

Foreward-Journal of Persianate Studies

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Abstract:

In 2006, while researching my dissertation in India, I came across a short poem of the medieval Indo-Persian poet Amir Khosrow whose contents were so startling I read it several times. Only five lines, it plainly stated that daughters were better than sons—and gave among its justifications the fact that the Prophet's lineage had continued through his daughter, Fatima (Fātema). The sentiments echoed those I had come across in other of Khosrow's works, in which he referred to his young daughter as his "mother" and wrote that he expected to be reborn through her eventual progeny. But it clarified and emphasized those statements in a way that ran forcefully and surprisingly counter to the stereotypical and widely-received view in Muslim societies of daughters as, at best, burdens to be patiently borne.

Keywords: India | poetry | Amir Khosrow | Muslim society | gender studies | Muslim women | history | Indio-Persian history

Article:

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Nearly two years later, I was reminded of that poem and of those statements as I listened to a paper given by Karen Ruffle during a conference on Medieval Islamic Mysticism and History in Indo-Persian Cultures at the University of Washington. Ruffle's paper made note of Fatima's

peculiar sobriquet as *omm abiha*, or mother of her father, and as Ruffle, conference organizer Firoozeh Papan-Matin, and I talked later, the three of us pondered the awe-inspiring significance of that title. Although many sources interpret it to refer to the maternal tenderness with which Fatima cared for her father, some Shi‘i hadith and hagiographical texts allude to a greater role for her as mother of prophecy and the Imamate, for it is through her that lineal descent passed.¹ This import, echoed in Khosrow’s statements, accords an eminently exalted status to the daughter of the Prophet (and, by extension, to all Muslim daughters) by envisioning her as the propagator of her father’s name, legacy, and bloodline.

Those discussions—and later ones with Julia Clancy-Smith, whose work on the nineteenth-century Algerian saint Shaikh Muhammad and his daughter, Zaynab, broke important ground in this arena years ago—planted the seeds for the special issue you now hold in your hands. The five famous father daughter dyads described here, chosen from a broad geographical and chronological expanse, represent examples of women who succeeded their fathers to important positions, carried on their legacies, or otherwise shared in their power and influence.

At first encounter, the papers offer a striking diversity of views. Drawing on approaches ranging from history to art history to gender and religious studies, they reveal a complexity of means by which daughters negotiated power. Some women remained largely in the shadows of their fathers, maintaining a subservient and compliant demeanor that did not claim independent sovereignty. Linked to their fathers in public articulations of identity such as mosque inscriptions, they exercised their power in an often-discreet manner that did not directly challenge male hegemony—demeanors that adhere to the traditional image of Fatima put forth in Ruffle’s essay as part of her father’s body. The seventeenth-century Mughal princess Jahānārā, for example, “cloaked her ‘signs’ of prominence in a guise of modesty and compliance as the ideal of female subordination. . . .” Although, according to the court poet Kalim, she was “on the apex of sovereignty of the sun of fortune [Shah Jahān], she is always hidden behind the cloud of chastity.” Mihrimah (Mehr-o-māh), who commissioned a mosque complex in sixteenth-century Ottoman Istanbul, is identified in its inscription as the “pearl of the crown of the sultanate . . . the daughter of the sovereign of sovereigns of the East and West [Süleyman],” and in the complex’s endowment deed is referred to as a “Fatima in innocence, a Khadija in chastity, an ‘Ā’isha [‘Ā’isha] in intelligence, a Bilqis (Queen of Sheba) in natural disposition . . .”—comparisons that largely emphasize her unthreatening, “feminine” attributes.

By contrast, Sitt al-Mulk (Sett al-Molk), who ruled briefly in eleventh-century Fatimid Egypt, and Raziya, who came to power in thirteenth-century India, emerged from their fathers’ shadows (and, in the case of the latter, from behind the curtain of female modesty) to exercise independent sovereignty. Female power in both of these cases was still mediated through masculinity—Raziya essentially became a man in order to rule effectively; Sitt al-Mulk was nominally her nephew’s regent—but came forth from its protective and, by extension, secondary status to demonstrate an autonomy equal to that of the father. By this token, as Ruffle points out, these daughters bear closer resemblance to the powerful image in Shi‘i sources of Fatima as Mistress

of Paradise and intercessor on the Day of Judgment, whose dazzling radiance illumines the earth, than to that of her as poor and pious servant. But such power, it is notable, came at a cost: both Sitt al-Mulk's and Raziya's exercise of authority opened them up to malevolent and distorted historiography that sought to discredit women in power by accusing them of sexual misconduct. (Interestingly, as Afshan Bokhari has noted, lurid European travel accounts also described Jahānārā as engaged in immoral sexual activities.)

This special issue represents only a first foray into the topic. Future avenues of discussion, to name just a few, include fathers and daughters in hadith and the Koran, the factor status and class play in a daughter's ability to acquire and maintain power and influence, and the role of local mores in succession politics. Additional case studies such as sixteenth-century Safavid Shah Tahmāsp and Pari Khan Khānom and, in contemporary Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, also bear exploration. As it stands, however, this special issue opens up a discussion that challenges deeply held notions of what it means to be female in an Islamic society.

As guest editors, Julia Clancy-Smith and I have adopted the following protocol to accommodate the diverse linguistic traditions that appear in this special issue: authors who draw on sources that are primarily in Persian have followed the Journal of Persianate Studies transliteration system. Those whose articles draw on sources primarily in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish have followed simplified (e.g., with minimal diacritical marks) versions of the International Journal of Middle East Studies systems for those languages. Some concessions have been made for use of well-known anglicized forms of Mughal, Ottoman, and Persian names.

We wish to express our gratitude to Saïd Amir Arjomand, Habib Borjian, and Sunil Sharma for their support and assistance in bringing this special issue to publication.

Notes

1 See Ruffle's contribution to this volume.