

## Toward an Abbasid History of Emotions: The Case of Slavery

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doi:[10.1017/S0020743816001197](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743816001197)

The idea that there can be histories of everything or anything has not yet taken root in the field of Islamic history, which is still dominated by political history. There has been a revival of women's history, and gender studies is flourishing, but these developments have brought about only one radical rethinking of mainstream narratives: Nadia Maria El Cheikh's *Women, Islam, and Abbasid Identity*, which argues that Abbasid society's construction of early Islam and of its own self-image is profoundly gendered, because "Women, gender relations, and sexuality are at the heart of the cultural construction of identity, as they are discursively used to fix moral boundaries and consolidate particularities and differences."<sup>1</sup>

If gender shapes identity, something just as fundamental—emotion—shapes motivation, and, to go one layer deeper, a good part of causality. A history of emotions is still lacking in the spectrum of Islamic histories, but I believe it is an essential, whether we see it as a type of history or, as William M. Reddy has put it, "a way of *doing* [emphasis added] political, social, and cultural history, not something to be added to [them]."<sup>2</sup> Since people act on what they believe and feel, a history of emotions seeks to explain both why people act and what their actions mean to them. Historians of emotion hold a range of positions but agree that thinking and feeling are connected; that neither is a natural, ahistorical given; and—a view that sits well with Abbasid textual sources—that emotions are specific not only to cultures but, within them, to "emotional communities," of which, Barbara H. Rosenwein argues, there will be several in any society.<sup>3</sup> Identifying and exploring emotional communities is something for which we have a large body of early and medieval Arabic sources, including poetry and many types of narrative. Where to begin?

More than thirty years ago, pre-empting Reddy's maximalist stance on the role of emotion in history, although without using the word "emotion," Roy Mottahedeh tried to show that moral commitment within politics under the Buyids was a genuine shaping force across society.<sup>4</sup> The maximalist history of emotions has Abbasid forerunners. One example is Ibn al-Sa'ī's (1197–1276) *Nisa' al-khulafa'* (Consorts of the Caliphs),<sup>5</sup> which portrays caliphal concubines from the beginning to nearly the end of the Abbasid caliphate. Drawing largely on literary sources such as Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani's 10th-century *Kitab al-Aghani* (Book of Songs), it idealizes the concubines' talents, feelings, and character, presenting the women as contributors to the prestige of the dynasty. It is a slim work,<sup>6</sup> but nonetheless significant because of its dual focus on slavery and emotion. It does not claim to explain great causes and effects, but it does demonstrate that a serious historian took seriously literary accounts of the emotional strategies used by women slaves to win affection, respect, and even power.

Slavery permeated not just elite Abbasid society but the whole of urban society, which makes it in and of itself a point of departure for investigating that society. Furthermore, some degree of quasi slavery, or legal incapacity, may well have been the norm for well

over half the Muslim population: as Kecia Ali has argued, in early Abbasid legal thought, “slavery . . . is inseparable from ideas about marriage.”<sup>7</sup> Slavery, moreover, offers access to that same society’s insights about itself, because it bulks so large not just in legal thought, but also in Abbasid historiography and literature. We have just seen how Ibn al-Sa’i made use of literary sources. How might we use them?

The sources for slaves as figures in Abbasid literature, particularly love literature, are very rich, and are far from being fully tapped. Some five decades of modern scholarship have explored Abbasid love theory, its vocabulary, and its conventions, but these studies are largely descriptive, and either explain the social functions of literary love as a fashion or an intellectual exercise, or view it as a form of mysticism,<sup>8</sup> with the figures of women slaves (or boys) simply as tools for thinking with.

That they are hooks to hang other things on is often true. I have argued that stories that portray the vulnerability of women slaves as a form of moral authority used to teach men to find fulfillment through restraint and faithfulness are fantasies. Such stories reflect, by opposites, how elite civilian men tried to resolve the insecurities of their own position in a violent and unpredictable hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> These story types, in which anxieties are recast fictionally to provide models of reassurance, were aids to psychological balance. They also show how the literary staging of emotion could be used to do political theory: happy-ever-after slave-and-master romances were a way of discerning kindness, care, and rationality in the power structure.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, the same literary sources which romanticize master–slave love also show the reality of Abbasid casual sexual relations with slaves as being often brutal, consumerist,<sup>11</sup> and callous.<sup>12</sup> Just as two decades of research has disproved the long-held axiom that autobiography and ego-documents are absent from premodern Arabic life-writing,<sup>13</sup> so a fresh approach may undermine the idea that the sorts of love portrayed in poetry and storytelling are always symbols of, or metaphors for, something else. There is social and psychological realism to be found in literary thinking about slaves. Particularly useful are sources that juxtapose romantic and realistic depictions of slaves in domestic settings, showing where they intersect and how they diverge. There is enough of this material for it to be held up against not only love poetry, romantic story telling, legal theory, and medical and philosophical theories of love as a malady or a passion,<sup>14</sup> but also manuals on buying slaves and documentary sources.

