"PARADISE IS AT THE FEET OF THE MOTHERS".[1] SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS CONCERNING THE FIGURATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN MEDIEVAL ARAB LITERATURE

Isabel Toral-Niehoff
Freie Universität Berlin
Germany

Date of receipt: 24th of January, 2013
Final date of acceptance: 17th of October, 2013

Abstract

The articles analyses in a preliminary study the configuration of *motherhood* (the mere biological fact of being a mother) and *motherliness* (the quality of having or showing the tenderness and warmth and affection of a mother, i.e. of maternal love) in Medieval Arab Literature, taking as case studies the portrayal of both topics in the *adab*-encyclopaedia *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd* by the Cordovan man of letters Ibn ʿAbdrabbih (860-940 CE). In addition, it discusses the methodical difficulties of investigating past mentalities, attitudes and social expectations in Pre-Modern Islam and pleas for a stronger consideration of literary texts.

Key Words

Motherhood in Islam, Gender and Women in Arabic Literature, History of Emotions and Mentalities in Islam.

Capitalia Verba

Dignitas matris Mahumedana, Genus et mulieres apud Arabicas litteras, Historia affectuum et idiosynchrasiarum apud Mahumedanas gentes.

---

1. Ibn Māja. *Sunan* (hadith nº 2771). The research for this paper has been carried out within the research project "Sexual taboos and family structures: sharia and sexual ethics in the pre-modern Islamic world (IIIth/IXth-VIIth/XIIIth centuries)", directed by Dr. Cristina de la Puente and financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (FF12010-16314).

Narrated Abū Hurayrah:

A man came to the Apostle and said: "Oh Apostle of Allah! Who is more entitled to be treated with the best companionship by me?"
The Prophet said: "Your mother".
The man said: "Then who?"
The Prophet said: "Your mother".
The man further said: "Then who?"
The Prophet said: "Your mother."
The man said again: "Then who?"
The Prophet said: "Then your father."[2]

1. Introduction: Motherhood in Medieval Arabic Literature

Where are the mothers in Arab literature? It is at least surprising to see that "motherhood" (the mere biological fact of being a mother) and "motherliness" (the quality of having or showing the tenderness and warmth and affection of a mother, i.e. of maternal love) are such neglected topics in the study of Medieval Arab Literature. This is all the more striking since, over the last decades, there has been a sustained interest in motherhood both from a scholarly and a popular standpoint outside Near Eastern studies.[3]

First, the majority of Woman studies in Medieval Islam so far are mostly based on legal, religious and medical writings[4] and not on texts with a primarily aesthetic goal, i.e., literary texts in the narrower sense[5] (I avoid the problematic term "fictional"

2. Bukhārī. *Ṣaḥīḥ* (hadith nº 5971). This hadith and the precedent are the commonplaces for motherhood in Islam, quoted regularly till now to emphasize the special status and priority of motherhood in Islam: Schleifer, Aliah. *Motherhood in Islam*. Louisville-Kentucky: Islamic Academy, 1986: 8. Apart from these, there are surprisingly few specific hadith sayings on mothers.

3. Staub, Susan C. *The Literary Mother. Essays on Representations of Maternity and Child Care*. North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2007: 1-2.

4. The most important works on the (social) history of maternity are to be found within studies on the history of childhood in Islam: Giladi, Avner. *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society*. Houndmills-London: St Martin's Press, 1992 (especially her essay on the sources pages 1-15); Giladi, Avner. *Infants, parents and Wet nurses. Medieval Islamic views on Breastfeeding and their Social Implications*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 1999; Motzki, Harald. "Das Kind und seine Sozialisation in der islamischen Geschichte des Mittelalters", *Zur Sozialgeschichte der Kindheit*, Jochen Martin, August Nitschke, eds. Munich: Alber 1986: 391-441; Rosenthal, Franz. "Child psychology in Islam". *Islamic Culture*, 26 (1952): 1-22. The monographic article on woman in the Encyclopedia of Islam does not deal with maternity: "al-Marʾa", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford E. Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, Wolfart P. Heinrichs, eds. Brill Online, 2013. Reference: Universitätsbibliothek der Freien (Universität Berlin). 14 October 2013.

