

## MUSINGS

# Remembering *Hypatia's* Birth: It Took a Village

[With a note on *KARAMAH's* birth]

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So many years have passed since that memorable day during the spring meeting of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) in 1980 when Dale Spender approached me to write a series of three books on Muslim women's rights. I had just finished a panel I organized on the topic, and it may have been the first of its kind at NWSA since all the speakers were Muslim women. The room was packed and the audience was very receptive. Dale saw a good publishing opportunity. She was the editor of *Women's Studies International Forum* (WSIF), a prestigious British journal. I was then a young professor teaching in Texas. I found the proposal intriguing and began discussions with her in earnest.

I mentioned the offer to my dear friend Joyce Trebilcot. She reminded me that SWIP (Society for Women in Philosophy) had been hoping to launch a feminist journal since the 1970s, but had not been able to find a publisher. She suggested that I approach Dale with the idea. I did. To make my proposal more palatable, I offered to edit the journal instead of writing one of the books she proposed to me. I knew the journal had nothing to do with Muslim women's rights, but it had everything to do with my own identity, a Muslim woman who was thoroughly committed to the feminist movement of the 60s. Furthermore, Dale was a committed feminist. Together, we could make it work.

Dale was a young British woman with wise eyes and a quick mind. She did not shun new ideas. Instead she looked for ways to make them happen. At that time, the publishing market was going through a slump. Journals were tanking, so no publisher was in the mood to start a new journal. But I insisted that we had a historical opportunity to produce a journal of feminist philosophy. Dale thought about the idea for a while and then took it to her publisher, Pergamon Press, in England. Pergamon Press hesitated for the same reasons that American publishers did, so we were back to square one. But neither Dale nor I were willing to give

up the journal; we wanted to make it happen, and “no” was not in our vocabulary.

We sat down and strategized. The problem was that we had no data that would show that our journal would have a following, so getting a publisher to commit to publishing it in a down market was impossible. It seemed that we were caught in a catch-22. We could not show a following without the journal, but we could not have the journal without a following. Then Dale hit on a brilliant idea: she wondered why she could not devote one of her journal issues every year to articles that would have appeared in the new *Hypatia*. In other words, *Hypatia* would “piggyback” off her journal until it could show a following. Once that was accomplished, we could then go to publishers and show them our track record. By that time, we hoped that the journal publishing market would have improved and that some publisher would be sufficiently impressed by our record to make us an offer.

That was the best arrangement we could achieve in those days, and it was pretty good. We had a prestigious publisher, distributor, and readership in the WSIF. All we had to do was produce material for one issue annually and show increased readership. SWIP members were ready to submit articles and purchase subscriptions. How could we fail? Dale pitched the idea to Pergamon Press and it was approved. I informed SWIP of this offer and its board was delighted. *Hypatia* was finally being born!

Incidentally, many people think that I chose the name *Hypatia* for the journal. After all, Hypatia was an Egyptian woman philosopher and I am of Middle Eastern descent. In fact, I was born in Beirut, Lebanon, and had never heard of Hypatia. One day, SWIP informed me that it had chosen to name the journal after her. I then found out that Hypatia was a fourth-century professor of philosophy and mathematics with a significant following. In fact, she led the Neoplatonic School in Alexandria, a testimony to her strong personality and great intellect.

To some of her contemporaries, Hypatia was a woman who did not know her place. Furthermore, her philosophical and scientific views were regarded by Christians as pagan. Paganism was a serious charge at that time, given the fact that Christians and pagans were in conflict. It is reported that a group of monks incited a mob against Hypatia and she was brutally murdered on her way to the academy. Her demise left an indelible mark on the intellectual life in Alexandria.

Unfortunately, none of Hypatia’s writings have survived. Presumably, they were destroyed when the Library of Alexandria was burnt down. Despite Hypatia’s tragic end, SWIP saw in this impressive historical figure conclusive proof that women have been engaged in philosophy for many centuries. In other words, despite all claims to the contrary, we women are not newcomers to philosophy, and philosophy is not a male discipline.

While I was in discussions with Dale, Joyce Trebilcot suggested to her department that I be invited to a visiting position at Washington University in St. Louis. She encouraged me to accept the invitation so that we would have more time to work together on establishing *Hypatia*. Of course, there was the added benefit of being with my old friend Joyce, so I accepted the offer and spent a wonderful year in St. Louis. Much of the discussion with SWIP and the early arrangements for *Hypatia* took place

there with Joyce's help. Indeed, I liked being at Washington University so much that I almost stayed in St. Louis.

However, a year earlier, I had felt the need to get into law. I had written many feminist articles but could see no change in society. I wondered if I should not enter a field that could help me implement some of my ideas. So I applied to law school at the University of Pennsylvania, my alma mater, where I got my doctorate in philosophy. It was not the best time to change course. I was finally at the cusp of getting tenured in philosophy. After some challenging times at my department, I was assured of getting tenure if I so desired. I had enjoyed my work there and was a popular and productive professor, but in later years, as the department grew and the new faculty became more diverse, I came face to face with the ugliness of patriarchy and ethnic prejudice.

I remember the time I ordered an electric pencil sharpener for my office. In those days, I went through a lot of pencils in my writings because I edited, and hence erased, a lot. I asked the secretary if such a request would be too expensive for the department. She assured me that it was within reason. One day, a colleague stopped by my office and asked me why I needed an electric pencil sharpener. Wouldn't it be cheaper to get a manual one and hire an Arab to turn it? On another occasion, I even received a tenure-vote promise tied to a marriage proposal. But those were the old days.

