

Interview Transcript
Sherry Jones
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By: Ethar El-Katatney

Q: Did you expect your novel would cause such controversy?

I began writing my book out of a real desire to tell 'Aisha's story and I was excited to bring the story of 'Aisha and all the women in Mohammad's life—wives and concubines—to western readers. I had done research and I hadn't found anything that was written in the English language about these women in terms of a novel. And so that was my intention.

I knew that I expected controversy because I'm writing about sacred figures in Islamic history. And because there are so many conflicting accounts by historians I had to make choices as I wrote and I knew that not everyone would agree with the choices that I made. So I expected some controversy and debate and discussion. I did not expect the initial reaction by Denise Spellberg that my book was offensive because of its sexual content. That was a total surprise to me. I never expected that to be the focus of the controversy.

Q: Did you make any changes after her reviews? Because I didn't feel the sexual content was as explicit as had been made out.

No, the only changes I made in the book were copyediting changes. Because a review of my book that had run on IslamOnline, the reviewer had mentioned the cultural aspect, oh the reviewer mentioned that Muslims wouldn't bow and that Mohammad had advised his followers not to bow. I had never read this in all my readings and this was the kind of thing that had I known as I was writing my book originally I would have wanted to reflect that in my writings.

So in original version Mohammad was bowing to his wives out of respect so I changed that because I wanted my book to be as culturally accurate as possible. But there's nothing else that's been changed in my version and I didn't see the need to alter or change any of those things because I feel as I wrote the 2 sentences about the consummation they weren't a scene or a sex scene. It was a summary of 'Aisha's feelings about it and it was very respectful to her and Mohammad. And obviously that's a big important event in this book. And I made the choice of how explicit do I get. And for me my respect for Mohammad and 'Aisha that I developed in the course of my research led me to I didn't want to go there but it was important to tell the reader how she felt about it.

Q: What were your research methods?

They were all translations of books. I studied Arabic for 2 years in the University of Montana and it wasn't enough to read it [...] I read everything I could find that had been translated into English and I routinely searched everything I could find in the University of Montana's library (I was working there at the time) everything I could get my hands on. Books by Arabic

scholars. Mostly the books that I got by authors by Arabic names were collections of hadith and I didn't notice then that complete hadiths were available online. I relied heavily on collection of hadith. Anything I could find about Mohammad or his wives I got it and read it.

Q: But you didn't consult with any scholars?

The problem...I did consult with a professor of Islamic history at the University of Montana and I guess he helped me find resources but as I found in my research the scholars don't agree on very much at all. It was such a long time ago and not very much was written down at the time and so even when you read for example the 4 volume history of the life of Mohammad by ibn kathir and he was writing in 14th century, he represented in Arabic fashion different accounts of the same event and then he would say "And Allah knows best." So even then people didn't always agree on exactly what happened. So in hindsight to consult with an Arabic scholar, to find someone else to talk to, I would have had only one person's interpretation.

I did ask various Muslim organizations to read my book I wanted to get opinions but I was completely unknown to any of these people; I was just a small time journalist from Montana and no one had time so I did the best I could with what I had to work with and I feel very confident about the results I reached. My Arabic class was not only a language class it was also a class devoted to culture and I spent long conversations with my Palestinian Arabic teacher about the Arabic culture and the history of Islam and we had many long discussions.

Q: You start your book with a very orientalist approach: "Join me in a harsh, exotic world of saffron and sword fights..." Do you feel your novel has orientalist undertones?

You have to define Orientalism. Well, of course I tried to as a novelist to immerse your reader in all the sensual material: you want your reader to feel he's there. So I did that to the extent that I felt I could. I didn't just portray the exotic saffron (there's not very much there in the book). I also portrayed the harshness of desert living, famine, hunger and the ascetic lifestyle of Mohammad. So there's some of that because it exists but I tried to be as accurate as I could be without having been there.

Q: 'Aisha at many times seems to be a 21st century woman talking. Tell me more about the way you chose to portray her. You portrayed her as rebelling against her life, hating that which other women readily accepted.

Aisha's life has inspired me. I mean, look at her. She started life out as a child completely controlled by men. She was married off by her father to her father's best friend, a man much older than herself, and she grew somehow into an independent, strong, and powerful political leader, advisor, scholar, that had to happen somehow. I doubt she played no conscious role in that. Anyone who could make that kind of transformation in her life had to at some point decided to follow that path.

Q: You portrayed her as hating the veil.

Of course there's a certain amount of imagination but given Aisha's strength of character I think it conceivable that she could have felt these ways and not all the women did. When it comes to veiling I presented a variety of viewpoints among the wives. My intention was not to impose my viewpoint but to show that here were women and there still are women who embrace the hijab.