5. The best comprehensive study of the literary figuration of women in Medieval Arabic literature is in: Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word. Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991: 29-53. "The Anecdotal woman", on the women in *adab*.

in this context[6]). This is unfortunate, since literary texts provide a precious insight into the representational aspects of culture[7] and offer indispensable evidence for the study of past mentalities, in spite of the serious methodic difficulties that emerge when we study past attitudes or modes of thought and feeling[8]. As Franz Rosenthal has put it, "the cream of what had been said in the form of verse, prose aphorism and pithy anecdote on every conceivable subject which an educated man (*adīb*) has to know... holds by far the greatest promise of serving as a source for us to get behind official attitudes and gain an insight into what real people thought and how they judged actions."[9] The vast ocean of Medieval Arab literature is, therefore, a most promising field of research for the study of motherhood and the cultural attitudes related to it.

The most important cause for the neglect of studies on maternity in Arab literature, however, is the remarkable absence of mothers in the sources themselves. "Motherhood" and "motherliness" as such is hardly ever the explicit topic of Medieval Arabic literature, even in the framework of *adab* encyclopedias, which ideally cover every aspect of human behavior and debate all social and ethical rules governing the "Arab civilized way of life".[10] For example, although both the paradigmatic encyclopedias by Ibn Qutayba and by Ibn ʿAbdrabbih respectively include one monographic chapter on "woman",[11] they concentrate only on two

---

6. On the problematic limits between fictionality and factuality in Medieval Arabic literature. See: Leder, Stefan, ed. *Storytelling in the framework of non-fictional literature*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998, especially his article: Leder, Stefan. "Conventions of fictional narration in learned literature", *Storytelling in the framework of non-fictional...*: 34-60.

7. It was especially Stephen Greenblatt and other representatives of *New Historicism* who emphasized the relevance of fictional texts and figurative arts (because of their "cultural resonance") as indispensable evidence for the study of History. See: Gallager, Catherine; Greenblatt, Stephen. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000: 1-19 and passim. See also: Becker, Sabina. *Literatur und Kulturwissenschaften*. Reinbeck: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007: 175-184.

8. "The study of past attitudes, or modes of thought and feeling, is one of the most difficult branches of historiography. Not only is evidence patchy and often indirect, particularly where intimate family matters or the mentality of the inarticulate and the illiterate are concerned, but the interpretation of such evidence requires an empathy, a feeling for nuances, and above all objectivity, a deliberate attempt to set aside one's own cultural assumptions that is not easy to attain". Wilson, Stephen. "The Myth of Motherhood a Myth: the Historical View of Child-Rearing". *Social History*, 9 (1984): 181-198.

9. Rosenthal, Franz. "Literature", *The Legacy of Islam*, Joseph Schacht, Clifford E. Bosworth, eds. Oxford: The Claredon Press, 1974: 324-325. For the use of *adab* as historical source, see also: El Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "In search for the Ideal Spouse". *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 4 (2002): 179- 196, especially, 180-183.

10. For a short definition of the complex concept of *adab* see: Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, Ideal Spouse: (*adab*) "is 'the best' that has been said in the form of verse, prose, aphorism and anecdotes on every conceivable subject which an educated man, an *adīb*, is supposed to know." El Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "In search for the Ideal...": 180, especially, 180-183.

11. Ibn Qutayba. *ʿUyūn al-Akhbār*, ed. Aḥmad Zākī al-ʿAdawī. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub, 1343-1925: IV, 1-145; (*Kitāb al-nisāʾ); al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*, 10 vols., ed. al-Tarḥīnī, ʿAbd al-Maǧīd. Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmīyat-Dār al-Fikr, 1997: VII, 88- 156 (*Kitāb al-marǧāna al-thāniya fī al-nisāʾ wa ṣifātihinna)*. See the articles by Nadia Maria El-Cheikh: El Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "In search for the Ideal..."; El-Eryan, Hani Muhammad. "Las mujeres y el matrimonio en el Kitāb al-ʿIqd al-Farīd de Ibn Abdrabbih al-Andalusī'". *Sharq al-Andalus*, 10-11 (1993-1994): 313-323; Toral-Niehoff, Isabel. "Sei seine Dienerin, dann wird er dein Diener sein!"

