

# *Zainab al-Ghazali: Pioneer of Islamist Feminism*

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## Abbreviations and Transliterated Arabic Terms

**EFU:** Egyptian Feminist Union

**MLA:** Muslim Ladies Association

***al-da'wah:*** Call or Mission. Used to describe Islamist activism.

***Da'ya(s) Da'iyat(pl):*** Female participant in *al-da'wah*

***al-Ikhwan:*** Brotherhood or Brothers. Used to refer to the Muslim Brotherhood

***Kafir(s) Kafirun(pl):*** Apostate. Used to criticize Nasser and other Muslims accused of renouncing Islam

***Mujahid(m) Mujahida(f) Mujahideen(pl):*** Fighter, one who strives. Often used in the religious sense, referring to one who fights in the path of God.

***Umma:*** Nation. Used generally to refer to the entire Islamic community.

## Introduction—Why Zainab al-Ghazali

The year is 1966. A middle-aged woman sits in an Egyptian military prison, awaiting the torture sessions that have become part of her daily routine. She recites verses from the Qur'an, sentences of classical Arabic which have been repeated endlessly, but which never lose meaning. *Bismillah al-Rahman al Raheem*.<sup>1</sup> She is among the top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, a social organization which seeks to Islamize Egyptian society and government. She is imprisoned on charges of sedition and conspiring to assassinate President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. She denies these charges, and while other members of the Brotherhood are weakened into submission through torture, every crack of the whip only serves to strengthen her resolve.

The year is 1981. A woman in her mid-sixties sits at a publishing desk for *al-Da'wah* magazine, a publication of the Muslim Brotherhood. She is the editor of a women's column for the magazine, and writes articles on the domestic nature of females and on the importance of motherhood and wifedom for Muslim women. When she is not writing, she lectures on the Islamic call, *al-da'wah*, the social movement whose participants seek Islam as a way of life, not merely a religion. *Bismillah al-Rahman al Raheem*. She speaks publicly on the important role which mothers and wives have in forwarding the Islamic nation. Return to the home, she encourages her female audience, and do not work outside the home unless there is dire need.

These are two stories, but they speak of only one woman. She is Zainab al-Ghazali, leader of The Muslim Brotherhood and one of the most controversial female Muslim figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in 1917 into the household of a local religious leader, she was inculcated with the importance of religion in everyday life. From an early age her father encouraged her to be a strong woman, and a leader who embraced Islam and the indigenous traditions of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> al-Ghazali emerged into Egyptian society at a time of great upheaval for women and the nation as a whole. The Wafd revolution of 1919 had granted Egypt nominal independence from Great

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<sup>1</sup> Arabic for "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." An Islamic benediction often used to begin prayer or a public speech.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist: Zaynab Al-Ghazali," in *Women and the Family in the Middle East*, ed. Elizabeth Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

Britain, but the nationalist movement continued to fight for true sovereignty throughout al-Ghazali's formative years. The nationalist movement was largely dependent on the mobilization of Egyptian women, whose participation marked a dramatic shift in social norms regarding women and their role in public life. The late nineteenth century had witnessed an awakening of a feminist consciousness among men and women within the elite classes of Egypt. This phenomenon was largely a nationalist reaction against colonial arguments that often used the "oppression" and "subjugation" of Muslim women as a cause for British control of Egypt. However, this colonial mission to "emancipate" the women of Egypt was more a tool of political propaganda than it was a feminist crusade. Lord Cromer—the British counsel of Egypt during the early twentieth century—must have been concerned for the political emancipation of only Egyptian women, as he was a well-known staunch opponent of the women's suffrage movement back in Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> Disproving the widespread belief that Egyptian women were helpless and desperate for the guidance of British tutelage, female activists began to mobilize behind the nationalist movement. Continuing the previous movements for women's political and educational rights—led by such activists as Nabawiyya Musa and Malak Hifni Nasif<sup>4</sup>—the nationalist movement proved to be another medium in which Egyptian women could assert their social agency. The mass participation of women within the nationalist movement changed the traditional gender landscape, as women moved from the margins to the heart of society. It was no longer a question of whether or not women should be freed from the traditional patriarchy that governed Egyptian society—not unlike the British society of Lord Cromer—but rather what path should such an emancipation follow.

This awakening, *nahdah*, resulted in the establishment of two schools of thought regarding the advancement of women: those who sought "westernization" of society, and those who sought "Islamization."<sup>5</sup> Each feminist camp viewed the other as the enemy. Although cautious of attacking Islam, "westernized" feminists argued that incorrectly-interpreted Islamic traditions were the root of the women's oppression, citing the seclusion of women, *harem*, to be a religious institution. On the other hand, the Islamists viewed the subjugation of women to be a product of the lack of religion in society. They contrasted the lack of women's education with the Qur'anic stipulated rights of education for women. These "westernized" and "Islamist" feminist movements were not the cleanly formed binary that their titles suggest. The "westernized" feminists, led by Huda Sha'wari and the Egyptian Feminist Union, considered themselves to be indigenous Muslim reformers who were not "betraying" their culture to British imperialism. Likewise, "Islamist" feminists, represented by Zainab al-Ghazali, were not devoid of influence from European encounters. It is likely that most Egyptians subscribed partially to aspects of both camps. While the "westernized" and "Islamist" feminists can not be so easily separated, historical hindsight has proven that the "westernized" feminism of Sha'wari achieved a monopoly over the Egyptian women's movement during the first half of the twentieth century. However, it now appears that the feminism of al-Ghazali has gained popularity amongst the

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<sup>3</sup> Leila Ahmed, *In Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> For more information see Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> This paper will assert that both schools of thought espoused a type of feminism, as they both were dedicated to the improvement the status of women and her empowerment in society. See section on Definition of Terms.

contemporary women of Egypt. This is a phenomenon that demands a re-inspection of the life and work of one of the first Islamist feminists.<sup>6</sup>

Entering the fertile scene of the Egyptian nationalist/women's movement, Zainab al-Ghazali gained an early exposure to women's activism and participation in public space. Joining the Egyptian Feminist Union when she was no more than eighteen, she was exposed to the ideology of Egyptian women who favored emulation of the west and a secularization of women's roles in society. However, al-Ghazali quickly became frustrated with the EFU's methods, believing that its members rejected Islam as a guide to defining the role of women in society.<sup>7</sup> She quit the organization, and went on to establish the *Jamiat Al-Sayyidat-al-Muslimeen*, or, Muslim Ladies Association in 1936. Correcting what al-Ghazali had seen to be the fatal flaw of the EFU, she and the MLA encouraged women to seek religion as a means to personal agency and as a source of advancement. While al-Ghazali insisted upon the independence of the MLA from the Muslim Brotherhood, she was closely affiliated with the larger Islamist organization and was among the top leaders within the Egyptian *da'wah* movement.

While specifically concerned with the role of women in society, al-Ghazali dedicated herself to the *da'wah* movement as a whole. She criticized "westernized" feminists for devoting themselves only to "women's issues," arguing that not only was it impossible to separate the issues of women from those of society at large, but that in fact such specifications only weakened the community and ignored comprehensive ailments of society.<sup>8</sup> As a *da'iyah*,<sup>9</sup> al-Ghazali was passionate about spreading Islam to all sectors of society, as well as devoted to teaching the benefits that she believed Islam would bring to Egypt. While she had been married at a young age, she quickly divorced her husband whom she remembered as trying to impede her *da'wah* activities.<sup>10</sup> With no children from her first marriage, she was able to fully devote herself to the work of the MLA and the Muslim Brotherhood until she married again. Her steadfast dedication to *al-da'wah* was again demonstrated by her insistence that the contract for her second marriage stipulate that her new husband could not prohibit or prevent al-Ghazali's activism. Such actions prove not only her commitment to the Islamist movement, but also demonstrate her beliefs in the personal agency of wives, and women. With a tamed husband and no children, al-Ghazali was able to fully dedicate herself to the life of public leadership at which she excelled.

After the military coup of 1952, the newly empowered secular-nationalists—led by Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser—targeted the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist ideology as a threat to their newly secured power. Accused of sedition, hundreds of Muslim Brothers were imprisoned or assassinated, crippling the leadership apparatus of the organization. Accused of conspiring to assassinate the president, al-Ghazali herself was incarcerated in a military prison before being transferred to the all-women's prison of *al-Qanatir*. Before her transfer, she was subjected to heinous torture and inhumanity, described in her memoir *Return of the Pharaoh*. Her leadership within the Brotherhood had made her a target, and she bravely withstood the consequences of such activism.

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<sup>6</sup> Soroya Duval, "New Veils and New Voices: Islamist Women's Groups in Egypt," in *Women and Islamization*, ed. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Hoffman, *An Islamic Activist*, 234

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 235

<sup>9</sup> A female participant in *da'wah*

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman, *An Islamic Activist*, 237

Because of her commitment to the *da'wah* movement, al-Ghazali is considered amongst many Islamists to be a *mujahida*—a fighter in the path of God. She is remembered as a bold, courageous, and outspoken woman who thrived in the male-dominated scene of politics and religious activism. Therefore, it may seem slightly incongruous to recall that this *mujahida* is the same woman who exhorted women to remain in the home, and take up the domestic roles of wife and mother. It is the recollection of this anecdote which richens the story of al-Ghazali. For at face value it seems that by promoting domesticity for women, she somehow rejected the life of public activism which she led.

As an editor for a column within *al-Da'wah* magazine, al-Ghazali had the opportunity to write numerous articles to women who wished to contribute to, or participate within, the Islamist movement. Given the life choices and experiences of the author, one might expect that such articles would promote the public activism and participation of women within the *da'wah* activities. Indeed, al-Ghazali encouraged her female—and male audience—to dedicate themselves to Islam and the Islamization of society. However, for her female readers, al-Ghazali specified that their participation be defined primarily within their natural roles as mothers and wives of the male fighters, *al-mujahideen*. While she herself acted on the stage of the *da'wah* movement, it seems she preferred that other women to work behind the scene. While she herself lived a life amongst men in the public sphere of politics and leadership, she encouraged Muslim women to return to domesticity, protecting and maintaining the base of Islamic society: the home and family. While contemporary western feminists may praise her life as having defied patriarchal social structure and for having claimed a public space, al-Ghazali rejected those western feminists, believing them to be corruptive to tradition and religion.

This perceived disjuncture between the rhetoric and action of al-Ghazali is the root of the controversy that surrounds her. However, it is also the key to understanding the ideological syncretism that she represents. Scholars in search of recognizable traces of western feminism in the Islamic world are tempted by al-Ghazali's life of activism and leadership, but are befuddled by her subscription to the cult of domesticity. Even more problematic for some is the fact that al-Ghazali is not an anomaly within the community of Egyptian Muslim women. Her ideological blend of conservatism, nationalism, feminism, and spirituality may be the guiding principle of many Islamist women today. She, and her inheritors, are conservative in their efforts to maintain religious and social traditions amidst the changing landscape of a modernizing society. They subscribe to nationalist sentiments in their rejection of western imperialism and its legacy, supporting the independence of Egyptians and complete sovereignty of Muslims. Thirdly, it is impossible to deny the sinews of feminist thought within the discourse of al-Ghazali, as she demanded the respect and rights of women within Islam and society as a whole. Finally, al-Ghazali and her successors are unwavering in their commitment to Islamism, striving for the panacea believed to be found in a collective and individual return to religion. While this paper will not address the future generations of Islamist women, the research of other scholars—such as Duval, Mahmoud, Abu-Lughod—has revealed the continuation of al-Ghazali's ideological syncretism within both the Islamist and the women's movement of Egypt. Understanding al-Ghazali is key to understanding the Islamists women of contemporary Egypt, their international counterparts, and their commitment to an ideology which seems at best contradicted and at worst misogynist to the ethnocentric eyes of some western feminists.

## *Definition of Terms*

The rising popularity of Islamism in Egypt has proved the impossibility of sidestepping the arguments of al-Ghazali and her inheritors, as ignoring their voices would result in a comprehensive ignorance of the current social reality. Rather than make this egregious error, scholars must strive to accept the arguments of al-Ghazali as being representative of a mainstream approach to feminism in contemporary Egypt. This use of the word feminism is deliberate, despite the reservations that certain parties may have regarding its application to Islamist activists. Some western feminists may cringe at the prospect of widening the definition so as to include women whom they have stereotyped as being conspirators to their own subjugation. However, as Saba Mahmoud has argued, it is impossible to expect one culturally specific definition of feminism to be applied to a separate society, whose own history and anthropological experience demand a feminism of its own.

“In the 1970’s, in response to the call by white middle-class feminists to dismantle the institution of the nuclear family, which they believed to be a key source of women’s oppression, Native-and African American feminists argued that freedom, for them, consisted in being able to form families, since the long history of slavery, genocide, and racism had operated precisely by breaking up their communities and social networks.”<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, al-Ghazali—and many other female Islamist activists—rejected the term of “feminist” due to its association with western imperialism and sexual promiscuity. Leila Ahmed is one such scholar who has researched the reluctance of Muslim Arab women to use this term.

“Colonialism’s use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imported feminism in non-western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination...”<sup>12</sup>

However, despite such reservations, it is clear that there are female activists from various cultures and times who have dedicated themselves to the improvement of the status of women and their empowerment in society. While their means may differ, this shared goal of gender justice allows for a new definition of feminism which can be found in a multi-cultural and international setting. It is my hope that through the analysis of the life and work of al-Ghazali, not only will I reconcile the perceived disjuncture between her life and works, but I will also aid in another reconciliation. By widening the definition of feminism, I hope to prove al-Ghazali’s subscription to a breed of feminist thought, and that she and her “westernized” counterparts are not as estranged as they mutually consider themselves to be. A feminism which takes into consideration the historical, cultural, and political backgrounds of different societies will no longer be a monolithic and exclusive ideology, but rather a multi-cultural federation of feminist thought.

As just exhibited by the term “feminism,” many words prevalently used in this paper may carry the unwanted weight of previous experience and presuppositions. Before continuing, it is

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<sup>11</sup>Saba Mahmoud, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup>Ahmed, 167

important to define a number of terms used prevalently. The hope is not to conclusively define their meaning in the abstract, but rather in the specific context of this paper.

**Feminism:** An awareness for the need of gender justice; dedicated to the improvement of the status of women and their social empowerment.

**Western/Westernized:** A socially constructed term derived from the assumption of a binary relationship between the “East” and “West”. When used by imperialist, it is often meant to denote cultural superiority in contrast to barbarity. When used by the imperialized, it is often associated with foreign hegemony and in contrast to indigenous sovereignty.<sup>13</sup>

**Islamism:** A modern socio-political movement which hopes to Islamicize society either gradually through education and social activism, or rapidly through a violent overthrow of the state and the implementation of *sharia*, or Islamic law.

The goal of this paper is to shed light on a figure who has been shrouded in controversy, and to expand the narrow understanding of feminism which has previously precluded the existence of an Islamist feminist. However, this paper does not intend to slap a label of “feminist” on al-Ghazali, a label which she would have resented and which would also fail to do justice to the complexity of her character and experience. In order to prevent such an outcome, this paper will attempt to analyze the life and works of this woman within the context which that lived, and the cultural norms which guided her life. Short of a full biography of al-Ghazali, this paper will attempt to break down the perceived disjuncture between the experiences that shaped her life, and the writings which defined her legacy.

Chapter One addresses the various influences that contributed to the formation of al-Ghazali’s public personality and complex ideology. While not excluding other possibilities, this chapter targets the three main influences of al-Ghazali: the early Egyptian feminist movement, the gender discourse of Sayyid Qutb, and Sufi traditions. By displaying these various sources of conservatism, nationalism, feminism, and spirituality, this chapter hopes to lay the groundwork for untangling the various tensions found within her discourse. Her actual arguments will be the subject of Chapter Two, where a number of al-Ghazali’s writings are analyzed, drawing out the central tenets of her work. I will assert that her arguments rested evenly on three critical points: the Muslim woman is fundamental to the success of Islamic society, she must fulfill her responsibilities in Islamic *da’wah*, and she must reject the evils of western imperialism that remained after the collapse of the formal colonial apparatus. The third Chapter examines the response which the life and work of al-Ghazali rendered in both Arab-Islamic journals and amongst feminist scholarship. By collecting the various interpretations of al-Ghazali, this chapter aims to create a more comprehensive understanding of this controversial figure. Through the various adulations or condemnations of her work, a better understanding will be created: a conglomerate which is bigger than the sum of its parts. This final chapter also seeks to examine these various methods of interpretation in order to better determine a proper method of debating and discussing the subject of feminism in an Islamist context.

