works of Bint al-Shāṭiʾ (1913-1998), no single study has examined her pilgrimage account to the Ḥijᾱz in full.1 This article seeks to remedy this lack. Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’s travel account is unique. Indeed, it is two travelogues in one. It is comprised of her ’Umra (lesser pilgrimage) 1951 account titled Rihla il-Jazῑrat al-’Arab (A Journey to the Arabian Peninsula) and her Ḥajj account from 1972 titled Liqāʾ ma’ a l-Tarīkh (Encounter with

∗Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Boutheina Khaldi, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates at bkhaldi@aus.edu.

She propounds the Islamization of the Arab-generations with a lost identity and divided loyalty. Has destroyed our homes and torn our unity asunder trying to prepare for the Nakba she calls “Zionist cancer” which, in her estimation, is “associated with intellectual imperialism which
Middle Eastern Studies
Nakba: The Search
Malᾱyῑn, 1986), 16; See also Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, “Arab Intellectuals and al-
- Fundamentalism,”
Jihad: An Introduction,”
Only by returning to the pristine Islam of
al-
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Shāṭiʾ,
She espouses instead Islamic revivalism based on the tenets of Salafism. Only by returning to the pristine Islam of al-salaf al-sālih (the righteous forefathers) who lived with— and immediately after— the Prophet Muḥammad could Muslims regain their strength and be on par with the West. “The past should guide us (yahdῑ khuṭᾱnᾱ),” Bint al-Shāṭiʿ argues. Modernity is not incompatible with Islam. Indeed, it is an integral part of it, she elucidates.
Bint al-Shāṭiʿ ascribes the Arab defeat against Israel, what she refers to as “the dejected reality that the Muslim umma (community of believers) lives through,” to the Western imported ideologies embraced by the Arab world. She espouses instead Islamic revivalism based on the tenets of Salafism. Only by returning to the pristine Islam of al-salaf al-sālih (the righteous forefathers) who lived with— and immediately after— the Prophet Muḥammad could Muslims regain their strength and be on par with the West. “The past should guide us (yahdῑ khuṭᾱnᾱ),” Bint al-Shāṭiʿ argues. Modernity is not incompatible with Islam. Indeed, it is an integral part of it, she elucidates. The regression of Muslims is not ascribed to Islam per se, Bint al-Shāṭiʿ contends, but to extraneous elements that were accrued by later Muslim generations that drifted away from true Islam, which need to be purified.
Bint al-Shāṭiʿ urges the Arab Islamic community to come together to defend itself against what she calls “Zionist cancer” which, in her estimation, is “associated with intellectual imperialism which has destroyed our homes and torn our unity asunder trying to prepare for the Nakba (disaster) a generation with a lost identity and divided loyalty.” She propounds the Islamization of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the only alternative to overcome the Arab defeat and unite the umma. Islamic

3Dr. Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, al-Isrᾱ́ ʿiliyyᾱ́ fī l-ghazw al-fikrῑ (Cairo: Maʿad al-Buḥūth wal-Dirūsᾱ́t al-
4Dr. Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, Maʿa l-Muṣṭafᾱ (Beirut: Dār al-Kitᾱb al-ʿArabī, 1972), 11.
5Dr. Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, al-Shakhshiyya l-Islᾱmiyya: Dirᾱsᾱ l-Qurʾㄋīn (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil-
6Dr. Bint al-Shāṭiʿ, Maʿa l-Muṣṭafᾱ, 12.
identity (\textit{huwiyya Islᾱmiyya}), an inclusive concept that does not have national borders, should supplant an ethnic one (\textit{huwiyya qawmiyya}) to counter the Jewish state created by Israel.\textsuperscript{10} For as Bint al-Shāṭiʾ stipulates: “It is only in the adversities of the present that the past manifests itself. We can breathe the fragrance of history with the Prophet Muḥammad only mixed with the dejected reality that the Muslim community lives through.”\textsuperscript{11}

