SOME NOTES ON WOMEN IN CLASSICAL ARABIC LITERARY TRADITION

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the role and image of women in an *adab*-monograph, viz. the *Kitāb Aḫbār an-nisā'* of Ibn Qayyim al-Ǧawziyya[1], leaving aside the problem whether the work is rightly attributed to him or not. The book is by no means ingenious – it is mainly compiled from highly popular sources such as *'Uyūn al-aḫbār* of Ibn Qutayba and *Kitāb al-Aġānī* of Abū l-Faraǧ al-Iṣfahānī[2] – but its size is convenient for this analysis and the book may well be looked upon as a typical representative of this genre.

The book consists of stories, mainly anecdotes, most of which are not *about* women, but merely *involving* women; the main interest of the author – like that of other *adab*-writers – is the presentation of witticisms and elegant verses, as well as the display of his philological expertness; he is less interested in analyzing the role or behaviour of women.

Before taking a closer look at the women of the *Aḫbār*, it must be noted – and this holds true also in most of the *adab*-literature and e.g. Persian literature – that the portrayal of women in the *Aḫbār* does not reflect, at least not closely, the actual status of women in Islamic society at any given period: the image of women, or anything else, in the *adab*-literature is subject to literary conventions, which deform the reality, sometimes beyond recognition. Gleaning information on Islamic society from these works of art would require a close scrutiny of a large corpus of texts belonging to different genres and a comparison with non-literary texts.

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[1] Ed. Nizār Riḍā, Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt. Bayrūt 1985.

[2] Or other, later sources drawing on the same material.

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After these preliminary notes, we may turn to our subject. The roles in which women are introduced are conventional and can be reduced to a few, archetypal roles, of which four are more frequently used. Note that the first three are somewhat overlapping. These four stock figures are:

1. wife – which includes widow as a variant
2. 'beloved'
3. slave-girl
4. old woman

The chief aspect in the image of wife is either her faithfulness or her infidelity. In the romantic – a term which I use here more or less in the same meaning as *ʿuḏrite* – stories wife's faithfulness to her husband is emphasized, and she remains faithful even after the death of her husband. A larger group of anecdotes deals with her infidelity, including her so-called infidelity after his death – which, from a modern point of view, is not exactly faithlessness, but only incapacity to conform with the unrealistic standards of *ʿuḏrite* love. Those anecdotes in which the widow is remarried, sometimes under the pressure of her family, and then, often already before the wedding night, repents and dies or disappears, have a romantic tone and can be grouped together w2ith other romantic anecdotes. In some nonromantic anecdotes the widow, or the divorced wife remarries. If she has given her first husband an oath not to remarry, or not to marry a certain person, she may absolve herself from the oath. This is seen as infidelity even when the oath has been given e.g. to appease the dying husband.

In a certain group of anecdotes a woman deceives her husband when he is still alive, or has not yet divorced her, which is infidelity even by European standards. Frequently this infidelity is only suspected, it is not proven in the story. When it is real, the driving force of the woman to be faithless to her husband is usually not explicitly stated to be her sexual appetite, contrary to e.g. the stories of *Alf layla* and erotic literature like *The Perfumed Garden* of Shaykh an-Nafzāwī[3], where the

[3] *The Perfumed Garden of Shaykh Nefzawi*. Translated by R. Burton (several editions).

'stout, black slave' is a common figure and a cause of women's faithlessness. In accordance to this the cunning wife *à la Decamerone* or *Tūṭī-nāma* (I am referring here to the Muḥammad Qādirī recension[4]) is not frequently depicted. More often a faithless wife is a passive object of seduction. Rather astonishingly, this group of anecdotes is quite small: even in the chapters *Mā yuḏkaru min ġadri n-nisā'* (p. 144-167) and *Mā ǧā'a fī z-zinā wa-t-taḥḏīri min alīmi ʿiqābihi* (p. 168-208) these anecdotes clearly represent a minority. With this one could compare the fact that faithless wives are almost non-existent in the works of the Persian bel esprit Saʿdī.