aspects of femininity: woman in her social role as spouse and in her physical dimension as the object of manly desire.[12] Meanwhile, the small section dedicated to parental love in the encyclopedia by Ibn ʿAbdrabbih focuses almost exclusively on love between fathers and their offspring.[13] This harmonizes with the evidence in hadith, Quran and all sorts of pedagogical treatises, wherein mothers are rare and adults are mostly caring fathers and engaged (male) teachers.[14]

What about the exemplary female figures of Early Islam? The absence of such powerful "motherly" archetypes in Islam[15] like the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Son of God, is symptomatic. The Prophet's mother, Āmina, is said to have died when he was six years old; most legends about her figure revolve around the motif of the light of Muḥammad *(nūr Muḥammad)* that was seen blazing on his father ʿAbdallāh's forehead and was entrusted to Āmina, who conceived Muḥammad. The depiction of her motherly love for Muḥammad, however, is not part of these traditions[16].

Within the triad formed by the most emblematic women in Early Islam, his first wife Khadīja bint Khuwailid (d. 619), his wife ʿĀʾysha bint Abī Bakr (d. 678) and his daughter Fāṭima bint Muḥammad (d. 633), only the latter's legacy conveys a maternal ideal comparable to the Virgin Mary. Khadīja was the mother of the only surviving children, but her legacy is mostly founded on her role as steadfast supporter of her husband's mission[17]; ʿĀʾysha, his most beloved wife, died childless. Fāṭima, the most beloved daughter of the Prophet, was also wife of his cousin ʿAlī and mother of the prophet's grandsons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. There are indeed some similarities in the Muslim legend of Fāṭima which resemble the Christian veneration of Virgin Mary,[18] both considered as holy women and female mediators between man and God. Since Fāṭima was the only daughter to give descendants to the

---

Auf der Suche nach der idealen Ehefrau: Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi und sein Buch über die Frauen', *Didaktisches Erzählen. Spielarten literarischer Belehrung in Orient und Okzident*, Regula Forster, Romy Günthart, eds. Berlin: Lang, 2010: 255-275.

12. As Nadia Maria El-Cheikh states, "there is no discussion of daughters, mothers or sisters. Woman in these contexts is equivalent to wife" (El Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "In search for the Ideal...": 186).

13. Book V: 273-276. There is one exception: One *khabar* depicting *Fāṭima* playing with her son Ḥusayn, page 274. The chapter (*bāb fī ḥubb al-walad)* deals with parental love in general, in example, including love for adult sons and daughters.

14. Giladi, Avner. *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood...*: 19-41; "The New-Born Infant" and passim.

15. The honoring title *ummahāt al-muslimīn* "mothers of the believers" conferred after Khadījas death upon all the wives of the Prophet is to be understood metaphorically and was also applied to ʿĀʾysha, who died childless. It conveys just symbolically an aspect of maternity; the phrase originates in the Qurʾān and refers to the exemplary status of the prophet and his wives. Spellberg, Denise A. *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past. The Legacy of ʿA'isha bint Abi Bakr*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994: 154.

16. Rubin, Uri. "Āmina", *Encyclopaedia of Islam...*

17. Watt, Montgomery W. "Khadīdja", *Encyclopaedia of Islam...*; Spellberg, Denise A. *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past...*: 153-156.

18. For this parallel, see: Aucliffe, Jane Mc. "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in Quranic Exegesis". *Islamochristiana*, 7 (1981): 19-28; Thurkill, Mary F. "Holy Women, Holy Vessels: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam". *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies*, 14/2 (2007): 27-51. For the emergence of the Fāṭima legend, see: Klemm, Verena. "Die frühe islamische Erzählung von Fāṭima bint Muḥammad". *Der Islam*, 79 (2002): 47-86; Spellberg, Denise A. *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past...*: 156-161.