By interweaving the Israeli occupation of Palestine, “the dejected reality that the Muslim community lives through,” into a religious framework, viz., the travelogue, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ seeks to galvanize the Arab-Islamic world and revitalize and renew its national consciousness. She purports not only to cultivate individual piety, but also to effect socio-political change. Scholarship for Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, to borrow her own words, is thus an act of devotion, “\textit{jihᾱd wa- ḕibᾱda} carried by the pen.”\textsuperscript{12} She stipulates: “Let my words inflame the anger of my fellow compatriots and my Islamic community against Zionism’s presence in the land of prophecies…They are the only ones whom I ask to defend us against this viral disease and protect our honor from the shame of the Zionist occupation. The only resort left for me, in this critical period of our history, is to struggle with the pen.”\textsuperscript{13}

Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’ s oeuvre should be considered and studied as such. This article thus argues that Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’ s pilgrimage narrative is a key component of her commitment literature, what she refers to as “\textit{adab al-jihᾱd},”\textsuperscript{14} and it provides a strong heuristic for comprehending the true essence of Islam as perceived by her. Aware of the wisdom of Ḥajj “to foster a shared sense of identity and communal belonging (\textit{tarsῑkh shu’ῡrinᾱ bi- waḥdat al-intimᾱʾ}) to the Qur’ān community (\textit{ummat al-Qurʾān}),”\textsuperscript{15} Bint al-Shāṭiʾ positions the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a cause for all Muslims everywhere.

While displaying animus toward the state of Israel and its ideology, Zionism (Ṣuhyῡniyya), Bint al-Shāṭiʾ criticizes Saudi reactionaries for resisting modernity and deviating from the progressive nature of Islam. Only through their return to the Qur’ān and Sunna and devotion to the \textit{umma} could Muslims regain their strength and defeat the State of Israel.

\section*{2. A Lifelong Journey with Islam}

At an early age, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ received a traditional education in a \textit{kuttāb} (Qurʾānic School) and at home.\textsuperscript{16} She memorized the Holy Qur’ān, studied the fundamental principles of Islam and the Arabic language and sciences. Formal religious education during that period was not an option for


\textsuperscript{11}Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, \textit{Maʿa l-Muṣṭafᾱ}, 11.

\textsuperscript{12}Bint al- Shāṭiʾ, \textit{Arḍ al-Mu`jizāt}, 99.

\textsuperscript{13}Dr. Bint al- Shāṭiʾ, \textit{A’dᾱ l-Bashar} (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿlā lil-Shuʿῡn al-Islᾱmiyya, 1968), 181; see also Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, \textit{al-Shakhşiyyya l-Islᾱmiyya}, 12; Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, \textit{al-Islᾱrᾱ l-īlyyᾱt}, 10.

\textsuperscript{14}Dr. Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, \textit{Turᾱthunᾱ bayna mᾱḍin wa Ḥᾱdırin} (Cairo: Maʿa had al-Buḥῡth wa-Dirῡsᾱt al-ʿArabiyya, 1968), 121.

\textsuperscript{15}Bint al- Shāṭiʾ, \textit{Arḍ al-Mu`jizᾱt}, 121.

Bint al-Shāṭi'; women were admitted to al-Azhar University only in 1962, and indeed, Bint al-Shāṭi’ was the first woman ever to lecture there.  

Bint al-Shāṭi’’s informal religious education along with her academic training at Cairo University as a graduate student under the tutelage of her professor and later husband, Amīn Khūlī (d. 1966), shaped her interest in Qur’ānic studies. As Bint al-Shāṭi’ expounded: “Since my professor Amīn Khūlī showed me the spacious horizon to which I aspired in my Qur’ānic studies and guided me into the difficult path to disclose the secrets of the miraculous eloquence of the Qur’ān, I have spent my academic life with the Prophet.” Bint al-Shāṭi’’s journey in her study of Islam would not be complete without a journey to the Hijāz. Prompted by both religious obligation and intellectual motivation, she admits that a physical journey was necessary to gain full knowledge of the Hijāz and its history. As she expounded: “We, those who studied Arabic sciences and Islam, should be pleased if our journey could be extended to the regions of the peninsula that we lived all our lives studying its language and poetry, fancying its desert, narrow mountains passes, and campsites, and accompanying its poets and vagabonds.”  

Bint al-Shāṭi’ was driven by a fervid curiosity to know and explore the way Arabia adopted modernity and engaged with it, and the challenges it encountered. It is interesting that for her authenticity is only achieved by “see[ing] with my own eyes.” We discern here a tendency to locate the authentic outside books. The desire for unmediated experience is thus desired and pursued through an authentic engagement with the place, which is the Hijāz. Bint al-Shāṭi’ perceives herself as part of an intellectual community and an active female contributor—not just a consumer—to the ongoing intellectual climate of ideas. She authors her own sojourn and records her own perspective qua woman. As une écrivaine engagée whose role is to effect change, she engages in social and political issues that are affecting the Islamic umma. In doing so, she proffers the reader new valuable insights into the pilgrimage literature and the Hijāz.

