

The Educational Tradition of Shiite Women in Safavid Society: Bintul Majlisi

Fahimeh Mokhber Dezfouli¹

Associate Professor of History and Civilization in Islamic Nations, Department of History, Faculty of Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Received 13 July 2024

Accepted 5 February 2025

Abstract: The Safavid era witnessed the convergence of Shi'ism with political governance, reshaping Iran's societal and cultural landscape. The city of Isfahan has a long educational tradition of Shiite 'Alimat and Muhaddithat. The practice reached to a peak during the Safavid era, and a large number of Iranian 'Alimat appeared. They were often the members of the great Shiite scholar's family. Amina Begum, daughter of the great Safavid scholar Mulla Muhammad Taqi Majlisi. Because of her family situation and also the status of her predecessors, great women scholars in her family, as well as living at the capital of the Safavid as a magnificent place for several religious schools, she could reach to a position and achieved considerable works in Arabic literature and Shiite jurisprudence. The purpose of this paper is to consider Amina status among a number of 'Alimat before and after her. Whether those women achieved their academic works during this period due to the possibility of studying at home, or it was a cultural feature of the Safavid era that the women could easily go to religious schools and qualified.

Keywords: Safavid Society, Pedagogy, women, Iran, Amina, Shi'a Scholars.

Introduction

According to some historians, first Iranian who converted to Islam was a lady, 'Umm ul Faresiyih, from Isfahan.² The city was also well known for the number of Muhadithat in Islamic era.³ Some of them were such a great scholar that many people gathered for listening to their lessons. For instance; Fatemeh Aqili Jozani who taught a majority of scholars in Isfahan; including the great Seljuqs vizier Nizam ul mulk Tusi.⁴ This tradition continued through all centuries afterward and reached to its peak in Safavid era. In Safavid society three categories of women are considerable:⁵ First, the elite women belong to the family of shi'i scholars such as Sheikh Baha'i wife, Mulla Sadra daughters and al-Majlisi daughter and granddaughter⁶. They were all *mujtahidat*, *'alimat* and *muhadithat* in Safavid Isfahan; educating often at home; by their fathers, brothers, husband or fathers in law. It is worth mentioning that the patriarchic in Safavid society, or possibly their chastity and piety, made the situation of women, even those educated and pious, that they were called by their fathers or husband names rather than their own name: as *Zawjih sheikh Baha'i*, *Bintul Majlisi* or *Zawjih mulla Khalil*. It had been tougher in some families that we don't know even the first name of those women at all.

¹ Email: fmokhber_d@yahoo.com

² They mentioned that Salman Farsi, the only Iranian companion of the Prophet, met her in Mecca or Medina before seeing the Prophet and converting to Islam. (Ibn Athir, *'usd ul ghabah fi Ma'rifa al-Sahabah*, vol.7, p:25)

³ Sam'ani Marwazi in his book, *Al-Tahbir fi Mu'jam al-Kabir* noted that he had spent 3 years in Isfahan and benefited of the classes of Hadith there, he mentioned the name of 30 women whom he taught hadith from them, most of them from Isfahan. (ed. Munirah Salim, Baghdad, 1975). For instance: he is writing about 'Um ul Hasan that many men and women gathered to listen to her lectures. (Sam'ani, *Al-Ansab*, vol.5, p.592 Beirut, 1988.

⁴ Sam'ani, *al-Tahbir*, vol.2, p.429.

⁵ Ferrier divided women in the safavid era into six groups: first, the married women from high class families, most of them from Safavid court. Second, the women lived in big cities and making hands crafts and art works, third, the women of villages who worked on lands; fourth, the women who married temporarily (*mut'a*), then slaves and the lowest were prostitutes. (Ferrier, R.W. "Women in Safavid Iran; the evidence of European travellers", in G.R. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the medieval Islamic world; power, patronage and piety*, New York, 1998, St Martin Press, pp.384-406.

