IN SEARCH OF FEMALE AUTHORITY IN ISLAM: A CONTEMPORARY SHI’A MOJTAHEDE

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Abstract Muslim women of all centuries have striven for religious knowledge at various levels. Historically women have had a prominent role in transmission of hadith, they have been teachers and Imams, and they have given khutba (religious sermons) at mosques. However, contemporary Islam has failed to produce prominent female religious authorities. This paper introduces a female Shi’a mojtahede. It aims to problematize the questioning of the concept of female religious authority within the framework of Islam. One religious scholar who came close to achieving such a position is known as Banooye Irani, the Iranian lady. In a time when Iranian women were becoming increasingly active in professions such as teaching, engineering, and medicine, as well as writing and designing, this religious scholar used a pseudonym to publish her multi-volume interpretation of the Qur’an. She established a high level of religious authority especially within Isfahan. Is religious authority measured by legacy, and if so what is the legacy of Banooye Irani?

Keywords: Religious authority, ejtehad, Shi’a jurisprudence, liberation, self-marginalization.