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Lady Fatima's Role and Influence on Muslim Society

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Abstract

The present article is a collection of ideas and opinions on Lady Fatima's influence in society and the reasons behind her impact in history gathered from the words of three scholars: Huj. Dr. Mahmoud Taqizadeh Dawari, Huj. Ali Akbar Reshad, and Huj. Dr. Ahmed Beheshti. She was titled Abundance (Kawthar)[1] as she performed a great service to society through her virtues that quenched the thirst of society throughout history. Lady Fatima is known for her merits, noble traits, and accomplishments.

She upheld the roles of being a considerate daughter, a devoted wife, an affectionate mother, and a concerned educator for the community of Muslim women.

As her father was the best exemplar for the human race, she was the ideal woman as she served as the perfect example for Muslim women.

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Mahmoud Taqizadeh Dawari: In the history, culture, and civilisation of Iran after the emergence of Islam, Lady Fatima (s.a.) is and has been an inspiring figure for people of all fields including the religious, male and female political and social activists, peace-makers, teachers, theorists, fundamentalists, religious and traditional artists, family-loving poets, calligraphers, specialists in matters related to marriage, family, and child-rearing, affectionate spouses, and loving mothers.

Many aspects of her influence and affect can be found in all types of literature, including religious teachings, mystics, art, and political and revolutionary slogans. Lady Fatima (s.a.), through her exemplary children - Hasan, Husayn, Zainab, and Umm Kulthoom, - has also been affective in keeping

the Shi'i school of thought alive. Thus, we can say that this great woman's role in our lives is not a matter of debate. Without a doubt, she is one of the most remarkable spiritual personalities throughout Islamic history. Our discussion will be about her role and influence in society from a historical, cultural, and religious perspective.

Lady Fatima's influence

Lady Fatima's influence is the outcome of her merits, noble traits, and accomplishments. Some of these merits and traits have been given to her and are non-acquired, such as family values. Because she is the daughter of the Prophet (S) and Lady Khadijah, the wife of Imam Ali (a) and mother of Hasan and Husayn, she is part of a unique noble household. She was born to a monotheist family whose faith descended from the religion of Prophet Abraham. These are rare merits that have assembled under her name, and though she has not struggled to gain them, they still result in her nobleness and elevation.

I will clarify this matter with an example: Take a diamond, which is highly valued compared to all other stones. Its luxuriousness is because of its natural merits as it is irreplaceable and is rarely found. Also, its strength and transparency is unmatched. Likewise, peacocks are attractive and unmatched in its beauty. So we see that peacocks and diamonds are very much loved and treasured, yet their merits are not acquired and are given to them by God. Their value is not the result of hard work and struggle. On the whole, we humans are attracted to unique creatures and objects, and Lady Fatima (s.a.) is similar: she is unmatched and is a rarity.

To further explain this, let us investigate the birth of this great woman with the aim of understanding these non-acquired merits. According to a well-known narration, she was born on the 20th of Jamadi al-Thani in the second year after the advent of Islam. The Prophet (S) was commanded to distance himself from Lady Khadija for forty days and to occupy himself in prayer and invocation of God. He spent this time at the house of Fatima bint Asad, the mother of Imam Ali (a). He would fast during the day and stand in prayer throughout the night. During sunset, he would ask for the doors of this house to be opened so that whosoever may wish could be his guest and join him for a meal.

Thus, the Prophet (S) willingly distanced himself from Lady Khadija. Although the distance between the house of the Prophet (S) and that of Fatima bint Asad was short, what is important is that the temporary distance made between spouses is known to be effective in creating a strong and long-lasting affectionate relation between a husband and wife. Thus, the best and most accurate conditions were prepared for the coming of Lady Fatima (s.a.), and all conditions for a healthy child were observed. Imam Ali (a) who was the host of the Prophet for these few days narrates that on the fortieth day, the Prophet broke his fast with dates, grapes, and water, and then returned to his house.

In hadiths, it is recommended that the couple be in the state of ablution (wudhu) before intercourse, that the physical contact be preceded by prayer and supplication, and that it should not take place on a full stomach. These recommendations are effective in balancing the physical and mental faculties which

result in a healthy foetus. Of course, other aspects effective in the character of the child, such as the environment and heredity, are not to be overlooked by parents. A child is moulded as a result of various features, primarily the purity of the parents' body and soul.

Additionally, the mental and spiritual conditions of the parents can only be effective when they are habitual. In other words, the habitual good thoughts and actions should have penetrated into the heart and have become strong and firm. A temporary spiritual condition or a brief gentle emotion will not suffice in its transmission to the future generation. On the other hand, a rooted emotion or a firm desire affects the foetus whether it is good or bad. If the soul is overflowing with sincerity such as that of the Prophet's (S), then only a pure and healthy embryo will be conceived. Time, repetition, and distance are needed to acquire noble traits and virtues, the example of which can be found in this narration. Therefore, for the conception of Lady Fatima (s.a.), a strong and pure basis was prepared. Indeed, the account of her birth clearly draws attention to the importance of the parents' emotional condition on the child at the time of conception, and medical studies today have confirmed this.

