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Women are Deficient in Intellect

The sermon regarding women that has received the most attention in *Nahj al-Balaghah* is the sermon on the deficiencies of women.¹ Presented as '[An excerpt] from his speech after the Battle of the Camel, in condemnation of women', it reads:

O people! Women are deficient in faith, deficient in shares, and deficient in intellect (*inna al-nisa' nawaqis al-iman nawaqis al-huzuz nawaqis al-'uqul*). As for their deficiency in faith, it is their sitting back from ritual prayers and fasting in the days of their menstruation. And as for their deficiency in their intellects, it is because the testimony of two women is like the testimony of one man. As for their deficiency in shares, it is because their inheritance is half that of men. So beware the evils of women. Be on guard against the good ones among them, and do not obey them in good so that they do not desire evil.²

Reactions among Shi'i scholars with respect to this sermon have been multifold. Historically, commentators tended to accept these views as facts about the nature of women,³ as did the prominent modern Sunni reformer, Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), who wrote that 'it is a thing corroborated by the experience of centuries!' He describes the sermon as apt on the grounds that women's mental capacities are geared towards their primary responsibilities in child-rearing and domestic duties; his comments are a reminder that this way of thinking is not limited to Shi'ism.⁴

A common view is that these words were actually directed at 'A'ishah bint Abi Bakr, the instigator of the Battle of the Camel – which was the first major civil war among Muslims and resulted in tremendous loss of life – but out of respect for the fact that 'A'ishah was a widow of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib spoke to her in the plural ('women') rather than to her directly ('you'). This view is expressed in *Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah* by Ibn Abi al-Hadid, generally taken as the starting point for launching an investigation into *Nahj al-Balaghah*. He takes the statements about women's deficiencies at face value but then explains that they are directed at 'A'ishah who erred in what she did (at the Battle of the Camel).⁵ This view is reinforced by one of the alternative sources, *Tadhkirat al-Khawwas*, which says that the speech was directed at 'A'ishah. (Of course, that still leaves the question of whether *Tadhkirat al-*

Khawas, which was compiled significantly after *Nahj al-Balaghah*, should be accepted as a reliable source.).

This view, espoused by the prominent Shi'i scholar Naser Makarem Shirazi, is popular today, perhaps because it sidesteps the issue – that is, it neither necessitates rejecting the authenticity of the passage, nor does it necessitate that these statements about women be taken as truth. However, the fact remains that even if the quotation is addressed to 'A'ishah alone, it still reflects a very negative view of women; if a similar statement were addressed to an ethnic minority, it would not be accepted.^{[6](#)}

Additionally, even if these criticisms were only directed at 'A'ishah, that would still set a precedent of demonizing 'A'ishah for her gender. That is to say, rather than being criticised for leading a rebellion, she is being criticised for stepping out of her place as a woman, with the implication that other women should stay in line lest they end up like 'A'ishah. This is not dissimilar to a (presumably, spurious) narration in another book which denigrates 'A'ishah on the grounds that she menstruated (an attack which is both figuratively and literally 'below the belt'); that is, it attacks her via her femininity, a common tactic for intimidating women into leaving male space.^{[7](#)}

This brings up the greater issue of historical narrative – how history is told, and what morals are presented from the story. Traditionally, the main critique of 'A'ishah is that she disobeyed the Qur'anic verse telling the wives of the Prophet to stay in their homes (Q 33:32–33). However, firstly, this verse is directed solely at the wives of the Prophet and not women in general; in fact, women such as Zaynab bint 'Ali or Nusaybah are praised for their public stance during times of conflict. Secondly, over ten thousand men are reported to have joined 'A'ishah in the campaign, hence violating the Qur'anic commandments not to engage in sedition or killing, but similar criticisms are not levied against them.

The real issue is not that 'A'ishah left her home but, rather, what she did. Nonetheless, 'A'ishah is usually condemned for leaving her home. For this reason, it will be particularly interesting to see how 'A'ishah's rebellion is portrayed in *Kitab Sulaym*, and whether or not, in that work, Imam 'Ali condemns her as a woman, or as a rebel.

This historical narrative, combined with this sermon, is what the contemporary scholar Naser Makarem Shirazi uses to justify an ideology of gender which restricts women:

Imam 'Ali wished to speak of her and her actions in an indirect manner to open the eyes of the people and therefore the method which he chose was to explain the religious rulings which are specific to women, and the rulings highlighting the 'limitations' and 'restrictions' in the rights and privileges of women and men, and to show us that they are not equal – in all areas of life – and that this too is for a reason. Through this, he wanted to show the people that 'A'ishah is the same as other women in these certain issues and to make them question themselves as to why they should have followed her and listened to her advice (over that of Allah and the Noble Prophet).^{[8](#)}

While he mentions 'limitations' and 'restrictions' on both women and men, no limitations or restrictions for

men are outlined in this sermon; therefore, 'equal' is a euphemism. Ironically, the points that Makarem Shirazi brings up here are in opposition to the efforts of contemporary Shi'i apologists to 'prove' that Islam is not unfair or oppressive to women; for instance, today, it is common to argue that the differences between men and women in giving testimony or receiving inheritance are not due to any innate difference in worth or intellectual capacity between men and women. Even more ironically, Makarem Shirazi begins his discussion with the insistence that these words apply only to 'A'ishah, but concludes by explaining that they really should apply to all women because all women suffer from these deficiencies!