Prophet, she can be truly considered as the mother of all his venerated progeny, the *shurafāʾ*. However, the emergence of the popular Fāṭima legend seems to have been a late evolution and mostly a phenomenon of Shīʿī Islam, where she became the veritable ancestral mother of Shīʿa.[19] On the contrary, in early Sunni tradition, Fāṭima was a very pale figure, just remembered as one important female member of the *ahl al-bayt*, the prophet's family, alongside others such as ʿĀʾysha and Khadīdja. The Sunni traditions center on her wooing, her wedding, her marriage, the poverty of her household, her relationship to her father, her short life-span after the death of Muhammad and her death.[20] Fāṭima's maternity, in contrast to Shīʿī traditions, is much less accentuated'[21].

This general absence of mothers in the sources is rather surprising and definitely requires further research. Firstly, maternity is a biological and social fact in any society, and, as the hadith quoted at the beginning show, mothers were held in high esteem in Islam and had a relatively strong legal status. They had complete charge of their children at least until the *tamyīz* (or seventh year) of their children,[22] even in case of divorce, and were therefore responsible for a phase of life that was considered essential for the human character.[23] Secondly, marriage, maternity and procreation were considered as the principal fulfillment of femininity. Virginity was only an ideal for young women before the first marriage; there was no socially accepted place for unmarried adult women, no kind of voluntary celibacy constituted an option, and remaining childless was a malediction[24].

2. A Case Study: Mothers in the *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*

Because of the scarcity of preliminary research on motherhood in Islam, on the one hand, and because of the vast ocean of potential material, on the other, it is impossible to make any definite statements at this stage. I will therefore restrict my observations in the following pages to one case study to open the discussion: the depiction of "good mothers" in the *adab* encyclopedia *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*, composed by

19. On the Shīʿī traditions, see: Klemm, Verena. "Die frühe islamische Erzählung von Fāṭima...": 66-70.

20. On the Sunni traditions, see: Klemm, Verena. "Die frühe islamische Erzählung von Fāṭima...": 52-66. Spellberg remarks that "information about Fatima in the earliest sources is sparse compared with the tremendous elaboration of detail about her life in later sources, particulary Shi'i authors", Spellberg, Denise A. *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past...*: 156.

21. Klemm, Verena. "Die frühe islamische Erzählung von Fāṭima...": 60.

22. Motzki, Harald. "Das Kind und seine Sozialisation...": 417-425.

23. Giladi, Avner. *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood...*: 33-39.

24. Sterility was an impediment for marriage, Motzki, Harald. "Das Kind und seine Sozialisation...": 404. For the eminence of marriage (which should control and "domesticate" human sexuality, seen as the main source of *fitna* or chaos, see: Schneider, Irene. *Der Islam und die Frauen*. Munich: Beck, 2011: 106-111 ("Die Furcht vor Ausschweifungen"), see: Motzki, Harald. "Das Kind und seine Sozialisation...": 403-407 and for example the opening sections in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* and *ʿUyūn* to their women's books, which both open with a hadith advocating for marriage as *sunna* and against celibacy.

Andalusian man of letters Ibn ʿAbdrabbih (860-940 AD), which is a collection that has the advantage of being considered to be representative of the whole genre.[25] Since encyclopedias should ideally touch on all aspects of the socially and morally accepted, "civilized" life-style, one would also expect to find ideal mothers therein, at least in an indirect way. My aim is to focus the monographic chapter on women[26] and to explore the way in which motherhood and motherliness is discussed (or not) and which aspects of femininity are emphasized instead.

The *ʿIqd al-Farīd* ("unique necklace") is an encyclopedic work consisting of 25 books or *kutub* which deal with all sorts of topics considered as pertaining to *adab*. The title "unique necklace" is not only ornamental, but also points to the organizing principle: knowledge is presented as a necklace of 25 precious pearls, and, following this metaphor, each book-title corresponds to the name of a gem or pearl.[27] Each book is divided into chapters, which in turn are composed by short independent narrative units or *akhbār* (singular *khabar*). This is a common compositional form in Arabic prose literature and historiography[28]. It is important to emphasize that most of these *akhbār* are also transmitted in other *adab* collections and in historiographies (though often in slightly different versions), so that we should read them not only in the context of the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* but also within the intertextual web of parallel versions. This multitextuality and strong intertextuality is a characteristic feature of *adab* and Arab prose in general and should be kept in mind in order to correctly interpret the meaning of each particular *khabar*.

