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The Portrayal of Women in Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays

The portrayal of women in *Nahj al-Balaghah* sends a death-knell to anyone arguing that Imam 'Ali viewed women in an equitable light – if, of course, these passages are taken as authentic. To shed more light on the question of Imam 'Ali's views of women, it is now time to examine *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays*. Since *Kitab Sulaym* is considered to be the earliest extant Shi'i text, it deserves special attention. Whether or not *Kitab Sulaym* is authentic in whole, in part, or even not at all; and whether or not *Kitab Sulaym* actually traces all the way back to the first century *hijri*, *Kitab Sulaym*, at the very least, reflects the social mores and worldview of pre-'Abbasid Shi'a, and therefore stands in contrast to most other Shi'i works, including *Nahj al-Balaghah*, which were compiled later.

A brief introduction to Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays

Kitab Sulaym consists of 91 narrations attributed to or about 'Ali ibn Abi Talib passed on through a disciple of his named Sulaym ibn Qays, said to have died while al-Hajjaj (d. 95 ah) was in power. While there is disagreement over whether Sulaym ibn Qays was the compiler's real name or a pseudonym, the content indicates the compiler was aligned with the Shi'i cause, was against the Umayyads, and was situated in the early period of Islam. The question of the authenticity of *Kitab Sulaym* is complex, with the possibility that different narrations (or even portions of single narrations) date to different eras. Hossein Modarressi feels that the core of *Kitab Sulaym* traces back to the early Umayyad era, with later insertions, revisions, and accretions; he is optimistic that the original text can be identified and recovered. Specifically, he notes that a good portion of the book can be established to date to the reign of Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik (r. 105-125 ah).[1]

He feels that the content itself is reflective of popular Shi'ism in the Umayyad period; as he puts it, 'It is a display of primitive, unsophisticated beliefs among the rank and file of the Shi'ites of Kufa during the late Umayyad period with clear residues of the usual Kaysani exaggerations on the virtues of the House of the Prophet. It also refers to the Umayyad positions on some of the matters discussed', and that that

‘[m]any such popular, unsophisticated Shi’ite lines of interpretation and belief were later transformed and developed by the Shi’ite rationalists of the fourth and fifth centuries.’2 Amir-Moezzi, on the other hand, favours the idea that *Kitab Sulaym* is essentially authentic, but that it is impossible to discern the original manuscript from the revisions and accretions.3

Robert Gleave, Patricia Crone, and Tamima Bayhom-Daou have each approached the question of the authenticity of *Kitab Sulaym* by analysing individual narrations; in fact, Robert Gleave suggests the evaluation of the entire book in said manner as a future project for the willing. Gleave argues that a narration in *Kitab Sulaym* which addresses *hadith* narration dates to the late 8th century/early 9th century (and perhaps could have been taken from al-Shafi’i),4 while Crone holds that a narration on Mu’awiyah’s efforts to spread false narrations dates between 762 and 780 – or, more specifically, to the time when the Shi’a were optimistic about the ‘Abbasid revolution and before they had realized that it would make their situation worse.5

Bayhom-Daou examines the same narration as Gleave and identifies it as pre-classical; she notes that the narration dates to a time when the Imam himself was seen as an answer to the problem between conflicting narrations, whereas by the time the Four Books were compiled, Shi’i scholars were dealing with the different problem of having conflicting narrations attributed to the Imams themselves.6

Regardless of precisely when the material in *Kitab Sulaym* originated, its earlier provenance is evident in tone of the book with respect to the discussion of women. In this regard, it is distinctly different from in *Nahj al-Balaghah* as well as some other later narrations, and is more similar to the style of narrations attributed to the Prophetic era. This is despite the fact that *Kitab Sulaym* addresses some of the same issues as *Nahj*, such as the tension between Imam ‘Ali and ‘A’ishah.