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<sup>13</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod criticizes the East and West Binary as basing itself on the false notion that “...take the form of narratives of cultural domination versus resistance, cultural loyalty versus betrayal, or cultural loss versus preservation.” See Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 16.

This examination of al-Ghazali will be in itself a study of how to discuss a figure such as she. Feminist, Islamist, or both; al-Ghazali deserves to be remembered as a multi-dimensional talented figure whose legacy should not be limited by the intellectual prejudices of others. This paper argues that rather than acting as proof of a contradicted woman, the seeming disjuncture between the actions and words of al-Ghazali is proof of the ideological syncretism that defined her life.

## **Chapter One: Arriving at al-Ghazali: Social Intellectual and Religious Influences**

*“It will be a long time before any true idea of the dignity of woman enters the debased minds of Arab Mohammedans.”*<sup>14</sup> –Rev. Henry Harris Jessup. D.D, 19<sup>th</sup> century American Missionary

Jessup’s quote sums up the Euro-American stereotypes surrounding Arab-Muslim women during the late nineteenth century. These women were pictured as victims, oppressed by culture and religion alike, and doomed to a lifetime of ignorance and subjugation. What is most pernicious about this understanding of Arab-Muslim women is that it seeks to target Arab-Islamic culture as being particularly misogynist, as though the treatment of Egyptian women in the late nineteenth century were any worse than that of contemporary Great Britain or the United States. As British commanders used the “oppression” of Egyptian women as a basis for colonial rule, British imperialism and Egyptian nationalism both became intrinsically tied to the question of Egyptian women. As the forces of colonialism and nationalism played tug of war for public favor, cries for feminist reform were often countered by pleas to conserve cultural traditions and religious authenticity. Zainab al-Ghazali would come to espouse an ideology that attempted to synthesis conservatism, nationalism, feminism, and spirituality. Such an ideology was not simply created in her lifetime, but was the culmination of a series of historical influences which pre-date the subject of this paper. By examining the roots of her ideology, this chapter will target three main sources of influence on the life and works of this woman: the debates of early Egyptian feminism, the gender discourse of Sayyid Qutb, and the traditions of Egyptian Sufism.

### *The Debut of Egyptian Feminism*

The Egyptian encounter with Europe aroused a number of pressing questions for the nation. As the encounter was largely defined by a colonial relationship, many Egyptians questioned the nature of this seemingly omnipotent colonial power. Was western influence to be a blessing that delivered the modernity and advances developed in Europe? Or, was western influence an insidious poison that produced mindless puppets who would happily sacrifice their traditions and sovereignty to their imperialist masters. Most Egyptian reformist of the late nineteenth century compromised these two interpretations, arguing that while Egypt should seek to model itself after Europe’s technological advances and militaristic superiority, it should not lose its distinct heritage as an Arab-Muslim state.<sup>15</sup>

Many aspects of society were considered by these reformists: education, law, military, dress-code, and the role of women. The latter two became, perhaps, the most inflammatory subjects, as the British command frequently pointed to the “oppression” of Egyptian Muslim

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<sup>14</sup> Henry Harris Jessup, *The Women of the Arabs* (New York Dodd: and Mead Publishers, 1873).

<sup>15</sup> Soha Abdel-Kader, *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society, 1899-1987* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987),53.

women as a primary reason for colonialism of the country.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the Egyptian nationalist movement depicted the nation as a woman, evoking the conflation of patriotism with protection of one's women.<sup>17</sup> The institution of the *harem* was often targeted as the epicenter of the misogyny in the Islamic world, both by western Orientalists and by Muslim reformists. Based on the Islamic and Ottoman traditions of the seclusion of women, these harems were the housing units for the wives of the Sultans and Ottoman elite. Reserved purely for women, with the exception of male eunuchs, the harem could be seen as both a social, gregarious setting for elite women, and also as a prison preventing the participation of those women in public life.<sup>18</sup> Soha Abdel-Kader espouses the first argument, pointing to the various memoirs and diaries of elite Egyptian women which told of the social interaction of the harem and failed to mention any sentiments of oppression. However, Margot Badran disagrees, arguing that the subjugation and oppression of the harem would lead directly to the early Egyptian feminist movements.<sup>19</sup> The true experience of life in the harem is therefore difficult to discern. However, what we do know is that the image of the harem became the symbol of the marginalized Muslim woman, and thus became the target for both Orientalists and also for Egyptian reformists who sought to modernize their nation.

### *Qasim Amin: Indigenous Feminist or Colonial Patriarch?*

This relationship between modernity and the status of women is seen quite clearly through the experience of Qasim Amin, author of *Tahrir al-Mara/The Emancipation of Women*. Published in 1899 in Cairo, this book was a denouncement of the treatment of women in Egyptian society, a glorification of the "gender equality" of Europe, and a call for Egyptians to liberate their women by ending a number of religious and cultural traditions. Amin was highly critical of polygamy, seclusion of women, veiling, lack of women's education, and of laws that made divorce easily available for men. He believed that the status of women in a certain society was a clear indicator of the level of civilization which that society had reached.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while he specifically criticized the treatment of women in Egyptian society, he kept no secrets about his disgust of Egyptian society as a whole. This is clearly demonstrated by Amin's argument that the despotic nature of Egyptian society was conducive to this subjugation of women.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Amin argued, if Egyptians wished to attain the political freedoms and advancements of European society, Egyptian women must be ready to adopt the social norms and cultural mores of the sophisticated Europeans.

Like previous reformists, Amin did not advocate a complete break with Egypt's Islamic past. Despite whatever radical suggestions Amin may have issued in regards to polygamy, women's education, and seclusion, he maintained that Islamic law could be compatible with modernization through reinterpretation, *ijtihad*, of the Qur'an.<sup>22</sup> But as it was in its current state,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 57

<sup>17</sup> Nadje al-Ali. *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 44

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>19</sup> Margot Badran, "Huda Sha'rawi and the Liberation of the Egyptian Woman." (Oxford University, 1977). cited in Abdel-Kader, 22

<sup>20</sup> Juan R. Cole, "Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn of the Century Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 13 (1981), 395.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 396

<sup>22</sup> Abdel-Kader, 44



Amin argued that Egyptian Muslim society deprived the woman of the rights and respect to which she was entitled, and which her European counterparts received.

“Freedom for men is countered by enslavement for women; education for men is countered by ignorance for women. Men develop their rationality and mental faculties, leaving for women only idiocy and retardation...The whole universe is for men, while women occupy only the peripheries and dark corners”<sup>23</sup>

However, Amin’s convincing words should not be taken out of context, lest we forget the complexity of his person and argument. He was an elite Egyptian of Turkish background, who had studied at length in France, and who was considered by many to be a colonialist mouthpiece. Furthermore, one can read in his writings a tone which is utterly patriarchal, in which the emancipation of women is viewed in terms of what profits it will bring to men, rather than what moral obligation it should render upon society.

“Our present situation resembles that of a very wealthy man who locks up his gold in a chest. This man unlocks his chest daily for the mere pleasure of seeing his treasure. If he knew better, he would invest his gold and double his wealth in a short period of time.”<sup>24</sup>

Such a statement supports al-Ghazali’s future argument that western approaches to “women’s liberation” were based on a capitalist greed to exploit women as commodities.

Additionally, modern critics—such as Leila Ahmed—have suggested that Amin simply aimed to rearticulate in indigenous terms the imperialist notion that Arab-Muslim women lived in oppression in order to further assert the backwardness of Egyptian society.

“In calling for women’s liberation the thoroughly patriarchal Amin was in fact calling for the transformation of Muslim society along the lines of the Western model and for the substitution of the garb of Islamic-style male dominance for that of Western-style male dominance.”<sup>25</sup>

As it becomes more difficult to assess the true reasons behind Amin’s calls for liberation, it becomes easier to understand the knot of issues surrounding the question of women during this period of reform. Even for those who may have been legitimately concerned with the status of Egyptian women, it seems that achieving reform without being stigmatized as “western” or without compromising feminist goals was nearly impossible.

Amongst the most vocal of Amin’s critics was Ta’lat al-Harb, who preached against Amin’s encouragement of western emulation. Instead of resorting to a foreign culture to gain inspiration for the role of women in society, al-Harb argued that Egypt should look to its traditional Islamic heritage for guidance. In a clear attack against Amin’s arguments, al-Harb declared the utter importance of both seclusion of women and the veil. Criticizing Amin’s

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<sup>23</sup>Qasim Amin, "Tahrir Al-Mar'a/Emancipation of Women," (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1970). cited in Abdel-Kader, 21

<sup>24</sup>Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women*, trans. Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed, 161

Qur'anic interpretation, al-Harb argued that the Qur'an is unequivocal in its message that women must practice veiling, including covering the hands and face—a practice which Amin had deemed unnecessary.<sup>26</sup> al-Harb supported the expansion of women's education, but qualified that their education should not compromise his strict belief in the importance of seclusion. Additionally, such an education should be largely religious and encouraging of the traditional female role of a domestic, modest, and subservient wife and mother.<sup>27</sup> al-Harb truculently denounced Amin's support of the entrance of women into the public sector, arguing that this would violate the sacred principle of seclusion. Although clearly critical of Amin's theories on the treatment of women, al-Harb is perhaps even more condemning of Amin as a westernized fraud. As Abdel-Kader explains, "al-Harb branded the movement for the emancipation of women as just another plot to weaken the Egyptian nation and to transfer the immorality and decadence prevalent in the West to Egyptian society."<sup>28</sup> The dependence on anti-western rhetoric to form an argument is a theme which characterized al-Harb, and which would continue to characterize Islamists such as Sayyid Qutb and Zainab al-Ghazali.

The debate between Amin and al-Harb can be understood as an early confrontation between the forces of "westernized" and "Islamist" thought. It was not a confrontation between feminism and anti-feminism, as both Amin and al-Harb supported the continuation of patriarchal societies.<sup>29</sup> Just as Amin and al-Harb differed on the methods of preserving male dominance—Amin encouraged the adoption of British patriarchy while al-Harb urged a continuation of the Islamic system—later feminists would debate which ideology would best serve to overturn such structures.

### *Huda Sha'wari and Westernized Feminism*

If al-Ghazali may be considered the feminist complement to al-Harb's Islamic patriarchy, than certainly Huda Sha'wari would be the feminist complement to Amin's embracement of "westernized" patriarchy. Born in 1879 into the harem of Sultan Pasha, her elite status provided her with an education of French, Turkish, piano, and the Qur'an. Despite her privileged upbringing, Sha'wari recalls an unhappy childhood; a melancholy caused from an early recognition of the social discrimination between girls and boys. She recalled that her brother was given many more opportunities than she, and began to realize that this preferential treatment was on the basis of his male sex.<sup>30</sup> For Huda, one of the most influential moments was her marriage at thirteen to a gentleman in his forties, Ali Sha'rawi. Like most marriages amongst the Egyptian elite, she had no choice in the arrangement, and her new life as a young wife was unbearable.<sup>31</sup> In what Sha'wari wrote on her marital relationship, it is clear that this period of her life reinforced her frustrations with gender inequalities.

As a young woman, Sha'wari began to interact with French women living in Cairo, eventually coming to participate in various salons that aimed to be a place where women could discuss various social and political issues.<sup>32</sup> Topics such as universal suffrage, seclusion, and divorce laws took primacy at such discussions. In addition to the opening of a dialogue on such

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<sup>26</sup> Cole, 402

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 403

<sup>28</sup> Abdel-Kader, 62

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed, 163

<sup>30</sup> Abdel-Kader, 82

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 82

<sup>32</sup> Abdel-Kader, 83

issues, these meetings were also important simply for the development of public networks and social communities which had been unavailable to women in the harem. This dialogue between European, Arab, and Turkish women was one of Sha'rawi's early exposures to western feminism. Sha'rawi's decision to unveil—an action which distinctly separated her feminism from the future Islamist feminism—has been attributed to the influence of Eugenie Le Brun, a French feminist who was quite close with Sha'rawi.<sup>33</sup> It is important to recognize that Sha'rawi, as a member of the upper echelons of Egyptian society, welcomed the association and affiliation with European culture. As the Egyptian elite often gained from the imperialist experience in Egypt, they were more inclined to emulate or praise European culture as more highly sophisticated than that of the indigenous, poorer classes.<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that elite Egyptians were somewhat less authentic than their middle and lower class counterparts, but rather that many affluent Egyptians assumed the adoption of western-type thought and behavior to achieve progress and advancement.

Sha'rawi and other women activists were heavily involved in the revolution of 1919, and often saw their own struggle for gender equality in terms of the nationalist struggle for independence.<sup>35</sup> When the revolution failed to repay with suffrage the women whom had fought for its success, Sha'rawi decided to establish the Egyptian Feminist Union, an organization which would continue the struggle for gender equality. While the nationalist struggle had been achieved, the women of the EFU were unable to give up their fight for the goal of erasing their “disadvantage status.”<sup>36</sup> Their emphasis on equality in both the private and public spheres is not only what made them unique in Egypt, but what demonstrated the influence of western feminist on Sha'rawi's ideology. While this adoption of a western tone may have been welcomed by much of the elite, it was the reason why others rejected Sha'rawi and her notions of feminism. Sha'rawi and her followers claimed that they were not attempting to change the *sharia*, and that they all considered themselves to be good Muslims who were merely fighting for their “usurped Islamic rights”. However, Sha'rawi's association with the west seemed to critics that her feminism was yet another colonial instrument.<sup>37</sup>

One such critic of this western influence was Zainab al-Ghazali, who at one point was a member of the EFU. Her decision to leave the organization seems to have been largely because of her disappointment that the EFU based itself on what she saw as western feminism, a concept which she felt was neither necessary nor appropriate for an Islamic society. She disagreed greatly with the approach that members of the EFU took in their struggle for women's rights.

“She campaigned for women and the nation in Islamist terms, whereas the other feminists at the time campaigned for women's rights and human rights in the language of secularism and democracy. Whereas these feminists consistently stressed the superiority of the West in their feminist goals and actions, al-Ghazali was committed to indigenous culture and to pursuing feminism within Islam”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Margot Badran. *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*. (New York: Feminist Press, 1987), cited in Duval, *New Veils*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed, 147

<sup>35</sup> Abdel-Kader, 88

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 92

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 95

<sup>38</sup> Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 105.

al-Ghazali accused Sha'rawi and the EFU of attempting to ape the west, invoking the same accusations that al-Harb had thrown at Amin. Additionally, al-Ghazali and al-Harb both depended disproportionately on criticizing the arguments of their intellectual enemies. Despite her disapproval of EFU methods, it will be seen in al-Ghazali's work that the Egyptian Feminist movement had a profound influence on developing both her antagonism towards the west, and also her insistence that women's rights be secured through Islam alone.

### *Sayyid Qutb*

al-Ghazali's belief that feminist goals could be achieved through Islam is simply an extension of the Islamist theory. If all ailments in society can be cured by a return to Islam, then so too may women gain the respect and rights she deserves through Islamization. One of the great theoreticians of this philosophy, and likewise, one of al-Ghazali's greatest influences, was Sayyid Qutb. Although today he is largely remembered as influencing Ayatollah Khomeini and the leaders of al-Qaeda, his discourse was much richer and more diverse than encouraging violent revolutions. A leading intellect of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb was a prolific writer, publishing a number of works of Qur'anic exegesis and on social commentary of Islamic life. In his book, *Social Justice in Islam*, Qutb devotes several pages to describing what he believes to be the role of women in an Islamic society. Written in 1945, this work contains the main arguments which al-Ghazali would later come to espouse as head of the Muslim Ladies Association and as a spokeswoman for the Islamist movement. Given the close contact between the two leaders of *al-da'wah*, it is likely that Qutb's work directly influenced the creation of al-Ghazali's discourse.