The remaining view is that these sermons are inauthentic on the basis that they conflict with the Qur'anic treatment of women. Ayatollah Ishaq Fayyad (a *marja'* living in al-Najaf al-Ashraf) and Ayatollah Fadlallah have expressed this view, and it has been attributed to Ayatollah Sane'i as well.⁹ Despite his adoption of a theological theory centring on inherent spiritual differences between the female and male, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli also implies that he doubts the authenticity of this sermon by saying that these words are beneath Imam 'Ali – even if they were only directed at one woman – and that the best thing to say about the authenticity of the sermon is 'I don't know'.¹⁰ It has also been suggested that this sermon was fabricated to defame Fatimah al-Zahra' (the wife of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib) in order to reduce her claim to Fadak, a conflict which is seen as symbolizing whether Abu Bakr or 'Ali ibn Abi Talib had the right to succeed the Prophet as caliph.

This view is not without merit since the sermon itself refers to a woman's lesser standing in receiving inheritance and offering testimony, both of which were pivotal issues regarding Fadak, in that Abu Bakr claimed that prophets did not leave inheritance, and that one female witness (namely, Umm Ayman) was insufficient because the Qur'an requires one male or two female witnesses.¹¹ Mahdi Mehrizi, an Iranian scholar who has written extensively on the subject of women and Shi'i *ahadith*, observes that this narration conflicts with the Qur'an and with other *ahadith*, including *ahadith* which refer to the '*aql*' of women.¹²

It has also been suggested that these statements should be taken as socially contextualized, in that girls in that era tended to marry quite young (as young as nine years old), and at an age before they were intellectually mature enough to advise their husbands; or that women in general tended to be denied education opportunities and hence lacked opportunities for intellectual growth. However, these interpretations are incompatible with the perception of Imam 'Ali as a man whose wisdom and words transcended his era, as well as the fact that his wife and daughter were known for being knowledgeable. Lastly, in her book on the view of women in Shi'i sources, Rawand Osman also questions how this sermon fits in with the Qur'an and the historical actions of the women from the household of the Prophet.¹³

Five alternative texts are identified in secondary literature as verifying this sermon:

1. *Tadhkirat al-Khawwas* by Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256/1257 ce, Hanafi)

2. *Qut al-Qulub* by Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 996 ce, Sufi Shafi'i)

3. *al-Kafi* by Shaykh al-Kulayni (d. 941 ce, Shi'i)

4. *al-Amali* by Shaykh al-Saduq (d. 991 ce, Shi'i)

5. *al-Ikhtisas* by Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022 ce, Shi'i) [14](#)

Of these works, the strongest – according to modern Shi'i scholarship – would be *al-Kafi*; not only is it the most highly regarded *hadith* collection, but it is also the earliest source listed. The next strongest sources would be *al-Amali* and *al-Ikhtisas*, both of which are *hadith* collections by well-known Shi'i scholars in roughly the same era. The least reliable would be *Qut al-Qulub* and *Tadhkirat al-Khawas*, since – like *Nahj al-Balaghah* – they do not include chains of narration or sources, and are not by Shi'i scholars; *Tadhkirat al-Khawas* is particularly weak, given the centuries elapsed between it and *Nahj al-Balaghah*.

Al-Kafi, therefore, is the most logical source to start with. However, an investigation into *al-Kafi* reveals only the last sentence of the sermon:

From a group of our companions, from Ahmad ibn Abi 'Abd Allah, from whoever related it, from al-Husayn ibn al-Mukhtar, from Abi 'Abd Allah, peace be upon him: 'The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, said, "Beware the evils of women, and be on guard from them. And if they command you to good, then oppose them, so that they may not desire evil from you."'[15](#)

While this sentence is, admittedly, not the most favourable towards women, it does not explicate the intellectual and spiritual deficiencies of women in the same way that the sermon does. This narration is also questionable from a *rijali* (biographical) standpoint, in that it has a gap in its chain of narration. Therefore, to say this sermon is substantiated by *al-Kafi* is misleading.[16](#)

The next two sources, *al-Amali* and *al-Ikhtisas*, contain texts that are essentially identical to the excerpt from *al-Kafi*, but with slightly different chains of narration. However, the context of this narration is different. In this narration, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib is giving ethical advice, such as not being suspicious of others, and there is no indication that it is connected with the Battle of the Camel. This, therefore, raises a question as to whether the sentiments in the sermon can really be said to have been directed at 'A'ishah at the Battle of the Camel. The narration concludes with him saying:

[...] And it is upon you to [associate with] sincere brothers, and increase your benefit from them, for they are a resource in ease and a shield in misfortune. And, in your speech, consult those who fear Allah, and love your brothers according to their amount of piety, and beware of the evils of women, and be on guard from the good among them. If they command you to good, then disobey them so that they may not make you desire evil.[17](#)

Like in *al-Kafi*, only the last sentence of the sermon is mentioned. However, a key point is the way in

which ‘brothers’ are discussed as a group separate from ‘women’. While the Qur’an does not separate female from male believers, and instead frequently refers to them together (for instance, as *al-mu’minun wa al-mu’minat*, lit. ‘the male believers and female believers’), this separation implies that men are normative in humanity, and women are exceptions. As in *al-Kafi*, there are gaps in the chain of narration in both of these sources; additionally, two of the narrators are considered questionable. One is Abu Jarud, the founder of Zaydi–Jarudi Shi’ism – that is to say, someone who defected from the Imams and hence might be considered suspect from a Twelver Shi’i view, albeit his narrations are not necessarily rejected.¹⁸

The other is Muhammad ibn Sinan, considered by some to be among the *ghulat* (heterodox extremists); this would be in line with an association noticed between misogynistic narrations and some narrators described as being among the *ghulat*.¹⁹ In any case, given its different context, this narration is insufficient to reinforce the sermon in *Nahj al-Balaghah*.²⁰

This exhausts the Shi’i sources, and leads to the Sunni sources. While Sunni sources can be admissible as a valid source of narrations in Shi’i scholarship, the fact remains that Sunni and Shi’i scholars have different standards for the acceptability of narrators, and many Sunni narrators are not accepted in the Shi’i tradition, and vice versa. Additionally, the possibility that this sermon may have been fabricated for polemical reasons also makes a non-Shi’i transmission of this sermon insufficient from a Shi’i perspective.

