



Moroccan Islamist Nadia Yassine Imagines the Life of the Prophet

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Abstract

Moroccan Islamist Nadia Yassine's *Life of the Prophet Imagined* does not embody overtly feminist messages, but is composed of stories told from the woman's perspective. Head of the women's branch of the Islamist movement al-'Adl wa-l'ihsane and daughter of its founder, the late Cheikh Abdessalam Yassine, Nadia was born after Moroccan independence, but her life and work were shaped by the country's French colonial heritage. Active in politics since her high school days, her Islamist activities reached a high-point in 2000 when she led a mass women's rally, countering a feminist demonstration. Her evolving ideas built on an Islamist foundation engaged Moroccan feminism and Islamic feminism. Her *Life of the Prophet* reflects her experiences as a woman, and reaches out to Muslim women

Key words: Sira, Islamist, Morocco, women, feminism, Islamic feminism, Prophet Muhammad.

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Faslı İslâmcı Nadia Yassine Peygamber'in Hayatını Düşlüyor

Özet

Faslı İslâmcı Nadia Yassine'nin *Life of the Prophet Imagined*'i açıkça feminist mesajlar ihtiva etmemekte, fakat kadın perspektifinden anlatılmış hikâyelerden oluşmaktadır. el-'Adl ve ihsâne isimli İslâmcı hareketin kadın kollarının başkanı ve kurucusu Şeyh Abdüsselâm Yassine'in kızı olan Nadia, Fas'ın bağımsızlığından sonra doğdu fakat hayatı ve çalışmaları ülkenin Fransız sömürge mirasının etkisinde şekillendi. Lise günlerinden itibaren aktif biçimde politika ile ilgilenen Nadia'nın İslâmcı faaliyetleri feminist bir gösteriye karşı kadın mitingini yönlendirdiği 2000 yılında zirveye ulaşmıştır. İslâmî temele dayalı zamanla tekâmül gösteren fikirleri Fas feminizmi ve İslâmcı feminizmle irtibat hâlinde olmuştur. Onun *Life of the Prophet*'ı da bir kadın olarak tecrübelerini yansıtmakta ve müslüman kadınlara hitap etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siret, İslâmcı, Fas, kadın, feminizm, İslâmcı feminizm, Peygamber Muhammed.

Moroccan Islamist Nadia Yassine Imagines the Life of the Prophet, 2010

In January, 2010, Moroccan Islamist Nadia Yassine began posting chapters from the life-story of the Prophet Muhammad on her internet site and facebook page. The series was entitled *The Life of the Prophet Imagined (La vie du Prophète romancée)* and opened on “A dawn morning like no other . . .” when a young slave woman named Thouwayba went to the stalwart patriarch Abdelmoultalib to inform him that a boy had been born. The news was greeted by the “youyous” of the women, and by the noble Fatima bint Amr, grandmother of the newborn.¹ This opening is quite different from those of most biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, composed by men, which drily state the date of his birth, or his lineage, or more dramatically, shepherds or messengers announcing the birth of the Prophet.² From the outset, Nadia’s vignettes of the life of the Prophet are stories told from a woman’s perspective. In this respect, her re-creation of Muhammad’s early life dovetails with the feminist agenda of rewriting history, as women would have told it. Nadia’s work does not, however, project overtly feminist messages, as feminist versions of the life of the Prophet have done in the past.³

From the mid-nineteenth century until today, Muslims have rendered the life of the Prophet Muhammad in different ways, projecting their messages in diverse manners to varied audiences. The first of these messages was apparently a series of essays composed by the great Indian reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1870, but the work of the Indian Amir Ali eventually published under the title *The Spirit of Islam* was more influential.⁴ Amir Ali’s book was immensely popular in the West, and

1 Nadia Yassine, “La vie du Prophète romancée”, posted on her web-site www.nadiayassine.net January 21, 2010, (accessed December 11, 2011). This web-site was unavailable at time of publication.

2 See, for example: M. al-Siba’I, *Al-Sira al-Nabawiyya: Durus wa-Ibar*, Cairo: Dar al-Tawzi’ wa-al-Nashr al-Islamiyya, 1636 A.H. / M. al-Siba’I, *Life of the Prophet*, trans. A.R. Kidwai, Delhi: Hindustan Publications, 1985; Moustapha Akkad, *The Message [Al-Risala]* Morocco and Libya, 1976.

3 Naguib Mahfouz, *Children of Gebelawi*, trans. Philip Stewart London: Heinemann, 1981; *Awlad Haratina* Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1997; Ruth Roded, “Gender in an Allegorical Life of Muhammad: Mahfouz’s *Children of Gebelawi*,” *The Muslim World* 93 (2003), pp. 117-134; Assia Djebar, *Loin de Médine : filles d’Ismael*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1991; Assia Djebar, *Far from Madina*, London: Quartet Books, 1994; Ruth Roded, “Recreating Fatima, Aisha and Marginalized Women in the Early Years of Islam: Assia Djebar’s *Far from Medina* (1991) *Hawwa* 6 (2008), pp 225-253.

4 Christian.W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, New Delhi: Vikes, 1978, pp.28–31. Ahmad Khan’s work was composed in response to William Muir’s four-volume *The Life of Mahomet* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1858–61) with introductory chapters on the original sources for the biography of the Prophet. S.A. Ali, *The Spirit of*

also impressed western-educated Muslims from the Indian subcontinent to Egypt.⁵ French-Algerian Orientalist painter and convert to Islam Etienne Nasr al-Din Dinet published a life of Muhammad in 1918 with twenty-seven figurative and scenic paintings rendered in a European, naturalist style. This work has remained popular with Muslims to this day.⁶ From the 1930s, virtually every major literary figure in Egypt composed a modern biography of the Prophet Muhammad ranging from the apologetic *Hayat Muhammad* by Muhammad Husayn Haykal (first serialized in the press from 1932) to the allegorical *Awlad Haratina* of Naguib Mahfouz (1959) to the socialist Abdal-Rahman al-Sharqawi (1961).⁷

All modern versions of the *sira nabawiyya* are based on the same classical Islamic sources – some more, some less. They differ, however, in what material on the Prophet Muhammad is selected from the classical Arabic works, and how it is rendered. The target audience for the *sira* dictates the content, but the genre chosen also influences the composition. The ideas, social milieu and life experience of the composer impact on the messages conveyed through his or her life-story of Muhammad.

The major classical Islamic works on the Prophet were all compiled by men, although Muslim women were the source of much material on the life of Muhammad. Through the centuries, women were also among the transmitters of these classics, but do not seem to have contributed to their amplification. Among the numerous

Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam with a Life of the Prophet, London: Methuen, 1922; first published in 1891.