Examining Qutb's work, one finds his section on gender equality tucked between chapters on general equality in Islam and in an Islamic society. This context demonstrates Qutb's belief that gender equality is neither more nor less important than the equality of other relationships in society. According to Qutb, men and women share an equal status in the eyes of God, yet the issue of gender equality is not of great importance which must be elaborated upon. In this document, Qutb aims to achieve three goals. The first is to prove that first and foremost, Islam values a kind of equality between the sexes. The second is that there are acceptable reasons and circumstances that may prevent equality from prevailing all of the time. The third goal is to counterattack the west and argue that, in fact, it is they who deprive women of their entitled respect.

Qutb firmly believes that Islam grants women equality with men. He not only explicitly states this in the opening paragraph, but he also makes it the overall theme of the chapter. In order to support his argument, Qutb relies heavily on various suras, or chapters, of the Qur'an.

“Whoever does good works, man or woman, and is a Believer—such shall enter into Paradise and shall not be wronged one jot.”

“Whoever does good works, man or woman, and is a Believer—we shall make them live a good life, and we shall give them their reward for the best that they have done.”<sup>39</sup>

Qutb argues that these suras clearly indicate that God does not discriminate between the sexes, and that in the eyes of God, men and women are equal.

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<sup>39</sup>Sayyid Kotb, *Social Justice in Islam*, trans. John B. Hardie (New York: Octagon books, 1980), 50.

In addition to spiritual equality, Qutb also insists that Islam granted women intellectual equality and financial independence. In the Qur'an, God commanded both men and women to strive for knowledge. Likewise, both men and women had the privilege of owning and administering property, and the responsibility of paying the zakat, or alms. These three pillars of spirituality, intelligence and finance are the bases of Qutb's claim that there is gender equality in Islam.

Qutb seeks to defend Islam against the western attacks that it is a misogynist religion. Therefore, he focuses on the issue of equality as it seemed to be the central issue of western feminism. However, aside from the three aforementioned spheres, it appears that gender equality is not a value that Qutb holds to be important in Islam. Qutb argues that it is only natural that men and women should not be considered equal in certain situations. He insists that physical differences, cultural practices, and differing responsibilities between men and women call for unequal participation from each gender. But while Qutb makes it seem that equality is the rule—perhaps to meet western standards of feminism—his proof seems to suggest that gender equality is not the central factor in Islamist feminism. Qutb's method of speaking in terms of western feminism is rejected by al-Ghazali, who de-emphasizes the question of equality when speaking of the rights and status of women. Instead of holding Islam accountable to the arbitrary stipulations of western feminism, al-Ghazali seeks to define a feminism that is derived from the indigenous culture. Qutb does not attempt such re-definition, and therefore his defense of Islam is in terms of equality and other western feminist ideals. Thus, while Qutb was a great influence on al-Ghazali and the development of her discourse, she adjusts the vocabulary of her argument to better suit Islamist feminism, rather than oblige western audiences.

According to Qutb, the physical and emotional discrepancies between men and women preclude any possibility of true gender equality, and any effort to create such an unnatural phenomenon would prove disastrous. For instance, Qutb grapples with the problematic sura which calls men to dominate women.

“Men are the overseers over women because of what Allah has bestowed of His bounty on one more than another.”<sup>40</sup>

Qutb goes on to argue that the explanation for this blatantly unequal gender relationship lies in the fact that the different social roles given to men and women have produced various emotional dispositions in each sex. As it is customary for women to be the caretakers of children, he argues, they have developed into more passionate, emotional creatures than their pragmatic, professional husbands.

“So when man is made to oversee woman, it is by reason of physical nature and custom that this ordinance stands.”<sup>41</sup>

By using his own bio-sociological explanation for the development of men and women, Qutb intends to prove that the control which men have over women is an inequality that is simply unchangeable and socially necessary.

Continuing his effort to explain certain inequities in Islam, and in specifically the Qur'an, Qutb confronts the issue of gender discrimination in the courtroom. It has been interpreted from

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 50

the Qur'an, that the word of two women is equal to the word of one man. Therefore, when giving evidence in a trial, there must be two female witnesses if they wish to testify.

“In this verse itself the explanation is made clear; by the nature of her family duties the growth of the woman’s spirit is towards emotions and passions, just as in man it is towards contemplation and thought.”<sup>42</sup>

Again, Qutb defends this sexist discrimination through the existence of physiological discrepancies between the sexes, even if he has no scientific evidence to back up his claim.

In addition to these physical differences that call for modified treatment, Qutb also notes social responsibilities which call for an unequal relationship between the sexes. Faced with the notorious law of inheritance, Qutb argues that there is a sound reason why the man receives twice as much as a female inheritor.

“He marries a woman, and he undertakes to maintain her and their children; he has to bear the responsibility of the whole structure of the family. So it is no more than his right that for this reason...he should have the share of two women.”<sup>43</sup>

As shown by various examples above, Qutb assumes the social roles of men and women to be so concrete that they are as unchangeable as the physiology of men and women. Since it is assumed that the man must be the provider of the household—and that the woman must be dependent upon him—then it is likewise logical that the man should receive twice the inheritance as the woman.

Throughout Qutb’s presentation of the acceptable inequities between men and women, his purpose has always been two-fold. The first is to assert that these inequities are natural, and that they are permanent. Not even a religion as enlightened as Islam would dare, or wish to alter such differences between men and women. God created men and women to be different, to be two halves of a whole, but not necessarily two identical halves. Secondly, Qutb continuously tries to downplay the significance of these instances of discrimination. His argument focuses on the belief that these are rare occasions, exceptions to the overall rule of gender equality in Islam. This of course creates confusion for the reader; does Qutb support gender equality, or not? His determination to prove that Islam espouses gender equality would point to the fact that he supports the notion, yet his emphasis on innate differences between the genders points to his acceptance of a degree of gender discrimination. This confusion proves the problems which arise from Qutb’s attempt to frame Islamic feminism in accordance with the stipulations of western feminism—a mistake which al-Ghazali learned to avoid.

Perhaps aware of the trap in addressing gender equality, Qutb moves on to another issue which more clearly points out what Islam guaranteed female believers. Qutb, like many Islamic scholars, argues that Islam brought many new rights to the women of seventh century Arabia. He strains to emphasize the fact that before Islam, female infanticide was common and that the coming of Islam brought an end to the practice.

“Islam was opposed to the idea that girl child was a disaster, and that she was better put away while she was still an infant; it was implacably opposed to the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 51

custom of burying daughters alive, which was current in the life of some of the Arabian tribes.”<sup>44</sup>

By pointing out various ways in which Islam improved the life of women in early Arabia, Qutb hopes to support his previous assertion that they are valued members of society. Being a valued member of society does not equate to being equal with men, and Qutb avoids the topic which proved so troublesome.

Qutb again attempts to prove the respect that female Muslims receive, using marriage rights as an example. Qutb asserts that Islam assures women consensual marriage and that they can demand a dowry. Additionally, women have certain financial and physical rights which must be respected both in married life and in divorce. By focusing on the improvements that Islam brought to the women of seventh century Arabia, Qutb implies that Islam will also bring rights to the women of the twentieth century. Yet, while Qutb seems to imply that the improved status of the women of seventh century Arabia would be good enough for the women of modern Egypt, al-Ghazali further explains how Islam is still the source of women’s rights in modern day Egypt.<sup>45</sup>

Qutb’s avoidance of the issue of gender equality continues in his discourse regarding the comparison of the treatment of women in the west and in Islamic societies. He begins this section of his argument by stating that whatever rights or privileges Islam guarantees female believers, it does so purely out of righteousness, and not with ulterior motives. This noble purpose is in stark contrast to the supposed “rights” which the west has granted women, such as the right to work outside the home, which was in fact a capitalist attempt to exploit the “liberated” women. These poor women had not only been forced to work due to their indolent husbands, but also they were now being exploited by the cruel corporations of the USA and Europe.

Qutb’s attack on western society continues as he moves to one of his strongest attacks against the west: France had not yet granted women the right of administering their property without the consent of a guardian. Qutb assails these primitive laws, boasting that Islam had granted such a right hundreds of years earlier. Instead of instigating laws which would be beneficial to the women of France, the lawmakers were instead giving them other rights of which Qutb strongly disapproved.

“At the same time France grants to women the right of every kind of unchastity, public or private. This “privilege” is the only one which Islam denies to its women-folk, just as it denies it to men...”<sup>46</sup>

According to Qutb’s interpretation, the west is the true misogynist force in the world, and Islam is the true source of respect for women.

Qutb continues his prosecution of western misogyny, stating that women are purposely hired for positions in which their beauty may be objectified. He targets workplaces such as embassies and newspapers as being the scenes of ogling and inappropriate treatment of women. Qutb accuses both the executives and the women for participating in such an improper professional scene.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>45</sup> See Chapter II, on “Muslim Woman”

<sup>46</sup> Kotb., 53

“All of them are merely attempting to make use of women; and they know what success a woman can have in these fields. They know, too, what she must give to achieve her success.”<sup>47</sup>

These blunt words reveal Qutb’s true feelings on women working outside the home. He states that not only will men try to take advantage of working women, but that those women are willing to sacrifice their honor in order to rise in the professional world. Therefore, in the mind of Qutb, any woman who either chooses or is forced to work outside of the home has to relinquish her honor, in either a small or a large way. For even if she “gives nothing”, which Qutb quotes as being “an absurd supposition”, her honor would still be ripped apart by the hungry eyes which feast upon her.<sup>48</sup> Thus is the fate of working women, and according to Qutb, it is therefore clear why Islam encourages its female followers to remain in the private sphere. Here is where Qutb and al-Ghazali differ greatly. While al-Ghazali maintains that a woman’s primary duty is with her children, husband, and home, she also vehemently defends that Islam grants women the right to work in the public sphere.<sup>49</sup>

Continuing his attack on the treatment of women outside of Islam, Qutb contrasts the rights of women in Islam with those in communism. His condemnation of the communist system in terms of gender equality is very similar to his castigation of the treatment of women within the capitalist system. He argues that the only reason for women working outside of the home is because of their selfish and idle husbands.

“The essential fact is that men refused to support women, and that hence women were compelled to work like men and in masculine circles, in order to live.”<sup>50</sup>

Communism and capitalism—both centered on material wealth—are unable to consider what Qutb describes as “the generous and humane aspects of true human life.”<sup>51</sup> Women work because society has been so reduced to a “dog-eat-dog” mentality, resulting in the end of proper gender relationship and the destruction of the traditional home.

In Qutb’s final paragraph, he reneges on his previous statement and argues that Islam has always given women the right to work, even before communism and capitalism did so. However, where the capitalists and communists have continued to denigrate the women of their societies through exploitation and objectification, Islam is incapable of stooping to such a level. The mistake which the west made was its belief that material equality should be the yardstick of gender relations, and therefore it has focused needlessly on issues such as equal job opportunities and equal pay. Qutb argues that the west does not think of society as a whole, but gets caught up on individual success and wealth. For this flawed focus, the society—and the women of that society—suffer severe consequences. Islam does not make such mistakes, as it clearly makes the aim of both men and women to be the harmony of society as a whole.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>49</sup> Hoffman, *An Islamic Activist*, 236

<sup>50</sup> Kothb, 54

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 54



“..Islam looks at life from many sides, and envisages for individuals duties which differ one from other, but which are all mutually connected and ordered; within this scheme is envisaged the respective duties of men and women, and it lays on each of them the charge of fulfilling a duty primarily towards the growth and the advancement of life as a whole.”<sup>52</sup>

In his final paragraph, Qutb clarifies his stance on the notion of gender equality. In his opinion, men and women are not physically, psychologically, or emotionally equal, and therefore should not be treated as such. This does not mean that one is better than the other, or that one is more important in the eyes of God. Quite the contrary, Qutb argues that these two different halves are both necessary to create the harmonious society for which God intended on earth. Qutb realizes that it is difficult for the west to comprehend that two beings considered unequal may be valued equally, but for this he faults the west for its own ignorance.

This passage by Qutb is one of the most detailed opinions on gender relations by a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Unfortunately, it is only a few pages, and there are a great deal of points that go unexplained, and an even larger amount of questions which remain unanswered. To which French laws was Qutb referring as permitting women to be unchaste in public and private? Who is to decide which pre-Islamic customs are permanent—such as a patriarchal family—and which are to be overturned—such as female infanticide? This last question is perhaps the most problematic, for Qutb lists “customs” as one of the exceptional factors that prevent total gender equality. If it is merely these customs that prevent women from gaining equality, why is Qutb implying that culture should trump the equality granted by Islam? These pitfalls of his argument are largely due to his decision to argue for the rights of women in Islam through the lens of western feminism. Therefore, as will be seen in the second chapter, al-Ghazali’s alterations to the language of Islamist feminism allow her to successfully avoid the weaknesses of Qutb’s argument.

Despite these contradictions and vagaries, Qutb presents the reader with a concise and well organized argument on the question of gender relations in Islam. Although at times he stumbles over the western feminist issue of gender equality, in the end it is clear that Qutb believes that while spiritual equality is guaranteed in Islam, total gender equality is neither possible nor desired. While al-Ghazali will avoid Qutb’s mistake of emphasizing the question of equality, her argument clearly rests on a number of points developed by Qutb. Like Qutb, she insists that Islam guarantees the spiritual equality of women, that a woman’s primary role should be that of mother and wife, and that the western feminist movement devalues and denigrates women.

### *Egyptian Sufism*

Qasim Amin, Huda Sha’rawi, and Sayyid Qutb are all likely influences of al-Ghazali, and indeed are critical to the development of her discourse. However, there remains one influence which may not seem quite as obvious, but which played an irreplaceable role in al-Ghazali’s understanding of her own spirituality. This final influence was modern Egyptian Sufism, and the various ideals which al-Ghazali derived from Islamic mysticism. Sufism is a broad and diverse topic, and the modest objective of the next few pages is not a full examination of the hundreds of years of Sufi tradition. Rather, this section hopes to target certain characteristics of Sufism and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 54

explore how these particular traits reoccurred in the behavior and works of al-Ghazali. In doing so, it will become apparent that Sufism was an active influence in her life. This paper will explore specifically three pieces of evidence which prove the Sufi influence in al-Ghazali's life: her emphasis on devotion to a spiritual leader, the construction of herself as a saintly figure, and her view that she was an exception to both the norms of Islamic tradition and the rules of the state.

When looking at Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century, one must not overlook the importance of Sufism in daily life. It is true that the Sufi orders were not the social force which they once had been, even one hundred years before in the early nineteenth century. Before the rule of Muhammad Ali (d.1849) Sufi orders had been largely responsible for providing the religious practices, social structure, and most importantly the education of local communities.<sup>53</sup> Sufis were viewed as authentic religious authorities, whose legitimacy seemed even higher when compared to the political and spiritually-dead caliphate of the nineteenth century.<sup>54</sup> The reforms of Muhammad Ali succeeded in centralizing rule in Egypt, but cultural and religious practices remained largely particular to various towns and cities, where they were influenced by the individual authority of Sufi spiritual leaders. Therefore, while the government may have replaced Sufism in its responsibilities of education, Sufi leaders remained popular alternative sources for spiritual guidance in Egypt during the early twentieth century.

This devotion to a spiritual leader often came above all other commitments. As outlined above, Sufism provides alternative religious authorities, or as the rulers might see it, alternative allegiances.<sup>55</sup> How can there be a united nation when its citizens are Sufis who commit themselves fully to God and are fully devoted not to their caliph, khedive, or president, but only to their Sufi master? For this devotion to his or her Sufi master is indeed one of the most distinctive attributes of Sufism. Insubordination towards one's master is unthinkable, as one's teacher is "thought to be connected by a chain of grace or blessing and sometimes blood-kinship to a founding Saint."<sup>56</sup>

Zainab al-Ghazali exhibited this extreme devotion to her own spiritual guide, Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. In her memoir, *Return of the Pharaoh*, she relates her decision to finally submit to al-Banna's wishes that she relinquish full control of the MLA, allowing it to merge with the Muslim Brotherhood.

"I believed that he (al-Banna) was the Imam that all Muslims must pledge allegiance to...I felt that al-Banna was stronger than me and franker in disseminating and announcing the truth."<sup>57</sup>

al-Ghazali expounds, describing the note which she sent to al-Banna, in which she further expressed her obedience to his word alone. Pledging her total servitude to God, she goes on to swear her belief that al-Banna is the "only person who can do to this Ummah something for the Call to Allah in a way that pleases him."<sup>58</sup> Her diction reveals complete spiritual subservience to this man who she considered to be both stronger and closer to God than she. Similarly, al-

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<sup>53</sup>Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 23.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 215

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 216

<sup>56</sup> Michael Gilson, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1973 ),5.