So my intention was to help western women gain an understanding of the reasons for veiling and the different responses to it. In terms of her response to her *pardah* I had to use my imagination. It was highly unusual as I pointed this out for a girl to be confined to her home. From the age of 6 years old she was forbidden to play with boys so I used my own imagination and there's a certain amount of projection that goes on when you're writing fiction.

Q: The impression I got was that be a strong, independent strong woman you had to believe veiling was oppressive.

The kind of veiling that they had to do, according to Fatima Mernissi, was cover all but one eye, and I tried that myself. It is not the same as the kind of hijab worn now. It's not pulling your cloak over your hair, who's going to object to that? Mohammad admonished everyone to dress modestly. I tried to empathize how it might have been difficult to walk, you have a distorted perception.

And also you have to know that 'Aisha was a young girl throughout that book, she was a girl. In the sequel she reaches maturity and she reacts as a young woman. In fact I don't think she makes a big deal about it in the book. [...] we all, males and female learn to cooperate within the confines of our culture. And I know that women can be strong and navigate even with hijab. I met a woman in Norway, who was Egyptian and she was a very strong woman.

Q: You keep repeating that 'Aisha was a child bride, reinforcing that she was a child, which is contrary to the belief back then, which is that when a woman reached puberty, she was a woman and thus eligible for marriage.

When she married Mohammad she was a child. That's never been disputed. Well, that's not true there some said she must have been older when she got married because she participated in the battlefield and the minimum age of participating was 15.

She was a child when she married him, she had not reached puberty she was 9 in my book. And if you count [...] engagement which was considered as binding as marriage so if you count that then by our western term she was married at age 6. And my research has brought up a quote by 'Ali [ibn Abi Talib] saying a child bride. She wasn't a child bride at 14, she's [...] having sexual desires and longings at that age, she's starting to think about bearing a child [...]and I've argued this many times with many people that life

expectancy was only about 40 yrs at that time so everything had to start sooner. You had to start earlier at a younger age.

Q: Tell me about the hatun.

Hatun. I acknowledge that in that particular culture and place the specific term hatun was not used. The word comes from Turkey, however I wanted to illustrate the rivalry within the harem. I had read in Abbot's book in which she discussed the rivalry between woman for Mohammad's attention and affection. So this was a device I used as a writer of fiction. I imported that from turkey for the sake of showing to the reader what was at stake for the women in the harem and the challenges that were inherent in harem life as I have read and understood it.

Q: How truthful do you think you had to be to history? For example, your interpretation of hadith al-ifk, Lady 'Aisha's pregnancy, her wielding a sword etc

I had read in Ibn kathir's biography of Mohammad that 'Aisha was believed to have miscarried. The actual events I tried to be very true to history like the battle of Badr, the second war, the wives themselves, how he came to marry each wife, why they resisted marrying—why Maryam, and Rihanna resisted marrying him. I also tried to remain true to the culture.

The rule of historical fiction according to my understanding is that you create the setting, the culture as accurate as possible and that serves as sort of a stage on which you move your characters around. I tried to stay true to the characters and their personalities as I gathered from the readings. I tried to depict the battles and the reasons for them accurately then again there's a certain amount of imagination that has to occur because history doesn't tell us everything. Sometimes history tells us what happens but not why. Sometime history doesn't give us the dialogue so every time you put dialogue in a book like this one [...] I almost always had to make it.

Then there is also the question of metaphor [...] I couldn't just tell the reader that 'Aisha became empowered and women fought with the sword on the battlefield. I mean that's not a fictional device, you show not tell. So in effort to show I gave 'Aisha a sword as a metaphor of her growing power. So she had a little child sword, then one she finds on the battlefield, the one Mohammad gives her. It's actually a real sword he owned I found online in a museum so I was able to describe it. The name was real.

Aisha and Ali had this rivalry, and there are western historian theories about why they had this rivalry, where it came from, I used all that. There's also metaphor. So for example her relationship with Safwan. We know that 'Aisha didn't commit adultery with Safwan because she was exonerated by God. However we don't know what else happened, the true circumstances of her being in the desert. We don't know if she knew Safwan ahead of time, she was accused of it by various people of having been seen talking with him in the marketplace.

I wanted to show how 'Aisha might have grown into a woman controlled by men and longing for men to give her certain things to her maturation into a woman in control of her own destiny. So I used her relationship with Safwan as a metaphor. I gave her a situation where she was tempted and she overcame it. And as we all do when we are able to overcome temptations she became a wiser and more mature and more spiritually aware person.