3. “The Land of Miracles” Past and Present

As a modernist Salafist, evoking the past is essential for Bint al-Shāṭi’ as it is “only in the adversities of the present that the past manifests itself.” The dejected reality of the Muslim community entails undergoing a return to the pristine Islam to understand what went wrong along the way, she argues. Bint al-Shāṭi’’s travel narrative transfers the reader squarely back to the past and lets the reader personally discern the un-Islamic practices that have been accepted unquestionably in the name of Islam and led to the stagnation of the Muslim umma. By bringing the past to life, she enlightens the reader about the true essence of Islam and implicitly censures the patriarchy for steering away from the path of true Islam.  

As the cradle of Islam and Arab civilization, Arabia was the first area to be affected by the changes the Islam made. Arabia has been the “land of miracles” (Ard al-Mu’jizāt), Bint al-Shāṭi’ explains. The first miracle can be traced back to the early 7th century when the Prophet Muḥammad received his first revelations in Mecca, the spiritual center of Islam. The miraculous Qur’ān, as Bint al-Shāṭi’ stipulates, is a liberating text that “directed history and liberated man. It is the light that delivered humanity from ignorance (layl al-Jāhiliyya) to the noble ideals of truth, benevolence, and…  

18Bint al-Shāṭi’, Ma’a l-Muṣṭafā, 11.
20Ibid.
21Bint al-Shāṭi’, Ma’a l-Muṣṭafā, 11.
22Bint al-Shāṭi’, Ard al-mu’jizāt, 7.
beauty.”23 The emergence of Islam thus “revolutionized the entire realm of human life and its religious, intellectual, social, political, and economic aspects.”24

The second miracle was the discovery of oil in 1938 which brought about modernity through the Western foreigners who came to extract the oil. To be sure, Egypt’s reception of modernity was different from that in Saudi Arabia. While modernity in Egypt was a fait accompli, it was viewed with suspicion by the Saudi conservative society.25 A conservative modernist herself, Bint al-Shâṭiʾ extols King ’Abdul ’Azīz (r. 1932-1953) for “resisting the seduction of the West (finat al-firinha)”26 by “accommodating modernity within a true sense of authentic Islamic identity and culture.”27 Cognizant of the Imperialist underpinnings of modernity, King ’Abdul ’Azīz placed restrictions on the movement of foreign laborers.28

By disentangling modernity from Westernization, Bint al-Shâṭiʾ, like King ’Abdul ’Azīz, argues that Saudi Arabia can adopt modernity without losing its own important cultural value system. “The adoption of modern science and technology,” according to Bint al-Shâṭiʾ, “meant reclaiming the Islamic heritage, since modern European science had its origins in classical Islamic learning.”29 “Americans have not defeated the Arabs,” she contends. “Filled with doubt and caution, piercing black eyes are still following those strangers, guarding the heritage of the Arabian Peninsula, Arab customs and traditions, and Islam from the pretexts for invasion.”30 Tradition and modernity can co-exist, Bint al-Shâṭiʾ declares. As a matter of fact, modernity can strengthen-- and be strengthened by that same tradition and its strengths.

4. Claiming Intellectual Authority for Herself

In all her publications, including her travelogue, Bint al-Shâṭiʾ does mention her academic credentials and affiliation. She is a Professor of Qurʾānic Studies at Qarawiyyīn University in Fez. In a television interview, the Egyptian poet and television presenter Fᾱrῡq Shῡsha (d. 2016) asked her why she always affiliates herself with the Qarawiyyīn University when she has multiple affiliations.31 Bint al-Shâṭiʾ responded that she does so “intentionally to confront those…who deliver formal opinions about Islam and write on Qurʾānic exegesis when they are not qualified to teach a Qurʾān lesson in the lowest elementary school (katātīb).” She further added: “There is a principle in the Islamic School to which I belong that says: ‘Indeed this knowledge is faith, so carefully consider from whom you take your faith.’”32 By reminding the reader of her expertise and erudition in a domain that has been culturally perceived as an exclusive male prerogative, Bint al-Shâṭiʾ not only