<sup>57</sup>Zainab Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, trans. Mokrane Guezzou ( Leicester: Islamic Foundation Press, 1994), 26.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*,27

Ghazali tells of how before marriage, she forced her second husband to recognize the importance of her commitment to not only her mission, but also to al-Banna. “I have sworn an oath of fealty to Hasan al-Banna that I shall die in God’s path...”<sup>59</sup> To al-Ghazali, al-Banna was more than a teacher. He was a conduit between herself and God, the only one who could truly reveal to her what her mission was to be, and the only person on earth who could exercise any authority over this bold woman. This unquestionable devotion to al-Banna is the first of three indicators which demonstrate the influence of Sufism in the life of al-Ghazali.

The second Sufi trait that is revealed by the life and works of al-Ghazali, is the institution of sainthood. As stated before, the aim of this section is not to define or outline the history of Sufi sainthood. Let it be sufficient to say that it is a common theme in Sufi traditions that a master be considered much more than just an exceptionally pious man or woman, but that he or she may indeed be considered a saint. However, it must be noted that the term “saint” does not correspond directly to the same term used in Christian traditions. Michael Gilson argues that the whole notion of sainthood is “bound up, not with vague ideas of other-worldly holiness, but with the capacity for significant action in the world.”<sup>60</sup> In his book, Gilson notes that selflessness and even self-neglect are of utmost importance for saints. Remarking on the leadership behavior of one Sufi master, Gilson notes the way in which a master would place “himself always at the disposal of his followers, without any thought for his own personal comfort.”<sup>61</sup> Equally important, according to Gilson, was the asceticism of Sufi saints. Gilson argues that this asceticism was to be praised “both in terms of rigorous practices of devotion entailing a degree of physical suffering, and as an inward form of spiritual self-discipline”<sup>62</sup>

This is not to say that the performance of miracles is not of utmost importance in Sufi sainthood. Valerie Hoffman argues that, in fact, the ability to work miracles is critical to the very definition of sainthood. “Sainthood in Egypt is primarily a function not of virtue but of power. The ability to work miracles is a necessary attribute for a saint.”<sup>63</sup> While not always the case, many of the miracles attributed to Sufi saints involve the enduring of great pain, or even the unlikely survival of fatal scenarios. In her book, Hoffman gives a number of legends of how Sufi saints remained unscathed after submerging their hands into boiling molasses, or remained un-poisoned after handling numerous snakes and scorpions.<sup>64</sup> Through Gilson and Hoffman, one is able to achieve a general sense of the criteria needed to be considered a Sufi saint in Egypt: the ability to perform miracles and participation or activism in the local community of followers.

This conception of sainthood is a major theme in the writings of al-Ghazali, largely in describing herself. She tells of how she was a spiritual leader for both the women of the MLA and also for the male youth of the Muslim Brotherhood. Meeting Gilson’s requirement that a saint be dedicated to action and that she be a model for others, her memoir recounts how she received troubled pupils in her home even in the middle of the night.<sup>65</sup> Even after she was imprisoned, her leadership continued. Sitting in her prison cell, she would hear the screams of tortured Muslim Brothers. She recalls how she would comfort them with her words, and

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<sup>59</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim*, 101

<sup>60</sup> Gilson, 45

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>63</sup> Valerie Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia: University South Carolina Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

<sup>65</sup> al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, 39

encourage them with her own resoluteness in the face of torture. These events also allowed for al-Ghazali to meet the second criterion for sainthood: the enduring of great pain and the escapement of physical harm. In her memoir, she recalls her first interrogation session. After verbal and physical abuse, the guards set the prison dogs upon her.

“The dogs were unrelenting, digging their teeth into my scalp, my shoulders, back, chest...I repeatedly invoked my Lord...’Oh Lord!.. Bestow on me Your Tranquility’...I expected that my clothes would be thoroughly stained with blood...But, incredulously, there was not a single blood-stain on my clothes...My God be exalted!”<sup>66</sup>

Just as previous saints escaped death by snakes, and burns from boiling molasses, al-Ghazali managed to avoid serious harm from the vicious dogs. The integrity of this story is not important, as neither is the accuracy of the hundreds of similar stories of the miracles of saints. What is important is recognizing that al-Ghazali truly believed that through her piety and righteousness, God prevented any harm from coming to her. Cooke refers to al-Ghazali’s phrasing as “the language of Sufi saints”, remarking on the parallel themes found in these hagiographies.<sup>67</sup> Cooke goes on to argue that al-Ghazali even viewed this torture “as a means to her goal of salvation”. Her ability to withstand such pain—either through her own steadfastness or through divine intervention—gave hope to the other tortured brothers and sisters of the movement.<sup>68</sup> Having an understanding of the Sufi conception of sainthood, it is impossible to read al-Ghazali’s writings and not recognize the references to these Sufi themes of miracles and selfless leadership.

The final aspect of Sufism which is manifested in the life of al-Ghazali, is the idea of an exceptional believer. At the heart of Sufism is the idea that the relationship between God and the believer comes before all else. Likewise, Sufism can be seen as an exercise of individualism, not a practice of the community. As Hoffman puts it, “Sufis aim to transform the individual through a combination of divine grace and strenuous personal effort...Their concern is the reform of the individual, not of society at large.”<sup>69</sup> For Sufis, personal spiritual advancement trumps every social construct, whether it be from the national government, or even from religious authority.

As an example of this belief in being exceptional, Hoffman points to the issue of strict gender segregation: a generally accepted tenet of Islamic tradition. Hoffman points out that many Sufis do not abide by this rule, as both male and female Sufis socialize and practice together. Hoffman explains that many Sufis see themselves as exceptions to the general rules of society, even religion. For them, she continues, there is no need for such strict morality codes because they have already surpassed the obstacle of natural temptation that would otherwise require religious control.

“But having been made free from fleshly attachments, the Sufi can interact with other people without fear of temptation. For the sake of the weak man, women should not expose themselves to public view; but for the spiritual man, there is no temptation.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>67</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim*, 84

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 95

<sup>69</sup> Hoffman, *Sufism*, 363

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 250

This is just one example of how Sufis could consider themselves to be exceptionally pious; able to raise above the common believer. Their spiritual enlightenment thus exempts them from the social rules meant to control those less-exceptional believers. Hoffman points out that for this reason, Sufi behavior is often considered strange or unorthodox, but that the community must simply accept that such behavior reflects not a lack of belief, but rather the supreme spirituality of the believer.<sup>71</sup>

al-Ghazali certainly partakes in what could be described as strange or unorthodox behavior, both in defiance of Islamic traditions and also of the Egyptian government. The latter is less impressive, as there were many people, both Islamists and not, who resented the brutal tactics of Nasser's regime. al-Ghazali's refusal to cooperate with the laws of the state is less an indicator of Sufi influence as it is a reflection of the oppression and injustice which occurred during his rule. However, it is al-Ghazali's behavior, which seems to disobey certain Islamic traditions, that really points to her decision to view herself as an exceptional believer.

Primarily, she was a public, outspoken woman who not only dedicated her life to activism, but who also threatened her husband with divorce if he prevented her from living a life of public activism. From the surface, one can immediately see certain contradictions between her own life and the domestic role which she encouraged upon other Muslim women. For al-Ghazali, her non-compliance with a self-acknowledged norm for Muslim women was, in fact, the "strange" and "unorthodox" behavior that Hoffman referred to in her analysis of Sufis. It is clear that from al-Ghazali's point of view, she had complete faith that her actions were the correct and pious ones, even if they did not fit in with prescriptions for the majority of the community. While most Muslim women should abide by the traditional Islamic definition of the role of women, the piety of al-Ghazali allowed her to rise above and face the struggle, or *jihad*, which her community faced.<sup>72</sup> This decision to view herself as an exception to the rule appears as a direct result of the Sufi influence in her life.

al-Ghazali's ideological syncretism of nationalism, conservatism, feminism, and spirituality have roots in the history of early twentieth century Egypt. At that time, both reactionary patriarchs and radical feminists conflated the movements of nationalism and feminism. Patriarchs, such as Amin, associated improvement of the nation with the "liberation of women", whereas westernized feminists like Sha'rawi demanded that the newly granted rights of nationhood be applied to women as well. As colonialists—and those who espoused colonialist attitudes—attacked Islam for depriving women of their rights, Qutb sought to argue that women could find all of their rights in the indigenous source of their religion. Finally, Sufism provided al-Ghazali with the spiritual independence and confidence which would allow her to submit herself to God and not to the patriarchal hierarchy which confined the lives of other women. al-Ghazali's combination of these various influences would come to create a discourse that was both reactionary in its methods of employing conservative and spiritual rhetoric, yet revolutionary in seeking nationalist and feminist goals.

## **Chapter Two: Textual Tensions: Navigating Islamist Feminism**

Whether she was writing in her magazine column, giving a public lecture, or answering questions at an interview, Zainab al-Ghazali was clear and consistent on three following points

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 242

<sup>72</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim*, 103

regarding Muslim women and their role in society. The Muslim woman is fundamental to the success of Islamic society. She must fulfill her responsibilities in Islamic *da'wah*. Finally, she must reject the evils of western imperialism that remain after the collapse of the formal colonial apparatus. All three of these points are prevalent in her works, and provide the framework for understanding her message on the behavior, obligations, and societal role expected of Muslim women.

According to al-Ghazali, the Muslim woman is not a marginalized individual in society. Rather, she is the fundamental building block of the entire civilization. She should be rightfully acknowledged and appreciated as the teacher of the nation, the builder of society, and the mother of the future Muslim generations. Given this incredible responsibility, the Muslim woman must make sure to be educated, righteous, and religious in order to insure that the foundation she provides will produce a strong Muslim society.

“Women must be well educated, cultured, knowing the precepts of the Quran and the Sunna, knowing world politics, why we are backward, why we don't have technology. The Muslim woman must study all these things, and then raise her son in the conviction that he must possess the scientific tools of the age, and at the same time he must understand Islam, politics, geography, and current events...Islam does not forbid women to actively participate in public life...as long as that does not interfere with her first duty as a mother...”<sup>73</sup>

While al-Ghazali assures the reader that Islam does not forbid the participation of women in public life, she remains explicit in pronouncing their foremost role to be that of domestic caretaker.

al-Ghazali glorifies motherhood, purporting it to be not only the natural role for women, but also crucial to the success of the Islamic Society. An educated woman will produce an educated populace, just as a corrupted woman will produce corruption. Using al-Ghazali's logic, the Muslim woman retains full control over the direction of the community.

“It may take generations for Islam to rule. We are not rushing ahead of ourselves. On the day that Islam rules, Muslim women will find themselves in their natural kingdom, educating men.”<sup>74</sup>

According to al-Ghazali's theory, the stereotypes that Muslim women are disempowered and marginalized in society seem erroneous. Quite the contrary: as the educators, builders, and mothers of society, al-Ghazali envisions women to play a fundamental role in the community.

Building off of her opinion of the role of women in society, al-Ghazali maintains that Muslim women have an equally crucial part to play in *al-da'wah*. The Islamist mission will never be accomplished if Muslim women ignore their duty in the struggle to rectify the corrupted Islamic nation. al-Ghazali even contends that the duty of *da'wah* for Muslim women is greater than that of men.

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<sup>73</sup> Hoffman, *An Islamic Activist*, 236-37

<sup>74</sup> Al Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, 134

“The Brotherhood considers women a fundamental part of the Islamic call. They are the ones who are most active because men have to work. They are the ones who build the kind of men that we need to fill the ranks of the Islamic call.”<sup>75</sup>

This quote could be interpreted in two ways, both of which would be equally supported by al-Ghazali’s opinion of the role of Muslim women in society. One could interpret her words as a call for women to actually participate in the *da’wah* movement. This would be supported by the clear evidence of her own life: her experience as a socio-political activist and as a Muslim woman. The second interpretation would be to recall her belief in the educating nature of women, an interpretation which would limit a woman’s role in *al-da’wah*. She would work behind the scenes, properly raising and educating the men who would then struggle for the Islamic call. Both are possible, and perhaps they are not mutually exclusive. While the specific role of women in Islamic *da’wah* is unclear, it is unequivocal that al-Ghazali demands women to participate in the struggle.

The final emphasis in al-Ghazali’s work is her absolute denunciation of western imperialism and its continued social and cultural influence. She is extremely critical of what she believes to be efforts to weaken, control, and exploit Muslims around the world. Such goals are met—according to al-Ghazali—through the imperialist falsehoods of capitalism, secularism, and western feminism. All three are equally reprehensible, and all are bound inextricably to one another. Capitalist greed has broken the morals and fortitude of any remnants of religion, and has transformed western women into commodities. Misled by the falsehoods of “equality” and “liberation”, western women have sold their honor for wages, and have destroyed society with their negligence of marital and maternal duties. al-Ghazali argues that the west is now attempting to export their wicked ways to the Islamic nation, leading many Muslim women astray.

“For a few limited pennies we have sold our motherhood and then we ask about the role of women in society? What kind of a society is this where the home that forms the seed of the society has been ruined by tearing women between home and the workplace.”<sup>76</sup>

al-Ghazali denounces western feminism for plotting to destroy the fabric of Muslim society. The efforts to “liberate” the Muslim woman are nothing more than concentrated efforts to weaken the community, and retard the prosperity of the Islamic nation.

al-Ghazali laments those who misinterpret this anti-Muslim conspiracy as the “liberation” of women. She blames the “backwardness” of Muslims on “the imagining of issues invented by the enemies of Islam in order to attract the Muslim people’s attention away from the large issue of returning Islam to its former pride and glory...”<sup>77</sup>

al-Ghazali’s understanding of western influence—political, economic and social—to be malicious helps explain her dislike of “westernized” feminism. Despite her criticism, al-Ghazali

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<sup>75</sup> Hoffman, *An Islamic Activist*, 236-37

<sup>76</sup> Al-Ghazali, “Dawr al-Mar’a fi Bina’ al-Mujtama/The Role of Woman in the Building of Society”, unpublished paper presented at the Conference of Muslim Women, Lahore, November 1985, 4, cited in Azza Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc, 1998), 210

<sup>77</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ayyam min hayati/Days of My Life*. (Cairo: Dar Al Shuruq, 1986), 44, cited in Karam, *Women, Islamisms*, 209

embraces a number of the tenets of feminism. She demands equal value of women in society, promotes the participation and activism of women in movements of social justice, and clearly has no objection with women acting as leaders within the community. Therefore, while she may agree with the spirit of the feminist movement, her distrust of western imperialism—past and present—forces her to reject the ideology as another pre-packaged product of the west. The spirit of feminism may arise from within Islam, but there is no possibility of it arriving as an international import, stamped with a foreign name. While these three points may act as a general guideline for understanding the message of al-Ghazali, a closer examination of three of her works will further illustrate her understanding of the role of the Muslim woman in society.

### *Return of the Pharaoh*

In her autobiography, *Return of the Pharaoh*, al-Ghazali tells her personal accounts of the days before, and the months within one of Nasser's military prisons. It is the only known source that divulges al-Ghazali's personal story of *al-da'wah* and persecution. Likewise, it is the only source which clearly presents—albeit without acknowledging—the apparent paradox found between her rhetoric and her personal life. In her memoir, al-Ghazali is explicit about her religious motives, social goals, and high opinion of herself. Whether intending to glorify God, or herself, the writing portrays al-Ghazali as a devoutly religious woman who gave her all to *al-da'wah*. Envisioned as an exemplary figure in her leadership, piety, and courage, al-Ghazali guarantees herself a sacred place amongst those who fought in the path of God.