Q: You introduce doubt about the Qu'ran, making it seem in several places that Prophet Mohammad made up verses to satisfy his own desires. You used something Lady 'Aisha said when the verse ordering the Prophet to marry his adopted son's wife ("God certainly hastens to do your bidding") to further supplement this idea.

The book is from 'Aisha's point of view and if she said that to Mohammad, she said that, I didn't make it up and her saying it told me she could have wondered about it. It's from her point of view not me. This is how I would imagine 'Aisha would have seen what was going on, how she would have seen it.

And also, we don't know what Mohammad wanted, we don't really know that. We know what Mohammad did we know what Mohammad said but we don't know his inner desires. So I tried not to portray him or second guess his inner desires but I also tried to show from my impression of what I read of 'Aisha's point of view: what she thought, what she might have believed, what she might have suspected and what she might have thought.

Q: Sexuality is a normal part of life, but you have made it seem as though every one of the prophet's marriages was lust-based rather than primarily political alliances. Also, all of the women were portrayed as being gorgeous.

I read that Mohammad's wives were beautiful. He's a man, a flesh and blood man so what's wrong with him having desires for his wife? That's perfectly holy and perfectly legal, there's nothing wrong with that. He explains every single time to 'Aisha the political importance of these marriages. I'd also like to add that this is all from 'Aisha's point of view. She was known to be a very jealous wife. She was jealous of his wives. So in her eyes a gaze between Mohammad and his new wife is going to make her burn with jealousy and what makes you burn with jealousy other than the person you love having sexual desire or what you perceive as sexual desire? She would have thought [...] that he wanted every one of them otherwise why would she be jealous?

Q: You humanized the characters to a great extent, and accentuated all their flaws.

I didn't turn them into humans, they were human first then they were turned into sacred figures. Mohammad in the Qur'an says I am a mortal man. That tells me and the reading I've done, Mohammad resisted attempts to sacred-ise him. He wanted people to remember that God is the one to be worshipped. And in terms of portraying the characters' strengths and weaknesses, I hope

that I've succeeded in making well rounded characters and not creating any cardboard stereotype cutout one dimensional characters.

Even Ali I've tried to give some slack. I portrayed him I hope as a rounded character. Because he's portrayed through 'Aisha's eyes—their rivalry is well documented—he doesn't come across as good all the time. He was known to be impulsive and young, he was criticized [...] One criticism was that late after Mohammad's death when some wanted him to be the caliph was that he was young and impulsive had not had a chance to develop wisdom yet. So I hope that I've succeed in giving that character, despite 'Aisha's perception, giving the reader a picture of all the characters in the book as being fully formed human beings with strengths as well as weaknesses.

Q: So do you think having more than one point of view would have been a good idea?

The first draft of my book was 650 pages long. In my first draft I did switch among points of view. I worked with an editor who said this isn't going to work, you need to choose one. You need a hero, you need a protagonist, you need one central figure for everyone to root for. I wasn't skilled enough as a writer to be able to pull that off, to give you one hero through different points of view. It was my first novel, I was learning.

Also my first draft you'll be interested to know I was completely true to history as I could be. 'Aisha didn't have a sword in the first draft, she wasn't initially engaged to Safwan. I did all these things after because in working with editor I came to find that I didn't really have a novel. [I had a] series of interesting [events] but there was no novel here. A novel has a protagonist, a novel has a narrative, thriving action, tension, climax, all the action, resolution and so I didn't find that the lives of the characters conformed to that structure. So I had to introduce elements and make some changes for the sake of putting together a novel.

My second book, the sequel, because I'm now [better]...I revised the novel seven times. My 2nd book alternates between 'Aisha and Ali. So what you have is another point of view of 'Aisha. You have 'Ali's point of view of 'Aisha which is usually not flattering to her. And you also get 'Ali's point of view of himself which gives you a much rounded 'Ali than the first draft. And I was able to do that because my skills as a writer have grown.

Q: Do you think the fact that you've said the book is fiction will somehow reassure Muslims who are afraid of the inaccuracies that might be believed?

To me the question of whether 'Aisha really used a sword or not. I mean how important is that really? I mean the question of whether 'Aisha grew from a woman who was disempowered into a woman who was empowered. To me, non fiction dwells in the realm of fact, fiction dwells in the realm of truth and truth is subjective. I acknowledge that.

But the truth that my book is trying to explore is that women were more

empowered in early Islam that the western perception of women in Islam is today. That Mohammad was a leader, wise and gentle leader, compassionate and also egalitarian, and also non violent. I'm not saying he was non-violent but he did advocate as I point out in my book using violence in self defense only [...] if he was constantly attacked.

Western historians wrote of Mohammad as this very violent man who went on trying to convert people to Islam and kill people who didn't. Well, that's not what I found in my research at all so I was interested in keeping the truths of Islam as a religion of egalitarianism that longs for peace under Mohammad's vision for Islam.