It also contains material that is distinctly and unequivocally Shi’i, and therefore contributes to the delineation of a unique Shi’i identity, including a uniquely Shi’i conception of gender roles. Primary themes in the book include the Saqifah (where Abu Bakr was selected as the first caliph), the killing of Fatimah al-Zahra’ by Abu Bakr and ‘Umar; the usurpation of Fadak from Fatimah al-Zahra’, and the opposition of the companions – including Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘A’ishah, and Hafsah – to Imam ‘Ali. A narration attributed to Imam al-Sadiq indicates that *Kitab Sulaym* also became understood to be a text that demarcated Shi’i identity.7

With respect to the portrayal of women in *Kitab Sulaym*, one its main features is inclusion. Both women and men are summoned for important discussions: the Prophet summons both the women and men of the tribe of ‘Abd al-Mutallib to hear his bequest (*hadith* 61);8 Imam al-Husayn specifically asks both women and men to oppose Mu’awiyah (*hadith* 26); and Mu’awiyah orders that false *ahadith* against Imam ‘Ali be taught to women and children (*hadith* 26). Nowhere is it suggested that women should remain in the house or be uneducated. When Fatimah al-Zahra’ dies, women cry copiously; no one suggests that their voices are shameful and should be silenced.9 Fatimah and ‘A’ishah are both in the vicinity during the Prophet’s funeral prayers, although ‘A’ishah does not participate due to divine

intervention (*hadith* 4).

Imam ‘Ali is described as the Imam of every male and female belier (*mu’min* and *mu’minah*), whereas the sermons in *Nahj al-Balaghah* distinguish between women and believers. Umm Ayman argues publicly with Abu Bakr in the mosque; this is in contrast to the exhortation that women’s views are weak, and that women should not leave the house. There is also an emphasis on the inclusion of Fatimah al-Zahra’ in sacred narrative – such as in the story of the *mubahilah* (*hadith* 11, 26) and *hadith al-kisa*’ (*hadith* 11) – and the wives of the Prophet are included in and aware of contemporaneous events as opposed to being silent, hidden, or invisible.

Safiyyah marries the Prophet of her own accord; ironically, her marriage is portrayed as one that frees her, instead of as a form of ownership, since her dowry was her freedom (*hadith* 55). This is in contrast to the wives of the later Imams, who are rarely mentioned, as well as the likening of marriage to slavery. While it is not the most flattering form of inclusion, the legitimacy of matrilineage is also alluded to in the frequent mention of ‘Umar’s ignoble grandmother (*hadith* 4, 48); this is in keeping with Bernheimer’s observation that matrilineage was considered of more import in the Prophet era.[10]

Despite the common portrayal of Fatimah al-Zahra’ as someone who neither saw nor seen by men, several narrations describe Fatimah al-Zahra’ as being in the same room as male companions, and some narrations about her are related by men, thus implying that they saw or at least heard her (*hadith* 1, 21, 48, 49, 61). Several narrations also speak of when she went on a mule with Imam ‘Ali to visit the houses of the companions to remind them of their allegiance to ‘Ali (*hadith* 4, 12).

Rather than sending her husband to speak on her behalf, Fatimah al-Zahra’ speaks up about Fadak and argues intelligently and convincingly with Abu Bakr and ‘Umar (*hadith* 14, 48); there is no question of her having ‘womanly views’.[11] Perhaps due to the early provenance of the text, there is less of an emphasis on *hijab* as the defining value for a woman.

The only mention of Fatimah al-Zahra’s clothing is an allusion to her *khimar* (*hadith* 4), a head-covering which was considered traditional for that era, in contrast to some portrayals today which focus extensively on her being covered and unseen, and describe her as wearing as many as eight layers of clothing (in the heat of Medina no less). Additionally, a narration specifically mentions the time before the wives of the Prophet (not women in general) were told to take on the *hijab*; this narration has the Prophet, ‘A’ishah, and Imam ‘Ali sleeping in one room and, out of need, sharing one blanket (with the Prophet in the middle) (*hadith* 36, 60).

A crucial barometer for the treatment of women in *Kitab Sulaym* is the portrayal of the animosity between ‘Ali and ‘A’ishah. In the interpretation that the sermon on ‘women’s deficiencies’ in *Nahj al-Balaghah* is directed at ‘A’ishah, ‘A’ishah is criticized through her femininity – through deficiencies in her essential nature and intellect, and because she left the house; while, at the same time, the other perpetrators of the civil war are not criticized for violating the Qur’an. Here, the portrayal is the opposite: Talha and

Zubayr are criticized for encouraging ‘A’ishah to leave her house and thereby to violate the Qur’an (*hadith* 29).

