NADIA MARIA EL CHEIKH:
Women, Islam and Abbasid Identity.
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In this insightful and very readable book, Nadia Maria El Cheikh presents five case studies showing various ways in which the perception of the role of women in ʿAbbāsid culture reflects the wish to distance itself from the practices of Jahiliya and to establish its Sunni Muslim identity. Her approach continues the line of, among others, Denise Spellberg, Verena Klemm and Asma Afsaruddin. Using sources from ʿAbbāsid times as well as a few later works, El Cheikh discusses five topics. Her approach and arguments are well-grounded in the current discourse on the role of gender in the perception of history. The quantity of available Arabic source material is of course enormous, which makes one curious about the selection criteria that were used. For some reason there is no bibliography, but backtracking through the notes yields all the necessary bibliographical information.

The first chapter beautifully analyses the way in which the treatment of Hind bint ʿUtba and her husband Abu Sufyan in ʿAbbāsid sources reflects the changing attitude towards Jahiliya and the Umayyads. The early emphasis is on Hind as the very epitome of Jahiliya, behaving in a totally uncontrolled and irrational manner. Unleashing her anger against Islam she becomes a raving madwoman, mutilating enemy corpses and tearing out the liver of Hamza, the Prophet's uncle, at the battle of Uhud. In an act of near-cannibalism she even starts biting the liver. In this way, the author argues, she becomes one of those monstrous beings situated at the edge of the world, in this case not the edge of the geographical world but the temporal world of Islam. She also plays a part in the anti-Umayyad discourse: her arrogance and pride continue to be emphasized, and her son, the caliph Muʿawiya, is frequently referred to as "the son of the liver eater". As the ʿAbbāsid dialogue with the past becomes more conciliatory, especially towards the Umayyads, the representations of Hind as well as of Abu Sufyan gradually change. Hind is morally rehabilitated by stories featuring her respectable behaviour after her conversion to Islam, and some *adab* stories even present her as a woman cleared of the suspicion of adultery by divine intervention, just like ʿAʾisha.

Chapter 2 focuses on the Islamic attitude towards mourning rituals, showing how Sunni Islam tried, partly in vain, to eradicate Jahili customs of women's mourning, such as excessive lamentation, scratching one's face, shaving one's head and slapping one's face with sandals. Poetic lament, the literary domain in which women traditionally predominated since Pre-Islamic days, was also increasingly frowned upon. The background of the later Islamic opposition to all this, as El Cheikh explains, was that excessive grief could unleash emotions destructive to Islamic society, and this stood in the way of the new order that was being established. Such demonstrations of grief ought to be replaced by endurance, *ṣabr*. She gives beautiful and convincing examples of these changing views and also shows that attempts to change these customs were only partly successful.

The Qarmatians form the subject of the third chapter. Again focusing on mainstream Sunni sources, El Cheikh analyses the attempts to strengthen the views of orthodoxy by describing the licentiousness, sometimes amounting to orgies, of

heretics such as the Qarmatians (and in general Batinis). She shows how these accusations helped to present these heretics as exponents of the dark and chaotic trends connected with the Jahiliya, trends extremely threatening to society. She notes the remarkable detail that no specific woman is mentioned in the sources. This throws doubt on the veracity of the accusations, and ties in with the observation that the accusation of sexual licentiousness is widely used to counter and suppress heretic movements, not only in the Islamic world but also elsewhere.

"Beyond borders", the fourth chapter, deals with the way in which the description of gender roles functions as an indicator of "foreignness". Sexual behaviour considered outrageous (and accordingly despicable) by Muslims is a central element in such descriptions. Arabic geographers and travel accounts offer striking examples. Here, the focus is on Byzantine culture and how the representation of Byzantine women in Arabic sources serves to express disdain for Byzantine norms and values. As opposed to the modesty and seclusion imposed on Islamic women, Byzantine women are described as free and living under conditions permitting licentiousness. They are also depicted as playing a public role and wielding power. The Byzantine empress appeared in public, took part in ceremonials and acted as leader of the court. Occasionally, they also interacted with foreign rulers. One of the sources cited on this account is Marwazi, who extensively described Byzantium, including the role of the empress in public festivities and also in politics. It should be noted that the Marwazi in question is not, as is mentioned here, Muhammad al-Marwazi (d. 334/945), but Sharaf al-Zaman Tahir al-Marwazi (*fl.* around 1100 CE), court physician to Nizam al-Mulk in Isfahan, who devotes a section to Byzantium in his (to a substantial part unedited) *Book on the Natures of Living Beings*.

In the continuing border struggles between Arabs and Byzantines, many Byzantine female captives were sold into slavery and ended up as concubines in Arab households. Byzantine women were considered exceptionally beautiful, and the love they incited further explains why they were perceived as disruptive factors, a source of *fitna.* El Cheikh's careful and lucid analysis confirms the picture that arises in a branch of literature not used for the present study, namely the numerous stories in premodern Arabic fiction where Byzantine women take exactly the role mentioned above. *Sirat al-amira Dhat al-Himma* for instance, one of the vast narratives belonging to the genre of *sira shaʿbiya,* popular epic, abounds with stories about Byzantine women (often women with considerable martial prowess) whose devastating beauty is the cause of endless *fitna* among the Muslim heroes.

The final chapter, "Fashioning a new identity", is devoted to women belonging to the Prophet's household, his family and the Companions whose representations in Islamic sources were gradually developed to make them role models for the sort of female conduct that could strengthen Muslim identity. Not only Sunnite, but also Shiite views are brought up, the latter being especially relevant in connection with Fatima. Particularly interesting are the similarities pointed out between Mary, the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran, and Fatima.

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