- 5 Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan: 1857–1964*, London: Oxford University, 1967, p.87; W. Cantwell Smith, “Amir cAli”, *EI2* ed P. Bearman et al., Leiden, Vol. 1, 1986, p.443.
- 6 Dinet, E. et Sliman ben Ibrahim, *La Vie de Mohammed, Prophète d’Allah*. Illustrations de E. Dinet. Décorations de M. Racim. Paris: Piazza, 1918; Sliman Ben Ibrahim and Etienne Dinet, *The Life of Mohammad: Prophet of Allah*. Illustrations by Etienne Dinet. Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1990.
- 7 Muhammad H. Haykal, *Hayat Muhammad*, Cairo: Matbacat Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1935; *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Ismail R. al-Faruqi, Delhi: North American Trust Publications, 197; Muhammad.M. Badawi, “Islam in Modern Egyptian Literature”, in: *Modern Arabic Literature and the West*, London: Ithaca Press for the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, 1985, pp 3 -61; originally published in 1971; Anthonie Wessels, *A Modern Arabic Biography of Muhammad: A Critical Study of Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s Hayat Muhammad* Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972. Haykal’s work began as a response to EÅL . Dermenghem, *La vie de Mahomet*, Paris: Plon, 1929; trans. Arabella York. *The Life of Mahomet* London: George Routledge & Son, 1930; Abd al-Rahman. al-Sharqawi, *Muhammad Rasul al-Hurriyya*, Cairo: Al-Asr al-Hadith lil-Nashr waal-Tawzic, 1986; originally published in 1961 ; Naguib Mahfouz, *Awlad Haratina*, Cairo Al-Ahram 1959 Beirut: Daral-Adab, 1967; *Children of Gebelawi*, trans. Philip Stewart London: Heinemann, 1981.

biographies of the Prophet composed since the mid-nineteenth century, only a handful of women have undertaken this endeavor. In this respect, Nadia Yassine's retelling of the *sira* implicitly challenged the authority of men who have dominated this literary and scholarly field.

Nadia Yassine (b. 1958) is head of the women's branch of the Moroccan Islamist movement al-'Adl wa-l'ihlane (Justice and Charity, or Justice and Spirituality), and daughter of its founder, the late Cheikh Abdessalam Yassine. Born two years after Morocco achieved independence from France, she had a francophone education, despite the fact that her father was an Arabic teacher. She is, however, also fluent in Arabic and English⁸

Nadia has been active in Moroccan politics since the early 1970s, and gained prominence in 2000 when she led an Islamist mass rally in Casablanca, organized to counter a feminist gathering in Rabat. She has expressed her ideas about Islam and feminism in numerous interviews, a book⁹ (2003), articles, and postings to her web-site and face-book page (currently not available).

Nadia's on-line biographical sketches of the life of Muhammad are placed below in the framework of her Berber/Amazigh tribal roots, education and language strategy. The ideas projected in this *sira* are a product of her Islamist activism, as well as her evolving ideas as she engaged her father's Islamism, Moroccan feminism and Islamic feminism. In this context, the images, sounds, and dramatic text of Nadia's cyber stories of the life of the Prophet are analysed below in concert and compared to other works of this genre, with emphasis on the woman's perspective.

Berber/Amazigh Tribal Roots, Education and Language Strategy

Nadia Yassine was born in 1958, two years after Morocco achieved independence from France, but her life and work were shaped by the country's French colonial heritage. French colonial and neo-colonial policy impacted Nadia's Berber/Amazigh tribal roots, her educational trajectory and language strategy.

8 Nadia Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée" <http://www.nadiayassine.net>, (accessed December 11, 2011).; K.A Dilday, "Nadia Yassine's journey". Open Democracy https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-village/nadia_yassine_journey, (accessed July 31, 2015).

9 Nadia Yassine, *Toutes Voiles Dehors Maroc*, Le Fennec et France : Alter-éditions, 2003. Nadia Yassine, *Full Sails Ahead* trans. Farouk Bouasse Iowa City, Iowa, USA : Justice and Spirituality Publishing, 2006.

Berber/Amazigh Tribal Roots

Among the images that Nadia Yassine used to illustrate *The Life of the Prophet Imagined* was the ubiquitous Orientalist painting of a Berber woman (*Femme berbère*) by Emile Vernet-Lecomte, 1870. This interesting choice seems to indicate an Islamic privileging of the Berber/Amazigh people from whom Nadia is descended, as well as a familiarity with French Orientalist art.

The Yassine's origin from the great Shilha tribe of Southern Morocco impacted three generations of the prominent family, from the colonial period, through the policy of independent Morocco and to the rise of Amazigh consciousness. French colonial policy regarded the Berbers as Romans -- spiritual descendants of St. Augustine, and French Latin Africans. Berber lands were considered part of Europe and its inhabitants as Mediterranean and Latin, brothers to the Iberians, Ligurians, Corsicans and Celts.¹⁰ Moreover, the Berbers of Morocco were regarded as "whites" in contrast to the dark-skinned Arabs.¹¹ Despite this privileging of Berbers, the French did not open schools for them in Morocco until after World War I, so the impact of Berber schools was limited. Also, these French-run schools did not use the Berber language. As a result, Berber soldiers trained by the colonial state were more influential and far more numerous than Berber teachers.¹²

Nadia Yassine's grandfather, who was illiterate, joined the French horse cavalry and fought alongside the French during World War I. Returning to Morocco after the war, he settled in the south-western city of Marrakech with its Berber and illustrious Islamic heritage. Nadia's father, Abdessalam Yassine was born there in 1928.¹³

Despite being a Berber rather than an Arab, Abdessalam claimed noble descent from the Prophet, through the line of Muhammad's great grandchild Idriss.¹⁴ By ascribing his lineage to Idriss, Abdessalam Yassine was linking himself and his

10 Pessah Shinar, "The Historical Approach of the 'Ulama' in the Contemporary Maghreb" in: *Asian and African Studies*, 7 (1971), pp. 259-263; James McDougall, "Myth and Counter-Myths: "The Berber" As National Signifier in Algerian Historiographies" In: *Radical History Review* 86 (2003) pp. 66-88.

11 Spencer D. Segalla, *The Moroccan Soul. French Education, Colonial Ethnology, and Muslim Resistance, 1912-1956*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2010, pp. 49-50

12 Segalla, *The Moroccan Soul*, 227-234.

13 Abdessalam Yassine, "Recollections - Part 1 Interview by Al-Hiwar TV with Imam Abdessalam Yassine" Monday, June 23, 2008 <http://yassine.net/en/Default.aspx?article=Recollections1> (accessed December 10, 2011).

