Will history repeat itself for Muslim women?

A WOMAN'S WORTH

By FARIDAH HAMEED

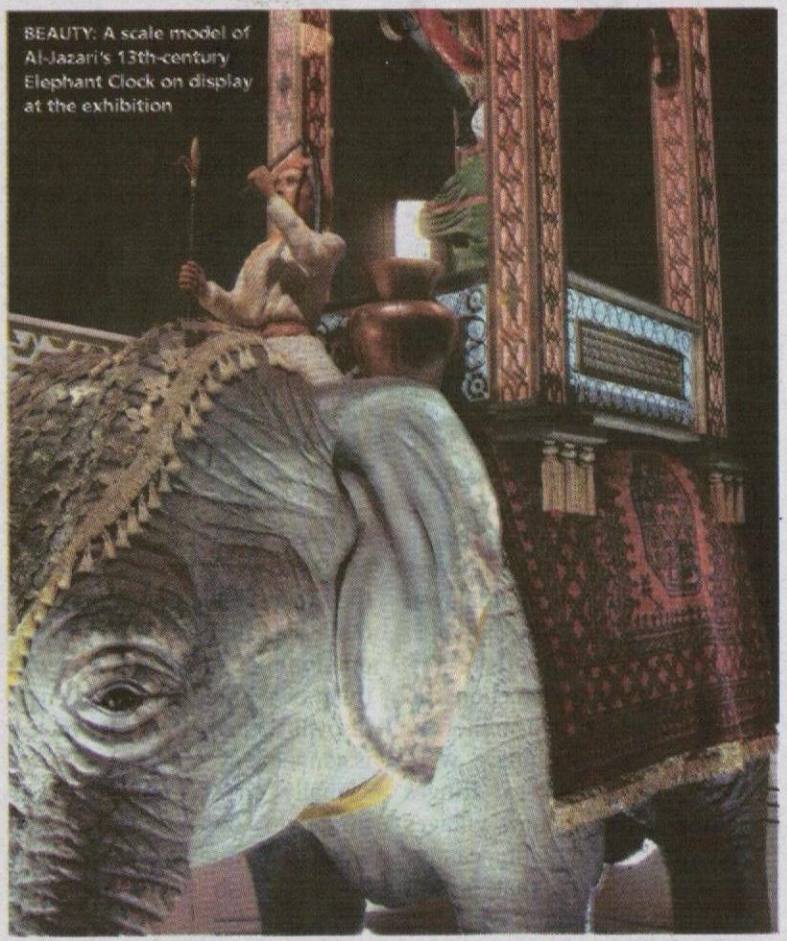
THE past, it is said, does not equal the future. It is a common phrase used by self-development gurus to make the point that what happened in our past does not have to define our future.

For the most part, I believe this. But in some instances, the past can be a source of inspiration, as I discovered in a recent visit to the *1001 Inventions: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Civilisation* at the National Science Centre over the Malaysia Day weekend.

This award-winning exhibition is on a three-year tour of Malaysia, and the first in Asia. The show has already received more than three million visitors during record-breaking residencies in London, Istanbul, New York, Los Angeles, Washington DC and the Middle East.

The exhibition features the pioneering men and women with groundbreaking scientific and cultural achievements from the 7th to the 17th century, at a time when Muslim civilisation stretched from Spain to China. This was the Golden Age of Islam.

While the exhibition itself is very interactive and well presented, it is not clear how many of the 1001 inventions are actually featured and repeated Google searches drew a blank.



BEAUTY: A scale model of Al-Jazari's 13th-century Elephant Clock on display at the exhibition

When it came to women pioneers, it was a letdown as only two are featured in this exhibition. Fatima Al-Fihri, who founded the world's first academic degree-granting institution of higher education, which is still in operation today as the University of Qarawiyyin in Fes, Morocco.

The other, Mariam Al-Ijliya, lived in the10th century in Aleppo, Syria. Her father was an apprentice to a famous astrolabe maker in Baghdad. Muslims used Astrolabes to determine the position of the sun and the planets in astronomy, astrology, and horoscopes. It continues to be used today to find the *Kiblat*, determine prayer times and the starting days of Ramadan and Eid.

As his student, Mariam's handcrafted designs were so intricate and innovative that from 944AD to 967AD, she was employed by the ruler of the city, Sayf Al Dawla.

I find it very hard to believe that in 1,000 years, only two pioneering women could be found. That set me off on a search to unearth more.

There was Sultan Raziyya (India, 1205-1240), who refused to be addressed as Sultana because it meant "wife or mistress of a sultan" and only answered to the title "Sultan". She was known for her belief that the spirit of religion is more important than its parts. She established schools, academies, centres for research and public libraries.

Rufayda binti Sa'ad who is widely considered the first nurse in Islamic history who lived at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. She was an expert healer and set up field hospitals in her tent during many battles.

The documentation of the achievement of Muslim women through the ages to the present is thin at best. In my research, here are some notable modern-day luminaries and role models:

Nawal El Moutawakel: First Muslim woman to win a gold medal in the Olympics

Nawal's win in the 400m hurdles race, made her the first Muslim woman and first African female to win an Olympic gold medal the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

Shirin Abadi: First Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003

As a judge in Iran, she was the first woman Chief Justice but now lives in exile in London.

Anousheh Ansari: First Muslim woman in space in 2006

She was the first private female space explorer. She has conducted multiple experiments while at the International Space Station. Anousheh was the first person to contribute to a blog from space.

Raha Moharrak: First Saudi and youngest Arab woman to peak Mount Everest in 2013

Raha was raised in Saudi Arabia in an orthodox family, one of the few countries that actively discourage women's participation in sports.

These are just a small sampling, and undoubtedly the tip of the iceberg. As I left the exhibition, I was inspired but deflated at the same time, wondering how we have gone so far wrong.

Today, 14 centuries after the Golden Age of Islam, the horrors being inflicted on girls and women in some Muslim communities — such as child brides, the stoning of women and female genital mutilation — make the 21st century look like the Dark Ages.

There are many reasons we look at history — primarily to point out how we can improve from our mistakes.

I think history repeating itself could be the very thing we need right now — the game changer for Muslims everywhere.

FARIDAH HAMEED is the creator of the Language of Power training programme for women. Connect with her on Facebook or LinkedIn or at her website www.faridahhameed.com