But what exactly did it mean, in personal terms, to be, or to have been, a slave? Here is a depiction of a marriage in which an aristocratic wife has attributes of a *jāriya* (a woman slave courtesan trained in music and literature), that is, her love of music, knowledge of poetry, the capriciousness with which she treats her lover/husband, and the refinement with which she entertains him. We may guess that she owes her power over her husband, at least in part, to her ability to bring to the marriage the glamour and excitement usually associated with slave courtesans. A wealthy landowner from near Baghdad tells the story:

When I was young, I married a woman of the [vizieral] Wabb family, who was extremely rich, pleasant, and well educated, and very spirited, and who surrounded herself with singing *jāriyas*. I fell violently in love . . . and for a long time we lived happily together. Then one day we had the sort of falling out that people have. In her anger, she rebuffed me, locked her chamber against me, and refused me entry, and sent a message demanding a divorce.

The husband abases himself, but to no avail. After three nights of grovelling outside his wife's door, he resolves to get a grip on himself. He has just had a bath and is getting dressed when: "My wife appeared surrounded by her *jāriyas*, some holding instruments and singing and others carrying trays with little pastries." Over wine and music, the couple are reconciled, and the wife explains:

I had no real cause to be unkind. I was simply in a mood to invent grievances, as lovers do, growing more and more stubborn . . . until just now I took up a commonplace book [*daftar*] that was at hand and leafed through it, and my eye fell upon these lines:

"Life is too short to waste settling scores:

Rather, seize the hour that passes like a cloud."<sup>15</sup>

The story is striking in merging two contradictory strands of thinking about romantic love that are applied to *jāriyas*, and applying them to a high-status wife. The wife initially appears to have the upper hand over her husband-lover and to treat him heartlessly, as do the courtesans of al-Jahiz's satirical essay.<sup>16</sup> Then, following her display of wilfulness, she conforms to the fictional type of the self-sacrificing *jāriya* whose lover treats her as a soulmate and may even end up marrying her and securing lasting, tranquil happiness.<sup>17</sup> This one brief anecdote raises numerous questions about male and female emotions, gender and marital relations, the education of women, and female role models (were *jāriyas* held up as a pattern to free women? Was this woman perhaps the daughter of, and brought up by, a *jāriya*?), female companionship and the presence of *jāriyas* in female households, and, last but not least, marriage contracts.

A second story brings us to the other end of the social scale. It concerns the marriage of Labib the Anchorite, an ex-slave, and a woman of unspecified social status. The narrator, Labib, was a well-known figure in late 10th-century Baghdad. He explains how he became a recluse:

I was a Byzantine slave. I belonged to a soldier who brought me up and taught me arms. When I reached manhood, he manumitted me on his deathbed. I managed to find work to support myself and married his widow, only so as to look after her, as God knows. One day, after living with her for a while, I saw a snake enter her room.

Labib catches the snake, but it bites him. First one arm is paralysed, then the other, and gradually,

both my legs were paralysed, and I lost my sight then my speech. For a whole year I was bedridden, and all I had left was my hearing . . . it gave me little pleasure. For a whole year, I was given drink and food when I was full and left alone and given nothing when I was thirsty and hungry. Then a woman came to see my wife.

"How's Labib?" she asked.

My wife replied: "There's no hope that he'll recover, or that he'll die."

This upset me and hurt me very much.

Labib does recover, however, unbeknownst to his wife, and the first thing he does is tell her to bring him a razor to shave off his military moustache. She behaves as if nothing

had happened to alter their relationship, teasing him about what his mates will say if he shaves. He will have none of it. He leaves the house, divorces her, and becomes an anchorite.<sup>18</sup>

Looking at things from the narrator's point of view, it is unclear whether he is telling us that his wife neglected him because he was her first husband's slave, or simply because he was a liability. As seen through the wife's eyes, it may be that she was unable to meet his needs because he could not make them known. The narrator's own sense of worth and autonomy does not seem to be impaired by his having been a slave: he says he married his master's widow out of a sense of responsibility (derived from what part of his background?). He is clearly proud to have been able to earn a living, and chooses to become an anchorite to please himself. The ex-slave of this story raises almost as many questions as the *jāriya*-like wife of the first story.