In any case, the first Sunni source is *Qut al-Qulub*, which contains a number of misogynistic and gynophobic statements (including an exegesis equating ‘fools’ (*sufaha*) with ‘women and children’.²¹ (The equation of ‘fools’ with ‘women’ is also mentioned in *al-Faqih*, a point which will be revisited later.)²² With respect to this sermon, it contains this passage:

And in the advice of Luqman to his son: ‘O my son, beware the evil woman, for she will make you old before you grow old; and beware the evils of women, for they do not call to good,’ and he was on guard from the good ones among them.²³

Clearly, this passage is even less substantial in its support for the sermon. Firstly, it also only contains the last sentence; secondly, it also does not appear in the context of the Battle of the Camel; and, lastly, it is not even attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib! In fact, the mention of *Qut al-Qulub* as a supporting reference for the sermon is quite a stretch (albeit one which is only discovered when one actually opens up *Qut al-Qulub* to see what it says). Additionally, this statement contains neither a source nor a chain of narration – particularly important since it is a non-Shi’i text – and so it can be set aside.

The final source is *Tadhkirat al-Khawwas*. Unlike the previous four sources, this work actually does contain the full text of the sermon (with some slight differences in wording), and is attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib at the Battle of the Camel. However, accepting *Tadhkirat al-Khawwas* as a supporting source is also problematic since, like the above, it contains neither sources nor a chain of narration; the excerpt is

simply introduced by 'biographical scholars have said (*qala 'ulama' al-siyar*)', and *sirah* is a known area of *hadith* fabrication. Additionally, because it was compiled roughly three centuries after *Nahj al-Balaghah* (and six centuries after 'Ali ibn Abi Talib), it cannot verify whether this sermon was present in earlier sources.

In short, while five sources are traditionally listed as supporting this sermon, a deeper examination of these sources shows that they do not actually lend credence to the authenticity of the sermon or locate it at the Battle of the Camel. None are considered authentic via the methodology of traditional *hadith* analysis, and only one actually contains the 'meat' of the sermon which is the discussion of the deficiencies of women. Although, as Makarem Shirazi mentions, it is not outside the realm of possibility for 'Ali ibn Abi Talib to have said the same thing more than once, that then makes it difficult to argue that these words were addressed specifically to 'A'ishah.

There is, however, one source that is *not* traditionally mentioned, and that is *Sahih al-Bukhari*, in which essentially the same statement is ascribed to the Prophet:

Once Allah's Apostle, peace and blessings be upon him, went out to the musalla for 'Id al-Adha or 'Id al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, 'O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire are you (women).'

They asked, 'Why is it so, O Allah's Apostle?'

He replied, 'You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you.'

The women asked, 'O Allah's Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?'

He said, 'Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?'

They replied in the affirmative.

He said, 'This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Is it not true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?' The women replied in the affirmative.

He said, 'This is the deficiency in her religion.'^{[24](#)}

Since *Sahih al-Bukhari* is not considered a source of Shi'i hadith, there is no need to consider whether or not this narration should be taken as authentic within the Shi'i tradition. At first glance, the attribution of an essentially identical statement to the Prophet, albeit in a different circumstances, would seem to bolster the possibility of the authenticity of the sermon. However, it also raises a new problem, in that it suggests an entirely new origin for these sentiments.^{[25](#)}

The Aristotelian connection

This leads to a deeper examination of the text of the tradition, and a surprising and almost entirely neglected concordance between this (and other) selections of *Nahj al-Balaghah* with quotations from Aristotle, to the degree that if one were to publish the quotations from Aristotle and put the name of Imam 'Ali on them, they would probably be accepted at first glance. The first idea that emerges is the concept of the 'deficiency' of women (*nawaqis* literally meaning 'deficient'). The idea that a woman is deficient, or is an incomplete man, traces back to ancient Greece, in that Aristotle held that women were incomplete copies of men and were deficient in two main ways: their reproductive physiology and their intellectual faculty.

Aristotle's view of the female as a 'mutilated male' parallels a description of Bilqis found in *Tafsir al-Qummi*, saying that Bilqis could not have been given 'of every thing' (Q 27:23) because she lacked a male organ and a beard.^{[26](#)} (This identification of women with eunuchs and pre-pubescent boys, and the implication that women, eunuchs, and pre-pubescent boys are inferior to men and hence should not be given authority, is also found in another saying in *Nahj al-Balaghah*.)^{[27](#)} Hence, women are closer to animals. Aristotle maintained that because men are naturally superior to women in terms of intellect, men are the rulers and women are the ruled.^{[28](#)} He elaborates on this in his *Politics*:

Hence there are by nature various classes of rulers and ruled. For the free rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in a different way. And all possess the various parts of the soul, but possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an undeveloped form. [...] [T]he temperance of a woman and that of a man are not the same, nor are their courage and justice, as Socrates thought, but the one is the courage of command, and the other that of subordination, and the case is similar with the other virtues. [...] [A]s the poet said of woman: 'Silence gives grace to woman' – though that is not the case likewise with a man.^{[29](#)}