⁶ See: Somayeh Karami and Fahimeh Mokhber Dezfouli, "The Pedagogical Situations for Women in the Safavid Era: Women in the Family of Shia Scholars", *Iranian Journal for Islamic Civilization*, series 53, no.2 Pages 561-590

The second group of women were the princesses and ladies related to Safavid court. However, they were often constrained in haram and envied the liberty of ordinary people, they tried to have social commitments. They owed their properties and fortune to build schools, mosques and hospitals. There is a long list of women among the *vaqifin* in Safavid Isfahan who generously offered their money and lands to serve ordinary people. Their motivations could be protecting their fortune from the changes of time and greed of rulers as well as spiritual intentions that is strongly recommended in Shiite beliefs. Most of *vaqifin* were interested in building schools and it was the top ranking of *vaqf* in Safavid Isfahan. It should be noticed that a close relationship between 'ulama and Safavid courts, perhaps, pull these two groups of women together.

The third and major group of women were ordinary people which clearly described by European travellers, most of them struggling for life and so as much as they are well off, stay more time at home, doing the households and bringing up their children.¹

Amina Beigum; her life and works

Amina Beigum, *Bintul Majlisi*² was a great scholar, *mujtahida* and *muhadditha* in Safavid Isfahan. She was born³ and grew up in a great family of Shiite 'ulama in Isfahan, Muhammad Taqi al-Majlisi (1003-1070H). Her grandmother was Zubeida Khatun (1024H)⁴, daughter of Great philosopher Mulla Sadra who taught Arabic literature to his son Muhammad Taqi in the beginning of his study.⁵ Amina brother was Mulla Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, the compiler of a grand Shiite source of Hadith, *Biharul Anvar* with more than a hundred volumes. Later on, Amina got married to one of the brilliant disciples of her father, Mulla Salih Mazandarani (d.1086H)⁶.

Amina's biography has come to most of the biographical works⁷; not much different from each other. She started her education under the supervision of her father⁸ who after her preliminary education including Arabic language and literature as well as dialectics, taught Amina *fiqh*, *hadith* and *tafsir*. She was a clever and pretty girl that seems to be a *mojtahida* before her marriage to Mulla Salih.

What made Amina well known and bringing her life in the most of biographical works was a story about her marriage and Amina quotation that widely reflected the religious families so far. As aforementioned, Mulla Salih was a brilliant disciple of Mulla Muhammad Taqi al-Majlisi who drew the attention of his teacher with hard working and good understanding. He was poor and pious. When his master realized that he planned to get marry, take the opportunity to offer her own daughter. He talked to the boy and then went to home and met Amina. He praised Mulla Salih for his knowledge and piety but also mentioned his poverty. Then, he recommended that it is just an offer and everything depends on her decision. Amina said "The poverty is not a deficiency for men".

The sources continue the story as she got married to Mulla Salih and once a night her husband was being prepared for his study and working on *al-Qava'id* by 'Allama Hilli, he faced the problems that couldn't solve. He tried but finally gave it up and left it for another day. Amina realized that and after he left home, she opened the book and explained all difficulties that had been marked there. Her husband

¹ Ibid.

² There is another woman called also Bintul Majlisi. She was Amina niece (daughter of her brother) that also called daughter of Mulla 'Azizullah.

³ The exact date of her birth and death is unknown that is expectable at the time. But according to Afandi she should be alive in second half of 11th H/17th AD.

⁴ Zubeida Khatun, second daughter of Mulla Sadra. According to Amin in A'yan al-Shi'a, she was a literate, knowledgeable, interpreter of Quran and memorize that. She was the author of a book; A commentary on Shafiya. (Amin, *A'yan al-Shi'a*, vol.3, p.83, 1410).

⁵ Her life is in A'yan al-shi'a, Mustadrak, vol.3, p.85.

⁶ Mulla Salih Mazandarani was a great mujtahid from Mazandaran, He came to Isfahan to study in its seminary that was flourishing under Safavid 'ulama. He was disciple of Sheikh Baha'I and Mulla Muhammad Taqi al-Majlisi. He composed many valuable books in fiqh and hadith. Such as commentaries on *Sharh I Lum'a*, *al-Kafi*, *al-Ma'alim* and etc. Some of his well-known disciple are Mulla Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, Fiyd al-Kashani and Mulla 'Abdullah Afandi.