Main instances of the faithless wife are the story of ʿAmr ibn Qamī'a (where the 'Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar'-theme is used) (p. 177-178), the story of the wife deceiving her husband while her lover's friend disguises as her (p. 188-190), and the famous story of Waḍḍāḥ al-Yaman and Umm al-Banīn (p. 156-158).

The most frequent theme in the anecdotes that deal with wives is, perhaps surprisingly, divorce. Normally in the anecdotes, as surely in the real life, too, the one who wants the divorce is the man. The cause of divorce may be his wish to marry somebody else – e.g. her sister, when the Islamic laws make divorce compulsory (e.g. p. 78) –, his sexual dissatisfaction with her (p. 78, 79, et passim), or a temporary fit of anger caused by her behaviour (e.g. p. 80-81). In a group of anecdotes the husband is seen repenting his rashness in divorcing his wife (e.g. p. 73-74, 74). In a few cases it is the woman who wants to be divorced (e.g. p. 79). The reason for this is usually the sexual incapacity of her husband or her wish to be married to some other man or perhaps both.

I have not seen the edition of the Arabic text. Note that women with a strong sexual appetite are found in some other anecdotal *adab*-books, e.g. the *Balāġat an-nisā'* of Ibn Ṭayfūr (especially the chapter *Aḫbār mawāǧin an-nisā'*).

[4] Anonymous (= Fr. Gladwin), *The Tooti Nameh or Tales of a Parrot.* Calcutta/ London, 1801. Same remarks hold true also for other *Ṭūṭī-nāma* recensions, both Persian and Turkish (cf. e.g. G. Rosen (übers.), *Tuti-nameh, Das Papageienbuch*, several editions, e.g. Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1987).

Marriage is not explicitly criticized, as it often is in Ṣūfī literature[5] and e.g. the works of Saʿdī[6]. The qualities of an ideal wife are often summarised in maxims: her physical good looks, nobility of birth, and above all, her faithfulness and obedience are emphasized, the last-mentioned also receiving the sanctification from *ḥadīṯs* quoted. In some maxims of *ʿuḏrite* tenor, romantic love and the sexual act are contrasted: the latter, even if it is not explicitly stated, can be equalized with marriage, and its sole *raison d'être* is to beget children – an idea common with several genres of Persian literature.

Bigamy and polygamy have only a minor part to play in the anecdotes. Even though in theory the jealousy of women is stated in the *Aḫbār* to be lesser than that of men (p. 84), in practice in nearly all the stories where a man takes a second wife, or a concubine, or even uses the services of a prostitute, his wife is seen to resort to different tricks and stratagems in order to prevent him from marrying or seeing her, or to force him to divorce the other woman, if he already has married her. Even the caliph Muʿāwiya is seen to submit to his wife in this situation (p. 185-186), and in another hilarious story (p. 121-122) a man, who had been stung by a scorpion when he was enjoying one of his slave-girls, has to bear his wife's eulogy to scorpions which, says she, defend the moral of the house. In another anecdote (p. 180) the jealous wife of Baššār ibn Burd plays the part of prostitute, and the blind poet gets caught by her – the same story is told in the *Kitāb al-Aġānī* about al-Farazdaq, and it is paralleled by stories in *Ṭūṭī-nāma*, its Indian predecessors, and Decamerone.

In some stories the happy union of a man and his wife is depicted: a just-married husband has been compelled to go to war, and he misses his wife and is duly sent back home to her (p. 196-198); a man can not

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[5] See e.g. James A. Bellamy, "Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature", p. 30-34, in Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot (ed.), *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam, Sixth Giorgio Levi della Vida Biennial Conference*, 1979, p. 23-42.

[6] See "Saʿdī – a Misogynist?" by the present writer in *Studia Orientalia* 64, 1988, p. 169-175.

travel because he can not bear to be separated from his wife (p. 30-31). In these anecdotes the aspect of *šawq* is emphasized, and they come near to *ʿuḏrite* stories as the husband takes the role of lover not able to meet his beloved.

The figure of 'beloved' belongs mainly to *ʿuḏrite* stories, in most of which both the lover and the beloved are abstinent and faithful to each other. The faithfulness vs. infidelity themes are by and large the same as with wives. The general atmosphere of anecdotes dealing with the relationship of lover and beloved, if we exclude the *ʿuḏrite* stories, is that of lighthearted flirt – stories centring mainly upon Abū Nuwās, ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabīʿa and al-Farazdaq. The masochistic theme of *la belle dame sans merci* is not customary in the *Aḫbār*.