And I wanted to show the difficulties of being a woman who loves her husband and must cope with a growing harem of sister wives. And I wanted to portray women's empowerment using 'Aisha as a role model under Islam. And how Mohammad's original image for women according to Mernissi and other authors was one of equality and empowerment according to what I've read. it proved to be too big a change for the male dominated culture of the time. Too much too fast and God helped steer Mohammad to a middle course for the sake of the higher good.

Q: What do you hope the book will achieve?

I hope that it will provide a point of view of 'Aisha that will inspire people, especially women. I acknowledge that my primary audience will be a female audience, though I think men will be interested in the political, strategies and the battles. Female protagonist, female on the cover, and it's about domestic harem life.

I hope western readers who read the book will come away sharing my experience of Islam and Mohammad. And that by gaining a greater understanding of Islam we can start to build bridges with the middle eastern culture and Islamic culture that we've demonized here in the US. It breaks my heart to and its always been very disturbing for me to hear the words Axis of Evil and to hear people putting down all Muslims after the 9/11 attacks [...] because of what a few did. So I hope that my book can help us to understand each other to build bridges between the east and the west. Or the Middle East and the west.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your background

My father was in the US air force so I grew up all around the country. I lived in Germany for a year when I was a child. Most of my family lives in north Carolina. So I come from a long tradition of southern writers. As an adult I started college when I was 18 then started getting into journalism. Because I was working full time I finally graduated with a BA in creative writing in 2006 from the University of Montana. I worked as reporter in north Carolina, Philadelphia and Montana. Now I'm a free lance correspondent for BNA and Women's enews. I finally got my college degree after 28 years.

I grew up in a poor family, not many people at that time had a college degree.

My mom since I was a child praised my intelligence and encouraged me to go to college so I did it the way I could do it which was 1 class at a time.

Q: How did you get interested in Islam?

I grew up in the Christian church so for many years I was a devout Christian. As I grew and matured I became more spiritually curious especially when I left the south. I began to read and began getting interested in other religions. Islam was the latest religion I was inspired to learn more about and that was inspired by 9/11 because people in the US around me were talking about all Muslims as though they had created this act. As a journalist I know to check your sources. [...] When we sent troops into Afghanistan and news media into Afghanistan I heard for the first time ever of oppression of women, stories of women being oppressed under the Taliban and how they had lost rights that they had. So I wanted to go to the source and not just believe what I heard but actually to read about it.

I read 9 parts of desire and the Price of Honor and they were written by western women journalists who had been in the Middle East. The books expressed how women's situation is different in different countries. That told me that it's not Islam that's oppressing women, it's the various cultures that [...] accommodate equalities of women or don't. Culture not religion. That's how I became curious.

People were speaking about Islam and Muslims in a derogatory fashion, and my own suspicion that it's not [...] when I traveled abroad especially right after US went into Afghanistan then Iraq. I went to Paris in 2002 and people said what are you doing over there? As if all the US agreed with these actions but there's always diversity of opinions and reactions of any group. So I was curious to find out about Islam and Muslims. That's what spurred my interest.

Q: Have you been to the Middle East?

No. Because I moved around my credits didn't transfer [...] I worked part time to finish my degree, divorced from my husband, raise my daughter alone. Didn't have the money to go to the Middle East. It dampened my desire to go when I found I couldn't go to mecca and medina.

Q: Last points?

My book is not only novel about 'Aisha. There's a 'Aisha novel trend going on this year. One in France last winter. One in Netherlands. One in April by Camron pasha. To get a full picture of 'Aisha from a historical fiction point of view, read them all. There's no one definitive view of history and not all agree [...] There's much controversy about consummation. She said I was married at 6 and consummated at 9, but does that mean he has intercourse with her at 9 before she hit puberty? It could just mean the marriage contract was completed in this year. Because the word consummated can also mean completed.

I always had the intention of honoring Islam from my work and I instead to do

so in my public speaking in public. I never expected violence to revolt and I still don't believe it will. My intentions are much different from the intent of the Danish newspaper. I've been told by a Danish journalist that they wanted to provoke—not that I think violence is ever a proper response—but I've always believed my intentions will shine through the work and I still believe that.

Q: You know, in Islam we believe intentions make all the difference.

Dante's heaven has different levels and hell has different levels. He said the level you achieve is the level that reflects your actions and also your intentions. He even wrote about heaven and hell as places that look like what you were on earth. If you had ugly actions and ugly intentions the uglier your hell is. And the more honorable and more beautiful your actions and intentions are, the more beautiful you appear in heaven.