23Ibid.
26Bint al- Shâṭiʾ, Ard al-Mu’ jizāt, 56.
28Bint al- Shâṭiʾ, Ard al-Mu’ jizāt, 55-6.
30Bint al- Shâṭiʾ, Ard al-Mu’ jizāt, 55.
31Shūsha’s interview with Bint al- Shâṭiʾ, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miYJaR3Y1DY
32Ibid.
gains the attention of the reader, but also legitimizes her own claim to authority as a female Muslim scholar (ʿālima, faqῑha) and a credible knowledge producer.

In a similar vein, in a lecture she gave at Umm Dirmᾱn Islamic University in Sudan in 1967 on Islamic conception of women’s liberation, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ corroborates the egalitarian form of Islam by drawing examples from Hadīth, the narrative records of the sayings or customs of the Prophet Muhammad. Religious matters are “not only the jurisdiction of male theologians,” she argues. Indeed, Muslim women were the producers of religious knowledge as manifest in a Ḥadīth account by the Prophet Muhammad encouraging his followers (ṣahᾱba) to seek out the opinion of his wife ‘Ā’isha [mother of the believers] on various religious matters. By comparing herself to the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’isha and to other renowned women in Islamic history, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ asserts her authority in the field of Islamic studies, a field that had remained an exclusively male domain.

To help her readers navigate through her travel narrative, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ provides them with a dalῑl (A Road Map). She divides this map into four sections: “The Night of the Arabian Peninsula,” “The Genuine Dawn,” “Behind Walls,” and “Encounter with History.” In full command of the history of the Hijᾱz, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ plays a tour guide (dalῑl) role. She orients the reader and takes that individual on a journey through time. She is both the guide and an authoress who holds epistemic authority over the reader and directs that person where she wishes that reader to go.

Interestingly though, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ uses the plural form “adillᾱʾ” (guides) to refer to Bedouin Arabs. She states that “Bedouin Arabs are masters of the desert (sūdat al-ṣaḥrᾱʾ). They are guides (adillᾱʾ) experienced in unknown paths and roads in the desolate desert.” Like Bedouin Arabs, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ is also an experienced guide. She guides the reader through the history of Arabia. Indeed, she is the master of Arabia and the Amῑrat al-Ṣaḥrᾱʾ (The Princess of the Desert), a title bestowed on her by King ʿAbdul ʿAzῑz Āl Saʿῡd. "Amara" in Arabic means “to command.” Hence, "Amᾱr," is a commander and prince. Prince, as an honorific title, is often accorded by literary critics to the best men of letters such as ʿAbdul ʿAzῑz ʿAbduh, who was named "Amᾱr al-Shuʿarᾱ." (The Prince of Poets) and Prince Shakhib Arsalᾱn (d. 1946) who, in addition to being a prince by blood, was "Amᾱr al-Bayᾱn,"(The Prince of Eloquence). Bint al-Shāṭiʾ was accorded the same honorific title. In doing so, King ʿAbdul ʿAzῑz creates a kinship with Bint al-Shāṭiʾ through a shared Arab-Islamic heritage. While he exercises his political power as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ exercises cultural and intellectual power.

Saʿῡdᾱs first knew Bint al-Shāṭiʾ as an active contributor to al-Nahδda l-Nisᾱ ʿiyya (the Women’s Awakening), a monthly Islamic journal founded by the well-known Egyptian Islamic activist and writer Labῑba Aḥmad (d. 1951). No wonder the journal received financial support from King ʿAbdul

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33Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, “The Islamic Conception of Women’s Liberation,” trans. Nazih Khater, al-Raῑda 125 (2009): 43. It is important to note that parts of the pilgrimage travelogue related to the status of women are repeated in the lecture.
34Ibid., 42.
35Ibid., 38.
36Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, Arḍ al-Mu΄jizᾱt, 22.
Like King ‘Abdul ‘Azīz, al-Nahḍa l-Nisā’ iyya advocated Islamic revival and “disseminated a brand of Islamic nationalism that countered the secular variety.”