The historical context of the composition of the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* is the early tenth century in caliphal Cordoba, so that it coincides with the apogee of the so-called "orientalization" of Andalusian culture during the Umayyad caliphate. This term refers to the gradual assimilation of the cultural models of Abbasid Baghdad beginning in the ninth century.[29] Against this background, it is less surprising that nearly the complete *akhbār* material is utilized by Ibn ʿAbdrabbih, i.e., "imported" from the cultural centers in Syria, Iraq and Egypt, whereas local Andalusian material is rather absent.[30] However, like other *adab* collectors, *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd* marked his local, Umayyad-Andalusian point of view by indirect, subtle means: by the specific organization, selection, focalization and reshaping of the material[31]. The setting of the *akhbār* is mostly neither al-Andalus itself, nor any urban medieval milieu

25. See: Werkmeister, Walter. *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-ʿIqd al-Farīd des Andalusiers Ibn ʿAbdrabbih (246/860-328/940): ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*. Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1983: 9; Fähndrich, Hartmut. "Der Begriff 'adab' und sein literarischer Niederschlag", *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft. Orientalisches Mittelalter*, Wolfart Heinrichs, ed. Wiesbaden: Aula-Verlag, 1990: V, 326-345, especially, 327.

26. See note 11.

27. *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*...: I, 4.

28. Leder, Stefan. "The Literary Use of the Khabar: A Basic Form of Historical Writing", *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East. Problems in the Literary Source Material*, Averyl Cameron, Lawrence Conrad, eds. Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992: I, 277-315.

29. See: Ramírez, José. *La Orientalización de al-Andalus*. Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 2002.

30. See: Werkmeister, Walter. *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-ʿIqd al-Farīd des Andalusiers*...: 38 and passim.

31. Toral-Niehoff, Isabel. "'Sei seine Dienerin, dann wird er dein Diener...": 274.

which could be familiar to the audience of the *ʿIqd al-Farīd*. On the contrary, the majority of the *akhbār* are located in a very distant space: It is either the well-known literary *topos* of heroic tribal Pre-islamic Arabia (*jāhiliyya*),[32] or the prophetical period (ca. 610-632 AD), or the period of the so-called four Righteous caliphs (*rāshidūn*), between 632 and 661 AD. These milieus, all located in Arabia, were commonly regarded in Medieval Arab culture as mythical places where exemplary behavior took place.[33]

The "book on women" is located toward the end of the compilation (book no. 21 from 25), which indicates the marginality of the female in Andalusian society, since the sequence of the chapters denotes a hierarchical semiotics (i.e., that the most important themes are located at the beginning)[34]. It is important to point out that "woman" in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* and in the *adab* is generally more about social character than biological gender: There are women as there are beggars, misers etc. —anecdotal and curious characters who are often the protagonists of comic stories.

The book is divided into the following sub-sections: The characteristics of women in marriage (by far the largest section); the characteristics of women and their natural disposition; the characteristics of wicked women; prolific women; stories of women; on divorce; those who divorced their wife and regretted it; on women's deceit; on concubines; on those whose mother is non-Arab; on bastards; on sexual potency. What is the semiotics behind this arrangement?

If we look at the thematic range of topics, we can state that there is a clear tendency in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* to point up the importance of women as wives, i.e. in the framework of marriage. Within this social institution they function first of all as a passive genealogic and political link between social groups, since marriage and divorce had to be arranged by men. The reasons for marriage given in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* are mainly politics and questions of social status, but never romantic love. Furthermore, marriage did not only function as a nexus between groups, but also symbolized mutual social acceptance, i.e., that, according to the rules of *kafāʾa* the bride's father and his clan accepted the groom as equal in status.[35] In the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* this aspect is highlighted by several *akhbār* dealing with the wives of the Prophet and the *ṣaḥāba* whom he honored by accepting them as sons-in-law and vice versa.

The woman as soul-mate and romantic lover is quite absent, and even the woman as sexual object seems to be secondary, at least in this book of the *ʿIqd al-Farīd*.[36] This last point is not typical for *adab*, since, as Fedwa Malti-Douglas highlighted in her

32. For the *jāhiliyya* as powerful cultural icon, see: Drory, Rina. "The Abbasid construction of the Jahiliyya: cultural authority in the making". *Studia Islamica*, 83 (1996): 33-49.