### *A Leader among Men*

Her autobiography opens with a car accident; an assassination attempt on al-Ghazali by Nasser's secret police. This political incident sets the tone for the entire memoir. As the subject of an assassination plot, it seems that the Nasser state considered al-Ghazali a threat. This status as an enemy of the state was not only welcomed by al-Ghazali, but she indeed wore it as badge of honor. The Muslim Brothers frightened Nasser, for no matter how many brothers were imprisoned, tortured or executed, leaders like al-Ghazali would continue to call Muslim men, women and youth to Islamic *da'wah* against the secular police state. While the assassination attempt was a failure, it serves as a reminder to al-Ghazali—and to the reader—of the government's fear of this formidable woman. While recovering in hospital, an aide warned her that Nasser not only hated her as a political opponent, but that he couldn't even bear to hear the sound of her name.<sup>78</sup> Nasser had made it his mission to dissolve her organization and to politically paralyze this woman whom he so deeply feared. al-Ghazali received this news like a hardened veteran, welcoming her adversary.

“Praise be to Allah that he fears me and detests me. I too detest him, for Allah. Nasir's despotism only serves to increase our persistence to please our consciences and live for the fulfillment of our mission...”

It is difficult to assess the validity of al-Ghazali's claim that Nasser considered her a top threat to his security. In an Islamic resistance movement, there are clear advantages to being perceived as a fighter of the enemy, and such a reputation would undoubtedly have suited al-Ghazali. Being

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<sup>78</sup> al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, 7



immortalized as driving fear into the hearts of the kafirun<sup>79</sup> might be the dream of most Islamist activists. In summing up her experience as a leader of Islamic *da'wah*, al-Ghazali considers herself as responsible for co-leading the movement which stripped Nasser of his power.<sup>80</sup> Her words convey a feeling of confidence that she, accompanied by 'Abd al-Fattah Isma'il, had brought the powerful Nasser and his brutish comrades to their knees.

In her memoir, al-Ghazali strives to emphasize her leadership within the *da'wah* movement. In addition to pointing out Nasser's personal hatred of her—which conveys her centrality within the movement—she mentions her key role in reviving the Muslim Brotherhood after the imprisonment of its leadership core. She describes how young men and women would come to her house for religious guidance, and how she would welcome them at all hours of the night.<sup>81</sup> Her intimacy with al-Banna is also an indicator of her status within the movement. She tells of a time in February, 1949 when she hurriedly was asked to arrange for al-Banna to leave the country in order to prevent his assassination. While such efforts were too late—al-Banna was shot and killed immediately following the warning—it can be assumed that the task of saving the life of the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood would not be given to anyone but an individual high in the chain of command.<sup>82</sup>

al-Ghazali became increasingly involved with projects of the Muslim Brotherhood, largely focusing on garnering financial and social support for the families of imprisoned or executed Muslim Brothers. However, her initial charity work began to transform into a full effort to revive the dissolved and paralyzed organization. Covertly working with 'Abd al-Fattah Isma'il, she pledged herself to Islamic *da'wah*: educating Muslim youth on their duties to God, alleviating the suffering of the families of the Muslim Brothers, and struggling against the tactics of the dictatorship.

“...A pledge of allegiance that we will fight in His sake and won't languor until we unite the ranks of Ikhwan, and isolate all those who do not want to work for Him, no matter what their position or weight.”<sup>83</sup>

From 1957 until her imprisonment in 1965, al-Ghazali was the third piece of the tripartite rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, along with 'Abd al-Fattah Isma'il and Sayyid Qutb.<sup>84</sup> Her role as a leader within the *da'wah* movement made her a threat against the state, and thus a target for persecution.

Despite these references within her memoir, it remains difficult to ascertain exactly how much control al-Ghazali attained within the Islamist movement. However, what is clear is that al-Ghazali considered herself to be one of the few core members who helped the *Ikhwan* survive the years of persecution. Her memoir leaves no question that this woman understood herself to be an indispensable leader within the faction.

### *Chosen for Piety*

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<sup>79</sup> Kafirun means literally “Apostates” in Arabic. Nassr and his secular government were often referred to as kafirun.

<sup>80</sup> al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, 171

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 35

<sup>84</sup> Mokrane Guezzou, *Return of the Pharaoh*, xxiii

In addition to considering herself a leader of the Islamist movement, al-Ghazali's memoir emphasizes the extent to which she also viewed herself as a moral guide; a remarkably pious individual even under extreme duress. Most obvious is her strict adherence to religious doctrine. Almost every page mentions al-Ghazali praying, praising God, referencing the Prophet, quoting the Qur'an, or preaching to her followers and tormenters alike.

While indicative of her piety, these Muslim norms are not what strongly enforce the image of al-Ghazali as a remarkably pious, saint-like figure. The proof comes from her visions of the Prophet and her prophetic dreams that indicate to the reader that she is no ordinary Muslim, but rather a chosen exemplar. In the days awaiting her sentencing, a sentence which she expected to end her life, al-Ghazali had a vision. The Prophet had visited her, and asked her to climb up a steep mountain. Along the way, she met a number of female companions from the MLA, and she asked each companion if she would join the journey on the path of God. The dream affected al-Ghazali profoundly, and she recalled the serenity that transpired afterwards.

“The feeling which now came over me was one of unencumbered peace, rest and tranquility. This vision had washed away all the pain and driven away all the fear and sorrow in my heart.”<sup>85</sup>

That vision had confirmed for al-Ghazali that which she had always known; she walked in the path of God and his Messenger. A vision of the prophet should not be taken lightly, and al-Ghazali's faith—and reputation—are reinforced by this sacred transaction.<sup>86</sup>

Her second and third dreams were not of Muhammad, but are indeed prophetic visions themselves. The night of the execution of Sayyid Qutb, al-Ghazali had a vision of her late colleague. In her dream, Qutb reassures her, saying “Know that I was not with them, I was in Madinah in the company of the Prophet (peace be upon)”<sup>87</sup> Upon awakening, al-Ghazali proclaimed to her cell mate, Qutb's sister, Hamdidah, that these visions were “a consolation, a strengthening from Allah.”<sup>88</sup>

Shortly after her visions of Qutb, al-Ghazali experienced another set of dreams which were equally, if not more powerful in convincing her of her own religious prowess. Days after her sentencing, al-Ghazali dreamt of her husband's face in the newspaper obituaries. Incredibly, a few days later, she read of her husband's actual natural death. al-Ghazali learned that her husband had been presented the choice of divorcing her, or being sentenced to twenty-five years hard labor. In her memoir, she makes clear that she understood the necessity of her aging husband's decision to divorce his wife rather than face certain death in prison himself. She emphasizes the fact that despite marital divorce, she and he were still comrades in their commitment to *al-da'wah*. Upon learning the date of the divorce, al-Ghazali was shocked to realize that it had occurred on the same day that she had received another vision of the Prophet.

“I recalled the vision that Allah had favored upon me...I had seen the Prophet (peace be upon him) wearing white clothes...I was standing with 'A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her)...She was advising me about something when the

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<sup>85</sup> al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, 154

<sup>86</sup> Gilsenan, 35

<sup>87</sup> al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, 166

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 166

Prophet (peace be upon him) came up to us, and called: ‘Have patience ‘A’ishah... ‘A’ishah was pressing my hand...and asked me to be patient.’<sup>89</sup>

These visions of the prophet, and prophetic dreams of the future are proof to al-Ghazali—and her audience—that she was an embodiment of piety and of religious strength. The aforementioned miracles of escaping dog attacks unscathed and of surviving hours of torture are complimented by her spiritual fortitude. Her memoirs make clear her belief that God protected her as a reward for her righteousness.

But it is not only the prophetic visions, and divinely granted immunity which prove al-Ghazali’s religious fortitude. Instead, her piety is most emphasized through contrast, in comparing herself to other female prisoners. After her torturous stay at the military prison, she was transferred to the all-female prison of *al-Qanatir*. While relieved to be out of the hands of her tormenters, al-Ghazali remarks that what she viewed in this prison was even more horrific than the whips and ropes which she had left behind. In the new prison, al-Ghazali was faced with hundreds of Muslim women who had forgotten, or had sold, their faith and honor.

“Here we were in front of a straying herd lost in the dungeons of Jahiliyya. Women who claimed to be liberated, were rather slaves to whims and desires. Their crimes had submerged them entirely and they had forgotten their humanity, purity, honour [sic] and dignity. Nothing but animals with no meaning to their lives except eating and intercourse.”<sup>90</sup>

al-Ghazali’s reaction of shock and horror prompted her to ask the guards to re-transfer her, as she could not bear to remain in the company of such women.<sup>91</sup> When the request was refused, she remained disdainful of any close contact with those “animals.” Unlike al-Ghazali, these women had been led astray by the temptations of sexuality and the fallacy of feminist liberation. Unlike al-Ghazali, these women were “blind animals led by blind men on a road which zigzagged endlessly before them.”<sup>92</sup> Who were these blind men, leading astray these corrupted Muslim women? al-Ghazali labeled the culprits as “Those who want corruption on earth, the people of atheism and falsehood, of evil and crime”<sup>93</sup> This was a direct accusation against the secularists of Egypt, arguing that it was they who had corrupted women and defiled Islam. But just as al-Ghazali fought the secularists in their attempt to create a Godless state, so too would she defy them in their efforts to corrupt her and her Muslim sisters. The female *kafirun* surrounding her in prison serve to remind the reader of the religious fortitude of al-Ghazali, and her piety in the face of Godlessness.

### *Courageous Women in Corrupt Times*

Such notions of the religious and moral superiority of al-Ghazali are omnipresent in her memoir, usually placed in contrast to the corruption of Nasser and his prison guards. al-Ghazali’s confidence in her own righteousness encouraged an audacity which contradicts the stereotypes of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 169

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 175

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 176

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 176

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 176

a modest, reserved Muslim woman. In the opening pages, al-Ghazali boasts that the MLA never acquiesced to the demands of the state, nor in fact did she ever consider the group to be within state regulation. al-Ghazali argued that the *kafir* government had no legitimate sovereignty in Egypt, and therefore was in no position to place demands on the MLA, its members, or any Egyptian Muslim at all.<sup>94</sup> al-Ghazali proudly remembers how the MLA was exceptional amongst other Egyptian groups in its defiance of the dictatorship. Whereas most people were too frightened to speak their mind and ostentatiously oppose the state to which they secretly objected to, the MLA refused to quietly oblige.

“The Muslim Ladies did not stand by as spectators, but spoke frankly about the events which were going on, seeking Allah’s pleasure, even if in the process it upset many people.”<sup>95</sup>

al-Ghazali and her group refused to compromise their morality, even if it cost them dearly. She relates how even after the military decree to prevent publication of their magazine, not one member willingly participated in the eventual closing down of headquarters.<sup>96</sup>

al-Ghazali’s boldness took on new meaning once she was imprisoned for conspiracy against Nasser. Before, non-compliance resulted in the closure and dissolution of her organization. Now, refusing the demands of the prison guards translated into floggings, starvation, and dog attacks. It was in prison where al-Ghazali’s courage was truly tested and proven to be remarkable. Over and over al-Ghazali was threatened with torture and death if she did not admit to conspiring to kill Nasser. Consistently, she chose torture over lying to save herself. Repeatedly she was cajoled to give names of brothers who were involved in the plot, and persistently she refused, insisting that there was neither plot nor conspirators to divulge. al-Ghazali did not refrain from criticism or condemnation of her accusers or torturers, even if such words resulted in further flogging. In one audacious moment, she dryly asked the man claiming to be the prosecuting attorney if the whips used against her were “from the law-school curriculum?”<sup>97</sup>

In her memoir, there is never a moment of despair, nor a hint of a loss of faith. al-Ghazali remains as steadfast in her recollection of the terrible ordeal as she purports herself to have been during the experience. In fact, al-Ghazali asserts that it was not she who was afraid of the whips of her torturers, but it was in fact the torturers who feared her.

“I looked at both men with contempt and disgust. I do not know if they felt the contempt in my looks or were stupid enough not to notice it... Yes, they seemed stupid to me, like dirt-stained flies. They thought they were frightening me, but I felt sure that it was they who were afraid of me.”<sup>98</sup>

As before, she was confident that she was walking the righteous path. She, not Nasser or his guards, would triumph in the end. If she were to die in God’s struggle, she knew that she would be remembered as a courageous martyr, and not as a compromising coward.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 63

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 77

In one remarkable scene, al-Ghazali's tormentors sent a soldier to rape her. This abhorrent form of torture was clearly targeted at al-Ghazali's honor, an incredibly sacred possession for Muslim women. al-Ghazali asserts that Nasser had ordered the guards to torture her more harshly than they would a man.<sup>99</sup> Using rape as a form of torture seems to corroborate such a claim. In telling the story of the attempted rape, al-Ghazali recalls the poor soldier who was ordered to commit the atrocity. He was reluctant to do the deed, yet unwilling to die for having disobeyed his orders—the fate of the first young soldier sent to rape al-Ghazali. As the young man began to move towards her, she was shocked by her own actions of self-defense.

“Before I knew it, my hands were firmly around his neck. ‘Bismillah, Allahu Akbar’, I shouted, and sank my teeth into the side of his neck. The man slipped out of my hands, white foam...frothed from his mouth...I was safe. Allah, the Exalted, had infused in me a strange force. A force sufficient to overcome this beast.”

Whether or not her courage was divinely inspired, it is clear that these experiences, as well as other experiences in al-Ghazali's memoir, are marked by significant bravery in the face of danger. She refused to buckle where many had collapsed, and her ability to withstand the pressure of intimidation and torture are emphasized in the text.

al-Ghazali not views herself as a courageous person, but specifically as a courageous woman. Gender roles and expectations—and disappointments—of male bravery are infused in the text. Her own ability to withstand torture is thus magnified, as her feminine courage is juxtaposed by the masculine weakness of those Muslim Brothers who cried for mercy. In particular, al-Ghazali is disgusted by a male member of the *Ikhwan*, ‘Ashawari, who was not strong enough to withstand the torture. He saved his skin by playing along with the witch hunt; giving names and detailing non-existent plots of sedition. al-Ghazali recalls when she was re-introduced to her former brother of *al-da'wah*, how disgusted she felt by his appearance. While she was decrepit from the starvation and harsh beatings, he was freshly showered, clean shaven, and wearing silk pajamas.<sup>100</sup> Where she, a woman, had stood strong—he had crumbled under pressure. al-Ghazali bemoaned the cowardice of his actions, but furthermore, she was ashamed that a Muslim man had lost his honor.<sup>101</sup> For when she was reunited with a tattered, yet unbroken ‘Abd al-Fattah, his unfaltering masculinity comforted al-Ghazali:

“The steadfast manhood displayed by ‘Abd al-Fattah gave me a sense of peace. For it emanated from the iman (faith) in Allah that is in him. I said secretly to myself: ‘Praise be to Allah, Allah has real men. May You protect them for your own da’wa. If ‘Ashawari has betrayed us, there are still patient, believing people; leaders of the way and seekers of the truth.’”<sup>102</sup>

In regards to courage, her memoirs are modest, yet unequivocal: al-Ghazali was courageous where others were cowards. Her resolution was strong, and it would not be weakened by intimidation, torture, rape, or even by the limited expectations of her own sex.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 84

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 114

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 116

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 116

*Nawah Bait Muslim: Toward a Muslim Household.*

In the late 1970s's and early 1980's, al-Ghazali worked as an editor for the Muslim Brotherhood periodical, *al-Da'wah/The Islamic Call*. She managed a column of the monthly magazine entitled, *nawah bait muslim/Toward a Muslim Household*. The icon of the section is a drawing of a Muslim family: parents and two children. The mother is veiled, the father is bearded and wears a head covering, and the two jointly raise a copy of the Qur'an. Next to the mother is her veiled daughter, and next to the father stands the son. This icon reveals the aim of the column: to rightly guide the Muslim family in its efforts to live according to word of God. This drawing also depicts the parents as having equal responsibility in the Islamic education of their children, as the husband and wife stand on equal ground, and whose arms both raise the holy book. The content of this column will support the icon's assertion of the importance of both sexes in the raising of a Muslim family, but will challenge any assumptions of gender equality which the reader may have induced from the caricature.