5. Women’s Liberation Is Not a Foreign Concept

During Bint al-Shāṭi’s ’Umra pilgrimage in 1951, she realized that Arabian women are viewed as second-class citizens. She refers to them as “ḥarīm (harem) al-Jazīra.” They were confined to a domestic sphere as though “solid barriers are erected around them” (ṣudῡd ṣammā’ maḍrῡba ‘alā ḥarīm al-Jazīra). Their seclusion reinforces their already marginal role in the Arabian society. “The labyrinth of ignorance forced upon them in the name of religion” (matāhat al-jahl al-mafṝūda ’alyha) is the cause of their social backwardness. Not surprisingly, Bint al-Shāṭi waits until her second Hajj pilgrimage in 1972 to write about these women going to schools.

While conservative interpretations of Islamic law in Saudi Arabia, combined with deeply entrenched societal norms, continued to relegate Saudi women to a subordinate status, upper and middle class women in Egypt had already succeeded in breaking free from what Bint al-Shāṭi calls “the harīm cage” and “the labyrinth of blind illiteracy” to “broader horizons of light and awareness.” Understandably, Egypt’s encounter with Western ideas, beginning with Napoleon’s 1798 expedition, was earlier than that in Saudi Arabia. This interaction was followed by a print culture where women began to assume an unprecedented place. Renowned Egyptian Islamic reformers, such as Sheikh Muḥammad ʿAbdu (d. 1905) and Qᾱsim Amῑn (d. 1908), absolved Islam of women’s backwardness by arguing for the emancipation of women based on a new interpretation of the Qur’ān. The abolishment of the practice of seclusion, education for women, and uncovering the face were the major topics that inspired these reformers.

In her discussion of women’s seclusion in Saudi Arabia, Bint al-Shāṭi does not break new ground. She reiterates the views of Muḥammad ʿAbdu and Qᾱsim Amῑn about the harem as a coercive practice passed on and consolidated by the Turks to curtail women’s power and control them. While exposing the practice of Saudi women’s seclusion to rigorous criticism, Bint al-Shāṭi

38Ibid., 233.
39Bint al-Shāṭi, Arḍ al-Mu’jizāt, 122.
40Ibid.
41Ibid.
45Ibid.
argues against the many temptations of liberation. She rebuts the equation of woman’s liberation with the “elimination of all distinctions between men and women, the distortion of sex, and the disruption of standards and values.”49 Bint al-Shāṭi’ affirms gender differentiation while still underlining the equal value of women and men within a complementary gender system.50

It is also worthy of note that she applauds Western women expatriates for taking on the challenge to accompany their spouses to the Arabian Desert to work in the oil industry. She argues: “They acquiescently left behind the comfortable life they lived in their home countries, following their husbands to that desolate and remote place to provide them with emotional support and help them overcome harsh working conditions… With their fine fingers, they wiped off the sweat dripping from their husbands’ foreheads.”51

Notwithstanding the significant gains for Western women in parts of the public sphere, Bint al-Shāṭi’ points out that the private sphere of the Western family is still regulated by traditional gender roles.52 Albeit modern and educated, she states, the Western woman “fully understands her role in life and is cognizant of her traditional responsibilities toward her man and homeland.” Polarization between man and woman, however, should be avoided, Bint al-Shāṭi’ stipulates. Man and woman “perfect each other and need each other to realize their full existence… Their joint life does not fall apart by having a conflict over power and authority.” In doing so, Bint al-Shāṭi’ actually criticizes feminism and perceives it as a way to only advance Imperialism.53

She also states that, unlike Western women who contributed to their nation building through their roles as mothers and wives, Egyptian women were ignorant of their responsibilities toward their husbands and nation.54 She excoriates them for not being supportive of their husbands. In lieu of encouraging them to improve their socio-economic status by looking for better job opportunities in Saudi Arabia, they were pressured into living and working in Cairo.55 Bint al-Shāṭi’ associates the Egyptian women’s lack of support of their husbands with their lack of proper education, a point that Qāsim Amīn thoroughly discusses in his book, Tahrīr al-mar’ā.56 The absence of love between husband and wife, he argues, results in a wanting family. “A husband’s lack of love for his wife was a result of her intellectual backwardness and inadequate upbringing. A wife’s lack of love for her husband, on the other hand, was due to her lack of experience of a true love.”57