14 A. Yassine "Recollections - Part 1"

family to the Prophet and to Idriss's Berber wife Kanza,¹⁵ as well as the prominent Berber women of the past.

Education

Nadia's father, Abdessalam, learned Quran in a sufi *zawiya*,¹⁶ followed by secondary school at the Ibn Yusuf or Yusufiyya mosque-university in Marrakech – one of the two most prestigious urban seminaries in the country.¹⁷ Chafing at the “traditional ambience” at Ibn Yusuf¹⁸, Abdessalam began learning French language and school curriculum in private from a friend with a French education. He then moved to the capital Rabat to study at a government boarding school, run by a Frenchman.¹⁹ After graduating with a major in Arabic, he taught Arabic in government schools in a school system controlled by the French.²⁰ He continued studying by correspondence, earning a classical Arabic diploma. This enabled him to teach in secondary education, and to advance to primary education inspector, first in Marrakech and then in Rabat.²¹ He also managed to study a bit of English on his own.

By the time Nadia was ready for primary school, Arabic education was available for girls as well as boys in Morocco through the university level.²² Nevertheless, Nadia was sent to “modern” primary and secondary school at the newly established Lycée Victor Hugo in Marakesh, founded in 1962 under the supervision of the Ministère Marocain de l'Instruction Publique,²³ and the elite Francophone cosmopolitan Lycée Descartes in Rabat, opened in 1963.²⁴ At that time, less than 60% of boys and girls age seven to twelve attended primary school, and 17% of the young men and 7% of the young women attended secondary school.²⁵ So Nadia was one of the privileged

15 Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

16 A. Yassine, “Recollections - Part 1”

17 Segalla, *The Moroccan Soul*, p 3.

18 A. Yassine, “Recollections - Part 1”; Jennifer E. Spratt, “The making of a fqih: The transformation of traditional Islamic teachers in modern times” In: *RLE: Japan Mini-Set E: Sociology & Anthropology: The Cultural Transition: Human Experience and Social Transformation in the Third World and Japan*, eds. Merry I White, Susan Pollak, 1984.

19 A. Yassine, “Recollections - Part 1”

20 A. Yassine, “Recollections - Part 1”

21 A. Yassine, “Recollections - Part 1”

22 Alison Baker, *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*, Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1998; Segalla, *The Moroccan Soul*.

23 <https://sites.google.com/site/lyceevictorhugomarrakech/presentation/histoire>

24 <http://www.lycee-descartes.ac.ma/spip.php?article46>).

25 Thomas K. Park, and Aomar Boum, “Berber Policy/Politique Berbère”, *Historical Dictionary*

few Moroccan girls of her generation to be launched on a multicultural, multilingual educational track. In 1980, Nadia received a BA in political science from the recently founded Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez.²⁶ She was among the first graduates of modern western higher education in Morocco.

Language Strategy

The Yassine family, like other Moroccans, particularly Berbers, were francophone during the period of French colonial rule, for a variety of reasons. Nadia's grandfather surely learned to speak some French during his stint in the French army, but he was illiterate, and the French did not establish schools for Berbers at this time, nor did they promote the Berber language.

Abdessalam was sent to Islamic Arabic primary and secondary schools, but since he felt that this traditional education did not challenge him enough, he took the initiative to teach himself French. He also taught himself English, an unusual choice at that time. His thirst for knowledge and abilities as an autodidact were truly impressive. Moreover, unlike many North Africans of his generation, he was not cut off from his Islamic roots, but rather chose to specialize in the classical Arabic language at the French-run teachers college.

Nadia admitted in an interview that she spoke only a bit of Berber and explained that: "I don't think we should remain prisoners of this tribal approach while the entire world is getting united and looks for common grounds with regard to broader issues. That's not sensible."²⁷ Her experience at francophone schools seems to have been fairly positive, and she regarded French as "the language that I have borrowed to write in," in order to be provocative.²⁸

In addition to spoken, Moroccan Arabic, Nadia was proficient enough in classical Arabic to translate verses from the Quran into French.²⁹ So Nadia was able to use the Arabic language for Islamic scholarship and political mobilization.

of Morocco Second Edition, Lanham, Maryland • Toronto • Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2005.

26 <http://www.nadiayassine.net>; *Historical Dictionary of Morocco* 2005; "Historique," l'Université Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, http://www.usmba.ac.ma/presentation_historique.php.

27 "Interview of Nadia Yassine by Al-Usbou'iyā Al-Jadida" 2005 <http://www.aljamaa.net/ar/document/2608.shtm> (accessed December 27, 2014)

28 Nadia Yassine, *Full Sails Ahead*

29 Nadia Yassine, *Full Sails Ahead*.

Islamist Activism

Nadia has been active in Moroccan politics since her high school days in the early 1970s. At this time, student rights and Marxist movements captured the imagination of the growing number of young women who managed to continue their academic studies, and a feminist Marxist movement emerged.³⁰ Only 3% of university students, however, were active in militant Islamic groups.³¹ Nadia Yassine herself, before becoming an Islamic militant, regularly wore jeans and T-shirts.³² This seems to be a harbinger of the ideological trajectory that she was to undertake.

During the 1980s, after graduating from university, Nadia founded the women's section of *Adl wa-l'ihane*.³³ Her web-site stated that she enlivens the women's section of the Justice and Spirituality movement in study groups whose mission is to engage the members in a feminine *ijtihad* (defined as an effort to contextualize revelation), focussing on Islamic spirituality such as defending the ideas of the founder Abdessalam Yassine. Her strong influence in the political field, it said, is that she herself puts into practice the ideas of Abdessalam about the effective participation of women in the movement as well as in a society searching for its *islamité*. This mission statement strongly anchors Nadia's goals for the women of al-'Adl wa-l'ihane in her father's Islamist vision and ascribes to him views about the advancement of women in the movement and in Islamic society as a whole. The means to achieve her objectives are study groups and familiarity with the Islamic concept of *ijtihad* of the Quran as practiced by women. Nadia's own activities embody the principles of Abdessalam regarding women and she serves as a role model for Islamist women and Muslim women in general. Interestingly, the emphasis in this statement is on spirituality rather than legalism. From the outset, Nadia's work with women in the 'Adl wa-l'ihane movement aimed to strengthen their self-esteem, consciousness of women's rights, and public engagement.³⁴ The influence of feminist ideas and activism were clearly apparent, even if the term was not explicitly referenced.