*"The Muslim Woman"*

In an issue from January, 1981, al-Ghazali wrote an article entitled, "al-Mara al-Muslima/The Muslim Woman". While the name seems to target the Muslim woman, the article makes clear that al-Ghazali believes that the fate of the entire Muslim community is at stake, as the *umma* rests on the shoulders of its women. This article is about the bigger picture, about the battle between the feminist imperialists of the west and the Islamic nationalists who wish to protect their women as one strategy in defending their own sovereignty. al-Ghazali is appalled at the number of Muslim women who have confused liberation with equality, and who have replaced their religion with the false feminist ideology propagated by the west. She confronts the Muslim women who desire to work outside the home and juggle the responsibilities of parenting and working. She accuses such women of blindly dragging down society with their negligence. Referring to the Egyptian feminist movement of Huda Sha'rawi—which encouraged women to gain independence and equality—al-Ghazali argues that while such women believe themselves to be in a state of awakening, they are in fact clouded by western deceit. Of the western feminist movement, al-Ghazali asks if it is achieving greatness, or wrecking havoc.

"Is it for her to raise up her house, her children, and her husband to the peak of understanding and to a better social standing? Or, is this movement dissolving the Muslim woman in her imitation of the western woman who is lost and who has become an object of pleasure, unprotected, and whose home is unguarded, and whose privacy has been violated!"<sup>103</sup>

In al-Ghazali's opinion, the movement that had claimed to improve society and the status of women, in fact, had produced the opposite effect. The imitation of the west in politics, behavior and dress had poisoned the *umma* and condemned Muslims to the same unfortunate lot of western secular atheists. Feminism, as a western import, is destroying the very fabric of Muslim society. In one sentence, al-Ghazali addresses what she sees as the heart of the issue: "As a women regresses, society regresses."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>Zainab al-Ghazali, "al Mara al Muslima/The Muslim Woman", in *al Da'wah*, No. 57 ( Jan 1981)

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

al-Ghazali is not satisfied with merely criticizing the westernized feminist movement, but goes on to offer advice as to how the women of the *umma* can manage the disastrous effects of this “foreign” phenomenon. Her solution to the problem is seeped in conservative, nationalist, feminist and spiritual décor, fitting for a disease she believes to be brought by radical, imperialist atheists. In order to battle the poisonous effects of westernized feminism, al-Ghazali decrees that the Muslim community must return to its Islamic roots. Muslim women must model themselves after the Qur’anic heroines of Hawwa’—wife of Adam, Khadija, ‘Aisha, Fatima, Miriam, the Queen of Sheeba, and the wife of Pharaoh in the story of Moses.<sup>105</sup> These women are all considered righteous and pious within Islamic traditions, and are therefore models of imitation for Muslim women today. However, as Barbara Stowasser explores in her book, “Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation”, these women represent various paradigms for Muslim women. Did al-Ghazali intend for Muslim women to adopt the strong, aggressive personality of ‘Aisha? Or, would she have preferred for Muslim women to model themselves after Fatima and Mary, the holy mistresses of motherhood in Islamic tradition. Khadija represents an independent woman with an entrepreneurial streak, running a caravan business and providing for herself. In contrast, Hawwa’ is remembered as a compliant companion of Adam, assigned to the domestic sphere.<sup>106</sup> With this spectrum of female archetypes to emulate, it is clear that there is not, nor has there ever been, one “proper” role for the Muslim woman in Islamic traditions. Therefore, al-Ghazali’s order for Muslim women to return to their Islamic roots does nothing to further define the proper behavior of a Muslim woman. Instead, it is intended to provide a starting point for an Islamist discourse that discusses the question of feminism through an indigenous lens.

By returning to Islam, and by casting out the legacy of colonialism—guised as feminism—the Islamic world would finally have a true revival. But in order to do this, Muslim women must reject the lies of western capitalism; they must refuse to work outside the home. al-Ghazali criticizes the supposed benefits of the working woman, and insists that her decision to work destroys more than her own honor.

“What good comes to a nation in which a woman has to work to feed herself? That woman is a commodity, and the men suffer from it, and the children suffer even more.”<sup>107</sup>

A woman should never choose to work outside the home, opines al-Ghazali, but she should only do so if the situation necessitates such dire action. With the eloquence of a polished demagogue, al-Ghazali encourages women to return to their homes, and to their marital and maternal responsibilities. “Return, my dear, to the home and stay there. Obey your husband and you and he will be rewarded for your obedience.” To emphasize her point, she recollects an American television program which had interviewed a thirteen year old boy as to whether or not he preferred his mother to remain in the home. As is to be expected, the young child agreed with al-Ghazali, saying that it is “natural” for his mother to stay at home.<sup>108</sup>

This article is a clear attempt by al-Ghazali to reduce the world to a simple dichotomy between the west and Islam. While in reality these two terms encompass wildly diverse spaces

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994 ).

<sup>107</sup> al-Ghazali, “al-Mara al-Muslima”

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

with undefined borders, al-Ghazali seeks to cleanly separate those two “civilizations” in terms of their treatment of women. Essentially, the west and its feminist sophistry have transformed women into being more of a commodity than a human being. The woman who worked outside the home suddenly had a price by which to be bought or sold. In contrast, Islam values and respects its women. They are exalted as the guardians of the future generation, as educators, and as mothers. Her dichotomy is harsh, and leaves no room for exceptions. She fails to mention the existence of Muslims who do not respect women, such as the Saudi government—that she openly criticized for not having provided adequate education to girls and women.<sup>109</sup> She also fails to mention the large number of women in the United States who do not work, but who choose or are forced to stay at home. These instances would destroy the clean dichotomy which al-Ghazali hopes to present. Such examples would demonstrate that there are common issues in western and in Islamist feminisms, and that they are not so estranged as al-Ghazali would have them be.

Her efforts to polarize the west and Islam are not unexpected, nor unprecedented. The tone and context of *al-Mara al-Muslima* are strikingly similar to Qutb’s *Social Justice in Islam* regarding the role of the woman in Islamic Society. Also similar to Qutb is al-Ghazali’s insistence that returning to Islam will cure the ailments of post-colonial Egyptian society. A total rejection of the colonial apparatus was needed if there were to be any hope of an Egyptian, and Islamic revival. And because capitalism, communism, and feminism all came from the west, it only seemed fitting that they should all be rejected at face value. It did not matter if such ideologies truly contradicted the tenets of Islam; it was enough that they were a product of the western empires. For this reason, al-Ghazali’s objection to feminism is mainly with its western origin, not with any specific anti-Islamic tenets. al-Ghazali does not address which specific feminist principles contradict Islamic traditions, perhaps an intended negligence that leaves a crucial question: are feminism and Islam really not so compatible?

#### “*The Muslim Woman and the Liberation of Jerusalem*”

al-Ghazali’s article, “al-Mara al-Muslima wa-Tahreer al-Quds/The Muslim Woman and the Liberation of Jerusalem” was published in her column in the February, 1981 issue of the *al-Da’wah*. In recognition of the peculiar title, al-Ghazali began her article by acknowledging the unapparent relationship that a Muslim woman might have with the “liberation” of Jerusalem. While it might have seemed strange to the uninformed reader, al-Ghazali insists that the connection is real and important.

“To the one who is aware and conscientious of his religion, it is understandable that the grand mission of the liberation of Jerusalem is for the Muslim woman, as it is for the Muslim man.”<sup>110</sup>

For many Arab Muslims, the Israeli capture of East Jerusalem was, and continues to be a devastating loss. In the hands of non-Muslims, Jerusalem has come to represent the pinnacle of Muslim defeat in world order. Likewise, the image of a re-conquered Jerusalem, back under the

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<sup>109</sup> al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, 34

<sup>110</sup> al-Ghazali, “Al-Mara al Muslima wa Tahreer al Quds,/The Muslim Woman and the Liberation of Jerusalem.” in *al Da’wah*, No. 58 (Feb 1981)



control of the Muslim community, has become the symbol of hope for an Islamic revival.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, this is a subject which would have been quite familiar for the readers of *al-Da'wah* magazine. Within the various editions from 1981, many articles and cartoons reflect the Muslim Brotherhood's obsession with the re-conquest of Jerusalem. One such cartoon, published as the cover of the May edition, depicts a bleeding, shackled Dome of the Rock, that is locked in chains by a star of David. The lock is about to be forcefully struck by an axe, carried by a hidden, presumably Muslim man. The title of the cartoon commands the reader to "Save the Captured Mosque." This cartoon is one of many reminders of the prevalence of the Jerusalem issue in the psyche of the Muslim Brothers and their followers.

Assuming that her audience was concerned with the "liberation" of Jerusalem, al-Ghazali argues that this issue should be a concern for not only Muslim men, but also Muslim women. The issue should be important to all Muslims, irrespective of their nationality, age, or sex. al-Ghazali asserts that women are just as responsible as men in defending the Islamic nation, and in fighting in God's path. This equality is one which is found in religious devotion, and in religious struggle. Both men and women are essential members of the *umma*, and therefore they must both carry the responsibilities that come with such membership.

al-Ghazali points to the fact that Israeli women are active in the efforts of their community, and that their participation had greatly benefited Israel. If the enemy was fully utilizing the potential of its population, shouldn't the Muslim community do the same?

"Oh Muslim youth, the Zionist woman carries weapons and benefits her government in many different tasks. Isn't it time that the Muslim Woman dawn the silken garb of determination and rectifies what has been spoiled by the Zionist woman?"<sup>112</sup>

Ironically, al-Ghazali seems to be encouraging Muslim women to emulate Zionist women and their active participation in each woman's respective struggle. al-Ghazali remains ambiguous as to the nature of women's participation and whether it was to be civil or militant. She prefers to vaguely exhort Muslim women to "be spiritually aware of the Palestinian issue, an issue of the Muslim nation."<sup>113</sup> The women of the enemy must be met by the women of the righteous if there is ever to be any hope of victory.

According to al-Ghazali, the "liberation" of Jerusalem and the advancement of the Islamic nation is a formidable task. It is a mission which all Muslims must undertake, both men and women. Is this emphasis on the important, equal role of women in the struggle a form of feminism? After all, al-Ghazali is clearly advocating the full participation of women in jihad as a prerequisite for success. She continues that women should not remain at the margins of society, quietly observing the hollow war cries of men. Such inaction and negligence would result only in failure and loss.

"The thoughts of our men and women are poisoned by the saber-rattling of our boys and the shyness of our women. In such a state, how will we ever take back Jerusalem?"<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies. Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 582.

<sup>112</sup> al-Ghazali, "al-Mara al-Muslima wa Tahreer al-Quds"

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

al-Ghazali appears frustrated with not only the inaction of the Muslim woman, but also with the spurious masculinity of Muslim men. She attacks them for being nothing more than young boys—*shabab*—playing tough, but not producing any real results. This restates a similar theme found in her previous writing: the importance of masculinity in the Muslim nation. Her disappointment in the cowardice of ‘Ashawari is remembered by her disappointment in the pseudo-masculinity of the Muslim *shabab*. al-Ghazali laments:

“My sons, where are the real men? Real men have a particular power which others lack. Real men have glory whereas others have loss and humiliation. Real men have determination, and they have strong women who are able to preserve their honor, and who provide the bases for building the state.”<sup>115</sup>

Her lament for masculinity compliments her cries for equal participation of women in the struggle. Men can not fight this battle alone, but neither can women. She has already determined the importance of the role of women, and she seeks to emphasize that men must not forget their own role in *al-da’wah*.

The dual themes of femininity and masculinity are pervasive in this article. al-Ghazali correlates the loss of Islamic sovereignty with the loss of masculine pride and feminine honor. al-Ghazali blames Muslims for having lost their power by losing their honor, and yet clearly she insists that the perpetuating weakness of the Islamic nation prevents Muslim men and women from restoring that honor. Whoever the enemy is—Israel, the United States, the Soviet Union—an Islamic loss of political power is met by an equal loss in the honor of both the men and women of the Muslim community. Therefore, what is at stake is not only the political and religious gains to be made by the “re-conquest” of Jerusalem, but also the restoration of masculinity and femininity which such a victory would procure.

Therefore, the title of this article is mildly misleading. Instead of focusing on the role of the Muslim woman in the “liberation” of Jerusalem, al-Ghazali lectures on the importance of the re-conquest, and what it would mean for both sexes of the Muslim community. It is her inclusion of women within this community that distinguishes her article, as she decrees that Muslims—men and women—should not forget the role which women must play in the struggle. At every injunction to her audience, or to the Muslim community at large, she chooses to use the Arabic grammatical construction for both the masculine and feminine plural. Where others may have left the struggle to the men of the community, al-Ghazali insists that women must not idly watch as their duties and responsibilities are neglected. For she, not only her men, or her nation, has much to regain through the “liberation” of Jerusalem.

“Without Muslim men and women, Jerusalem will never return. But with Muslim men and women, Jerusalem will return and we will be rescued from shame. ...For is it not time that we return masculinity to our boys, our male youth, and to our men? Likewise, is it not time that we return humanity and honor to our women?”<sup>116</sup>

al-Ghazali is adamant on the essential role that women have to play in the Islamic struggle, and on the substantial benefit that they will reap from its success. While focusing on the “liberation”

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

of Jerusalem, al-Ghazali uses this article to stress the importance of women in Islamic *da'wah*. This dual objective is reflected by the title, and enacted by her life.

This chapter reveals al-Ghazali's true feelings on the nature of the Muslim woman. She is a powerful member of society, whose prescribed role as a mother and wife ought to empower her, not oppress her. Furthermore, Islam is the true source of her agency. Within Islam, she may demand the respects and rights she is entitled to, whether they are that of motherhood and domesticity, or that of public leadership and Islamic *da'wah*. While al-Ghazali claims that there is no need for feminism in Islam, her life and works are a deliberate testament to how the ideals of feminism can be achieved through Islamist *da'wah*, according to indigenous means. However, this feminist interpretation of her work reflects merely one facet of al-Ghazali's discourse, as a reader could just as easily withdraw a conservative, nationalist, or spiritual reading of the text. The following chapter will examine a number of interpretations of al-Ghazali, whose combined analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of her multi-faceted discourse.

### Chapter Three: Interpretations Between Adulations and Condemnations

As the last chapter demonstrated, al-Ghazali was a strong figure who refused to bow down to oppressive regimes, whether they took the form of secular nationalism, indigenous patriarchy, or western feminism. She was clearly a *mujahida*, or, a female fighter.<sup>117</sup> A *mujahid*—or *mujahida*—could strive for any goal: justice, equality, or their vision of an Islamic society. As her writings reveal, Zainab al-Ghazali was indeed a *mujahida*, struggling for a cause in which she desperately believed. However, her writing leaves a number of questions regarding the specifications of her cause. As the following interpretations will demonstrate, her complex discourse allows the reader to independently determine the true mission of al-Ghazali's life. There is no obvious answer, and the variety of following interpretations will prove this ambiguity and diversity of her discourse.

al-Ghazali's life and writings expose a woman who could not be defined by a single cause, or an exclusive ideology. Throughout her writings, one can find the sinews of four overarching themes: conservatism, nationalism, feminism, and spirituality. While she may not have explicitly declared her allegiance to each ideal, her actions and words portray a woman who subscribed to aspects of these four ideologies.

Distinctly conservative, al-Ghazali strove for the return of society to the traditions of Islam, calling for an end to the radical modernization of the day. Markedly nationalist, she assailed the remnants of western colonialism and encouraged the solidarity found within the unity of the Islamic nation. Unequivocally feminist, al-Ghazali bitterly defended the equal rights of women, insisting upon the importance of her sex in society. Finally, al-Ghazali's life as a religious activist and self-recognition as a "soldier of God" confidently point to her subscription to spirituality, or religion.

These four ideologies are present in the writings of al-Ghazali, and they carry with them different objectives and their respective implications for the reader. For western feminists, such pairings as "feminism" and "conservatism" may be at odds. For staunch secularist, the pairings of "nationalism" and "spirituality" may be equally contradictory. Therefore, instead of enriching

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<sup>117</sup>*Mujahida* is the active participle of the Arabic word *Jihad*, which means "to strive." Centuries of scholarly debate within the Muslim community have expanded and contracted the definition to include and exclude various forms of fighting, but ultimately, the simple verb means to struggle for a cause. For more information, see Michael Bonner. *Jihad in Islamic History*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)

our understanding of al-Ghazali, these four ideologies threaten to confuse the reader. Where there should be profundity, there are accusations of hypocrisy, or there is a refusal to acknowledge the presence of all four players. Interpretations on al-Ghazali have been, therefore, somewhat limited in their understanding of this figure, as they do not fully address the spectrum of thought within her life and discourse. This chapter will examine a number of these interpretations in order to create a comprehensive image of al-Ghazali, gained from the fragmented views of others.