⁷ Afandi in *Riad ul 'ulama*, vol.5, p.407; Khawnsari, *Rowdat al-Jannat*, vol.2, p.118; Amin, *A'yan ul Shi'a*, vol.2, p.95; Qumi, *Fi al-Koni va al-Alqab*, vol.2, p.64, 97; Mahallati, *Rayahin al-Shari'a*, vol.3, p.329 and etc.

⁸ Hassun said that she perhaps learned from her brother Muhammad Baqir as well. (*A'lam al-Nisa al-Mum'menat*, p.117).

returned and read the texts; realized that she was a *mujtahida* herself. It should be noticed that Mulla Salih was himself a great scholar and *mujtahid*.

An account by Mirza 'Abdullah Afandi that was Mulla Salih disciple and friend of Amina's family, is so valuable for this research. He described Amina as '*Alima, Fazila* and *Saliha* and mentioned that she completed her study under the supervision of her father. 'Afandi said that he heard about her knowledge, as so Mulla Salih (he referred to him as my master) asked her to help him for understanding *al-Qava'id*.¹ He also pointed out that Amina is the author of a number of good works; such as A commentary on *Alfiya* by ibn Malik, A commentary on *al-Shawahid* by al-Suyuti and also a book in *fiqh* that on the section of '*ibadat* comes to end. She was a poet as well and some sources mention that she had a *divan*, some of them have been written on her grave stone in Isfahan.²

Unfortunately, the works by Amina are not available now.³ While there is no any document to prove her status as a *mujtahida*; Afandi reported that she read all her knowledge to her father that means an oral *ijaza*⁴. And also there is a number of books by great Shiite scholars that referred to Amina Beigum as '*Alima, Mujtahida* and *Muhadditha*. In addition to Afandi⁵, Khawnsari⁶, Qumi⁷, Mahallati⁸, Amin⁹, Behbahani¹⁰ and Burujerdi¹¹ called her a qualified *mujtahida*. Muhammad Hassun in his work *A'lam al-Nisa'* called her '*alima, fadila, faqiha, mujtahida, muhadditha, mu'allifa* and *mudarresa*. He also describes Amina as a poet and extremely pious.¹² Amina taught in some schools in Isfahan for women and also women came to her asking their questions. As a *Muhadditha*, she helped her brother Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi to compile some parts of his great work, *Bihar al-Anvar*.¹³

It is worth noting that she had seven or eight children; one or two daughters¹⁴ and six sons. Most of them '*Alim*, the oldest was Hadi who translated Quran into Persian and wrote a commentary on *al-Kafi*, was known as Agha Hadi¹⁵. There are at least twelve families of Shiite scholars that claimed to be Amina descendent; among them Bahrul 'Ulum, Borujerdi, Wahid Behbahani, Shahrastani, Davani, Khatunabadi and '*Al i Agha*.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the dates of Amina's birth and death are not recorded in the sources. We can just estimate that by her husband Mulla Salih death (1086H) and also as Afandi(1066-1129H) reported that he was

¹ Afandi, *Riad ul 'ulama*, vol.5. p.407. Khawnsari, *Rowdat al-Jannat*, vol.2, p.118; Mahallati, *Rayahin al-Shari'a*, vol.3. p.329; Mudarris Tabrizi, *Reihana al- 'Adab*, vol.5. p.148

² Afandi, *ibid*; Qumi, *ibid*; Khawnsari, *ibid*. All mentioned the same story. It seems the main source was Afandi and so others inspired by his work.

³ I still looking for them in the libraries and the collections of manuscripts. There are a number of the manuscripts of the commentary on *Alfiyah* that their authors are unknown. For instance; one in Qum in school of Faiyziyih, written in 1088 H, two in Ayatullah Mar'ashi Najafi library date 1100 H. But I couldn't find any evidence that one of them is Amina's.