The tacit comparison between women and slaves here resembles an equivalency between marriage and slavery for women which underpins classical Islamic perceptions of marriage.^{[30](#)} In this quotation, it is also of note that Aristotle treats the woman as an exception to the human norm rather than as part of the human norm (a trend which even continues in much of contemporary Islamic thought), and the mention of woman's 'courage' calls to mind a statement in *Nahj al-Balaghah* that courage is a virtue for men and a defect for women;^{[31](#)} another quotation attributed to Imam 'Ali says that a woman's image is on her face, but a man's in his speech.^{[32](#)}

Of course, such a description of women does not take into account the strict social restrictions on women (in both ancient Greece as well as Islamic Mesopotamia) that kept them cloistered inside, and socially and financially dependent, giving the average woman no recourse for survival but jealousy, scolding, and tears. Since ancient Greek thought is considered to have heavily influenced the

development of the first few centuries of Islamic thought, and *Nahj al-Balaghah* was not compiled until the eleventh century ce, it is entirely possible that beliefs of ancient Greek origin could have been ascribed to the Prophet or ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, particularly since it is generally felt today that Byzantine and Mesopotamian cultural restrictions on women were imported into classical Islamic culture and were not present in the Islamic community during the time of the Prophet.³³ The fact that, as will be seen, comparable ideas are not found in the earlier text, *Kitab Sulaym*, lends credence to this idea.³⁴

In discussing Aristotle’s view of women, Lynda Lange cites a seventeenth century Frenchman who says:

Aristotle [...] pretends that women are but monsters [...]. If a woman (how learned soever she might be) had wrote as much of men, she would have lost all her credit; and men would have imagined it sufficient to have refuted such a foppery by answering that it must be a woman, or a fool, that had said so.³⁵

Although dealing with entirely different traditions (ancient Greek and Christian European), Lange’s observations summarize the entire problem of saying the sermon is directed to ‘A’ishah: if such things were said about men – or any other group – they would never be accepted.

Aristotle, Nahj al-Balaghah, and contemporary Shi’i ideologies of gender

It should be emphasised that the question of the authenticity of this sermon is not a theoretical or historical issue. Instead, these ideas persist in dominant views of women among contemporary Shi’is. Even in translation, Aristotle’s description of women strongly resembles descriptions of women by some twentieth-century Shi’i scholars who argue that because a man is more spiritually, ethically, and intellectually complete than a woman, men must be in authority over women at all times. (Of course this is not the only contemporary Shi’i view on gender; however, it is taken as ‘orthodox’ in many circles.). The interested reader is invited to pause and take a moment to guess which words are Aristotle’s, and which belong to twentieth century Shi’i scholars, and to reflect on how this exercise indicates the sharp relevance of these concepts to the Shi’i experience here and now. (The very interested reader is invited to consult the endnotes to discover which quotations are from antiquity and which from the modern era.)

a) For man’s nature is the most complete, so that these dispositions too are more evident in humans. Hence a wife is more compassionate than a husband and more given to tears, but also more jealous and complaining and more apt to scold and fight. The female is also more dispirited and despondent than the male, more shameless and lying, is readier to deceive and has a longer memory; furthermore she is more wakeful, more afraid of action, and in general is less inclined to move than the male, and takes less nourishment. The male on the other hand, as we have said, is a readier ally and is braver than the female [...].³⁶

b) The feelings of woman are aroused quicker than a man’s. Her sentiments are excited sooner than those of man; that is, a woman, in matters with which she is involved or of which she is afraid, reacts

sooner and with more acuteness just as she feels, while a man is more cool headed [...]. In activities based on reasoning, and in abstruse intellectual problems, woman cannot equal man, but in literature, painting and all matters that are related to aesthetics, she is not behind man. Man has more ability to keep a secret than woman, and he keeps unpleasant private matters to himself better than a woman [...]. Woman is more soft-hearted, and instantly resorts to weeping, and occasionally to fainting.[37](#)

c) Men have much greater judicious prudence than women, and consequently they are much stronger and braver and more capable of performing strenuous tasks requiring intrepidity and forbearance, while women's life is dominated by feelings [...]. 'Men are the maintainers of women' is not confined to husbands [...]; rather, it gives authority to the men, as a group, over the whole group of women, in the common affairs which affect lives of both sexes on the whole. The general social aspects which are related to man's excellence as, for example, rulership and judiciary, are the things on which a society depends for its continuance. It is because of the prudence and judiciousness which are found in men in a higher degree than in women. Likewise, fighting and defence depend on strength and far-reaching strategic planning. In such affairs men have authority over women.

d) As far as the broad issues and general social aspects – like rulership, judiciary and war – are concerned, they have to be controlled by intellect, free from the influence of emotions and feelings. Thus they have to be entrusted not to women but to men who are governed more by intellectual power than emotional feelings.[38](#)

e) [As for woman] because of her lack of rationality and her deficiency in organization and her inability to get to the level of men, by-and-large Islam does not allow her to be appointed as a judge or to give her the guardianship over her children even in case of the death of the father. So, how can it be possible for her to be allowed to guard the interests of the umma and whatever is related to such an overwhelming task?[39](#)

From these passages – four of which come from twentieth-century Shi'i thinkers and only one of which comes from Aristotle – it is clear that the concept of the 'deficiency' of woman as well as the sense of a woman being ethically weaker continues to have a far-reaching impact on Shi'i thought.

Textual analysis continued: menstruation and evil

The second issue of note is the negativity associated with menstruation. A discussion of perceptions of menstruation in the Shi'i tradition, as in the Sunni tradition, is complex; suffice it to say here that there is, at least, a logical problem, in that menstruating women do not actually fast less since they are expected to make up missed fasts during the year. Additionally, it is hardly fair to criticize women for a natural process.