The 1990s were heady years for Islamists and feminists, but Nadia Yassine

30 Alison Baker, *Voices of Resistance*.

31 Henry Munson Jr. "The Social Base of Islamic Militancy in Morocco" In: *The Middle East Journal*, 40(1986), pp. 84-267.

32 Munson Jr. "The Social Base of Islamic Militancy."

33 <http://www.nadiayassine.net>; Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Islamism, Moroccan-Style: The Ideas of Sheikh Yassine" In: *Middle East Quarterly*, 10 (2003) pp. 43-51.

34 Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco*, Minneapolis - London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 21.

seems to have kept a low profile until the end of the decade, deferring to her father's guidance.³⁵ Abdessalam remained in house arrest, but many people attended meetings at his home in Salé that were videotaped.³⁶ His movement and other Islamist groups gained the ideological upper hand on most university campuses and largely displaced the leftist groups that had monopolized student ideologies previously.³⁷ For the first time, a "realist" Islamist movement took a limited part in the 1997 elections, with modest quantitative but impressive symbolic results.³⁸

At the same time, independent women's organizations proliferated as the king was prompted by internal and domestic pressures to allow the increase of NGOs. Women's rights became the focus of public discussion and demonstrations, resulting in a fascinating interaction of liberal, leftist and religious groups. In 1991, a leftist grassroots women's organization (*l'Union de l'Action Féminine*, UAF), collected one million signatures on a petition calling for reform of the Code of Personal Status, *Moudawana*, Morocco's family law. This event has been viewed as the opening shot in an on-going debate that pitted Islamists against feminists.³⁹

In the wake of the 1997 elections and the appointment of the "alterance" government headed by a socialist prime minister, The Plan of Action for the Integration of Women in Development (*Le Plan d'action nationale pour l'intégration de la femme au développement*) was produced in collaboration with the world bank.⁴⁰ The plan was developed by liberal and leftist activists who seemed to know little about Islamic law. It was based entirely on the international discourse of women's rights, but called for reforming legal codes, and specifically the personal status code.⁴¹ Although the question of family law reform had not been of prime importance for Cheikh Abdessalam, Nadia focussed on this issue in her public

35 Marvin Howe, *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. description of meeting with Nadia in 1995.

36 A. Yassine, "Recollections - Part 1."

37 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Islamism, Moroccan-Style: The Ideas of Sheikh Yassine" In: *Middle East Quarterly*, 10 (2003) pp. 43-51.; Eva Wegner, *Islamist Opposition in Authoritarian Regimes: The Party of Justice and Development in Morocco*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

38 Wegner, *Islamist Opposition*.

39 Iman Ghazalla, *Sculpting the Rock of Women's Rights: The Role of Women's Organizations in Promoting the National Plan of Action to Integrate Women in Development in Morocco*. University of Minnesota: Center on Women and Public Policy. 2001

40 Ghazalla, *Sculpting the Rock of Women's Rights*.

41 Leon Buskens, "Recent Debates on Family Law Reform in Morocco: Islamic Law as Politics in an Emerging Public Sphere". *Islamic Law and Society* 10 (1/2003) pp 70-131.

attacks on the government's Plan of National Action.⁴²

Nadia's Islamist activities reached a high-point on March 8th 2000 when she led a mass women's rally in Casablanca, supported by a coalition of Islamists, in opposition to reform of the *Moudawana* personal status code, and to counter a feminist demonstration in Rabat in support of reform.⁴³ At first, the events of 2000 seemed to highlight the polarity of Moroccan feminists and Islamist women, but after further analysis, they may be viewed as what Salime has termed "movement moments" – turning points in the trajectory of the Islamist and feminist movements. They were also turning points in the development of Nadia Yassine's views.

In 2005, Nadia again gained notoriety when she was accused of publicly defaming the monarchy. When brought to trial, she appeared with a white gag emblazoned with a red cross over her mouth, holding up a sign that read: "Don't touch the Liberty of Press and Freedom" - in English for maximum global exposure.⁴⁴ In April, 2006, Nadia went on a book tour of the United States in collaboration with Dartmouth, Harvard, Fordham and Georgetown universities to promote the appearance in English of the translation of her book *Full Sails Ahead* and to "clarify some misunderstandings about Islam." In late 2009, Nadia participated in a round table on Islamic Feminism at the International University of Menendez Pelayo at Tenerife.⁴⁵ At the same time, she began posting her stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad⁴⁶

Evolving Ideas: Islamism, Feminism and Islamic Feminism

Islamist Foundation

Nadia Yassine clearly adopted the basic ideas of Islamism from her father and other leaders of his 'Adl wa-l'ihsane movement, but she also displayed a sensitivity to gender issues in Morocco which reflected her activism in the women's sphere.

Not surprisingly, Al-'Adl wa-l'ihsane opposed the Plan of National Action for the Integration of Women in Development (*Le Plan d'action national pour l'intégration*

42 Buskens, Recent Debates on Family Law Reform.

43 Buskens, Recent Debates on Family Law Reform.; Howe, *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening*; Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*.

44 K.A Dilday, "Nadia Yassine's journey".

45 Nadia Yassine, «Féminisme islamisme combats et résistances», posted on her web-site and facebook page January 26, 2010, (accessed April 25, 2011).

46 Nadia Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée", posted on her web-site www.nadiayassine.net

de la femme au développement), developed by liberal and leftists activists under a government headed by a socialist prime minister.⁴⁷ The Islamist spokespersons argued that the plan did not address the real economic problems of families, but focussed instead on marginal issues, such as polygamy that rarely occurred in real life because most men could hardly afford one wife. Moreover, the government planners were accused of distracting Moroccans from real problems such as the liberation of political prisoners, the right to freedom of speech, or democracy.⁴⁸ True, these issues were of special interest to the Islamist movement, but they also exhibited a concern with broader political and economic concerns. Nevertheless, the impression that arose from these statements by the 'Adl wa-l'ihane Islamists was that they opposed feminist projects in Morocco.

Nadia's reaction to the Plan of National Action, in 1999, adhered to the Islamist view of feminism as an imperialist plot against Islam, but it also reflected an understanding of women's legal plight in Morocco: "At first glance it is difficult for anyone to reject the plan – without appearing reactionary," Yassine acknowledged, noting that the old Family Code was unjust and should be changed.