On the one hand, this removes a sense of agency from ‘A’ishah, since it implies she would not have gone without their urging; but on the other hand, it removes the gendered aspect of the condemnation of her and also holds the male perpetrators responsible. Additionally, this passage specifies that the command to stay at home applied only to the wives of the Prophet as opposed to to all women.

This is in keeping with an absence of gendered critiques in *Kitab Sulaym*. ‘A’ishah and Hafsah are criticized for their actions, but not for being deficient in intellect or menstruating. In fact, the only mention of menstruation is to say that people in a state of ritual impurity (*janabah*) or who are menstruating may not enter the Prophet’s mosque – except for the Prophet’s womenfolk (*hadith* 51). This portrayal differs from the discomfort with menstruation in the sermon on women’s deficiencies. While the narration from *Bukhari* asserts that the majority of the dwellers in Hell are women, the description of the dwellers of Hell here (*hadith* 7) is ungendered – and, given the number of male villains in the text, one gets the feeling that more men than women may be on their way to Hell.

Instead, an unusual feature of the portrayal of Imam ‘Ali in *Kitab Sulaym* is his use of childbirth as a metaphor. This adds legitimacy to (and sympathy for) the female experience. In one of these narrations, Imam ‘Ali gives the example of a woman wanting to give birth quickly; he says: ‘You have broken away from ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib like the breaking away of the head which parts from the body, like a woman giving birth who wants the child to leave her sooner and does not prevent a hand from touching it’ (*hadith* 12).

This example combines both the male and female experience (warfare and childbirth) as normative, and shows some empathy for the condition of women during childbirth. In the other, he provides a *du’a* to make childbirth go faster; this is done in the name of Maryam and is one of the few places in Shi’i *hadith* literature where she is actually invoked in an archetypal sense as a mother (*hadith* 88). Additionally, one of the presuppositions by Aristotle as well as commentators on the sermon on women’s deficiencies is that a woman is intellectually deficient so she will focus more on housework, which is her natural role; however, *Kitab Sulaym* describes Imam ‘Ali coming outside covered in flour because he was grinding flour at home (*hadith* 55).

The only misogyny in *Kitab Sulaym* is attributed not to Imam ‘Ali but rather to his opponents. For instance, ‘Umar is cited as saying ‘what do we have to do with the opinions of women’ after he attacks the house of Fatimah (*hadith* 4). It also says that Mu’awiyah ordered the Arabs to marry non–Arab women, but not to let Arab women to marry non–Arabs; and to disallow inheritance from leaving the Arabs, and not to give non–Arab women property or gifts. This is to keep money in the hands of the Arab tribes (*hadith* 23).[12]

While the intent may not have been to marginalize or restrict women, it nonetheless does that; and the idea that a woman should not marry outside of her culture is still prevalent today. Ironically, although the

inclusion of Mu'awiyah's directive is intended to discredit him, a narration is included in *al-Faqih* equating 'women' with 'fools' and explaining that the point of that is to indicate that it is abhorrent (*makruh*) to leave inheritance to women.13

In sum, the treatment of women in *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* is vastly different from that in *Nahj al-Balaghah*, even though both books are centred on Imam 'Ali and discuss similar themes. Both books are also internally self-consistent in how they portray women, which suggests that the material about women in each book comes from a specific era.

The portrayal of women in *Kitab Sulaym* is much closer to how the Prophetic era is envisioned – with women attending the Prophetic mosque with men, and without a stigma attached to women appearing in public. Unlike many of the narrations discussed in these chapters, there are no gendered attacks criticising women for being female or on the basis of their reproductive systems; instead, people, male and female, are criticized for going against *ahl al-bayt*.

While there is no guarantee that the content of *Kitab Sulaym* is authentic, because it traces to an earlier era, it should be seen as more reflective of the cultural norms of the Prophetic era, and reinforces the idea that more restrictive or misogynistic narrations are products of a later era. Unlike *Nahj al-Balaghah*, *Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays* provides a much more equitable and inclusive portrayal of women.