It goes without saying that uneasiness with menstruation predates Islam, and it is quite possible that some ancient attitudes towards menstruation influenced the discussion of it among Muslims. Even in the

twentieth century, menstruation was still mentioned as a 'biological' and 'scientific' reason for the need for male authority;⁴⁰ similarly, in his commentary on his sermon, Makarem Shirazi explains that 'during the time of their menstruation, they enter into an almost-ill period in which they require rest and are not in a position to engage in acts of worship.'

Lastly, there is the characterization of women as evil, which recurs three other times in *Nahj al-Balaghah* – once in another sermon (to be discussed in the next section), and in the sayings 'a woman is a scorpion whose grip is sweet' and 'a woman is evil entirely, and the worst evil in her is that one cannot do without her.'⁴¹ The narrations equating woman with evil are inconsistent with another saying in *Nahj al-Balaghah* which says that 'the doer of evil is worse than evil itself' (saying 32), which separates the person from evil.

The portrayal of woman as evil is not found in the Qur'an, and Sayyid Fadlallah politely says that this narration is irreconcilable with the Qur'an unless another meaning is intended.⁴² The perception of woman as evil dates back to antiquity, including Judaeo-Christian and Sunni perceptions of Eve, as well as in the trope of demon-goddesses and evil seductresses – mythologies which persist even in today's popular literature. The image of woman as a devourer of man also plays on a primal (male) fear, and the imagery of a scorpion-goddess also dates back to ancient mythologies; whether or not Imam 'Ali actually said these things, he did not invent them.

It would seem unlikely that these statements would issue forth from Imam 'Ali given the favourable reports of domestic harmony in his marriage to Fatimah al-Zahra'.⁴³ While some scholars would maintain that Fatimah al-Zahra' was an exception to womanhood, and that that these statements apply to 'ordinary' women (perhaps, those who menstruate), Mahdi Mehrizi notes that the Qur'an itself presents the Virgin Mary and Asiyah as 'examples for the believers' and not as 'exceptions'.⁴⁴

This sermon can be read in tandem with another sermon in *Nahj al-Balaghah* which offers the notion of 'womanly views'; unlike the above, here, the textual evidence supports the view that it is directed at 'A'ishah.

As regards a certain woman, she is in the grip of womanly views, and malice is boiling in her bosom like the furnace of the blacksmith. If she were called upon to deal with others as she is dealing with me she would not have done it. Even hereafter she will be allowed her original respect, while [her] reckoning is an obligation on Allah [...].⁴⁵

As above, directing these insults to 'A'ishah does not change the fact that they are demeaning to other women, and are along the same lines as an ethnic slur. While women may suffer particularly from the stereotype of harbouring malice, 'A'ishah is hardly the only person to have rode out to war harbouring malice. The alternative sources in this case neither provide additional information nor pre-date *Nahj al-Balaghah*; some are copied from *Nahj al-Balaghah* itself, and one is narrated from a drunkard who was reputed to narrate *hadith* while imbibing. Therefore, they cannot lend support to the presence of this text

in earlier sources.[46](#)

Should the sermon on women's 'deficiencies' really be looked at as three separate passages?

Up until now, there has been a tacit assumption that this sermon should be treated as one whole, originating from one source, and which is either authentic or inauthentic as a whole. However, the presence of snippets of it in other sources suggests that it in fact may be an amalgamation of three different pieces. This idea is reinforced by the differing style between the three pieces. The sermon can be broken up as follows:

- a) **The eloquent statement:** 'O people! Women are deficient in faith, deficient in shares, and deficient in intellect.'
- b) **The gloss:** 'As for their deficiency in faith, it is their sitting back from ritual prayers and fasting in the days of their menstruation. As for their deficiency in shares, it is because their inheritance is half that of men. And as for their deficiency in intellect, it is because the testimony of two women is like the testimony of one man.'
- c) **The exhortation:** 'So beware the evils of women. Be on guard against the good ones among them and do not obey them in good so that they do not desire evil.'

Despite the fact that the phrase 'women are deficient in faith, deficient in shares, and deficient in intellect' may be unpleasant to some people, language-wise, it is eloquent, succinct, and powerful; no doubt this is why Sharif al-Radi selected this line. As discussed above, it may have resulted from the attribution of ancient ideas to Imam 'Ali; the attribution of the sayings of wise people to the Prophet or Imams is a known cause of *hadith* fabrication.[47](#) The second part of the sermon comes across as an explanatory gloss. Often, in *hadith*, explanatory glosses by transmitters were mistakenly added to *hadiths* as part of the text (this is referred to as a *hadith* being *mudraj*); although, in this case, it could have been taken from *Bukhari* as well.[48](#) Not only is the style of this section different, in that it lacks the eloquence and force of the first sentence, but it also is easy to challenge logically. Then, the sermon concludes with the third part – the exhortation – which appears as a separate narration attributed to various people in different circumstances.[49](#)

Needless to say, the likelihood that this passage was constructed of separate parts, each of which appears in different books attributed to various people at various times, lends further support to the view that these words were not actually said to 'A'ishah at the Battle of the Camel, or even by Imam 'Ali at all.