"But this plan comes in the framework of a strategic global policy. There are undeclared interests behind the plan. It was sponsored by the World Bank in the framework of Beijing. It's part of the effort to break up the nuclear family, part of the Western concern over demographics in Islamic countries".⁴⁹

Nadia Yassine first fully elucidated her world-view in a volume of essays published in 2003 titled *Toutes voiles dehors* -- translated into English as *Full Sails Ahead* in 2006, and into Arabic as *Arkiba ma'ana: Da'wa ila Ibhara*. The book focused on standard Islamist missionary messages, with a preface dated October 24, 2001, that relates apologetically to the "attack perpetrated against the American superpower on September 11, 2001." In this work, Nadia displayed her familiarity with a wide variety of European classical and contemporary sources, as well as popular culture, and Islamic fundamental texts. From a critique of modern secularism, Nadia focused in on the Arab world, Islam and finally, the Prophet Muhammad. A section entitled "The Prophet and Power" was later excerpted on her web-site. There was little or no reference to women, women's rights or their roles in Islam, or feminism. Apparently, Nadia wished to establish her credentials as a spokesperson for Islamism, not only on women's issues.

47 Ghazalla, *Sculpting the Rock of Women's Rights*; Buskens, Recent Debates on Family Law Reform.

48 Buskens, Recent Debates on Family Law Reform.

49 Howe, *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening*.

In 2009, Nadia Yassine answered an invitation by a group of American academics to weigh in on a debate about the definition of Islamism.⁵⁰ Employing what she terms “intellectual resistance,” she built her case on ideas of Saussure and Chomsky, and deconstructed the western concept of Islamism as violent, anti-democratic and anti-modern. Islamism, she argued, is “self-identification in relation to the original texts” that began with a “coup d’état” of the Umayyads who “hijacked sacred texts.” This very current political-literary definition of salafism rooted Islamism firmly in an understanding of the Prophet’s sunna and the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

Accommodation with Feminism

Although Nadia worked to empower Moroccan women, and expressed her sensitivity to women’s suffering as well as the injustice of the *Moudawana*, like many Islamist women, she has repeatedly expressed her discomfort with the term feminism. Islamists have regarded western and westernized feminist movements as part of the “Zionist-Crusader plot” to undermine Islam by targeting Muslim women. Western gender norms have brought about licentiousness, pornography and degradation of women, they claim, and feminists are “men-haters” who advocate free sex.⁵¹ Moreover, Nadia has fore-fronted motherhood as the goal of the natural qualities and psychological dispositions of women, in interviews in 2003 and 2004, as do the Islamists.⁵² At the same time, Nadia argued that she is not a feminist, but that Islam is feminist, there is a “feminist Islam”, and femininity is preferable to feminism.⁵³ She has restated the common assertion that the Prophet Mohammed was himself a feminist since he improved the lot of women.⁵⁴ Moreover, she has continually emphasized women’s achievements within the ‘Adl wa-l’ihsane movement. Many women manage projects and institutions, and Nadia herself is the spokesperson for the movement.⁵⁵ The women of her Islamist movement number in the thousands, representing 50% of the organization and 30% in representative

50 N. Yassine, “La vie du Prophète romancée”.

51 Uriah Furman, *Islamiyun : Dat veHevra bemishnatam shel ne’emanei haIslam bnei zemanenu* [Islamiyun: Religion and Society in the ideology of Contemporary Islamists], Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 2002.

52 Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*; Ellen McLarney, *Soft Force: Women in Egypt’s Islamic Awakening*, Princeton University Press, 2015.

53 Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*.

54 Anita McNaught, “The King and the Sheikh’s Daughter”. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/correspondent/1899478.stm> (accessed December 27, 2014).

55 Alfred Hackensberger, “Die Rolle der Frau muss sich ändern: Gespräch mit der marokkanischen und islamischen Feministin und Demokratin Nadia Yassine”. Telepolis 17.05.2006 <http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/22/22587/1.html> (accessed Decrmbre 26, 2014).

bodies.⁵⁶

Despite achieving personal prominence heading the anti-feminist demonstration of 2000, Nadia later openly expressed her wish to join the feminist march, saying: “To be honest with you, I marched in Casablanca with my heart turned to women marching in Rabat.”⁵⁷ Her views seem to have been evolving towards greater accommodation with feminism, even adopting the term in the Islamic context. Nevertheless, she continued to reject “feminist” as a self-definer.

Adopting the Discourse of Islamic Religious Feminism

In addition to taking on feminism, Nadia gradually adopted the discourse of Islamic religious feminism. She has stated that “Muslims have inflicted a terrible injustice on women in the name of Islam”. She maintained that there is an urgent need for re-interpreting Islamic tradition, and unless women are involved in that process they will never come out of their trap.⁵⁸

Feminism of different sorts -- liberal, state, radical -- have appeared in the Middle East for over a century, but only in the last decades have Muslim women expressed their feminism in explicitly religious terms. “Islamic feminism” (as opposed to Muslim feminism) has been defined as “a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm.”⁵⁹ It is an attempt to reconcile belief in Allah and His Prophet with feminism. One of the earliest and most prominent Islamic feminists is Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, and Moroccan Farida Bennani is a specialist on the subject of women’s rights under Islamic law. Moreover, Islamic feminism was advanced by global organizational efforts beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Paris, France, and from 2005, at International Congresses on Islamic Feminism held in Barcelona, Spain.⁶⁰ So Nadia certainly was familiar with their ideas.

Islamic feminists hold that social justice and equality are inherent in true Islam

56 Nadia Yassine, “Féminisme islamisme combats et résistances», posted on her web-site and face-book page January 26, 2010, (accessed April 25, 2011).

57 Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*, Interviews in 2003 and 2004.

58 Magdi Abdelhadi, “Accused Morocco Islamist speaks out” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4297386.stm> September 30 2005 (accessed December 26, 2014).

59 Margot Badran, “Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt” In: Margot Badran (edt), *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1993, pp.141-167

60 Ruth Roded, “Islamic and Jewish Religious Feminism: Similarities, Parallels and Interactions” in: *Religion Compass, Intertwined Worlds* 1-13, 6 (4/2012), pp. 213-224.

and it is only centuries of Muslim men functioning in patriarchal societies that have interpreted Islam to the detriment of women. Muslim women, therefore, must return to the fundamental texts and employ *ijtihad* independent reasoning to reinterpret these classical texts – the holy Quran, the *sira nabawiyya*, and the oral law – *hadith* and *fiqh*.⁶¹

Nadia has also stated that Islam, as embodied in the Quran and the Sunna, is a religion of justice. The *Moudawana* is not a sacred text, she said, and requires thorough revision. Millions of women suffer injustice because of it. By means of *ijtihad*, family law can be adapted to the requirements of contemporary society. Reforms should be implemented by going back to the pure Islam of the Prophet.⁶² “For years, I kept repeating that women did not have problems with Islam,” she said in an interview in 2003. “Now I am saying *we do* have problems, *I mean* with the way Muslim men *stole* this religion from us” claiming that Muslim men “have hijacked Islam since the early times of the revelation, making it this patriarchal and sexist religion.” The solution, she claimed, is for women to take Islam back.⁶³

In an interview in 2007, Nadia answered a direct question: how can one be an Islamist and a feminist at the same time?

