

Introduction

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Anyway, these words exist in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, and solutions must be sought for them [...]. If we challenge their authenticity, then our entire [corpus of] sacred sources will come into question. If we say they're pseudo-universal propositions [addressed only to one woman], then not only women but men and many other rulings based on them will be affected. If we accept them as they are, then we must resolve the consequences of their incongruity with our present society. What we can say is that there's a kind of absolute neglect regarding such ahadith. They aren't addressed seriously, so no serious solutions are found for them.² – A contemporary Iranian thinker on the narrations about women in *Nahj al-Balaghah* 'Women are deficient in intellect' is one of the most controversial Shi'i narrations today.

This and other unfavourable narrations about women attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib in *Nahj al-Balaghah* are particularly troubling in the Shi'i tradition since the Shi'i tradition treats Imam 'Ali as inerrant and as a paragon of justice and humanity. He is also put forward as a model of an ideal husband. These passages are also troubling since he was married to the Prophet's daughter, who is lauded in the Shi'i tradition as a perfect and inerrant woman; this led Annemarie Schimmel to remark that he 'ought to have had a more positive attitude' towards women.³

It goes without saying that the Qur'an includes both men and women in its discussions of humanity, and does not make negative generalizations about women; additionally, these narrations are difficult to accept today due to the mass participation of women in intellectual endeavours. Thus, these narrations seem to contradict both the received text as well as everyday experience. Nevertheless, there is strong resistance to questioning the authenticity of this material due to the sanctity surrounding *Nahj al-Balaghah*.

I will approach the – in Shi'i circles – often taboo question of the authenticity of this material in three ways. First, through a detailed analysis of the alternative textual sources for these passages and their chains of narration; this is because alternative sources are often cited as supporting evidence for the authenticity of material in *Nahj al-Balaghah*; however, an in-depth look at the alternative sources not only shows that they do not substantiate the authenticity of these sermons, but also introduces new

problems. While doing so, I will also explore the ‘middle ground’ solution that the sermon on women’s ‘deficiencies’ was addressed solely to ‘A’ishah (rather than to all women) due to her participation in the Battle of the Camel, and whether or not that is actually substantiated by the alternative sources. I will also explore the ethical problem which arises when attacking a female figure through her femininity. Third, I will engage in textual critique, and consider the possibility that the concept of the ‘deficiency’ of women actually dates back to antiquity – specifically, Aristotle.

Lastly, I will offer a comparative approach and explore how ideas on the nature and role of women in *Nahj al-Balaghah* compare with those in *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*, the oldest extant Shi’i text which is centred on Imam ‘Ali; my theory is that if the portrayals conflict, then perhaps the later material (i.e. *Nahj al-Balaghah*) which conforms to post-Prophetic cultural norms (i.e. the social values of the classical ‘Abbasid Empire) could have been attributed to Imam ‘Ali posthumously. Since I have never seen an analysis of gender in *Kitab Sulaym*, I suspect this approach may be unique. The use of both classical and contemporary methods is intended to offer a multi-dimensional and comprehensive insight into the question of the authenticity of these passages.

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² The contemporary Iranian thinker, Abdolkarim Soroush, on the narrations about women in *Nahj al-Balaghah*. Abdolkarim Soroush, in Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1999), 226. (She is transcribing from an audio recording.) Transliteration adjusted for consistency with this article. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181, 223.

³ Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum International, 2003), 54. She does, however, admit to the possibility that such statements are inauthentic (i.e. they were not actually said by ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib).

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