Bint al-Shāṭi’ also underscores the importance of female education in building a sound family and nation. She strongly disavows the assumption that modernity entails the renunciation of traditional gender roles. Indeed, education helps women become enlightened mothers and wives and good Muslims. In doing so, she draws on her own experience as a wife and mother. The intellectual compatibility between her and her husband and mentor, Amīn Khūlī, made their relationship successful. “Modernity and domesticity” in Bint al-Shāṭi’’s estimation—as Ellen McLarney rightly

49Ibid., 40.
50Ibid.
51Ibid., 63.
55Ibid., 64-5.’
56Qāsim Amīn, Tahrīr al-Mar’ā (Cairo, 1899).
57Ibid., 32-3.
pointed out—“are complementary, reflecting an image of ideal Islamic womanhood that would become a staple of revivalist discourse.”

6. Revisiting the Hagar Narrative

To expound on the high position that women in general, and mothers specifically, hold in Islam, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ adduces as an example the narrative of the historical figure Hᾱjar (Hagar), the Prophet Abraham’s second wife and Ismᾱʿῑl’s mother. The incident where she ran seven times between the hills of Saфа and Marwa to find water for her thirsty son Ismᾱʿῑl, after having been abandoned by her husband, Abraham, in the desert, is commemorated in the Ḥajj and ʿUmra in the rite of saʿy between Saфа and Marwa. “The saʿy of Hagar,” as Bint al-Shāṭiʾ points out, is “cherished by Islam and by the generations before Islam and this is why it has become a Ḥajj and ʿUmra rite.” Hagar’s struggle to save her son is “an act of worship and a pious deed.”

Bint al-Shāṭiʾ reminds the reader of the esoteric aspects attached to this rite. Indeed, it attests to the supreme importance of women in Islam. As a mother, Hagar, like other characters who are women, has helped shape Islamic history by raising prophets. Even though she was a slave and a woman of color ill-treated and oppressed by Sarah, the wife of the Prophet Abraham, God does not leave her to perish in the desert. He granted her dignity and protection. She “must live to be part of history and struggle to be the subject of it.” To be sure, “Hagar entered religious history with the worries of her motherhood,” Bint al-Shāṭiʾ explains, and “gave Mother’s Day in the Arab World its real value and meaning.” Through her perseverance and faith in God, Hagar proved that women’s role in building civilizations is no less important than men’s. Honoring Hagar in Islam by institutionalizing her leadership in the form of the Ḥajj and ʿUmra serves as a clear reminder that Muslim women should be revered and honored.

7. In the Footsteps of Their Foremothers

Until 1956, Saudi women were denied an education because of the clash between modernists and reactionaries. Notwithstanding King ʿAbdul ʿAzῑz’s efforts to implement a policy of modernization and reform, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ points out that his efforts were met with opposition from religious scholars. What she found ironic, however, was that while technological progress was eventually accepted, despite initial resistance, women’s education was still banned. Bint al-Shāṭiʾ argues that modernity cannot be sustained without changing traditional habits of thought and social practices that have relegated women to a subordinate position and deprived them of education which is an essential instrument for modernization and social change.

During her 1951 ʿUmra pilgrimage, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ wondered why women lagged behind and “were impeded from seeking knowledge when the pursuit of knowledge in Islam was an obligation of every Muslim, both male and female.” The answer was: “religious scholars fear that her education
is an excuse for moral corruption” because “when women learn how to write and read, there is no guarantee that they will not send and receive love letters, which will lead to temptation and error (al-
ghiwᾱya wal-ighwᾱ).” Bint al-Shāṭi’ censured the warped view of Islam by providing a counter-history to that dominant narrative. “Woman’s chastity was and will remain in her hands,” she contends. “It should not be imposed upon her from outside. In Islam, she is, like [every] man, equally responsible (mukallafa kal-rajal sawᾱʾ bi-sawᾱʾ).”

As a religious authority well versed in the Qur’an, Bint al-Shāṭi’ does not want people to confuse Islam with tradition and think that because of Islam women are denied the right to education. To be sure, Islam is not a misogynistic religion. “I know that it is Islam that has liberated (harrara) our minds (‘uqῡlanᾱ) and hearts (damᾱʾiranᾱ),” Bint al-Shāṭi’ stipulates. Education is indeed “[a woman’s] lawful human right, earned by her birth into the human species,” she argues. “This right is outside anyone’s will, for no creature can distort the woman’s humanity and force her to live her life as a mute and dumb doll.”