Yassine: Those are just labels. Simplifying things stems from the logic of the media. But seriously: The history of the women’s movement in the West has unfolded completely differently from here. It is based on other traditions and pursues different goals. Seen superficially -- if all that matters are the rights of women -- you can call me a feminist if you like. But I speak for a different culture, the Islamic one. Our religion is very much friendly to women. In theory, in our sacred texts, we have many rights. But the men, these little machos, have robbed us of that. It’s their fault that the whole world believes the opposite.⁶⁴

Here, Nadia gently rejects western feminism, but shows her willingness to employ the term, and more important, to adopt the basic feminist idea that men have deprived women of their rights in order to support their ideas of masculinity.

In 2010, Nadia Yassine prepared a measured response to Islamic Feminism for

61 Roded, *Islamic and Jewish Religious Feminism*.

62 McNaught, “The King and the Sheikh’s Daughter”; Buskens, “Recent Debates on Family Law Reform...”

63 Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam* p. 124

64 SPIEGEL ONLINE Interview with Moroccan Islamist Nadia Yassine: “Our Religion Is Friendly to Women” July 03, 2007 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-moroccan-islamist-nadia-yassine-our-religion-is-friendly-to-women-a-492040.html> (accessed January 6, 2015)

an academic conference in Tenerife.⁶⁵ After outlining the theoretic convergences, divergences and synthesis between feminism and Islamism, she evaluated her own Justice and Spirituality movement. J & S converges with Islamic Feminism, she stated, in the participation of women in “feminine reading” and in the rejection of “chauvinist reading.” It diverges from Islamic Feminism, she says, in that the women’s section of J & S does not deal only with feminine matters but advances general goals. This is an interesting spin on the criticism that Islamist women’s organizations aim to mobilize women for the cause and exploit them. The implication of Nadia Yassine’s statement is that Islamist women like her deal with broad issues such as the future of the Muslim world as well as women’s issues. Her strategy here is not to attack Islamic Feminism, but to show how her movement is superior to it.

Nadia Yassine’s background, popular activism and the evolution of her ideas inevitably brought her to the ideal foundation period of Islam – the life of the Prophet Muhammad. “The society at the time of the Prophet comes very close to my ideas,” she told a reporter in 2006.⁶⁶

The Life of the Prophet From the Woman’s Perspective

Nadia Yassine’s *Life of the Prophet* consists of fourteen vignettes from the birth of Muhammad until the appearance of Gabriel, posted in Arabic and French to target an audience of North African Muslims whom Nadia wished to mobilize for her movement.

Each chapter is accompanied by music and prefaced by an image. The placement of the episodes on web sites and Facebook pages allow for a degree of audio-visual depth, although less than the numerous films that have been produced on similar subjects.⁶⁷ The music that accompanies the stories is extremely interesting – ranging from a spiritual church-like melody, to a North African flute and drum composition, to a quiet western piano, guitar and flute arrangement. The pictures that head the chapters begin with a light in the sky to signify the birth of the Prophet, and are followed by images of North African tribal men and women, who allude to but do not depict the male or female companions of the Prophet (*sahaba, sahabiyyat*). In the text, Nadia sets the events of the Prophet’s life in richly drawn scenes -- evoking the settings, the aromas and the tastes as she envisages them.

65 Nadia Yassine, «Féminisme islamisme combats et résistances»

66 Hackensberger, “Die Rolle der Frau muss sich ändern..”

67 Arab films about the advent of Islam were produced in Egypt during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s culminating in the internationally-produced *Al-Risala/The Message* (1976).

Nadia Yassine did not for the most part cite the sources she used to compose a life-story of Muhammad, but from her previous work we know that she was familiar with the classical *sira* of Ibn Hisham and Islamic *hadith* criticism.⁶⁸ When challenged on her depiction of Muhammad's passionate attraction to his cousin Fakhita bint Aboutalib (whom he proposed to but who wished to marry another), Yassine noted that the Prophet's feelings for Fakhita existed, the events existed, and even Ghita, Muhammad's white goat existed. The only thing she had invented perhaps is the manner of telling the tale. The story is romanticized, she wrote, so that our hearts will go out to the man as much as to the message.⁶⁹

In fact, the image of the Prophet that emerges from Nadia's biographical sketches is of an exceptional human being, but a human nonetheless, who has very human emotions. The appellation "Peace Be Upon Him" is not attached to Muhammad's name, as is customary among many Muslims, and only at the very end of the work is he referred to as "the Messenger." Throughout his early life, Muhammad moves in a women's world, and it is women who describe him for the most part. This is true of the infant Muhammad of course, who is described by the women in the birth-room and by his nurse Halima and his mother, but also the adolescent, the young man and the bridegroom who are described by Mariya, the monk Bahira's niece, by the women of Quraish, and most notably by his bride Khadija.⁷⁰ He is a sweet, beautiful and wise child, with intelligent eyes, and a physically imposing man, honest (*al-amine*), noble, and serene, yet mysterious as well.

Some of the miracles that punctuate Muhammad's early life are natural "miracles" such as the milk produced by a nursing woman.⁷¹ Supernatural miracles, such as "the opening of the heart"⁷² the signs at his birth,⁷³ and the miracle of the cloud,⁷⁴ are reported by women. The miracle of the "opening of the heart," for example, is seen through the eyes of Halima. She tells of her fear and even hysterics when she discovered that the infant Muhammad had disappeared, the warm tears she shed when she found him, and the kisses she covered him with when she realized that he was unharmed. Halima wishes to protect Muhammad from the men and women who would think he is delirious when he tells the strange story about the men who

68 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée".

69 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter IX

70 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapters VII 1,2; VIII 1,2; X 1; XI 2.

71 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter IV 2.

72 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter V.

73 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter V 2.

74 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter VII.

opened his chest and washed his heart. Similarly, Muhammad's mother Amina denies the allegation that he is under the protection of "obscure forces" or djinns, and brings as proof the fact that she did not suffer any of the normal difficulties of pregnancy when carrying him, and more significantly, that she and the midwife saw light emerge from the new-born. When the young man Muhammad's caravan approaches the encampment of the Christian monk Bahira, his niece Mariya sees the cloud that follows them.