Material of this sort offers prospects of coming to grips with the all-important question of how, in Abbasid society, people thought about what it meant to be a human being, whether a slave, free, or anything in between, and how they dealt with legal, physical, and psychological limits and imbalances of personal power. That these were matters of lively concern to one emotional community, people of cultivated sensibility—*adab*—is evident in the subjects they chose to write about and how they wrote about them. How far can their thinking about slavery and humanity take us, and how does it compare with that of other emotional communities?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nadia Maria El Cheikh, *Women, Islam, and Abbasid Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>2</sup>See Jan Plamper, "Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 249.

<sup>3</sup>In the same interview, Rosenwein takes issue with the "hydraulic model" of emotions as entirely different and separate from reasoning. For the history of the "hydraulic model" of emotions conceived as an ungovernable natural force, see Robert C. Solomon, *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142–45.

<sup>4</sup>Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Ibn al-Sa'i, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa, trans. The Editors of the Library of Arabic Literature (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>It is the only survivor of a pair, the sequel to a work on consorts who lived to see their sons become caliphs.

<sup>7</sup>Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>8</sup>In chronological order, some major contributions are: Jean-Claude Vadet, *L'Esprit courtois en Orient dans le cinq premiers siècles de l'Hégire* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1968), a dense work whose discoveries and insights have been made almost inaccessible by its lack of any form of index; Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs: the Development of the Genre* (London/New York: University of London Press Ltd/New York: New York University Press, 1972); André Roman, *Başşar et son expérience courtoise. Les vers à 'Abda: texte arabe, traduction et lexique* (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1972); Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), chap. 2; Albert Arazî, *Amour divin et amour profane dans l'Islam médiéval à travers le Diwan de Khalid al-Katib* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1990); Suzanne Enderwitz, *Liebe als Beruf. Al-'Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf und das Gazal* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1995); Thomas Bauer, *Liebe und Liebesdichtung in der arabischen Welt des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998); and Raja' bin Salama, *al-'Ishq wa-l-Kitaba* (Cologne: al-Kamel Verlag, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>Julia Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 141–43.

<sup>10</sup>See Julia Bray, "A Caliph and His Public Relations," in *New Perspectives on Arabian Nights: Ideological Variations and Narrative Horizons*, ed. Wen-chin Ouyang and Geert Jan van Gelder (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 29–30; and Bray, "Practical Mu'tazilism: The Case of al-Tanukhi," in *'Abbasid Studies: Occasional Papers of the School of 'Abbasid Studies Cambridge 6–10 July 2002*, ed. James E. Montgomery (Leuven, Paris, and Dudley, Mass.: Peeters, 2004), 124–25.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, James E. Montgomery, "For the Love of a Christian Boy: A Song by Abu Nuwas," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 27 (1996), 115–24.

<sup>12</sup>In both Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Aghani*, and al-Tanukhi, *Nishwar al-Muhadara*, we find examples of unsentimental, even harsh, realism in the portrayal of situations depicted elsewhere in these works in idealized and romantic terms. For examples, see the story of a slave woman in love with her married master, who sells her to avoid his wife discovering the affair in Julia Bray, "Verbs and Voices," in *Islamic Reflections Arabic Musings—Studies in Honour of Alan Jones*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland and Philip F. Kennedy (n. p.: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 175–76; and an anecdote about a man who uses a contraceptive on his slave woman because pregnancy would lower her resale value in Bray, "The Physical World and the Writer's Eye," *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam—Muslim Horizons*, ed. Julia Bray (London: Routledge, 2006), 230–31.

<sup>13</sup>See Dwight F. Reynolds, acknowledgements to *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography and the Arabic Literary Tradition*, ed. Dwight F. Reynolds (Berkeley, Calif., Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), vii–ix.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Hans Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Dimitri Gutas, "The Malady of Love," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (1984): 21–55.

<sup>15</sup>Al-Tanukhi, *al-Faraj ba'd al-Shidda*, ed. 'Abbud al-Shaliji (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1978), 4:426–28 (no. 492).

<sup>16</sup>A. F. L. Beeston, trans. and ed., *The Epistle on Singing-Girls by Jāhiz* (Warminster: Aris & Philips Ltd., 1980).

<sup>17</sup>For some examples of the pattern, see al-Tanukhi, *Faraj*, vol. 4, nos. 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 474, 475, 476, 478.

<sup>18</sup>Al-Tanukhi, *Faraj*, 4:196–98 (no. 434). See Julia Bray, "The Physical World," 229, 232–33. A slightly different version is given in al-Tanukhi, *Nishwar al-Muhadara*, ed. 'A. al-Shaliji (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1971–73), 2:256–58 (no. 150).