⁴ Afandi, 5/407; Hassun, 5/95.

⁵ Afandi, , vol.5, p.407.

⁶ Khawnsari, *Rowdat al-Jannat*, vol.2, p.118.

⁷ Qumi, *Fi al-Koni va al-Alqab*, vol.2, p.64,97

⁸ Mahallati, *Rayahin al-Shari'a*, vol.3. p.329

⁹; Amin, *A 'yan ul Shi'a*, vol.2, p.95.

¹⁰ Behbahani, Ahmad, *Mir'at al-Ahwal jahannama*, Ali Davani(ed.)p.106.

¹¹ Davani, Ali, *Ayatullah Burujerdi*, p.78-9.

¹² Hassun, 116-117. Siyid Hassan Zanuzi in his work *Riyad al-Janna* when brings the biography of Mulla Muhammad Baghir Majlisi, referred to Wahid Behbahani and pointed out Amina was a '*alima* and qualified *mujtahida* who helped her brother for compiling his work, *Bihar al-Anvar*.

¹³ Amin, vol.3, p.607; Mahallati, vol.3, p.329;

¹⁴ It is a cultural feature of Safavid era that whatever about girls and women is ambiguous. The women were in compare with their predecessors more active in the society but more sober and sedate.

¹⁵ So, another name for Amina is '*Umm i Agha* and a great shiia family of 'Ulama named '*Al Agha*.

¹⁶ Others are Musawi Ha'iri, Hussaini Mar'ashi Ha'iri, Golistana and syid Ali Tabataba'i the author of *Riad al-masa'il*.

her contemporary. A tomb in Takhtpoulad cemetery in Isfahan belongs to Amina with some of her poems on it.¹

Mujthidat and Muhaddithat; their situation in Isfahan

Gharavi Na'ini divided Iranian *Muhaddithat* into four groups belonged to different centuries: 14 persons from 1th to 4th centuries A.H., 86 women from 5th to 7th H, 10 *Muhaddithas* from 8th to 10th H and 25 from 11th to 14th H.² So, we come to a conclusion that the number of Shiite *Muhaddithat* was increasingly grew up since 5th to 7th century H³ and among them, many *muhaddithats* are from the families of the great Shiite 'Ulama; ⁴Daughter of Siyid Murteda 'Alam al-Huda(d.436 H)⁵ who narrated *Nahjul Balagha*, that was compiled by her uncle Siyid Radi;⁶ Aysha Varkanyia(d.460H), also called Umm al-Hasan was daughter of Sheikh Hasan Varkani from Isfahan; Two daughters of Sheikh Tusi who could get the *ijaza* from their father. Moreover, it is interesting to know that most of those *muhaddithat* in Gharavi's work are from Isfahan, educated by their father, brother or husband.

Obviously, the rising of Safavid was an opportunity for Shiite '*alimat* and *muhaddithat*, and so the tradition of teaching females in 'Ulamas family was enhanced. Since 10th century AH we witnessed great '*alimat* and *muhaddithat* in Safavid Isfahan. First of all, daughter of Sheikh Ali Manshar, wife of great Safavid sheikhul eslam Sheikh Baha'i. She was *mujtahida* and *muhadditha*. She was the only daughter of the sheikh, so had been taught by her father. Afandi said that he saw bint Manshar who taught fiqh and *hadith* to women when she was just a little girl.⁷