33. Toral-Niehoff, Isabel. "'Sei seine Dienerin, dann wird er dein Diener...": 263, 264.

34. Toral-Niehoff, Isabel. "'Sei seine Dienerin, dann wird er dein Diener...": 257.

35. Linant de Bellefonds, "Kafāʾa", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition...*

36. The objects of male desire in Medieval Arabic literature were mostly concubines, slaves and singers, who could move much more freely within the male sphere and were much more accessible than free women, who were secluded in their domestic sphere. These attractive, erotic women find their place in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd*, but not in the book on women, rather in the book on singers and songs, *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd...*: VII, 3-84.

programmatic chapter on "the anecdotal woman", the figuration of women in *adab* represents especially "physicality"[37]. This is especially true if we look at the parallel work by Ibn Qutayba (his *Kitāb an-nisāʾ*), where the main topic is —notwithstanding the title— not only the *female* body, but also the body in general (the beautiful body, but also the ugly one, including diseases and physical disabilities like blindness, and —very bizarre— male conditions such as the *hernia*)[38]. Although we find in the book of women of the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* some typical hyperbolic depictions of the perfect female body, its sex appeal and appearance, topics which are a commonplace in Medieval Arabic literature, these passages are relatively marginal in this work, since the focus is on the social institution of matrimony.

What about mothers? Regarding the aspect of motherhood, this point is never addressed directly in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd*. This omission harmonizes with the invisibility of mothers we stated in other sources. However, it is implied that the spouse was not only expected to be sexually disposable, but also to procreate as "mother" of male children who embodied and perpetuated this connection, since male offspring is always mentioned to state the prestige of a woman (and of her husband, of course). This implies that maternity (in the sense of the successful procreation of males) was fundamental for the respectability of a married woman.

But what does the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* say about the adequate behavior of a mother, about the good mother? As we will see, virtuous female motherly behavior meant, first of all, chastity. Mothers, like spouses, had to be chaste in order to preserve family and tribal honor. According to the traditional patriarchal value system, the woman was the repository of the honor of her male relatives: of her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons. This meant that the immaculate honor of a woman reverted to her sons; therefore it was common to question a mother's honor so as to denigrate the son and to defend with great emphasis the honor of one's own mother to enhance personal prestige.

As a case in point, I will present the depiction of a woman in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* who was an important *mother* because of her prominent sons: Hind bint ʿUtba, the wife of Abū Sufyān, chief of the Meccans who had opposed Muḥammad until his last days[39]. She was the mother of caliph Muʿāwiya, founder of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus (and of his successor Yazīd), and thus became the veritable "mother" of the Umayyads. Since Hind was a prominent woman, she is not as nameless as most of the women in Arabic literature[40]. Therefore, we are able to delineate a more complex and pointed literary female character.

37. Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word...*: 30 and passim.

38. Toral-Niehoff, Isabel. "'Sei seine Dienerin, dann wird er dein Diener...": 263

39. Hind (born probably ca. 580 C.E) was a prestigious Meccan woman contemporaneous to the Prophet. Her high status was based on her eminent position in the web of tribal aristocracy: She was daughter of an important personality of the Quraysh (ʿUtba b. Nāfiʿ) and member of the clan ʿAbd al-Shams, was wife of another important Quraysh (Abū Sufyān, from the leading clan of the Banū Umayyah), and mother of two later caliphs: Muʿāwiyah, Yazīd; Buhl, Fr. "Hind Bint ʿUtbab. Rabīʿa", *Encyclopaedia of Islam...*

40. Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word...*: 34 and passim.

The image of Hind was very controversial. According to the main-stream Abbasid discourse, generally hostile to the Umayyads[41], and according to the rule "question the honor of the rival's mother to humiliate him", Hind became the emblematic "bad woman" of barbaric Jāhiliyya. This must have been a serious problem in Umayyad Cordoba, because her bad reputation seriously stained the honor of the ruling dynasty. The author of the *ʿIqd al-Farīd*, Ibn ʿAbdrabbih, was a loyal client of the Umayyads and felt much indebted to the dynasty that had fostered his social ascendance[42]. We can therefore presume that there was a strong apologetic impulse in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* to idealize Hind as an honorable and exemplary mother and to counterbalance her bad image.