In her 1972 Hajj pilgrimage, Bint al-Shāṭi’ was invited to visit King ‘Abdul ‘Azῑz University in Jeddah to witness the unprecedented social reforms that had changed Saudi women’s lives in a twenty-year span. King ‘Abdul ‘Azῑz’s, and later his son King Fayșal (r. 1964-1975), biggest battles against ignorance and stagnant thinking bore fruit.70 Saudi women now go not only to primary schools, but also to universities. The type of education they received, however, reinforced the traditional dichotomy of gender roles. Saudi women were educated to be good wives and mothers as King ‘Abdul ‘Azῑz stipulated in his 1959 formal speech: “We have decided to bring into effect the desire of the ‘Ulamᾱ in Saudi Arabia, and to open schools to teach our girls the science of our religion from the Qur’ᾱn… and other sciences which are in harmony with our religious beliefs … The schools will not have any negative effect on our belief or behaviour or customs.”

By referring to the religious and domestic subjects covered by the curriculum, King ‘Abdul ‘Azῑz nudges reactionaries to accept female education and reassures them that it is commensurate with Islamic tradition and suits their nature as homemakers, teachers and nurses. Understandably, until 2002, it was the Department of Religious Guidance that oversaw female education while the Saudi Ministry of Education controlled males’ education.72

In the same vein, Bint al-Shāṭi’ points out that women’s education is not a foreign concept. It is an integral part of Islam, which has liberated women. “We don’t owe this to foreign concepts borrowed from the modernized West,” she states. As a matter of fact, women’s education is “an Islamic liberal concept determined fourteen centuries ago in the Qur’ᾱn which was the last message from heaven.” Bint al-Shāṭi’ argues that by investing in women’s education, Saudi Arabia “reconnected what was severed from the Muslim umma’s past when Muslim women made history” by often taking part in the scientific, academic, and political life of their times.74 What Saudi women have achieved in the domain of education is indeed “a continuation of the legacy of their female

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67Ibid., 122.
68Ibid.
70Ibid., 121.
73Bint al- Shᾱṭi’, “The Islamic Concept of Women’s Liberation,” 38.
74 Bint al- Shᾱṭi’, Ar ParseException: Attempted to get substring of a null object.
123.
predecessors, the companions and followers of the Prophet Muḥammad, and of generations of Muslim women that succeeded them who reached the rank of sheikh in Arabic science and Islamic studies.”

“One of those women,” she stipulates, “even became a Muslim caliph, ruling over Egypt and Syria, namely Queen Ṭayyibat al-Dinar Shayratur Durr, who led a triumphant and decisive campaign in our conflict with the Crusaders.” Bint al-Shāṭī′ ascribes the regression of women’s status, and hence the umma, not to Islam but to what she calls “the persisting residue of ancient ages.”

8. Remembering Jerusalem

As a committed intellectual, Bint al-Shāṭi′ resorts to what she calls “jihād fikrī” (intellectual struggle) to help change not only the reality of Saudi women by underlining the role of women’s education in building stronger families and communities, but also the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, a major concern for the Muslim umma. Second only to the holy Islamic sites of Mecca and Medina, Jerusalem occupies a very special place in the hearts of the entire Muslim community. Bint al-Shāṭi′ holds King ‘Abdul ‘Azīz in high esteem. A modernizer but still a conservative king, a founder of an Islamic state and the custodian of the faith, King ‘Abdul ‘Azīz used the Hajj as the ultimate symbol of the communal solidarity of Muslims to call upon Muslims to ward off “the shame of the Israeli occupation of Palestine” (ār Isrāʾīl) through armed Jihād.

A Salafist thinker well versed in history, Bint al-Shāṭi′ seeks to understand the present by the past. In the same vein, she seizes the Hajj to reflect on the Arab-Israeli issue. By tracing it back to the time of the Hegira (622 CE), she avers the age-old and intractable Arab-Israeli conflict. Her Islamist discourse on the Jewish—and by extension Zionist and Israeli—threat to Islam and Muslims is expounded in her A′dā′ l-Bashar [Enemies of Humanity] and al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī l-Ghazzw al-Fikrī [Judaica in Intellectual Imperialism]. In her two works, she underscores the continuous tradition of Jewish opposition to Islam from the early Islamic period until more recent times. In A′dā′ l-Bashar, she states: “In Yathrib [Medina], Jewish gangs alighted like voracious wolves on the most fertile region in Northern Hijāz not taking into account this Meccan boy [the Prophet] who—after only half a century— would enter a long and bitter war against the Jewish evil and endure the burden of Jihād to cleanse the Medina and its surroundings from that destructive malicious evil.”