The roles of slave-girls in these anecdotes range from romantic beloved to singing girl and prostitute in urban settings, but they normally play an extremely passive role, except when they help a lover and his beloved to meet. One figure worth mentioning is the slave-girl who loves in *ʿuḏrite* style her previous master who either has died or has been forced to sell her (e.g. p. 137-138).

Old women are introduced mainly as *qawwāda*s, matchmakers or 'madames', and they are normally seen in unfavourable light, whereas in e.g. the works of Saʿdī they are normally more or less agreeable figures[7]. In one anecdote the old age of the wife is explicitly stated to be the cause of divorce (p. 11). In another the religiosity of an old woman is the cause which prevents a bedouin from seeing his host's wife and committing *zinā* (p. 176); though from an Islamic point of view this is naturally a good thing, I am not by any means sure that the woman's behaviour is not to be seen here as irritating scrupulousness, since the general atmosphere of this anecdote is that of light-hearted love-making.

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[7] See M. Southgate, "Men, Women, and Boys: Love and Sex in the works of Sa'di", *Iranian Studies* 17 (1984), p. 413-452, especially p. 423.

Other female figures in the *Aḫbār* include poetess, who normally is at the same time the beloved, the 'Mysterious Knight'[8] of the prose romances (only once, p. 199-204), and grown-up daughter, whose chastity and virginity, just as in real life, is a constant cause of worry to her father. From the stock figures of *Alf layla* the sorceress is, of course, totally absent, as are other magical elements. Mothers and children, boys as well as girls, are also missing.

If we turn for a while from the figures to the settings of the anecdotes, before taking up the question of the book's attitude towards women, we see that the range of these settings is very limited, and they are usually neither specified nor described in any detail even in the short stories. The only exception to this in the *Aḫbār* is the short story about Abū Nuwās (p. 158-165), which begins with an elaborate *sağ*ᶜ-description, which, if not specifying the place, at least describes it, though in an uninformative way. The scene of most of the anecdotes is not even hinted at. If it is mentioned, it is either desert, as in most romantic anecdotes, or city, and there e.g. the palace of the caliph, a private house, or a house of the *qayna*'s.

The attitude towards women in the anecdotes varies from the favourable one in the *ᶜuḏrite* stories to outright misogyny. The most misogynous element in the *Aḫbār* is not provided by the anecdotes themselves, but by the proverbs, maxims, gnomic verses and gnomic *ḥadīṯ*s, where women are often described as lascivious, disobedient and prone to infidelity if not mischievous in general. To take but a few random examples of this kind of material:

maxim: *lam tunha qaṭṭu mraʾatun ᶜan šayʾin illā faᶜalathu* (p. 11)

advice, attributed to ᶜUmar: *istaᶜīḏū bi-llāhi min širāri n-nisāʾi wa-kūnū min ḫiyārihinna ᶜalā ḥaḏar* (p. 144)

gnomic verse: *inna n-nisāʾa matā yunhayna ᶜan ḫuluqin / fa-innahu wāqiᶜun lā budda mafʿūlū* (p. 11)

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[8] Cf. Fr. Rosenthal, "Sources for the Role of Sex in Medieval Muslim Society", p. 13-14, in al-Sayyid-Marsot (ed.), *Society*, p. 3-22.

gnomic verse: *lā ta'mani l-'unṯā ḥabatka bi-wuddihā / inna n-nisā'a widāduhunna muqassamū // al-yawma ᶜindaka dalluhā wa-ḥadīṯuhā / wa-ġadan li-ġayrika kaffuhā wa-l-miᶜṣamū* (p. 11)

ḥadīṯ: *inna l-mar'ata ḫuliqat min ḍilᶜin ᶜawǧā'a fa-in ḏahabta tuqawwimuhā kasartahā fa-stamtiᶜ bihā ᶜalā ᶜiwaǧin fīhā* (p. 144; though here the end mitigates the misogynous tenor of the *ḥadīṯ*)

ḥadīṯ: *šāwirūhunna wa-ḫālifūhunna fa-inna fī ḫilāfihinna l-baraka* (p. 145)[9].