For this examination, it is necessary to consider articles and writings from a linguistically and geographically diverse set of sources. While this chapter will locate various discourses into “Feminist Scholarship” and “Arab-Islamic Commentary” it should be duly noted that such an organization is merely a starting point for analyzing specific discourses. Those interpretations labeled as “Arab-Islamic” were categorized as such do the language in which they were published, and the religious emphasis of their writing. Likewise, authors who have acknowledged themselves to be involved in feminist theory wrote the analyses listed under “Feminist Scholarship”.<sup>118</sup> This is not to say that the two categories are mutually exclusive. Indeed, two of the three feminist scholars examined in this chapter are from either Arab or Islamic origins.<sup>119</sup> As will be asserted, the categories of “feminist” and “Islamist” are highly perforated, and specific ideas and ideologies found within each are not confined to one or the other but rather are shared property between the two.

#### *Arab-Islamic Commentary: Praise for a Warrior*

The commentaries for this section came exclusively from Ibn al-Hashami’s book, entitled *Hummum al-Mara al-Muslima wal-da’iya Zaynab al-Ghazali/Concerns of the Muslim Woman and the dai’ya, Zainab al-Ghazali*, which is a published account of an interview with al-Ghazali. The commentaries are found at the beginning of the book, in an effort to help magnify the character of al-Ghazali, proving her fame and vast audience. The lack of available Arabic sources on al-Ghazali proved to be an impediment to a comprehensive analysis of how she is interpreted by Arab-Muslims within the Middle East, forcing this paper to rely solely on the following excerpts. It is not to say that the following commentaries are misrepresentative of popular opinions on al-Ghazali, but rather that they are demonstrative and not conclusive.

While the following sources vary in the extent of their emphases, all of them hail al-Ghazali as an exceptionally brave woman, and person, who committed herself to *al-da’wah* despite the persecution she endured as a result. *al-Watan al-Arabi/The Arab Nation*, praises the courage al-Ghazali exhibited during her time in prison where her asceticism and suffering strengthened her determination to fight in the path of God. This newspaper is not considered a religious publication, nor is it publicly connected with the Islamist movement. However, the editors clearly exhibit a respect for this Islamist activist who defied the oppression and persecution brought by the Egyptian government of Nasser. *al-Watan al-Arabi* continues in its

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<sup>118</sup> For more information on Saba Mahmood’s involvement in feminist theory, see her homepage at <http://ls.berkeley.edu/dept/anth/mahmood.html> For more information on Miriam Cooke, see her homepage at [http://www.duke.edu/web/muslimnets/mcw\\_bio/](http://www.duke.edu/web/muslimnets/mcw_bio/) For more information on Azza Karam, see Chapters One and Two of her book, *Women, Islamisms and the State*

<sup>119</sup> Karam identifies herself as an Egyptian Muslim woman. See Karam, 1998, 33  
Mahmoud identifies herself as a Pakistani Muslim woman. See Mahmood, preface

adulation of al-Ghazali by commenting on her perseverance in *al-da'wah*, even throughout her later years.

“Now, despite her older age of 73 years, she still travels from place to place, country to country to give lectures. She also advises young women on the path of *al-da'wah* and guide them towards righteousness. Her house is always open, welcoming all those who seek her advice.”<sup>120</sup>

*al-Watan al-Arabi* does not mention al-Ghazali's discourse of domesticity which has drawn attention from feminist scholars. In its article on al-Ghazali, this Arabic publication manages to memorialize al-Ghazali as a mujahida. This article is not interested in debating the complexities of her personality, the tensions of her arguments, nor the possibilities of feminism found within her discourse. She is remembered simply as a woman who saw a transgression in society, and who devoted her life to *al-da'wah* in order to cure the ailments of her community.

The Islamic magazine, *al-Sahwah al-Islamia/The Islamic Awakening*, invokes similar themes in its tribute to al-Ghazali. After recalling the years of deprivation and suffering in prison, the editor glorifies al-Ghazali for her resilience and dedication to *al-da'wah*.

“...She came out of those hardships stronger in her faith in God and to the noble goal which she has dedicated her life. Her life was filled with constant work, intended for the victory of Islam.”<sup>121</sup>

She is remembered for her commitment to justice, and by a faith that allowed her to endure the consequential suffering. This editorial praises her action, yet similar to the commentary in *al-Watan al-Arabi*, it does not acknowledge her writings or rhetoric regarding the domesticity of women.

In the above two articles, al-Ghazali is treated as a fighter for God. In the eyes of these editors, and perhaps the readers of their magazines, al-Ghazali is best defined as one who fought for justice, and for *al-da'wah*. They have boiled down the various dimensions of this multi-faceted character, and produced a single title in which to encapsulate al-Ghazali: mujahida. From these articles, the audience would have remained ignorant of the depth of al-Ghazali's discourse, and the implications that it has for women and feminist theory.

In a third article, from a separate magazine, al-Ghazali is described in another set of terms. Instead of using the popular lens of jihad in which to view al-Ghazali, the Islamic magazine, *minar al-Islam/The Pulpit of Islam*, praises al-Ghazali on basis of her opinions on the question of women. In a polemic narrative, the editor describes the sophistry of westernized

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<sup>120</sup> Unknown author. "Untitled Editorial on Zainab al-Ghazali." *al-Watan al-Arabi/The Arab Nation* (02/05/1987), in Ibn al-Hishami (ed.), *Hummum al-mara al-muslima wal-da'iyā Zaynab al-Ghazali/Concerns of the Muslim Woman and the da'iyā, Zainab al-Ghazali*. (Cairo: Dar al-i'tisam, 1990),17

<sup>121</sup> Unknown. "Untitled Editorial on Zainab al-Ghazali." *al-Sahwah al-Islamia/The Islamic Awakening*. no. 157 (12/22/1988), in Ibn al-Hishami (ed.), *Hummum al-mara al-muslima wal-da'iyā Zaynab al-Ghazali/The Concerns of the Muslim Woman and the da'iyā, Zainab al-Ghazali*. (Cairo: Dar al-i'tisam, 1990),18

feminist ideology in the Islamic world, and the chaos and social upheaval that it has rendered in the community.

“Some try—and have long been trying—to describe the (Muslim) woman as a woman of the “harem”, or that she is a second class citizen, who does not have any rights outside of concubinage. And now this understanding is beginning to creep and penetrate into the mindset of society, others are taking on the other viewpoint, imitating the fashion of the western woman in all her customs, and ways of life...and the modern woman has begun to scream her demands for freedom and equality and the right to work and partake in political and social life.”<sup>122</sup>

This critique of the western feminist movement in Egypt is not unlike the critique which al-Ghazali herself issued towards certain Muslim women who sought to “liberate” themselves. This shared condemnation of the methods of western feminists in the Islamic context demonstrates that al-Ghazali was not alone in her discourse. The more voices which cry against western feminism, the more al-Ghazali becomes a paragon for the application of Islamist feminism, and the less she can be reduced to a pariah of global feminism.

Indeed, in the eyes of *minar al-Islam* and its readers, al-Ghazali is the heroine who rescues Egyptians—men and women—from the destruction that feminists have wrecked.

“...It was necessary that we dissipate these faulted ways of thinking from the Muslim woman, and our leader who showed us to the paved path amongst the ragged mountains, was Zainab al-Ghazali.”<sup>123</sup>

Hers was the clear voice of reason and righteousness amidst the uproar of insanity and falsehood. She is remembered as a savior, and as a leader who came to the need of a troubled nation.

In all three of these articles, al-Ghazali is glorified for her leadership and perseverance in the face of oppression and social disorder. In none of the found articles from Arab-Islamic sources is she criticized for perceived inconsistencies or tensions between her life of activism and her rhetoric of domesticity. This sort of criticism seems to be confined to the camp of feminist scholarship, whose interpretation will now be discussed.

### *Feminist Scholarship: Reconciling Differences*

For feminist scholars, Zainab al-Ghazali is the monkey wrench in the discussion of feminist thought in twentieth century Egypt. This is to say that for scholars who analyzed and loudly applauded the growing stream of western feminist consciousness in Egypt—as exemplified by Huda Sha’wari and Nawal al-Sa’dawi—al-Ghazali proved to be an exception to the rule. Where feminist scholars pointed to the increasing number of women unveiling as a sign of spreading liberation, al-Ghazali staunchly promoted the hijab as a sign of a woman’s modesty and piety. Where feminist scholars pointed to the mass entry of women into the work force as a

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<sup>122</sup> Unknown. "Untitled Editorial on Zainab Al-Ghazali." *minar Al-Islam/Pulpit of Islam* no. 2 (November-December 1983) in Ibn al-Hishami (ed.), *Hummum al-mara al-muslima wal-da'iyā Zaynab al-Ghazali/Concerns of the Muslim Woman and the da'iyā, Zainab al-Ghazali*. (Cairo: Dar al-i'tisam, 1990), 19

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

sign of progress, al-Ghazali encouraged Muslim women to remain at home. One such scholar, Azza Karam, succinctly described the quandary. “al-Ghazali’s basic tenets regarding the role that Muslim women should occupy is a secular feminists’ nightmare.”<sup>124</sup> While secular feminism may resent al-Ghazali’s utilization of religion in empowering women, it is necessary to examine al-Ghazali’s life and works with a lens other than that provided by western feminist history. Was she not a powerful woman who rose to leadership in a conservative male hierarchy? Did she not dedicate herself to society, shirking traditional roles of obedient wife and mother? Did she not argue vehemently for the participation of women in society and for the full recognition of their equal rights and liberties? These distinctly feminist aims complicate the belief that she was against the spirit of the feminism, a reputation that she herself promulgated. For feminist scholars, al-Ghazali presented an unexplainable yet undeniable compilation of conservative, nationalist, feminist, and spiritual ideologies.

When examining the research and analysis which feminist scholars have attempted, there appears to be two main strategies in reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable ideologies which al-Ghazali promoted. The first, and easiest conclusion for many scholars to draw is that of hypocrisy. al-Ghazali lived a life which seemed contrary to the one which she preached, and this can only be described as hypocritical. The second conclusion which scholars draw is that al-Ghazali operated by way of ulterior motives. al-Ghazali lived in a conservative community, and the only way she could continue to live as a forceful, independent woman was if she couched her argument in traditional, patriarchic language. These two methods are often interwoven, as individual scholars admit their own perplexity suffered from studying the life and works of al-Ghazali.

Miriam Cooke is a prominent scholar of women in Islam, and her work “Women Claim Islam” is a collection of essays on various Muslim women and the diverse issues of their worlds. Cooke devotes a chapter of her book to al-Ghazali, entitled “A Muslim Sister”. The chapter, and the star character, are seen by the author as anomalies to the other stories of Muslim women who struggle against the conservative patriarchs of their communities. al-Ghazali is seen as an exception to the rule, and her life and work are viewed as a conundrum which must be explained. Cooke does not intend to criticize al-Ghazali, but it is clear that Cooke considers the behavior of this paradoxical *da’iya* to be in desperate need of explanation. As Cooke notes in an essay on al-Ghazali, “She uses the rhetoric of domesticity while subverting its meaning through her behavior.”<sup>125</sup> This statement was taken out of context, and does not fully represent Cooke’s final argument. However, it does display the initial difficulty which she and other feminist scholars find when analyzing al-Ghazali. For when there is such a disjuncture between what we read of her life, and what we read of her opinions, hypocrisy seems to be the only viable explanation. Cooke continues to point out the incongruity of her life and words.

“She may claim in interviews and write in Islamic journals that women should restrict themselves to the home, but in her life, and significantly in writing her life, she marginalizes domesticity and glorifies political activism.”<sup>126</sup>

While Cooke convincingly establishes the disjuncture between al-Ghazali’s action and words, she proposes that such a gap was a deliberate effort on al-Ghazali’s part. According to Cooke,

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<sup>124</sup> Karam, (1998), 209

<sup>125</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim*, 103

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*,103

the purposed separation allowed al-Ghazali “to assert autonomy and equality within the highly patriarchal system of a fundamentalist Islam while holding on to her Islamic credentials.”<sup>127</sup> On one hand, if al-Ghazali had practiced what she preached—domesticity and obedience to male dominance—she would never have risen to the upper echelons of the Islamist movement, and would never have gained the podium needed to fulfill her mission. Likewise, had al-Ghazali preached what she practiced—had promoted marital independence and encouraged women to dedicate themselves to a cause other than the family—she undoubtedly would have been considered a threat by the male authorities in the religious movement. Therefore, Cooke asserts, al-Ghazali pragmatically chose a rhetoric of domesticity which allowed her to live a life of public activism.

This argument depends on the hope that al-Ghazali’s actions speak louder than her words, or are meant to be taken as evidence of her true belief. Cooke’s analysis walks a thin line between objectivity and persuasion. While she intended to exculpate al-Ghazali from accusations of hypocrisy, Cooke perhaps does not approach the investigation without another agenda. Cooke’s analysis points to her own hope—as a feminist scholar—that al-Ghazali was herself a feminist, and that she only couched her rhetoric in conservatism in order to be welcomed in the religious community. Cooke suggests that perhaps al-Ghazali did not actually support her emphatic statements on the domestic role of women, but only used them to retain her leadership and power. Clearly hinting at the political aims of al-Ghazali’s domestic rhetoric, Cooke jests at the pacifying effect which such words would have on the male Muslim populace.

“Islam welcomes women into public space (al-Ghazali would suggest) but only after they have been good wives and mothers in private space. The nervous man who may have balked at the implication that women might be trespassing on his turf is reassured.”<sup>128</sup>

Cooke’s argument is entirely plausible, and her effort to understand the nature of the paradox of al-Ghazali is laudable. However, the mere attempt to discover the unmentioned cause behind al-Ghazali’s actions risks re-writing history and also threatens to impose western feminism where it perhaps was not intended. Cooke seems to be suggesting that al-Ghazali must have had ulterior feminist motives, because if she did not, how can we understand her life of political activism? This is not the first time in which Cooke has been accused of attempting to derive western friendly ideals out Arab-Islamic works. In a critique written on Cooke’s “Opening the Gates”<sup>129</sup>, Zjaleh Hajibashi criticizes Cooke for what she describes as “well-intentioned ventriloquism which makes it seem that Middle Eastern women speak to western discursive concerns.”<sup>130</sup> While written in response to a different writing, Hajibashi’s concern of imposing western discourses onto non-western characters is also relevant to Cooke’s interpretation of al-Ghazali.

Like Cooke, other scholars have argued that despite their repulsion to the word “feminism” many female Islamists have embraced the spirit of the movement. One such scholar is Azza Karam, who has studied women’s participation in Egyptian Islamist movements. In her research, Karam addresses the problem of applying the description of “feminist” to female activists who may reject the term.

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<sup>127</sup>Miriam Cooke, "Saint or Subversive?" *Die Welt des Islams* 34, no. No.1 (April 1994).

<sup>128</sup> Cooke, *Women Claim*, 91

<sup>129</sup> Miriam Cooke and Margot Badran, (eds.), *Opening the Gates* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2004).

<sup>130</sup> Zjaleh Hajibashi, "Feminism or Ventriloquism," *Middle East Report* (Sept-Oct 1991).



“Apparently, the women’s rights terminology is problematic, even where the actual efforts are not. Whereas the term feminism is refused widely, some of its meanings and agendas are, nevertheless, adapted by different actors within different historical and cultural contexts. The rejection of the term *feminism* does not mean the absence of a feminist consciousness and agenda.”<sup>131</sup>

Having interviewed a number of female members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Karam concludes that while women such as al-Ghazali reject being called *feminist*, many tenets of feminism are trans-cultural and are not imposed onto, but rather arise organically out of a number of different cultures and communities which ostensibly reject the term.

Therefore, it is still erroneous to assume that al-Ghazali’s rhetoric of domesticity was only a front to gain political power. However, the fear of imposing “Western discursive concerns” should not prevent scholars from recognizing clear commonalities between the western feminist movement and its counterpart in the Islamist community.

In the previous quote, Azza Karam appears understanding and flexible as to the definitions and application of feminist theory in the non-western world. However, she is not so gracious in her own independent analysis of Zainab al-Ghazali. Like Cooke, she recognizes the apparent disjuncture, or paradox, between al-Ghazali’s life and her message. However, unlike Cooke, she does not attempt to reconcile this contradiction by supplanting a hidden feminist agenda. Nor does she attempt to give any plausible explanation for al-Ghazali’s paradox. Rather, she simply condemns the disjuncture as hypocrisy and as proof of the illegitimacy of al-Ghazali’s argument.