Another interesting point in this narration is its subtle indication to family planning. Parents should agree and decide to have a child before conceiving. Children are not merely the result of short-lived lusts and desires, because if such is to happen, children will be unwantedly handed over to society. It is quite clear in the above narration that the Prophet (S) and Lady Khadijah had carefully planned for the birth of a child and had prepared the grounds for it.

Thus, Lady Fatima's importance is because of her great merits and attributes, some of which were not acquired, but were a part of her because of her family, lineage, and relations. In addition to these merits, she possessed virtues which she acquired. These virtues resulted in her elevation and it distinguished her character in the eyes of many throughout history. They created the greater part of her character as they include her spiritual state, generous way of life, rational behaviour, wise words, pleasant manners, and other qualities which have made her a role model in our society and culture. Each of her virtues will be explained to enable us to follow and imitate her path.

Another essential factor in elevating Lady Fatima's prominence amongst us is the Prophet's (S) praise of her, although a deeper understanding of his words would need to be explored separately.

Lady Fatima's role as an educator in society

Ali Akbar Rashad: With every great Prophet and every Imam there exists a woman who plays the role of a guide, educator, and upbringer. Alongside the great men such as Prophets Abraham, Jesus, Moses, and Muhammed (S) along with the Imams, there has always been a distinguished woman. An example of this is seen in the life of Prophet Moses, who was brought up by his mother and sister. Also, in the time of Prophet Jesus, there was no man worthy of being his father, yet there was a woman who was capable of nurturing a Prophet, and it was because of her that he came into society, that is, only through the rearing of a mother.

Moreover, the first trustee and helper of Prophet Mohammed (S) was Lady Khadija. She was also the first person to accept the religion of Islam and to follow him. After her demise, it was the young Fatima who stood by her father during hardships, which gave her the title 'The Mother of her Father.'[2] The young Lady Fatima (s.a.) was a kind and gentle companion to him, just as a mother would be. Afterwards, Lady Fatima (s.a.) was a great support for her husband, Imam Ali (a). Although it is generally assumed that family lineage is kept alive through the male gender, in Islam, infallibility and leadership have been transferred from the Prophet (S) through Lady Fatima (s.a.).

If Lady Fatima (s.a.) is 'Kawthar'[3] meaning 'Abundance' as is understood from the 108th chapter of the holy Qur'an, it is because her level of knowledge and understanding is like a bubbling spring, continuously overflowing and quenching the thirst of the people throughout history. Lady Fatima Masuma[4] (s.a.) who is buried in Qum is a mere branch of this spring, and yet she has become the source of considerable religious activity and blessings. And it is from the blessing of the Islamic Seminary that a personality such as Imam Khomeini was nurtured. Throughout Shi'i history, every philosopher, thinker, and scholar are in fact the spiritual children of the Prophet.

A great scholar is reported to have said, "Once in a dream I was told that Lady Fatima (s.a.) is the night of Power (Qadr). When he asked Ayatollah Sha'rani about this, he was told that a similar phrase with the same meaning has been reported from Imam Ja'far (a). It is true that there are many similarities between Lady Fatima (s.a.) and the Night of Power. For example, we can compare the eleven other months, which do not have a night of power to the eleven infallible Imams who were born from her.

Literary work remaining from the knowledge of Lady Fatima

It is unfortunate that although we may know much about the historical events surrounding Lady Fatima (s.a.), we do not know as much about her knowledge. Until today, we do not have a decent and comprehensive commentary on her sermon regarding Fadak.[5] Once I had the pleasure of meeting Ayatollah Jawadi Amuli, and I happened to be talking about the Daneshname Fatemi[6] during which I complained about the lack of sources, narrations, and documents. He said, "The narrations and traditions may be few, but they are rich." He added, "Lady Fatima's sermon is the mother of Nahjul Balagha, and all of Imam Ali's letters, sermons, and words are a commentary and explanation of her sermon."

It is very unfortunate that this great woman's teachings have been left aside; we should feel apologetic to her. When conversing with Professor Mohammed Hakimi in the same regard (Daneshname Fatemi) he held the same opinion as that of Ayatollah Amuli. He said, "Nahjul Balagha is a commentary of the sermon of Fadak of Lady Fatima (s.a.). Is there a greater injustice than the fact that Imam Ali – the first and last of the oppressed – is the exegesis of the existence of Lady Fatima (s.a.), yet her teachings should be left aside and neglected?"[7]

Lady Fatima's knowledge

Dr. Ahmad Beheshti: Lady Fatima (s.a.) did not have an official education, and nothing has been mentioned in historical reports about her being educated by any teacher or scholar other than the Prophet (S). Although she had not been educated in the common way, she still had a high level of understanding and knowledge, and therefore we cannot presume she was illiterate.