Summary of Narrations

Topic

Source

Implications

Notes

1. Hossein Modarressi, Tradition and Survival, 83-36.
2. Ibid., 85.
3. Robert Gleave, citing Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, 'Note bibliographique sur le Kitâb Sulaym b. Qays, le plus ancien ouvrage shi'ite existent', in M.A. Amir-Moezzi, M.M. Bar-Asher and S. Hopkins (eds), Le shî'isme Imamite quarante ans après. Hommages à Etan Kohlberg (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 33-48.
4. Robert Gleave, 'Early Shiite hermeneutics and the dating of Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays', in in Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, vol. 78, no. 1 (2015), 83–103.
5. Crone holds that this narration is obviously a piece of 'political satire', although it seems unlikely that it would have been perceived as such by classical Shi'i scholars given the sanctity associated with the transmission of hadith. Patricia Crone, 'Mawali and the Prophet's family: an early Shi'ite view', in M. Bernards and J. Nawas (eds.), Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 167-94.
6. Tamima Bayhoum-Dou, 'Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays revisited', in Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies LXXVIII, no. 1 (February 2015), 105-119.
7. 'If any of our Shi'a or those who love us do not have Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays, then they do not have anything of our matter [i.e. wilayah], and they do not know anything of our ways. It is the alphabet of the Shi'a, and a secret of the secrets of the family of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family.' al-Mirza al-Nuri, Mustadrak al-Wasa'il XVII, 298, no. 42 (21397). The late provenance of the narration makes it difficult to discern whether it really traces back to Imam al-Sadiq, but it does indicate that, at some point, this conception of Kitab Sulaym as definitively Shi'i was in circulation. In any case, Kitab Sulaym clearly situates itself against the Umayyads.
8. Because Kitab Sulaym is relatively short, narrations are given by number. Taken from Sulaym ibn Qays al-Hilali, Kitab

Sulaym ibn Qays al-Hilali, ed. M. Baqir al-Ansari al-Zanjani, 3 vols. (Qum: Nashr al-Hadi, 1415 ah).

9. In contrast to the description of women mourning publicly here, as well as in the account of Fatimah al-Zahra' mourning publicly and audibly for her father, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Muqarram, a contemporary scholar who wrote a commonly referenced work on the Karbala' narrative, refutes narrations saying that Um al-Banin, the mother of 'Abbas ibn 'Ali, publicly mourned her sons as well as al-Husayn at the Baqi' cemetery on the grounds that, due to her stature and her position as a wife of Imam 'Ali: 'She could not have said anything contradictory to the canon of the shari'ah which prohibits a woman from being exposed in any way to strangers either through prohibition or as a precaution so long as there was no extreme necessity for it. It goes without saying that when a woman mourns someone she has lost, she ought to sit in her house and fortify herself against being seen by strangers or her voice being heard by them as long as there was no urgency for it.' 'Abd al-Razzaq, Maqtal al-Husayn (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Islami, 1979), 336-340. (Translation taken from Yasin Jibouri, Maqtal al-Husayn: Martyrdom Epic of al-Husayn (n.p.: n.l.).) This is an example of projecting contemporary assumptions about ideals for women onto primary sources.

10. Theresa Bernheimer, The 'Alids: The First Family of Islam, 750-1200 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 37.

11. Fadak as a model for female activism is discussed in Rachel Kantz Feder, 'Fatima's Revolutionary Image in Fadak fi al-Ta'rikh (1955): The Inception of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's Activism', in British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies XLI, no. 1 (2014), 79-96.

12. In her analysis of this narration, Crone indicates that this is the mechanism where by 'elites turn themselves into [...] castes' and notes that many tribal Arabs did in fact refuse to marry their daughters to non-Arabs. Of course, this mechanism is dependent on the notion that identity and social belonging are transmitted patrilineally. That being said, it should be observed that some Shi'i laypeople today object to marrying sayyid girls to non-sayyid males, which results in the same phenomenon simply in reverse.

13. al-Saduq, al-Faqih IV, 226, no. 5534.

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