Summary of Narrations

Topic

Sources

Implications

Notes

- [1.](#) This sermon is frequently numbered as Sermon 80, although differences in numbering appear in different editions.
- [2.](#) My translation, aimed at a literal rendition of the passage. Some of the translations in this article from Nahj al-Balaghah are my own, while others are taken or adapted from the widely circulated English translation Peak of Eloquence, translated by Askari Jafery ([Bombay]: Islamic Seminary for World Shia Muslim Organisation, 1978).
- [3.](#) In Surat al-Mar'ah fi al-Turath al-Shi'i, Muhammad al-Khabbaz cites the following examples: 'Ali ibn Zayd al-Bayhaqi Farid al-Khurasani says in Ma'arij Nahj al-Balaghah, 'The intellects of women are intellects which are overcome by greed, desire, and fear'; al-Shaykh al-Mirza Habib al-Hashimi al-Khu'i says in his Manhij al-Bara'ah fi Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah 'As for categorizing their intellects with "the intellects of women", it is because they have the shared qualities of shortcoming and deficiency, and a paucity of understanding regarding the commonweal specifically with respect to civil administration and warfare'; al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi says in Tawdih Nahj al-Balaghah, 'The weakness of the intellectual faculties of women established in 'ilm al-hadith; and she is emotional and cannot be depended on for important/great matters [...]. Allah the Exalted has created the woman for domestic tasks [...] and therefore he has placed in her strong emotions so that she will care for her house and her children, and with this, her intellectual power decreases'. Muhammad Khabbaz, Surat al-Mar'ah fi al-Turath al-Shi'i (Beirut: al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2009), 79–100.
- [4.](#) Muhammad 'Abduh, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah I, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 129.
- [5.](#) Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah VI, 20 vols. (n.p.: Dar al-Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 214.
- [6.](#) Osman notes the view that says it was aimed at 'A'ishah, and suggests that could have been part of a time that had 'anti-woman sentiments' since Sunni narrations condemning women's political leadership also emerged at a similar time, although that presupposes that the passage in Nahj actually dates to the era of Imam 'Ali. Fatima Mernissi suggests that the Sunni narration condemning female leadership emerged due to the fact that from 629–632, there were various claimants to the Sassanid throne, including two women. Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. M. Lakeland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1991), 50; Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Imami Shi'i Islam* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 157–158.
- [7.](#) The section in Bihar reads: 'Maryam was batul, and Fatimah is batul. Al-Batul is one who does not see redness ever – that is, she does not menstruate, for menstruation is disliked (makruh) among the daughters of the prophets. [...] The Prophet said: 'O 'A'ishah, O Hamra' [the Red], Fatimah is not like human women – she does not get ill as they get ill.' Using 'Hamra' [the Red] in this manner is a way of turning around the nickname 'Humayrah', often treated as a flattering nickname given to her. Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar al-Jami'ah li-Durar Akhbar al-A'immat al-Athar XLIII, 110 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Wafa', 1983), 15, no. 13. This is particularly relevant given the demonization of menstruation in this sermon.
- [8.](#) Nasir Makarem Shirazi, *The "Deficiencies" of Women* [a partial translation of his extensive commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah], trans. S. Bhimi ([Canada]: Islamic Publishing House, 2012), 3.
- [9.](#) Ayatollah Fayyad expressed this view privately in a discussion with a Shi'i scholar in London on the grounds that this statement contradicts the Qur'an.
- [10.](#) 'Abd Allah Javadi Amoli, Tafsir-e Tasnim XI, 34 vol. (Tehran: Asra', 2014), 294–5. Special thanks to Shaikh Mohammed Ali Ismail for pointing this out.
- [11.](#) See discussion of this in Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi & Karim Douglas Crow, *Facing One Qiblah: Legal and Doctrinal Aspects of Sunni and Shi'ah Muslims* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 2005), 47. Abu Bakr also rejected Imam 'Ali as a witness on the grounds that he was married to Fatimah.
- [12.](#) Mahdi Mehrizi, 'Ta'ammoli dar Ahadith-e Nuqsan-e 'Aql-e Zanan', in 'Ulum-e Hadith LXXXI, 81–99.
- [13.](#) Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna*, 158–162. I was once told privately by an Iranian of the older generation that Ayatollah Motahhari held this view but that it was posthumously removed from his work.
- [14.](#) 'Abd al-Zahra' al-Khatib, Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah wa Asaniduhu II, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa', 1985), 86–97. Al-Khatib's work is considered one of the standard works today for sourcing Nahj al-Balaghah. Additionally, Makarem Shirazi lists several others, but the texts he lists do not contain any of the passages from the actual sermon and only contain supplementary material, such as a letter from 'Ali ibn Abi Talib to 'A'ishah asking her why she performed jihad as a woman.

