the original structure of al-Rāzī and al-Bīrūnī. The impact of Arabic sources on his work is indeed great and highly impressive. He followed the order of Ibn-Sina in *al-Shifā* and al-Ghazālī in *Ihya’ Ulūm al-Din* and Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar (468–538/1075–1144) in *al-Mufassāl* and al-Ṭūsī in *Tadhkīrah fi ‘Ilm al-Hay'ah*.

Barhebraeus acknowledges this impact of Arabic Scientific thought when he says:

There arose among them (the Arabs) philosophers, mathematicians and physicians who surpassed the ancients in the subtlety of their intellect. Placing them not on another foundation, but on Greek basements, they perfected the buildings of the sciences which were great on account of their clear diction, and their most studious investigations, so that we, from they received knowledge through translators — all of whom were Syrians — are now forced to ask them for it.¹

Muhammad Khalifa Hasan Ahmad


*Turning the Tide* is a book for women that can touch the inner recesses of our beings. As it explores the various outer and inner facets of a woman’s life, we are guided on the careful and meticulous path of the remembrance of God. In many ways, it serves to challenge our sentiments, bring focus to confused ideas, and inspire new aspirations. Its conceptual fountainhead springs from the eternal sources and thus the prevailing motif arises from a realization of *tawḥīd* and a striving for *taqwā*.

The book has an interesting format that invites the reader to think about ages and stages of life in a variety of ways and metaphorical images. First, it lays out the chapter topics: the soul, childhood, youth, knowledge, the heart,

health and appearance, marriage, motherhood, the age of wisdom, and the soul’s journey on; then it parallels each chapter with a carefully chosen metaphor from nature: wide oceans, snowflake crystals, streams, springs, seas of change, lakes and reflections, clouds and seas, raindrops, treasures in the sea, and the shoreline. These metaphors themselves become an extension of the metaphoric water droplet, which sends out concentric circles when it drops on the surface of the lake, takes on many forms as conditions change, and is on a continuous journey through the water cycle. Within each chapter, with its topic and respective metaphor, there are layers that explore specific aspects of a woman’s life, and these layers have a sequence: a discussion about the particular stage of life, myriad voices which present a woman’s thoughts, translated verses from the Qur’an, abādīth, and supplications quoted from major works, and then each chapter concludes with a narrative of a noble woman in Islamic history. Throughout the book, scenic photographs with vast horizons, tranquil seas and skies, and successive ripples on the surface of lakes and streams provide visual metaphors that appeal to one’s inner awareness, summoning personal response and further reflection.

Suma Din has carefully selected stories of exemplary women, may Allah be pleased with them all, to help the reader focus on the stages of a woman’s life. In the chapter on childhood we read about Fāṭimah al-Zahrā’ (d. 11/632), the beloved daughter of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him); she grew up in the centre of the nascent Muslim community and had an extremely close relationship with her father. In the chapter on youth, the story of Asmā’ (d. 73/692), the daughter of Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) who was courageous in her youth, describes how she was responsible in assisting the departure of her father and Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) from Makkah, how she made the journey to Madinah shortly thereafter even though she was in advanced pregnancy and gave birth to her son ‘Abd Allāh [Ibn Zubayr] (d. 73/692) in Qubā’. With reference to marriage, we have much to learn from the example of Khadijah al-Kubrā (d. 3 B.H./620), who had a twenty-three year intimate partnership of noble mind and heart with the Prophet (peace be on him), and was, in fact, the first believer in the message of Islam. When it comes to motherhood, we can immediately refer to Maryam and the birth story of her son [‘Īsā (peace be on him)] as related in Sūrah Maryam; here we read of devotion, humility, anguish, and love. For the time of growing older, we read about Barakah, known as Umm Ayman (d. 11/632), who had cared for Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) and taken care of his household throughout his life with strength and wisdom, and who journeyed from Makkah to join the Muslims in Madinah when she was in her sixties.
Several chapter topics highlight descriptors, rather than stages, in a woman’s life and we read about other noble women who are beacons in our past. ‘A’ishah al-Śiddiqah (d. 57/676), wife of the Noble Prophet (peace be on him), was well-recognized for her scholarship and she contributed greatly to the path of learning, transmitting over two thousand two hundred ahādīth. It was Āsiyāh, the wife of the Pharaoh, whose compassionate heart insisted that baby Mūsā (peace be on him) come to the Pharaoh’s palace where she raised him as her adopted son, and she was a firm believer despite her husband’s anger. And in reference to health and appearance, we learn of none other than Bilqīs, Queen of Sābā, who, when she realized that she was deceived by appearances, came to understand things as they truly are. In the chapter “The Soul” we read about Hājar, mother of Prophet Ismā‘īl (peace be on him) and wife of Prophet Ibrāhīm (peace be on him), who was unrelenting in her belief and had total trust in her Sustainer. The last chapter of the book, as also in our earthly lives, is “The Soul’s Journey On,” and it discusses how, with the passing of generations, virtuous women have been united in their belief and how their virtues remain alive in story for us all.

Metaphor is a powerful tool to convey understanding. The Qur’ān itself presents many metaphors: a strong tree, life-giving rain, a tiny mustard seed, the unassuming gnat, the sparrow that falls. Each can elucidate and guide. Each metaphor, when we reflect on it, points us to the Originator and Sustainer of Life, Who is the source of sustenance and guidance for each of us also. The two revealed books, the created cosmos and the revealed text, are filled with these signs; it is for us to be able to read the āyāt with open hearts and respond; they give us orientation. The journey is ongoing, the directions are clear, the path is straight.