Likewise, Imam Ali (a) had not been taught in a class or by a private tutor, yet he carried out numerous compilations, including the compilation of the Qur'an. And although nothing has been reported about Lady Fatima's literacy in historic contexts, there are many indications that prove her ability to read and write. For example, a story has been reported in which Imam Hasan and Husayn (a) had written something which they brought to Lady Fatima (s.a.) to evaluate the one with the better handwriting.

She then referred the matter to the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (a), and they in reverse asked her to make the decision. This clearly indicates her ability to differentiate in this matter, because had it not been so, the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (a) would not have asked her to decide.

Another point which helps us understand Lady Fatima's knowledge is a phrase used by Imam Sajjad (a) in his description of her to his aunt Lady Zainab (s.a.). He said, "By the praise of Allah, you are a learned person who has not been taught." This phrase is most definitely true about Lady Fatima (s.a.) as well; she was a learned person who had not been taught, and therefore her knowledge must have been God-given. In the traditions and narrations she has been named The Learned Lady (Muhadditha), and it has been reported that the angels would converse with her. They would tell her about the future events and she would dictate it to Imam Ali (a) who would take note of the information.

Also, with reference to Ziyarat Jami'a Kabira and other narrations, she is the place where God's verses were revealed and conversed. Thus, she most definitely had the status of a learned person who had not been taught, and she had the highest level of knowledge and infallibility compared to other great female figures.

Lady Mary is another woman who spoke to the angels, and according to the verses of the Qur'an, she is one of the few chosen women of the world:

And when the angels said: 'O Mary! Surely Allah has chosen you and made you pure, and has preferred you above all (the women of creation).' (4:42)
'O Mary! Be obedient to your Lord, prostrate yourself and bow with those who bow in worship.' (4:43)

Here it is quite clear that she is a distinguished woman whom, due to this high level, is given the merit of being able to talk to the angels.

Prophet Moses' mother also conversed with the angels as revealed in the Qur'an:

And We revealed to Moses' mother saying: Suckle him. Then when you fear for him, cast him into the river and do not fear nor grieve, Surely We will bring him back to you and make him one of the messengers. (***28:7***)

Was this a revelation carried out through the angels or was it direct? Some may ask, is it even possible for people other than the prophets to speak to the angels? Some of those who are of the Sunni school of thought do not accept this. They claim that it is not possible. Yet in these verses we clearly see that women who most definitely were not prophets have spoken to the angels.

Therefore, Lady Fatima (s.a.), who has an elevated status amongst the chosen women of the world, unquestionably holds such high virtues and merits. Martyr Murtada Mutahari in his lectures has said:

It is quite possible that Lady Fatima's status is higher than that of the Imams. We know that the status of the Imams is higher than that of some of the Prophets and therefore she is higher than that.

There is a narration which I heard from a scholar – though I have not seen or read it anywhere yet – in which Imam Hasan Askari (a) says, "Fatima is a proof over us Imams." And when the Imams are proofs over the people and Fatima is a proof over them, then surely her knowledge cannot be underestimated.

Therefore, if the Prophet taught Imam Ali (a) a thousand doors of knowledge, and said, "I am the city of knowledge and Ali (a) is its gate", then without a doubt Lady Fatima (s.a.) is positioned in front of this gate.

Is there anything left of Lady Fatima's commentary on the Qur'an?

The women of that time most definitely benefitted from her knowledge, but these were women who were either illiterate or their knowledge was mediocre, and therefore they could not completely benefit from her vast knowledge. It is similar to a top mathematician teaching at the advanced level to beginners. Those women were not on the level needed to benefit completely from this great woman. Nonetheless, given that she would narrate traditions and engage in conversations with the angels is sufficient proof of her knowledge and understanding.

Moreover, Imam Ali (a) took notes on those conversations, though Imam Ali (a) himself was very knowledgeable. It is reported later in history that Imam Ali (a) once pointed to his chest and said, "Surely in here there is a lot of knowledge" and "I am more knowledgeable with regards to the pathways of the skies than those of the earth."

Lady Fatima's sermon of Fadak reveals her vast amount of knowledge. Interestingly, Lady Zainab, who was very young during the delivery of the sermon, memorised it at the mosque and afterwards related it to others. Papers and books can be written about this sermon, but still it would be limited to the author's

knowledge and cannot do full justice to the sermon.