- [15.](#) al-Kulayni, al-Kafi V, 517, no. 5.
- [16.](#) 'Allamah al-Majlisi, Mir'at al-'Uqul XX, 334, no. 5.
- [17.](#) Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (al-Shaykh al-Saduq), al-Amali (Qum: Markaz al-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr, 1417 AH), 380, no. 8; Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn al-Nu'man al-Baghdadi al-Mufid, al-Ikhtisas, ed. 'Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin, n.d.), 226.
- [18.](#) Hossein Modarressi, Tradition and Survival, 121–125.
- [19.](#) al-Tustari cites al-Tusi as saying that his narrations are confused and contain ghuluw. However, the tendency in modern scholarship is to accept his narrations. Muhammad Taqi al-Tustari, Qamus al-Rijal IX, 12 vols. (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin, 1419 AH), no. 306 (entry 6807). He is also described as 'very weak' in Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Ardabili, Jami' al-Ruwat II, 2 vols. (Qum: Maktabat Ayatullah al-Mar'ashi al-Najafi, 1403 AH), 124.
- [20.](#) The chain of narration in al-Amali (50th session) is: [unspecified] from Muhammad ibn al-Husayn ibn Abi al-Khattab, from Muhammad ibn Sinan, from Abu al-Jarud, from Abu Ja'far al-Baqir, from his father, from his grandfather, the Commander of the Faithful. Muhammad ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (al-Shaykh al-Saduq), al-Amali, 380 no. 8
The chain of narration in al-Ikhtisas is: Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, from Muhammad ibn Sinan, from some men (ba'd rijalihi), from Abu Jarud, narrating without links (yarfa'uhu) from the Commander of the Faithful. Muhammad ibn Nu'man al-'Akbari al-Baghdadi al-Mufid, al-Ikhtisas, ed. 'Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin, n.d.). Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn al-Nu'man al-Baghdadi al-Mufid, al-Ikhtisas, 226.
- [21.](#) Abu Talib al-Makki, Qut al-Qulub II, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Ilmiyyah, 1997), 424.
- [22.](#) Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (al-Shaykh al-Saduq), Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih IV, 4 vols. (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin fi al-Hawzah al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 226, no. 5534.
- [23.](#) Abu Talib al-Makki, Qut al-Qulub II, 400.
- [24.](#) Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari II (n.p.: Dar al-Fikr li-al-Taba'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawdi', 1981/1401 AH), book 24, no. 541. This idea recurs in other parts of Bukhari as well. One of my former students, Mohsan Mear, has argued that in all of the Sunni recensions of this narration, the narrators should be considered as inauthentic as per Sunni rijal works.
- [25.](#) A similar phenomenon is found in an infamous narration in which men are instructed not to let their daughters learn how to read, in that it is attributed through different chains to both 'A'ishah as well as the Imams. (This is despite the fact that both 'A'ishah and many women in the Imams' households were learned.)
- [26.](#) 'The female is, as it were, a mutilated male'. Aristotle, Generation of Animals, trans. A. L. Peck [Greek and English] (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library & Harvard University Press, 1942), 175 (Book II, section 3). This translation uses the phrase 'deformed male', although 'mutilated male' is commonly used in literature debating the ideological ramifications of this sentence. While Aristotle's erroneous descriptions of the physical inferiority of women (such as women possessing fewer teeth or a smaller brain) are taken in conjunction with the rest of his worldview to imply that he was attempting to provide a biological basis for male domination – as, indeed, is done in the some contemporary Shi'i gender ideology.
The opposing view should also be noted, in that Robert Mayhew in The Female in Aristotle's Biology. Reason or Rationalization argues that Aristotle was not ideologically motivated and that feminist critiques of Aristotle are not loyal to what Aristotle actually wrote. Paul Schollmeier offers a defence of Aristotle's view, and suggests that some of Aristotle's views could be construed as 'revolutionary' or gender egalitarian, albeit, at the same time, he concedes that 'Aristotle does argue that men and women by nature have different psychologies, and even that men are psychologically superior to women'. Paul Schollmeier, 'Aristotle and Women: Household and Political Roles', in Polis XX no. 1–2 (2003), 22–42. However, in this case, the use of it in the narration is similar to that by Aristotle, regardless of what he intended – that is, the female is reproductively imperfect compared to the male. The narration about Bilqis is in al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar XIV, 110, no. 3 (citing Tafsir 'Ali ibn Ibrahim).
- [27.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, saying number 102: 'Shortly a time will come for people when high positions will be given only to those who defame others, when vicious people will be regarded as witty and the just will be regarded as weak. People will regard charity as a loss, consideration for kinship as an obligation, and worship grounds for claiming greatness among others. At this time, authority will be exercised through the counsel of women, the posting of young boys in high positions

and the running of the administration by eunuchs.’

This description could refer to the harem culture of the ‘Abassids, with some women exerting authority in a behind-the-scenes manner and the employment of eunuchs. Otherwise, even today, neither the counsel of women nor eunuchs is politically prevalent in the Muslim world, although dire predictions such as this are sometimes used in sermons about the evils of the end of time to indicate why women should not have authority.

[28.](#) In discussing Aristotle’s work, Nicholas Smith specifically notes Aristotle’s description of women as ‘alogical’ and as inherently psychologically different from men due to their different role (what would be described in contemporary Shi’i terminology as ‘separate-but-equal’). In his discussion of Aristotle, he mentions that women are seen as having deliberative intellect over household and procreative matters but not political matters; this is similar to ‘Abduh’s view that women are understood to have been granted by nature the intellectual capacity necessary to carry out domestic tasks. ‘Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women’, in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* II, no. 4 (October 1983), 467–478. Maryanne Cline Horowitz holds that Aristotle’s view of the inferiority of female human nature led to many of the historical Western views of the inferiority of womankind and the subordination of women to men. Maryanne Cline Horowitz, ‘Aristotle and Woman’, in *Journal of the History of Biology* IX, no. 2 (Fall 1976), 183–213. Much of what they say would hold true if ‘Western’ were substituted with ‘Islamic’.

[29.](#) Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham [Greek and English] (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library & Harvard University Press, 1932), 63–65.

[30.](#) The assumption that marriage is somehow akin to slavery for women (milk al-nikah, or ‘ownership through marriage’, as opposed to ‘milk al-yamin’, or slave-owning) underlies most Shi’i and Sunni classical discourse on marriage, and is thought to have emerged from the prevalence of slave-wives in the ‘Abbasid era. It has been challenged in recent years by Kecia Ali, who has written extensively on this subject.

[31.](#) ‘The best traits of women are those which are the worst traits of men, namely: vanity, cowardice and miserliness. Thus, since the woman is vain, she will not allow anyone access to herself; since she is miserly, she will preserve her and her husband’s property; and since she is weak-hearted, she will be frightened by everything that befalls her.’ Nahj al-Balaghah, saying number 234.

[32.](#) Surat al-mar’ah fi wajhhiha wa surat al-rajul fi mantiqihi. Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar* LXVIII, 293, no. 63.

[33.](#) See the seminal work by Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992).

[34.](#) Muhammad al-Khabbaz mentions the similarities between the portrayal of women between Aristotle and Nahj al-Balaghah in Surat al-Mar’ah fi al-Turath al-Shi’i; however, he does not develop the idea.

