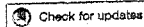


ARTICLES



Pagan or Muslim? “Structures of feeling” and religious ambiguity in al-Khansāʾ

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ABSTRACT

The seventh-century poet al-Khansāʾ is perhaps the most renowned elegist in the Arabic poetic tradition. As a woman at the heart of the canon, she stands as a feminist icon. But her poetry and life story have yielded divergent interpretations: many have characterized her verse as “wholly pagan,” whilst others have pointed to anecdotes about her later life in order to paint a picture of the ideal Muslim woman, selflessly sacrificing her sons for the cause of Islam. Here, in this essay, I tease out these contradictory strands of her literary and cultural identities and consider religious themes and imagery in her poetry, asking whether or not her verses reflect an emergent Islamic ethos. Drawing on Raymond Williams’ notion of “structures of feeling,” I demonstrate that her verses are informed by competing ideologies of fatalism and monotheism. These overlapping, seemingly contradictory discourses create space for multiple readings.

KEYWORDS

Al-Khansāʾ; elegy;
lamentation; Jāhiliyya;
structures of feeling;
Raymond Williams

Introduction

The seventh-century poet Tumādir bt. ʿAmr, otherwise known as the “snub-nosed” or *al-Khansāʾ*, is perhaps the most renowned elegist in the whole of the Arabic poetic tradition. That she is an important poet, celebrated across the centuries, is confirmed by the fact that no less than thirteen commentaries on her *dīwān* (collected poems) circulated in the pre-modern era.¹ She is recognized primarily for her *marāthī*—or poems commemorating the dead—devoted to her brothers, Ṣakhr and Muʿāwiya, who were both warriors struck down in battle. Her presence indeed looms large, particularly for women authors who find historical validation in her grief-stricken voice.² She is, famously, a *mukhaḍḍama* whose life spanned the pre- and early Islamic eras. In modern times, she has had a conflicted legacy. On the one hand, she stands as a feminist icon, as proof of the timelessness of Arab women’s poetic agency. Her representative stature is reflected in the title of Anissa Boumediène’s French translation of her collected poems: *Moi, poète et femme d’Arabie*.³ Yet, on the other hand, her persona has been co-opted by sexist and retrograde forces. For evidence of this we need to look no further than the so-called “al-Khansāʾ Brigade,” the unit of armed women set up by the group calling itself Islamic State to police women’s dress and behavior

in territories under their control.⁴ The contrast encapsulates the kind of tension that characterizes *and has always characterized* her legacy, a tension which has informed traditional constructions of her persona as well as modern scholarly receptions of her corpus. May one claim al-Khansāʾ as a figure who is both organically feminist and demonstrably Muslim? Or must we see her as either one or the other, as having two stages to her life: the pre-Islamic outspoken, womanly, and grieving stage and the early Islamic stoically Muslim one?

Contributing to the ambiguity surrounding the poet is the fact that her biography is very sketchy. She had at least two husbands and a number of children,⁵ and she reportedly converted to Islam. That, in addition to the fact that she was from the tribe of Sulaym, is more or less all we know about her life story. The dearth of biographical information about al-Khansāʾ has meant that people have used their interpretative faculties and, indeed, their imaginations to fill in the gaps. In an article about al-Khansāʾ’s reception in English-language sources such as world literature anthologies, Michelle Hartman observes that because al-Khansāʾ is “an enigmatic figure [...] it is easy to project a range of meanings onto her.”⁶

This “range of meanings,” whilst clearly evident in the modern era when competing images of her have become, in a sense, polarized, has its roots in the classical and folkloric traditions. Pre-modern sources, both literary and popular, display her personality from divergent and at times incompatible angles. In the sections of the introduction that follow, I attempt to map out how al-Khansāʾ has been received over the centuries: first, I look at the way her persona is narrated in “medieval” literature, be it “classical” or “post-classical,” and then I consider her reception in modern scholarship and popular culture. This leads into a discussion of Raymond Williams’ concept of “structures of feeling,” thereby laying the groundwork in the main body of the article for an exploration of religious themes and imagery in her poetry and their interrelationship with what we may think of as a feminist stance, or a stance that claims discursive space and agency for women.

Constructions of al-Khansāʾ

Medieval constructions

The feminist

There are a couple of anecdotes that portray al-Khansāʾ as a feisty spirit who challenges the authority of men. Most famously, it is related that once, when the poet al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī told her, “I have never seen one with a womb more poetic than you,” she quipped, “nor one with testicles.”⁷ Another anecdote that portrays al-Khansāʾ as undermining masculine dominance is much more elaborate in its construction. This account, which dates from the fourth/tenth century, involves her rejection of the elderly poet Durayd b. al-Ṣimma (d. 8/630) after he has expressed interest in marrying her. Due to its entertainment value, its exemplification of al-Khansāʾ’s mischievous personality, and its unfolding against a monotheistic backdrop, I relate the anecdote as it appears in the *Kitāb al-aghānī* in full:

Abū ʿUbayda⁸ and Muḥammad b. Salām⁹ said: When Durayd asked for her hand in marriage, she sent a servant of hers and told her, “Look at him when he urinates. If his urine penetrates

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