The sermon of Fadak

The teachings of the sermon of Fadak can be found in the Qur'an and Nahjul Balagha. It can then be compared to the narrations which remain with us today from the Imams. In other words, the only source of all the teachings of the Qur'an and the words of Lady Fatima (s.a.) and Imam Ali (a) is God. And when the source of a group of things is one, their content will also be consistent, keeping in mind that we do not have anything higher than the Qur'an.

Notable features of the Lady's life

As an author of sources on child upbringing and family, her life is inspiring and it has strongly influenced me. All of her invocations, prayers, and acts of worship are a manifestation of her inner being. Even though I accept the fact that the external side of every person's life stems from their inner being, I feel that we are incapable of understanding the peak of this aspect in the life of Lady Fatima (s.a.). Nevertheless, if we ponder on her daily life, we may be able to easily understand her, and this in turn opens doors to a deeper understanding of her teachings and ideas.

When I look at her family life, a few points come to mind:

Her marital life: although she was a greatly revered person, she continuously humbled herself in front of Imam Ali (a). She also bore all of problems faced by her family and yet she never complained. When Imam Ali (a) would return from a war with a blood-stained sword, she would not ask about the booty he brought. When her family felt hungry because of giving away their food for three days whilst they had been fasting, she did not object. She consistently maintained her household duties, while keeping in mind that this did not hinder her from modestly participating in any necessary socio-political affair. All of this was done with full contentment. Her personality was beyond our mental perception, although we know she was undoubtedly the best role model for all women who desire to be an ideal wife.

Her efforts in matters of upbringing children are also very instructive and should not be overlooked. During those hard times, she nurtured boys and girls in a firm yet gentle manner. Each of these characteristics helped people model them and were passed on to society.

Lady Fatima's rank amongst the Ahlul Bayt

Whenever the Lady entered a room in which the Prophet Muhammad (S) was present, he stood up each time and would kiss her hand. Thus, there must have been a stronger and deeper meaning behind this action. Additionally, whenever the Prophet (S) left the city, Lady Fatima (s.a.) was the last person he would bid farewell to, and upon his return, she was the first one he visited.

In The Story of the Cloak (Hadith ul-Kisa),[8] when God explains to Angel Gabriel as to whom are under the blanket, he said, “They are Fatima, her father, her husband and her two sons.” Lady Fatima (s.a.) is the focal point in this event. God did not say, “They are the Prophet’s family.” Thus, in this incident, even the Prophet is not made central.

Imam Ali (a), to whom the Prophet had taught “a thousand doors of knowledge”, would sit humbly in front of her in order to note down her dictations of what the Archangel Gabriel had said to her. This reveals that Lady Fatima’s status was at the climax, this being at a time when the women around her were illiterate and so uneducated that they were unable to benefit very much from this ocean of knowledge.

Conclusion

Lady Fatima maintained the roles of being a considerate daughter, a loyal wife, a loving mother, and an accomplished educator for her community and for women for centuries to come. With the limited amount of information within our reach about this “Mistress of all Women,” it is sufficient to know of the Prophet’s boundless love and respect to comprehend her status towards God and the Ahlul Bayt.

Not only has her noble birth resulted in her renowned status and elevation, but the greater part of her character, spiritual state, generosity, wisdom, knowledge, and pleasant manners as seen in several narrations affirm her eminence and give us the motive to select her as our exemplar as it, indeed, pleases God and His Prophet, and guides us towards the straight path.

1. The Qur’an, Chapter 108
2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 43, p. 19, narration number 19.
3. “Kawther” is also the name of a spring in heaven.
4. The daughter of the 7th Imam, Imam Musa al-Kathim (a) who is buried in the city of Qum, Iran.
5. A garden located in Khaybar, a strip of land located in Saudi Arabia. Found roughly thirty miles from Medina, Fadak was known for its water-wells, dates, and handicrafts. When the Muslims won the Battle of Khaybar, Fadak was part of the proceeds given to the Prophet Muhammad. Much before his death, he bestowed it to Fatima. Upon Prophet Muhammad’s death, Lady Fatima declared her right to own Fadak as the estate of her father which was gifted to her. The claim was rejected by the first caliph Abu Bakr. After realizing the detrimental consequences of Abu Bakr’s attempt to seize the land, Lady Fatima (s.a.) delivered a sermon called The Sermon of Fadak.
6. A collection of information, with a similar format as that of an encyclopaedia.
7. We thank Allah (swt) that we have at least been able to assemble a group of specialised scholars with the aim of taking a step towards understanding Lady Fatima’s teachings and knowledge by writing the Daneshname Fatemi. In order to present this piece of work, we have planned thirty stages, including the entrees, sources, and system.
8. An account of an incident when Prophet (S) gathered Hasan, Husayn, Imam Ali (a) and Lady Fatima (s.a.) under his cloak and prayed for them.

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