As has been said, the prevailing Islamic discourse on Hind was very hostile and signified a serious challenge for any idealization of the Umayyad ancestral mother:

As far as we can see, the historical Hind was a tough, resolute woman who took an active part in Meccan politics, and had been a vehement enemy of Muḥammad, encouraging the Meccans to fight against him. But it was not only her opposition to the prophet (a charge leveled against all Meccan aristocrats), but also her prominence in public life which offended later sensibilities. In her literary representation, her active partisanship against the emerging *umma* became not only a deterrent example of unbelief, but much more: Hind became a warning model in the evolving main-stream misogynous discourse that condemned any political activity by women. Most representative for this trend in favor of a passive female attitude is the increasingly ambiguous evaluation of ʿAysha bt. Bakr, the beloved wife of the Prophet, because of her active role in the First Civil war or *fitna*[43].

The culmination of the negative depiction of Hind is to be found in the authoritative biography of the Prophet, the *Sīra* by Ibn Isḥāq, and in the many texts deriving from it (like the history by Ṭabarī). Hind is shown therein as a pagan, bloodthirsty and merciless woman[44]. The most important narrative in the *Sīra* corresponds to an impressive bloody scene which took place after the battle of Uḥud, won by the Meccans, where she took revenge for her father, who had been killed before by Hamza, the uncle of the Prophet. After the Meccan victory, the Meccan women came to the battle-field in order to collect the cadavers, which seems to have been a common practice. Hind threw herself on the dead Hamzah, mutilated his corpse

41. Hawting, Gerald R. *The First Dynasty of Islam. The Umayyad Caliphate 661-750*. London: Routledge, 1986: 11-20 ("The Umayyads in Muslim tradition"). Though Shiite tradition is more hostile than is the Sunni, the anti-Umayyad bias is general, page 11. The majority of the charges against the Umayyads pertained to their political and religious discourse (see list in: Hawting, Gerald R. *The First Dynasty of Islam*...: 12 and following). The denigration of Hind (not mentioned in the List of Hawting) pertained to a discourse of honor and prestige.

42. For Ibn ʿAbdrabbih and his family see: Werkmeister, Walter. *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-ʿIqd al-Farīd des Andalusiers*...: 16-26. They were of indigenous stock and clients of the Umayyads from the end of the 8th century on.

43. Spellberg, Denise A. *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*...: 101-150, especially, 138-140 ("Fitna: Civil War and Female Sexuality").

44. Jacobi, Renate. "Portrait einer unsympathischen Frau: Hind bint ʿUtba, die Feindin Mohammeds". *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 89 (1999): 85-108, here 87-96.

and devoured his liver, wherefore her denigrating nickname became *ākilat al-akbād*, the "liver-eater". This cruel scene became very famous and confirmed her bad reputation as a fanatic, instigating and brutal woman, paradigm not only of barbaric amorality, but also of female malignity[45].

- How does Ibn ʿAbdrabbih save the tarnished honor of Hind and of all her offspring, the Umayyads? As we will see, the portrait of Hind in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* is to be interpreted within the framework of these well-known intertexts and establishes an apologetic counter-narrative within this debate:
- The famous scene of the liver-eating Hind is never told, but referred to, twice. It is referred to in an indirect way as a well-known, embarrassing fact that is not questioned. In both allusions, however, the text takes a stand in favor of Hind: In the first *khabar* ʿAbdallāh b. Zubayr[46] confronts the caliph Muʿāwiya with the famous denigrating nick-name *ākilat al-akbād* (liver-eater) of his mother. The caliph answers by emphasizing her high prestige in pre-Islamic and Islamic times, neatly side skipping the accusation. In the second *khabar,* Ibn ʿAbdrabbih indicates that, in folk belief, Hamza's liver was considered to be thaumaturgic, which, if true, would have diminished Hind's monstrosity[47].
- But the most extensive and relevant narrative is centered on an episode which menaced Hind's reputation in a much more fundamental way, since it questioned her chastity. It refers to an episode which allegedly took place during her first marriage (Abū Sufyān was her second husband), in her youth, before Muḥammad's prophetic career. Summing up, the *khabar* tells that her then husband, a Qurashī named Fākih b. al-Mughīra, accused her falsely of adultery. She and her father ʿUtba felt offended, and in order to more clearly confirm her honorability, they decided to seek the help of the divine and to consult a *kāhin* (a pagan seer). He revealed her innocence and additionally announced that Hind would be mother of a king, whose name would be Muʿāwiya. Although Fākih wanted reconciliation, the offended Hind divorced him and thereafter married Abū Sufyān, who would be the father of the caliphs Muʿāwiya and Yazīd[48]. The