The higher administration was aware of some of these developments. It quietly supported me and was willing to step in if necessary. But I wanted to fight my own battle, and was able to do so successfully. In the end, those who tried to stunt my career assured me that they had backed off and that I was welcome to return from St. Louis and receive tenure.

It was too late. I had an acceptance from a prestigious law school, and I needed to see change for women on the ground. I wanted to become an activist, so I asked for a leave of absence while I tried my luck at law school. Eventually, I resigned and completed my transition into law.

Being at Penn was wonderful. I was back in my element. I had all my old philosophy professors by my side. I got to know the faculty in Women's Studies, and I leveraged all these friendships and connections to make *Hypatia* a reality. Neither SWIP nor I had a penny in our pockets for a *Hypatia* budget, but Dale had set the deadline for the first issue. How do we get a journal issue done without a staff, without a budget?

I turned to the Philosophy Department for help and I was given an office. That was a great start. I reconnected with some faculty members who volunteered to review our manuscripts. I also met wonderful women graduate students and was able to inspire some of them to work for *Hypatia*. The first to sign on was Donna Catudal (now Seraniak-Catudal), who became the managing editor of the first issue. I then went to my friends in Women's Studies, which was in the same building as the Philosophy Department, and it provided us with one work-study student to add to our team of volunteers. It also provided us with valuable moral and tangible support. Thankfully, in

those days it was all that was needed. We were in business: we had a staff and an office, and a great deal of enthusiasm, so we all went to work immediately.

Unfortunately, despite my best intentions, I had no idea what demands the first year of law school would place on me. Slowly, I faded away from the *Hypatia* team. But *Hypatia* was in good hands, and Donna and the others did an excellent job. Articles were solicited and received on time. SWIP women supported *Hypatia* by submitting articles and also agreeing to review those submitted to them. Our volunteer staff sent articles out for review, and edited the manuscripts. Finally, we were done! The first issue of *Hypatia* appeared in WSIF and everyone was in seventh heaven.

But what about a second issue? Well, the second issue was already in the pipeline, but Donna was graduating as well as experiencing burnout, so Ruth Schwartz stepped in as the second managing editor. During this last period, Margaret (Peggy) Simons, another SWIP member, filled in for me by advising the team. She suggested the idea of a Simone de Beauvoir issue and offered to edit it. That became the third issue of WSIF-*Hypatia*. Indeed, SWIP as a whole lived up to its promise and gave *Hypatia* crucial support in these early days, support without which our volunteers could not have put together such good issues. Dale was elated.

By the time I graduated from law school, we had broken out of our catch-22. After three successful issues with WSIF, *Hypatia* became independent and was edited and published by Peg Simons for two years before moving to Indiana University Press in 1988. Finally, *Hypatia* had its own home, budget, and professional staff. The hard days of the struggle to found *Hypatia* were over. We had moved into a new era: the second stage of growing and nurturing an independent *Hypatia*. *Hypatia* was now in Peggy's able hands, so I felt comfortable moving to the next stage in my legal career, which was as an associate in a law firm on Wall Street. I had decided that it was time for me to experience powerful patriarchal systems in action. I remained in that twilight zone, away from my sisters, for several years before returning to teach in a law school. It was a great experience about which I have written briefly.

And what about my wish to change things on the ground? In 1993, I founded Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, where, among other things, we produce gender equitable Islamic jurisprudence. We have taught our ideas to women leaders from all over the world, and many tell us that we changed their lives.

I am especially impressed by the story of the Muslim woman community leader from Europe who was invited to visit the US. Her father, after consulting his imam, refused to let her travel alone. She had taken our classes, so she wrote to us about her problem. Since she was of North African ancestry, I told her that I would get her a *fatwa* (religious opinion) from a North African jurist that would address her father's concerns. Karamah, an Arabic word that means "dignity," had formed a network of distinguished women jurists, lawyers, and leaders of about 400 women in the Middle East and North Africa.

I turned to a distinguished member of our network who was a professor of Islamic jurisprudence in a major North African institution. It took her a few weeks to draft a reasoned opinion. However, before I even received the opinion, I heard from our

European leader again. She had been granted permission to travel. It appears that the daughter had informed her father of Karamah's view on the matter and that we were preparing an opinion. So he informed the imam of this development and questioned his ruling. The imam then modified his position and the daughter was allowed to travel. The whole problem was solved by simply *mentioning* the opinion! Karamah is pushing back patriarchal jurisprudence and authoritarian attitudes in the Muslim world, empowering Muslim women to speak out and partnering with Muslim women jurists, lawyers, and leaders to bring about change.

Some women graduates are now forming their own Karamah organizations and spreading our message. Will they succeed? Will we? They are speaking out right now in this Arab Spring, and it is still a struggle. They are also producing excellent gender-equitable scholarship, but that is another article for another time. The only question before us today is this: "Will there be a second stage for this Karamah venture?" I strongly believe that the answer is a resounding "yes." In the interim, I sometimes muse over the fact that this venture is somehow connected by an accident of history to *Hypatia*. The two are accidental sisters; they deserve each other's help and support. After all, Hypatia the woman was an Egyptian leader, and Karamah women were in Tahrir Square last year making our voices heard loud and clear.