[35.](#) Lynda Lange, ‘Woman is not a Rational Animal’, in *Discovering Reality* CLXI (1983), 1–15. . Accessed 27 February 2015. Citing François Poulain de la Barre.

[36.](#) The mystery speaker is Aristotle. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, Books 7–10, ed. and trans. D. M. Balme [Greek and English] (London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library & Harvard University Press, 1991), 219. This quotation indicates that the idea that women are ‘weak-hearted’ also predates Imam ‘Ali; Aristotle, in his case, extends it to animals as well as humans – for instance, calling upon the precedent of female and male cuttlefish. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, Books 7–10, 219–220.

[37.](#) The mystery speaker is Ayatollah Motahhari. Translation taken from Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, *Woman and Her Rights in Islam* [A translation of *Nezam-e Huquq-e Zan*], trans. M. A. Ansari (n.p.: Islamic Seminary Publications, [1982]), 54.

[38.](#) The mystery speaker here is the renowned exegete ‘Allamah Muhammad Huasyn Tabataba’i (d. 1981). This translation was quoted from the exegesis of verse 4:34 in ‘Allamah Tabataba’i, *al-Mizan: An Exegesis of the Qur’an*, trans. S. A. Rizvi (Tehran: WOFIS, 1983); however, it has been lightly edited for grammar.

[39.](#) The final mystery speaker is the late Ayatollah al-Khu’i, who was almost universally acknowledged as the most learned scholar among Twelver Shi’a during his time. Ironically, I wrote much of this while living in his former house, which at the time was inhabited by religious students from abroad. I hope he is not raising objections from the grave! Talib Aziz quoting

Ayatollah al-Khu'i in 'Fadlallah and the Remaking of the Marja'iyah' in Linda Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 208–209.

[40.](#) Ayatollah Motahhari, *Woman and Her Rights in Islam*, 7.

[41.](#) Regarding the comparison between a woman and a scorpion, there is nothing substantive regarding alternative sourcing in *Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah* (see volume 4, page 52); one alternative source (Ghurar al-Hikam) is given for the saying equating woman with evil (*Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah*, volume 4, page 185).

[42.](#) Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunnah*, 155, citing Sayyid Fadlallah.

[43.](#) A Sunni narration mentions marital strife between Imam 'Ali and Fatimah al-Zahra'; however, this narration is not accepted in the Shi'i tradition, and the marriage of 'Ali and Fatimah is held up as the example of an ideal marriage.

[44.](#) Mahdi Mehrizi, 'Ta'ammoli dar Ahadith-e Nuqsan-e 'Aql-e Zanan'. In the Shi'i tradition, Fatimah al-Zahra' is described as not having ever menstruated.

[45.](#) Sermon 156.

[46.](#) The alternative sources are listed as (1) al-Tusi (d. 1067), *Talkhis al-Shafi*; (2) al-Hilli (16th century), *Mukhtasar Basa'ir al-Darajat*; (3) al-Tabrisi, *al-Ihtijaj* (beginning of the sixth century hijri); (4) al-Muttaqi al-Hindi (d. 1567), *Kanz al-'Ummal*; (5) al-Majlisi (d. 1698), *Bihar al-Anwar*. Of these, I was only able to find the exact text in the latter two, although this could be an issue of manuscripts. *Kanz al-'Ummal* lists it in volume XVI, page 186, no. 44216; however, the chain of narration is simply given as 'Yahya ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan, from his father', with no indication of how it reached al-Muttaqi al-Hindi many centuries later. 'Ali ibn 'Abd al-Malik al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, *Kanz al-'Ummal*, 18 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1979).

Shaikh Yahya Seymour also noted some other problems with the chain of narration. First, while most rijali scholars consider Yahya ibn 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan to be unknown (majhul), he should really be seen as 'condemned' in the Twelver tradition because he writes a letter accusing Imam al-Kazim and Imam al-Sadiq of falsely claiming the Imamate. al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi I*, 366–7, no. 19.

Additionally, the sermon is narrated from Yahya ibn 'Abd Allah by Waki' ibn al-Jarrah, who used to contradict Imam 'Ali on fiqh by fasting continuously (i.e. without breaking his fast) and was known for drinking nabidh [an alcoholic beverage made from dried fruits such as dates]. In this regard, an account in *Tarikh Baghdad* says: 'Waki' ibn al-Jarrah came to us and settled himself in the mosque on the Euphrates. I used to come to him to hear hadith from him. So he asked me for nabidh. So I brought it to him at night in a wineskin, and I met with him to read hadith with him while he was drinking. And when he exhausted what I had brought him, he put out the light, and I said to him, "What is this?" And so he said, "If you had given us more, we would have given you more." al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Tarikh Baghdad XIII* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Ilmiyyah, 1997), 477. See also Muhammad Taqi al-Tustari, *Qamus al-Rijal X*, 437.

[47.](#) See 'Abd al-Hadi al-Fadli, *Introduction to Hadith* (London: ICAS Press, 2002) for a discussion on various reasons why fabricated hadiths are thought to have come into existence.

[48.](#) This, incidentally, is one of the explanations of hadith implying tahrif (alteration) of the Qur'anic manuscript in the Shi'i tradition, in that perhaps the explanations of commentators were interpolated into Qur'anic verses in ahadith. See M. S Bahmanpour, 'Review of Revelation and Falsification: The Kitab al-Qira'at of Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Sayyari, Critical Edition', in *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies III*, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 231–233.

[49.](#) I would like to thank my colleague Alexander Khaleeli for bringing up this possibility, which I feel has a strong likelihood of being correct.

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