This last-mentioned *ḥadīṯ* which forbids men to ask advice from women is an especially favoured theme in Arabian, Persian and Indian literary traditions.

In the *Aḫbār* one chapter, *Mā yuḏkaru min ġadri n-nisā'* (p. 144-167), contains many statements and anecdotes of this kind, but as it has already been noted, several concentrate on the fidelity of widows and accordingly are less misogynous. It has also been already mentioned that old women are mainly seen in an unfavourable light.

To counterweight these misogynous elements, there are several anecdotes where women are sympathetic figures. This is true, first of all, in the romantic anecdotes, but also in other anecdotes. One feature in a few cases attributed to women in the anecdotes as well as in prose romances and even in the *Būstān* of Saᶜdī[10] is religiosity, though we have of course anecdotes and maxims with just the opposite attitude. This feature is now and then mentioned, but it is only once elaborated, namely in a much quoted anecdote, where a bedouin girl advises a man

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[9] 'Never has a woman been prohibited to do something, but that she has done it'; 'Take refuge with God from bad women, and be on guard against good women'; 'When women are prohibited from something, /it no doubt will happen'; 'Do not rely from something, / on a woman who gives to you her love, / because women's love is divided (to several men); // today she coquettes and chats to you, / but tomorrow her palms and wrists belong to somebody else'; 'Women are created from a crooked rib, and if you try to make them straight, you will break them, so enjoy them though they are crooked'; 'Ask the advice of women, and then act contrary to it, for therein lies blessing'.

[10] See my remarks in *Studia Orientalia* 64, cited above in note 6.

who is searching for his lost camels to ask God about their whereabouts, because it is He who has given him the camels in the first place, and it is He who has taken them from him (p. 125-126).

As has already been noted women are mostly in passive and secondary roles in the *Aḫbār*, and far from the active and cunning wives or women of *Ṭūṭī-nāma*, *Decamerone* and other European or Indo-Persian tales, as well as from the women of *Alf layla*. If, for example, we exclude the *ʿuḏrite* stories and sporadic verses in other anecdotes, we are left with few quotations of women's direct speech; women don't speak, they are spoken of.

From a purely impressionistic point of view it can be said that the stories where women have active roles – e.g. the Abū Nuwās short story (p. 158-165); the story, similar to the 18th story of *Ṭūṭī-nāma* (p.98-101), of how a married woman meets her lover whose friend meanwhile takes her place in disguise (p. 188-190); and the above cited stories of the wife extolling the merits of scorpions (p.121-122), and the wife of Baššār disguising herself as a prostitute (p. 180) – are more amusing and nearer to European literary taste.

Explicit statements about the character of women are not frequent in the *Aḫbār*; except for the above mentioned statement of them being less inclined to jealousy, and some misogynous maxims, we only find one or two passages (p. 95-96, 96-98) stating that women are innately faithless and easily seduced due to the weakness of their nature. In the anecdotes the mere seeing of other men is described as a temptation in face of which women usually yield: the importance of seeing as a cause of infidelity is emphasized by the compiler of the *Aḫbār*, who cites similar and even literally same anecdotes one after another, e.g. the anecdote of veiling woman's eyes instead of her face is quoted twice[11].

As we have seen, the anecdotes deal with types rather than with individuals, although the characters of the anecdotes are fairly often given the names of historical persons; here historical persons have

[11] See e.g. p. 93, 175, and cf. p. 94 *et passim*.

become representatives par excellence of this or that type, so that new anecdotes may freely be coined around these persons.

In each anecdote of the *Aḫbār* only one type of women is outlined, though often each anecdote may give the impression that *all* women belong to the particular type the anecdote is describing. Due to the piecemeal character of anecdotal literature contradictory statements can thus be found side by side.

In individual anecdotes the female characters are extremely flat, one-sided and over-simplified, as one anecdote exemplifies only one facet of one character, but when the anecdotes are considered as a whole, the characters begin to merge into more rounded, archetypal figures.