Just as the Straight Path is a metaphor, so is the tide; however there is a fundamental difference in that the metaphor presented by Suma Din is of “turning” the tide, that is as if the natural and integral force that moves us is going the wrong direction and is in need of being turned. The subtitle then presents the second image, that of reawakening the woman’s heart and soul, which implies they have been asleep, though once awake, and that the drowsiness that has overcome the woman has engulfed her heart and soul, and which must now be awakened once more. It seems somewhat of a disjuncture in concept, that the tide—which has a dynamic movement, regular pattern, and clear direction—must be “turned” to come to its rightful state. The alliteration is nice, but the premise is shaky. The merit of the metaphor is in the meaning that lies beyond. To suppose that an individual were to gain
transformative power to “turn the tide” seems to be contrary to fitrah, the innate nature that fills our being.

In the Introduction, a negative picture is presented about how women have been subjected not only to wrongs of the past but also insidious new ones. It seems that the defining motif of a woman is one of crisis and a continuous challenge to her spiritual growth. True, women have taken the brunt of much abuse, been the target and the victim, and yet, is it not more wholesome to see women as part of the complex network of humanity rather than be separated out from it? It is in the complete context, which encompasses the paradox of definition “through the other” and the idea of pairs which runs throughout the Qur’anic narrative with such predominance, that we can say “there persists a need for inner harmony and a life of balance in which the deep yearnings of the soul can be satisfied” (p. ix).

Introspection and reflection are essential to everyone’s growth. Elsewhere, Suma Din has written they are vital if we are to make the most of the tomorrows that lie ahead. She writes that “beginnings and endings are common themes in everyone’s lives...Personal evaluation — on a daily basis — is part and parcel of a Muslim’s life. The five times of engaging in prayer and contemplation, standing before God, the Creator and Sustainer of all, is itself a time of stillness and quiet during the day’s activities. Hence the end of a year becomes an even greater landmark for thinking about where our lives are really going.” (“Farewell to another twelve months” in MCB Direct, the Muslim Council of Britain’s Community Information Service, Dec. 31, 2003). This meshes well with the reflections on ages and stages in a woman’s life in Turning the Tide.

The chapter “Health and Appearance” brings together two very distinct aspects of a woman’s life, and both could have had more substantial development in terms of how our health and our appearance are from Allah, how they are entrusted to us, and that they are each a test in the way we use them, disregard them, or misuse them. Appearance has to do with beauty, and the concept of beauty needs more explication: appreciation of beauty can easily turn into a cult of beauty, yet the Islamic view of beauty is solidly anchored in the manifestations of Divine attributes. A woman’s sense of modesty, self confidence, and self esteem is often twisted together and confused by external emphases on appearance. Unless we cultivate a sense of aesthetics and harmony deeply in tune with our faith we are left with a fragment of an idea that is skin-deep and tenuous.

Who is the audience of this book? In the introduction, Suma Din says: “Turning the Tide” takes a chronological journey through the stages of a
woman’s life and looks at the value and inherent worth of each stage” (p. x). Is it speaking to all women, as they live out their lives? Is it addressing an archetype of “woman” who passes through the decried ages and stages? As I read the chapters, I tried to place myself at the level of the adolescent, the young adult, the mother, and the elderly woman. It seemed that at each age and stage of life, the myriad voices seemed to somewhat dabble with the “idea” of being there, yet did not seriously present the encounters and dilemmas of an individual in that time of her life. This became apparent in what seem to be disjointed excerpts of journal entries, which express diverse attitudes and opinions; the utterance giving the impression of being orchestrated, as if they were representative of many different unique voices and yet all being composed by one pen. The confusion with the myriad voices is also reflected visually in the use of different sizes and styles of fonts. The audience may be less engaged when the authenticity of the speaker on the stage remains nebulous.

The glossary of Arabic words at the end of the book provides a helpful reference. It can be a reflective exercise just to ponder how the definitions of words given in English prove inadequate in conveying the full meaning of the Qur’anic concepts. We can also ponder the absence of certain terms. The inclusion of definitions for the words *hijāb*, *ṣadqāb*, *sakīna* [*sakīnah*], and *tazkiyah* would have been helpful. The concept of *ḥijāb*, for example, which is far more than a piece of fabric, has proven to be such a defining factor, and this book could have helped to clarify an often misused term and expound on the concept that would deepen our understanding.

In the glossary, we are provided the three categories of *nafs* as mentioned in the Qur’ān. It would have been helpful in the text of this book to consider the possible development of the *nafs* through stages, for the states of *nafs* are never static, as we continually strive to walk the straight path and we strive to achieve *al-nafs al-mutma’innah*, the contented self.

*Turning the Tide* is well written, personal and personable, and invites the reader to reflect on her own life experience, thereby extending the thoughts begun by the author to give expression to the unspoken and further enrich the text by reading between the lines. It is in this dynamic that the reader is truly engaged, and the potential for new growth can be realized as reflective thoughts become transformative thoughts, illuminating the inner presence and opening the heart.

Elma Harder

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