Because of the framework of Nadia's vignettes about Muhammad's early life, she does not have to deal with the "jihad issue" the controversial subject of the Prophet's forays and battles against the unbelievers, or the minimal role that women played in warfare. The Prophet's da'wa preaching of the faith, which would certainly be of interest to Islamists, is also after the time frame of Nadia's stories, and she does not relate to women's part in this crucial Islamic endeavour.

In Nadia's rendition of Muhammad's early life, Jews are part of the setting in Mecca, as merchants, neighbours who spoke in Hebrew (a language the slave girl Thouwayba secretly knew!), and who told of a messenger of their god "Iahvé" who would liberate his people as Moses had.⁷⁵ These descriptions dovetail with the situation of the Jews of Morocco with whom Nadia was surely familiar, and one wonders if this polyglot Moroccan woman knew Hebrew as well. The Jews are portrayed as not as knowledgeable as the Christians,⁷⁶ but a Jew, who used to tease the woman, tells them that the promised Prophet, the last open door between heaven and earth, is of marriageable age, and that one of them should take the initiative. The Christian monk Bahira relies on his special abilities – knowing the language of Abraham and Jesus -- to teach Muhammad, in line with Islamic tradition.⁷⁷ He also says that the Jews oppose any prophet after Moses, and tried to kill Jesus.⁷⁸ Later, Khadija's Christian cousin Waraka, who knows well the "celestial secrets" convinces her that Muhammad is the Messenger, heir of Jesus and Moses.⁷⁹ Thus, Christians seem to play a more positive role in Nadia's life of the Prophet than Jews, but both Jews and Christians verify that Muhammad is a true prophet. Also, the truly unsavoury chapters of Muslim-Jewish relations in the *sira* occur after the framework of these stories about Muhammad.

Nadia Yassine's chapters from the life story of the Prophet Muhammad are

75 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter IV.

76 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapters II2.

77 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter VII.

78 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter VII 2.

79 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter XII.

told from the woman's perspective, although they do not embody overtly feminist messages. Nadia does not deal with classic women's issues such as very young brides, preference for marriage to virgins, polygyny, concubinage, and ease of divorce. With its emphasis on women as sources of vital information and as major actors, *Nadia's Life of the Prophet Imagined* bears some similarity to Assia Djébar's *Loin de Médine*. Djébar, however, depicts the women at the time of the Prophet as proto-feminists - strong and outspoken proponents of their rights, while Nadia's women are more traditional in their words and deeds. Nadia's emphasis on motherhood and women's abilities as signs of God is similar to the ideas of Egyptian Islamist preachers Ni'mat Sidqi and Hiba Ra'uf documented by McLarney but she does not ascribe political importance to child-birth nor does she regard it or child-rearing as religious practice.⁸⁰

From the women's world of childbirth,⁸¹ to the Magnificent Khadija's attraction to Muhammad, unusual marriage and support of him,⁸² the images in *The Life of the Prophet Imagined* reflect Nadia's own experiences as a woman, and undoubtedly appeal to other Muslim women as well.

After announcing the birth of the baby boy, Nadia takes us to the women's world of childbirth -- the mother, sweaty and tired, the women around her, caring for her, the aroma of fresh oregano to ease the childbirth -- very realistic, and human. The "beloved" (bien-aimé) infant is given the "bizarre" name of Muhammad by his mother, to the shock of her mother-in-law, not by his grandfather and uncles as is the Arab tradition. Nadia Yassine enriched this scene with a sensitive and incisive depiction of the feelings of a woman who has lost her child. Muhammad's grandmother (Fatima) experiences a jumble of emotions at the birth of the baby: joy at the birth, of course, but also sadness as she remembers his dead father, her son, and bittersweet feelings as she remembers the father's birth, and the similarity of the two angel-face babies. "Only women can comprehend this maternal sadness and really sympathize with it," Nadia commented. Fatima even lashes out at the slave-girl for disrespecting her mistress, but the slave-girls understand that Fatima's mood swings are because she lost her son. When a man -- the grandfather Abdelmoutalib, the patriarch -- enter this women's space, Yassine expresses the feelings of all women: "It was not really the place for men, this prevailing atmosphere of motherhood!" ('Ce n'était pas vraiment la place des hommes, cette ambiance de maternité toute actuelle!')⁸³.

80 Ellen Anne McLarney, *Soft Force: Women in Egypt's Islamic Awakening* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015 pp. 7, 108..

81 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter II.

82 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter X-XI.

83 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter III.

Another poignantly gendered scene depicts the freed female slave Thouwayba – freed by Abdelmoutalib after she told him about the birth of the boy – happily walking down the street carried away by her status as a free woman, not accountable to anyone. She had purchased a pair of leather sandals, the first sign of her social rise, and a fabric for a dress like those that the free women wore. What a cruel world! People change their attitude to her because of the clothing she wears. Nadia recounted the slave woman's previous yearning for freedom, as she listened to the troubadours songs of liberation. Even after her own emancipation, she continued to dream of a liberator who would free her brothers and sisters still enslaved.

The reader is drawn in to another world of women at the market, where most of the bedouin wet-nurses, accompanied by North African tribal sounds and sights, reject the "little Hachemite orphan", and also disrespect Thouwayba who has brought him.⁸⁴ One of them points out that theirs is a difficult occupation, and they must guarantee an income for nursing the child they chose, an interestingly sympathetic approach to these working women. Thouwayba, however, prays to the goddesses to curse these evil women, and tearfully expresses her love for the infant who deserves better. Finally, Halima approaches – with rough barefoot feet and a sad smile, looking like a beggar – a stark contrast to the healthy, laughing midwives. This pathetic, colorless, arid woman offers to take the little orphan and points out that no one wanted her and no one wanted him, so perhaps it is a sign from the Gods that they belong together. She promises to be a loving mother and give him first from her teat, and perhaps she will have enough milk for him. In Nadia's version, during the first few years of Muhammad's sojourn among the Bedouin, Halima is tested by her own continued aridity and that of the whole tribe. In these difficult circumstances, her love and efforts on behalf of this perfect baby are shown. Of course, as we all know, Halima is later blessed with abundant milk and indescribable energy, and the entire village shares in this largesse, which brings rain, abundant milk and dates. What is less clear is whether these "little miracles" are a product of the baraka of an orphan, as a tribal elder says, of the love that flows through Halima to Muhammad, or a work of "the Gods" as she predicted. Is there a message here for poor suffering women that if they accept Muhammad into their hearts they will be blessed?