Hamida Ruwiydashti is another *muhadditha* who wrote a commentary on *al-Istibsar* by sheikh Tusi. She also was taught by her father and she herself was teaching other women.⁸ Three daughters of Mulla Sadra were all among the brilliant scholars of Safavid era; Zeinab Shirazi who learned from her father and brother and had got an oral *ijaza* from her father. She was also wife of Mulla Muhsin Fiyd al-Kashani.⁹ Zubeida Shirazi, Amina Beigum grandmother, and Masumah who was wife of Mirza Qavam al-Din Tabrizi, her father disciple. She learned from her sister Zubeida and her father.¹⁰ Amina Beigum raised in such a family and society and with her niece, Daughter of Mulla 'Azizullah who was herself a great *mujtahida* and *muhadditha*, wrote a commentary on *man la Yahzduruhi faqih*, continue the tradition among al-Mjlisi family.¹¹ Among Amina's cousins there are Mulla Muhsin Fiyd Kashani granddaughter Ftaima (d.1118H) who was *mujtahida*, getting her *ijaza* from her grandfather and father¹². In addition to the above mentioned *mujtahidat* in her family, Amina brought up her daughter Zakiya as a *mujtahida*. Zakiya learned from her mother and then her father. She wrote a commentary on *al-Kafi* for her father including the sections of *al-'Aql* and *al-'Ilm* which are available and keep in a library in Qum.¹³ There are a number of *mujtahidat* and *muhaddithat* in Amina's granddaughters as well.¹⁴

¹ However, Muslih al-Din Mahdavi, a researcher on Majlisi family, denied that Amina's grave is in Takhtpoulad. He said that the daughters of Majlisi, all buried close to Majlisis(father and son) in Isfahan grand mosque.(Mahdavi, *Daneshmandan va buzurgan Isfahan*, Isfahan,1348H, p.67.)

² Gharavi Na'ini, Nehla," Zanan Irani va naghsh I anha dar gostarish hadith va 'ulum I an", Tahqiqat 'ulum quran va hadith, no.1, 1383H. She is also the author of a book *Muhaddithat Shi'a*, Tehran,1387.

³ It should be noticed that it is the time of Siljuqs and Isfahan was flourished with the great schools under their power. As Nizamiyachs strongly supported by Sunnis school of thought, other sects such as shi'a attempted to confront it by establishing particular schools for Shiite. After dark ages of Mongol invasion that ruins Isfahan, it was in Safavid era that again Isfahan became melt point of Shiite beliefs and thoughts.

⁴ Gharavi, Ibid.

⁵ She also called daughter of siyid Murtida and her name is unknown.

⁶ Afandi, vol.5. p.409.

⁷ Afandi,5/407.

⁸ ibid,5/404.

⁹ Agha Buzurg Tehrani, *al- Dhari'a ila Tasanif al-Shi'a*, vol.3. p.84.

¹⁰ Amin,3/83.

¹¹ Ibid,5/95.

¹² Ibid,3/159.

¹³ It has been kept in Mar'ash Najafi library with No.614.

¹⁴ See aforementioned biographical works. And also, articles by Gharavi Na'ini.

In spite of this number of *mujtahidat* and *muhaddithat* in Safavid Isfahan, we have seldom access to information about their social situation. Some of them travelled to other countries for *Haj* or education. For instance, a lady from Isfahan known as “Wife of Mulla Khali ullah” travelled to Arabia for haj and composed a travel account in 1200 poems that is the unique Safavid haj account. She depicted all social and cultural events in her way to Haj.¹

When Isfahan was flourished under Safavid, the women tried to have commitments to improve the madrasas and so a number of madrsa also established by women mostly from safavid court. The madrasas of Nimavard by Zeinab Beigum in the entrance of bazar which is still one of great seminary in Isfahan, Two schools by Delaram Khanom, mother of Shah Abbas II; Jadde bozorg and jaddeh kuchik are still available and work. Although, some of them as a madresa by Maryam Beigum in Hasanabad has been ruined. In most of those madrasas there was a section for teaching women in particular.

However, there are many *mujtahidat* and *muhaddithat* in Isfahan, it seems they neither possessed the position of Marja’iyat nor attempting to have that. Those women had educated, seeking spiritual goals and even prefer to be unknown or achieving their works under their father, brother or husband names.