By bringing the past to life, Bint al-Shāṭi′ urges Muslims to follow the Prophet’s example in dealing with the Jewish threat. Jihād is the answer and antidote, she contends.

9. The Poetics of Resistance

On the Day of ‘Arafā, which holds both religious and historical significance as the day on which God perfected Islam and approved it as a way of life, and the Prophet Muḥammad delivered his Farewell Sermon (Ḥajjat al-Wadū′), pilgrims keep vigil on Mount ‘Arafā and supplicate God to bestow His forgiveness and wisdom upon them. Amidst their supplications, they also pray for Palestinians in their struggle against the Israeli occupation. This empathy among Muslims is a required component of faith, as Jihād is an individual duty held to be incumbent upon every Muslim.

As a political activist, whose role is to galvanize Muslims into action, Bint al-Shāṭi′ opts for poetry to foster more awareness about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and provide a firm basis for

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75Ibid.
76Ibid.
77Ibid.
78Bint al- Shāṭi′, al-Isrā’īliyyāt fī l-Ghazzw al-Fikrī, 10.
80Bint al- Shāṭi′, A′dā′ l-Bashar, 11.
81Ibid., 11, 13.
collective action. The Palestinian question ceases to be only a Pan Arab question. By Islamizing the conflict, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ arouses the sympathy not only of the Arabs, but also of Muslims everywhere.

A powerful medium for expressing emotions, her ‘Arafa and the Feast of the Sacrifice (‘Īd al-Adhā) poems are very poignant. They convey anger and elicit a strong resistance. ‘Īd al-Adhā is celebrated throughout the Muslim world as a commemoration of the Prophet Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice everything for God’s sake. Since defending one’s religion and land is the duty of every Muslim, martyrdom is perceived as an act of devotion. Like the Prophet Muḥammad’s journey through the heavens and his encounter with God (Miʿrāj), Palestinian martyrs also ascend to heaven as a reward for their piety and devotion.

Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’s poems serve to expand the religious consciousness of the Muslim umma and create a sense of unity in a time of crisis. In doing so, she exposes not only the pain of the Palestinians, but also records their tragedy and gives new voice to their resistance: “[Our children] won’t say we were here/ We have amused ourselves or we have forgotten what has befallen us/ They won’t say we have forgotten the injustice done to us/ We have entertained ourselves with tales from here and there, / jokes we used to chew/ to shy away from grief/ They won’t say in our ‘Īd/ we have neglected for a moment our tragedy/ as if we were unaware of its dimensions/ as if we didn’t see its extent.” 82 The Palestinian tragedy thus becomes “ma’sātunā,” a Muslim communal tragedy.

To conclude then, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ’s travel narrative is indeed unique. As a polyphonic text, it gives voice to women and the Palestinians who share marginalization and disempowerment. By so doing, it provides a strong heuristic for comprehending the true spirit of Islam, which is based on the principle of Jihād (religious/spiritual struggle). Bint al-Shāṭiʾ thus unravels the different aspects of Jihād.

Jihād should not only be confined to Ḥajj and ‘Umra, but equally performed against social, moral, and political evils. The marginalization of women is a case in point. Bint al-Shāṭiʾ stipulates the restoration of the woman’s leadership position in Islam. Self-defense against Zionist aggression (armed Jihād) is another aspect of Jihād. Bint al-Shāṭiʾ thus seizes the communal aspect of the Ḥajj to enjoin Muslims everywhere to support the Palestinian cause and the cause of women.

In doing so, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ performs Jihād not only as a pilgrim but also as a committed writer who uses the power of her pen to promote Islamic revivalism based on the tenets of Salafism. By presenting herself as a social and political activist, she legitimizes her claim to authority, not only as a female Muslim scholar (ʿālima, faqῑha) and a credible knowledge producer, but also as a social and political reformer.

Bibliography


82 Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, Ard al-Muʾjizāt, 132-33.