The young Khadija appears for the first time as a secondary character in the room where Muhammad is born -- a beautiful neighbour who verifies Amina's dream and rumours among the tribes about the birth of a prophet. Later, the Magnificent Khadija is described in the lavish and sensual setting of her home – the floor freshly raked, the agreeable aroma of incense, the feminine touch evident in

84 N. Yassine, "La vie du Prophète romancée". chapter IV-V.

the room's furnishings. She sits on a divan draped in red and white, embellished in gold jewellery, hands hennaed, and claps for a black slave who brings a bowl full of figs and a goblet of milk for the guest. It is almost as if we are in the room when Aboutalib comes to ask her to hire Muhammad so that he could earn a bit of money and get married.

Khadija's physical appearance is equally imposing – tall and ravishing, with thick long black hair, a young face that does not show her age, and intelligent eyes. Her physical beauty is matched by her outstanding character – noble, serene, mature, compassionate and hospitable. She is profoundly respected by all of the Koraychites, and given the unusual surname “attahira” the pure because of her irreproachable conduct, her seriousness as a dignified and honourable woman as well as an incomparable merchant. One cannot escape the notion that Khadija gained the epithet “the pure” despite the fact that she was not a virgin when she married Muhammad. Moreover, several times during this meeting, she is referred to as a mother, and she mentions her second husband. This mature woman is contrasted with the flighty girl who chose to marry someone else instead of Muhammad. Khadija admits that she could use a confidant to help her with her multiple responsibilities – her caravans, managing her fortune and raising her girls properly – but there is no hint that a woman cannot undertake various occupations in addition to being a mother. Moreover, Khadija is so impressive that she is surely enough for any man – a reference to the fact that as long as they were married, Muhammad did not take another wife.

The wedding of Muhammad and Khadija is also told from a woman's perspective,⁸⁵ and it is almost as if we female readers are guests at this event. Muhammad appears, accompanied by joyous youyous, looking very handsome and elegant. He has abandoned his humble shepherd's dress for holiday attire – a red tunic with brilliant silver threads. He has become a powerful, virile man and he jokes with one of the women about her first white hairs. All of the women of the family are there: Fatema bint Assad, a surrogate mother, Thouwayba, Safia bint Abdoulmoutalib, an aunt, who serves as hairdresser to the many family members who came, the motherly Fatema and Baraka, Nafissa bint Mounia, Khadija's sister Hala, and her daughter Hala. Thouwayba has fixed her abundant hair in the style of the young Koraychites – two braids on either side of her face leaving a glimpse of ears. The women and children accompany the groom to the men of the family, while slaves carry the presents on their heads and chant. He is met by Aboutalib, Abbas, and Hamza, surrogate father and uncles, and his milk-brother Masrouh son of

85 N. Yassine, “La vie du Prophète romancée”. chapter XI.

Thouwayba. An immense tent has been set up, and slaves bring platters and carafes of water on the floor, clouds of dust. The women are gossiping about the guests, some of whom came out of loyalty to the tribe, and some out of curiosity. They want to see this man that Khadija chose after rejecting so many others.

It is the women around the calm serene bride who relate the magnificence of the groom Muhammad's entry, and the curious and nosy women who tell the story of the marriage of the century between the most noble Khadija and the Hachemite orphan, because Khadija is too discreet to speak of this. Khadija was a monotheist like her Christian cousin, and she believed that Muhammad was the Messenger, heir to Jesus and Moses. Muhammad won her over heart and soul, not by his youth and good looks, and certainly not by his social status, but by his mystery and tranquillity. Khadija is described as a strong and determined woman, mistress of her destiny. Poor Muhammad, on the other hand, seems insecure believing that no woman will want to marry him, like his cousin who rejected him. He has lost his heart to Khadija, but dares not even consider approaching her. At the wedding, amid the finery, the drumbeats, the dancing, the hennaed hands, the platters of grilled meat accompanied by bread and dates, and the heavy smell of musk and amber, Muhammad is like a sun that eclipses everything around him, like a star. Khadija asks herself: "Who am I to deserve to live at the door to Heaven?" and murmurs "Thank you God!"

In these last scenes, we see that the women who relate the stories about the Prophet Muhammad are not necessarily the respected transmitters of *ahadith* from the Islamic sources, but rather nosy and gossipy. The women and men at the time of the Prophet have human foibles, much like the current inhabitants of North Africa. This Muhammad, before he began his prophecy and mission of spreading the message, is modest and insecure, but an aura emanates from him that captures the hearts and souls of those around him. Khadija, the career woman and mother, of noble birth and wealth, seems to have everything, but what she seeks is the peace and mystery at the door to Heaven. Perhaps every woman can achieve this if she accepts the light of Muhammad.

In conclusion, the *Life of the Prophet Imagined* is told from the women's perspective, but does not raise women's issues, and only depicts women's agency to a limited extent in domestic scenes. The work is informed by Nadia's family background with Berber, tribal and North African sights and sounds. It reflects her education in western music and art. The languages that Nadia chose for this project were French and Arabic to appeal to French and North African Muslims. The cyber medium was quite effective at a time when almost half the population of

Morocco were Internet users and over 10% were Facebook users.⁸⁶ The setting as Nadia describes it is very familiar to North Africans bringing the story of the Prophet Muhammad home to them, particularly to the women.

Nadia's *Life of the Prophet Imagined* epitomizes her activism and ideas -- a weaving of Islamism, Feminism and Islamic Feminism. The Islamist aspects of these life-stories of the Prophet Muhammad are first and foremost that it is clearly aimed at women who apparently require a version tailored to their needs rather than more scholarly or serious genres. It focuses on the experience of women in the domestic sphere and exalts motherhood and mother's milk. It lauds the femininity of women. At the same time, it brings women of all stations to the Messenger and to the gate of Heaven. Feminism is reflected in this work in the very act of a woman challenging the implicit male hegemony over history and the reading of canonical texts. Also, it is women who report crucial historical material, enhancing their authority. Moreover, the woman who authored this work imagined the women's world at the time of Muhammad, what the women must have said, what they thought, and what they felt, a feminist technique. This is not, however, an overtly feminist endeavour since it does not reveal the injustices toward women in a patriarchal society, or the efforts of women to fight for equality. Nor can it be read as a battle cry for Muslim women. The influence of Islamic Feminism is evident in this project of a woman rereading the classical sources of Islam. Nadia seems to grant Muslim women some agency but they do not use it to improve the status of women in Islam.

86 "Internet World Stats" <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#ma> (accessed January 7, 2014)