Conclusion

There was a long and great tradition of schooling women in Safavid Iran and a number of ‘*alimat*, *mujtahidat* and *muhaddithat* lived in Isfahan, most of them belonged to outstanding shiite ‘Ulama families. They often educated under the supervisions of the male member of their families. Amina Beigum was a great lady from al-Majlisi family and could attain to the highest position in Islamic knowledge as a *mujtahida* and *muhadditha*. The great *mujtahidat* in her family, as her grandmother and aunts had certainly a great impact on her. She also tried to continue the way; taught and trained many *muhaditha* and *mujtahida*, including her daughter Zakiya. The cultural atmosphere in Safavid for ‘ulama families was as so they prefer to work under the name of their father or husband names. Despite the restrictions faced by women in this era, the women of Shi’a scholars’ households leveraged the scholarly environment. They had a crucial role in promoting Shi’a teaching by compiling works and organising classes for women of their time. In spite of all the activities the women did in Safavid era, they never got the position of a Marja’ officially.

References

1. Al-Hassun, Muhammad, A’lamu Nisa al-Muminat, 1411H, Qum
2. Amin, Muhsin, A’yan al-Shi’a, Beirut, (n.d)
3. Amin, Mustadrek al-‘A’yanu Shi’a, 1410H, Beirut.
4. Ansari, Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah, Tabaqatul Muhaddithin bi Esbihan val varidin ‘alaiha, 1988, Beirut.
5. Behbahani, Ahmad, Mir’atul Ahwal jahan nama, Ali Davani(ed.) Tehran, Amirkabir, 1370H.
6. Ferrier, R.W.” Women in Safavid Iran; the evidence of European travellers”, in G.R. Hambly(ed.), Women in the medieval Islamic world; power, patronage and piety, New York, 1998, St Martin Press, pp.384-406.
7. Gharavi Na’ini, Muhaddithat Shi’a, Tehran, 1387.
8. Gharavi Na’ini, Nehla,” Zanan Irani va naghsh I anha dar gostarish hadith va ‘ulum I an”, Tahqiqat ‘ulum quran va hadith, no.1, 1383H.
9. Ibn Athir, ‘usd ul ghabah fi Ma’rifa al-Sahabah, Muhammad Ibrahim al-Banna(ed.), Dar al-Sha’ib, (n.d)
10. Karami, Somayeh and Fahimeh Mokhber Dezfali,” The Pedagogical Situations for Women in the Safavid Era: Women in the Family of Shia Scholars”, Iranian Journal for Islamic Civilisation, series 53, no.2

¹ Shahrbanoo Beigum, *Safarnamih Manzum Haj*, Rasool Ja’farian(compiler), Isfahan, 1389H.

11. Khawnsari, Muhammad Baqir, Rowdat al-Jannat, Qum, Isma'ilian. (n.d)
12. Mahallati, Sheikh dhabihullah, Rayahinu Shari'a, Tehran, 1991.
13. Mahdavi, Muslih al-din, Daneshmandan va buzurgan Isfahan, Isfahan, 1348H
14. Mudarris Tabrizi, Muhammad Ali, Reihana al-Adab, Tehran, Khayyam, 1362H.
15. Najafi, Muhammad Hassan, "Zan va Marja'iyat", Kavoshi no dar fiqh, no.1, Bahman 1372
16. Nuri, Muhaddith, Fiyd al-Qudsi, Samarra, 1302.
17. Pages 561-590.
18. Qumi, Fi al-Koni va al-Alqab, Maktaba al-Misr, (n.d)
19. Sam'ani Marwazi, Al-Tahbir fi Mu'jam al-Kabir, Munirah Salim (ed.), Baghdad, 1975.
20. Sam'ani, Al-Ansab, al-Barudi (ed.), vol.5. Beirut, 1988.
21. Shahrbanoo Beigum, Safarnamih Manzum Haj, Rasool Jafarian (compiler) Isfahan, 1389H.,
22. Tehrani, Agha Bozorg, Al-dhari'a ila Tasanif al-Shi'a, 1983, Beirut
23. Zanzuzi, Muhammad Hussain, Riyadh ul janna, Qum. Mar'ashi Najafi library. 1998.