Karam’s work, *Women, Islamism and the State*, devotes a chapter to al-Ghazali as well as to other Islamists who have devoted a great deal of attention to the role of women in an Islamic society. Karam spends most of the chapter going through various excerpts from the rhetoric of al-Ghazali, choosing passages that emphasize domesticity of women, their role as mothers and wives, and that they are ultimately restricted to the home. After attempting to determine al-Ghazali’s position in regards to her publications and speeches, Karam begins to contrast the actual life and actions of al-Ghazali to the rhetoric that she produced. She gives scathing criticism for the hypocrisy of al-Ghazali, charging that she preached private, domestic lives for women while she herself lived as a public leader. Karam accuses her of pushing the priority of motherhood and marriage while she herself divorced her husband for interfering with her activism.

“Yet she openly admits she was the one who asked her first husband for divorce, and she stipulated to her second husband that he was not to interfere in her Islamist activism. In view of this, it becomes increasingly obvious that al-Ghazali seems to apply double standards: one for herself and the other for other Muslim women. Her own essentially public role and her private life contradict what she preaches.”<sup>132</sup>

It is impossible to ignore these apparent discrepancies between the life and the words of al-Ghazali. Yet, Karam does not seem interested in learning the reason for the disjuncture, but

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<sup>131</sup> Azza Karam, "Women, Islamisms, and State," in *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>132</sup> Karam (1998) 213

rather is eager to use them as a tool to debunk al-Ghazali's legitimacy. Where Cooke dances between objectivity and persuasion, Karam seems to border the line between subjectivity and ethnocentrism.

Karam claims that the "irony lies not so much in what al-Ghazali preaches, but in her own lifestyle."<sup>133</sup> It is clear that Karam attacks her for more than merely the supposed discrepancies. In earlier chapters, Karam commendably admits to her own former prejudices towards Islamist women, having believed them to be pawns in a system which will ultimately oppress them.<sup>134</sup> Karam also admits that she was greatly humbled by her conversations with a number of these Islamist women, who to her own surprise, revealed themselves to be powerful, articulate, thoughtful activists. Karam's confession to her own prejudices is impressive, and important in her own scholarship. However, in her discussion of al-Ghazali it seems that she has not yet removed all prejudices towards Islamist women. In her discussion of al-Ghazali's opinions on the proper upbringing of young girls, Karam attacks her for applying double standards.

"On one hand, the girl has a duty to be religiously active, but on the other hand, she must also be obedient. Yet it can also be seen as an inculcation of the values of listening to and obeying one's elders. What is most interesting is that while al-Ghazali stresses time and again that there is no separate issue for men and women, she nevertheless addresses the above specifically for girls. I have yet to find a similar message dedicated to boys."<sup>135</sup>

It is true that al-Ghazali focused most of her energy towards the subject of Muslim women, and it is also true that al-Ghazali did not believe that the subject of women could be separated from the subject of the entire Muslim community—one of the bases for her dislike of western feminism. What is questionable about Karam's study of al-Ghazali is not the individual facts which she discusses, but rather the overall picture which she concludes. After reading Karam's chapter on al-Ghazali, one is left with an image of the *da'iyah* as a hypocritical, regressive impediment to the women's movement within Islamic societies. This conclusion is produced by Karam's insertion of various factoids, coupled by her own prejudices, and completed by an overall failure to place al-Ghazali in the correct context. As Saba Mahmoud argues, "her (al-Ghazali's) argument should be analyzed in terms of the particular field of arguments it has made available to Muslim women and the possibilities for action these arguments have opened and foreclosed for them."<sup>136</sup> Mahmoud understands what Karam does not: that given the context in which al-Ghazali thrived, her life and actions were not hypocritical, nor did they produce a paradox.

Mahmoud's ability to critique al-Ghazali within the proper context is not surprising, as it follows the premise of her book *Politics of Piety*. This book is unique in its efforts to understand the women of Islamist movements—particularly those women involved in the mosque movement in Cairo—and also to question secular-liberal criticism of these women and movements. While Mahmoud does not devote much time to the individual figure of al-Ghazali, she astutely addresses her life as a *da'iyah* and also the debate which surrounds this controversial figure in feminist scholarship.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.,213

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 133

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.,210

<sup>136</sup> Mahmoud,183

al-Ghazali first appears in Mahmoud's book in a section entitled "Women and Da'wa", as "she is believed to have been the first prominent female *da'iya* in Egypt, and her trajectory as a *da'iya* exemplifies key developments in the history of women's *da'wa* since the 1940s."<sup>137</sup> In Mahmoud's opinion, al-Ghazali represents the "intertwined role that secular and religious institutions have played in the articulation of women's *da'wa*." Her religious upbringing provided her with the necessary credentials to become a spiritual leader, Mahmoud asserts, while her disposition towards women's activism developed out of an exposure to liberal discourse and the early Egyptian nationalism that encouraged the public participation of women.

"This influence is evident in al-Ghazali's position that Muslim women should play an active role in public, intellectual, and political life (such as running for public office or holding the position of a judge), with the important caveat that these responsibilities should not interfere with what she considers to be women's divinely ordained obligation to their immediate kin."<sup>138</sup>

For Mahmoud, al-Ghazali deserves to be memorialized for more than merely the controversy that her life and message stirred within feminist scholarship. She should primarily be remembered for her contribution to *al-dawah*, particularly for the advancements which she instigated in regards to the role of women in public religious discussion. al-Ghazali's ascension to a high profile *da'iya* and reputable religious leader was no small accomplishment, given the limited number of women *da'iyat* today and during her time. Mahmoud also accredits al-Ghazali with being among the few contemporary women who have written published commentaries on the Qur'an and hadith.<sup>139</sup> Her legacy remains today in the Egyptian contemporary women's *da'wah* movement—the subject of Mahmoud's study—and in the style and approach of modern *da'iyat*. This is true in regards to both doctrinal issues—such as the agreed prohibition of women imams and women's delivery of the Friday sermon—and also in regards to how *da'iyat* approach the subject of women's equality.

"Similarly, like al-Ghazali, the *da'iyat* seldom employ the rhetoric of women's equality: while they do invoke the language of rights to justify their access to sacred knowledge, the female bearer of these rights is not regarded as being on equal footing with her male counterpart."<sup>140</sup>

Clearly al-Ghazali remains an influence in the Islamist movement of Egypt today, both in terms of her doctrinal positions and in terms of interpreting gender equality. This legacy, which Mahmoud reveals, increases the importance of understanding al-Ghazali's discourse as a product of a common reality for Muslim women, and not as a trivial anomaly or a puzzling hypocrisy.

As previously mentioned, Mahmoud's critique of al-Ghazali greatly contributes to a better understanding of this woman, and unravels the paradox which has stumped many scholars. Breaching the subject, Mahmoud emphasizes the necessity of understanding what she calls the "doctrinal presuppositions at the core of Zaynab al-Ghazali's argument."<sup>141</sup> For Mahmoud, there

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 67

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 70

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 68

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 71

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 182

are two presuppositions which, if understood, fully explain al-Ghazali's actions and also exculpate her of any charges of hypocrisy. The first presupposition is based on the popular Islamic judicial understanding of a woman's responsibilities.

“...the position within Islamic jurisprudence...that a woman's foremost duty is to her parents before marriage, and to her husband and offspring after marriage, and that this responsibility is second only to her responsibility toward God.”<sup>142</sup>

As a woman's utmost responsibility is to God, if she finds that her husband inhibits or compromises her spiritual relationship, she must ultimately disobey her husband in order to fulfill her higher obligation. As Mahmoud argues, “it is within this space that al-Ghazali formulates her dissent against her husband.”<sup>143</sup> As is admitted by al-Ghazali, and widely pointed out by her scholars, she divorced her first husband for his efforts in preventing her participation in Islamic *da'wah*, and forced her second husband to sign an agreement to forever respect her primary commitment as an activist. It is this aspect of her life that is used as fodder for attacking her as a hypocrite. However, with her intellectual strategy, Mahmoud has confounded the arguments of those who attack al-Ghazali for encouraging marital obedience while she herself was rebellious. For al-Ghazali did not disobey her husband for the sake of money, independence, or any other cause but that of Islamic *da'wah*. Mahmoud argues that most critics of al-Ghazali fail to notice that there is only one excuse for women to not tend to familial duties.

“al-Ghazali does not argue that the pursuit of *any* kind of work in a woman's life permits her to excuse herself from familial duties: only her work “in the path of God” allows her to do so, and only those situations where her kinship responsibilities interfere with her commitment to serving God.”<sup>144</sup>

According to this argument, al-Ghazali committed no act of hypocrisy, nor was there any disjuncture between her own marital behavior and that which she recommended to other women.

The presupposition that a woman's utmost loyalty is to God is reflected in current female members of the Muslim Brotherhood. al-Ghazali's voice is apparent in the words of one female member as she expounds on the differences between a woman's relationship with her husband, and with God. “No man has the right to deprive a woman from her Islamic mission. Submissiveness is only to God and not to any human being.”<sup>145</sup> This member of the *Ikhwan* reinforces her argument—and her connection to the spirit of al-Ghazali—by insisting that it is actually a woman's right to divorce a husband who prevents her from her right to participation in *al-da'wah*.

In addition to exculpating al-Ghazali on basis of her devotion to God—which allowed her activism to supercede any marital duties—Mahmoud also points out another presupposition which allowed al-Ghazali to work publicly, free of guilt. In accepted Islamic jurisprudence, Mahmoud explains, there is recognition of the differences between the corresponding material and spiritual responsibilities between men and women regarding the family.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 182

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 182

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 182

<sup>145</sup> Duval, 62

“In this moral universe, while women are responsible for the *physical well-being* of both their husbands and children in the eyes of God, they are accountable only for their own and their children’s *moral conduct*—not that of their husbands.”<sup>146</sup>

Free of children, al-Ghazali was therefore also freed of any obligations to remain in the home, in order to instill children with morality and virtue. This understanding of the limits of a Muslim woman’s domestic duties is crucial in unraveling the tension between al-Ghazali’s rhetoric and her own behavior. As Mahmoud argues, it is impossible to analyze, let alone judge, the lifestyle of Zainab al-Ghazali without approaching the issue on basis of the precepts and terms that she lived.

In her book, Mahmoud’s seeks to analyze female Islamist activists—including Zainab al-Ghazali—through understanding the social structures and doctrinal regulations that defined their world. This manner of scholarship is necessary to prevent both the mistake of “feminist ventriloquism” as exhibited by Miriam Cooke, and that of contextual insensitivity, as exhibited by Azza Karam. Rather than searching for ulterior streaks of western feminist discourse, or condemning what seem to be either hypocritical or misogynist arguments, scholars of al-Ghazali should take a cue from Saba Mahmoud. Her scholarship achieves both a better understanding of the motivations and means of al-Ghazali, and also serves to be a model for further research within the study of women’s religiosity and activism.

From Mahmoud to *minar al-Islam*, Zainab al-Ghazali has been memorialized in both the world of feminist scholarship and in the memory of the Arabic-Islamic community. While those who remember her may disagree on how to interpret al-Ghazali’s message and mission, the diversity of those opinions reflect a truth about the nature of her discourse. It would be incorrect to isolate each opinion—producing an understanding of al-Ghazali as purely conservative or purely feminist. In fragments, each ideal does not encapsulate the ideological syncretism of al-Ghazali. If we follow Mahmoud’s method of framing al-Ghazali within the context that she lived, we may understand that she is not defined by the narrow confines of a single ideology. Rather, the writings of Zainab al-Ghazali reflect a woman who was guided by the ideological syncretism of conservatism, nationalism, feminism, and spirituality. Perhaps this understanding of the controversial woman is one upon which all her supporters and critics may be able agree.

### **Afterword: Woman to Woman**

“What do you think of me, of my outfit?” I had just finished interviewing a female member of the Islamist student group at Birzeit University in the West Bank, and apparently it was my turn to answer a few questions. Ghada sat in front of me, wearing a floor length mauve jacket, matched with a light pink hijab. I looked at my own clothing, noted my modest yet outdated style and simple, un-matched colors, and wondered to myself what sort of image of the American woman I was representing. So much for the ravishing, barely-clad bomb-shell; I was more the awkward, frumpy, American college student. “I think that it is a beautiful outfit, I wish I could coordinate my colors like you!!” It was not that I was purposefully avoiding the root of her question; rather, I wanted to hear what she thought I might say. I wanted to hear from her own lips the stereotypes of Muslim women that she suspected were imbedded in the thoughts of my “western” mind. Ghada laughed, but responded persistently. “Well thank you, but, what I mean is, do you think that I am oppressed because I wear the hijab?” Her friendly, yet serious

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 182

face revealed that she had judged me to not hold such misconceptions, but that she still wanted to voice her frustrations with the stereotypes of her identity.

The veil was not the subject of this paper, but for many Islamist women, the veil is the victim of as much misunderstanding as they are. For Ghada, the veil is not a symbol of oppression or of a marginalized status of women. Rather, the veil is her vehicle to empowerment, granting her mobility and a means for participation in the public sector. From my discussions with Ghada I learned that she wanted to speak out against the perception of a misogynist Islam, as for her, religion is unequivocally a source of agency for women. To emphasize her point, Ghada gave an example of how being an Islamist activist has not only allowed her access to public space, but has also forced her to confront the cultural impediments which generally inhibit Palestinian women. She explained to me how she is active in student government and that often she is required to stay up late in order to work on various campaigns or projects.

“I would come home late at night, because I was so committed to the campaign. My neighbors would begin to whisper and gossip about me, insinuating that perhaps I was up-to-no-good. But I was working for the Islamist party, for Islam and for *da’wah*! If those neighbors knew *more* about Islam, then they would know that it is my right to stay out late out night, if it contributes to God’s work.”

What would Zainab al-Ghazali have said to Ghada? Undoubtedly, she would have encouraged her to continue with her *da’wah* commitments, regardless of whatever traditional gender roles Ghada may have been challenging. For it is here in the Arab-Islamic world of today, where Islamist movements are gaining popularity, that we will find the legacies of al-Ghazali. Within Islamist circles, there are young, educated, articulate women who discover that they are empowered by Islam. Despite the stereotypes that the hijab—and the women who don it—are an impediment to feminism, here we find Islamist women who demand the personal agency that they are entitled to. These women actively seek empowerment, and find it within modes of spiritualized self-expression. Essentially, here we find feminism: Islamist feminism. Women like al-Ghazali and Ghada are finding ways to defeat the patriarchies which define their lives. Essentially, they are finding culturally specific methods to improve their status as women. Is not such behavior feminist at its roots? It is true that their means and methods are Islamic, but why should this prevent them the honor of participation in the struggle for women’s rights and respect? It is one thing if they themselves wish to reject the title of “feminists”, but whose right is it to deny them the recognition of their feminist project and participation in the international movement?

Islamist feminists—like Zainab al-Ghazali and Ghada—are faced with two formidable enemies. The first is the Arab-Islamic patriarchic culture, which seeks to maintain male-dominance of the public and political sphere. The second is western/westernized feminism, which attempts to retain a monopoly over the means and methods with which women around the world seek empowerment. The animosity of the first is expected, as twentieth century histories have proven the recalcitrance and resistance of various patriarchies to feminist movements. In contrast, the estrangement and antagonism between western and Islamist feminism is shameful, as it results only in cultural polarization and mutual loss of a potential ally.

When Ghada inquired about my opinions of the veil, she was testing the waters of my presuppositions, but she was also extending a hand of friendship. Why was she so eager to ask me about my thoughts on the hijab? Through my research on al-Ghazali and the Islamist

feminism that she espoused, I now clearly understand Ghada's persistence: it is time for change. Muslim women can no longer be thought of as the oppressed victims of a misogynist society, just as American women should not be generalized as promiscuous, corrupted victims of an equally misogynist society. Ghada seemed prepared to accept me free of the misconceptions that she had undoubtedly heard about my society. It only seemed fair that I should leave behind my own stereotypes, reach out, and take her extended hand.