45. Although she converted to Islam during the Prophet's lifetime, her status as a member of the *ṣaḥāba* has been contested until now. Her remarkably bad reputation is still part of the Islamic *mémoire collective,* see the impressive literary portrayal by Salman Rushdie in the Satanic Verses (referring to Hind, the main enemy of Mahound [Muḥammad], evidently an allusion to Hind bt. ʿUtba): "She was Hind, who had joined the Jahilian army, disguised as a man, using sorcery to deflect all spears and swords, seeking out her brother's killer through the storm of war. Hind, who butchered the Prophet's uncle, and ate Hamza's liver and his heart".

46. Prominent opponent of Muʿāwiya and later anti-Caliph under his succesor Yazīd. Gibb, H.A.R. "ʿAbd Allāhb. al-Zubayr.", *Encyclopaedia of Islam...*: 624-692.

47. Jacobi, Renate. "Portrait einer unsympathischen Frau...": 100-102.

48. This *khabar* about the false accusation is also told with slight differences in the Kitāb al-Aghānī by Abū-l-Faraj al-Isfahānī (897-967) and in the Kitāb al-Amālī by al-Qālī, (901-967), see: Jacobi, Renate. "Portrait einer unsympathischen Frau..: 96-102. Both *adab*-works came to al-Andalus after the composition of the ʿIqd al-Farīd', which means that all these traditions go back to common oriental source (see: The isnād in the Kitāb al-Aghānī). Since all works were nearly contemporaneous, they probably reflect an ongoing debate. Furthermore, all three authors were closely related to the Umayyad dynasty: Ibn ʿAbdrabbih was client of the Umayyads and courtly poet at the court of Emir ʿAbdallāh

account tells that she was the one who chose her second husband because she recognized the leadership qualities which qualified him as a king's father.

The account is significant in many aspects, since it combines two very powerful *topoi*, resulting in an apology and glorification of Hind.

First, the false accusation of adultery is a motif whose most emblematic parallel in Islam was the famous false accusation of ʿĀʾysha, or *hadith al-Ifk*[49]. In this episode, fourteen year old ʿĀʾysha, wife of Muḥammad, was accused of adultery, which became a serious threat for the reputation of the Prophet. As in Hind's case, ʿĀʾysha, reduced to a female passive role, could not actively defend her questioned honor, but was saved by a veritable *deus ex machina*, i.e. by divine intervention, since several Qurʾānic verses were revealed to exculpate her.

Secondly, it takes up the popular motif of the divine annunciation of a leader, whose most famous Islamic parallel is the case of Āmina, mother of the prophet[50]. Thus, the account transforms Hind into an honorable and worthy mother of the Umayyads, who does the best a good mother can do: preserve her good reputation and select the right father for her prospective sons. At the same time, it is a clear counter-narrative to probably existing denigrating *akhbār* circulating in anti-Umayyad milieus which questioned her chastity, implying that Muʿāwiya was not the son of Abū Sufyān.

As Renate Jacobi has duly stated, the portrayal of Hind in the *ʿIqd al-Farīd* shows the typical fictionalization and romanticization of historical figures in *adab* literature and forms part of the evolving Muʿāwiya legend.[51]. But it also reflects important ongoing political debates and discussions about appropriate female behavior in public and questions of female passivity vs. activity. In addition, it contains a strong political message insofar as it establishes a clear parallel between ʿĀʾysha and Hind: both women's respectability was questioned in pro-ʿAlid and anti-Umayyad milieus and both were accused of improper female enmeshment in politics, which could lead to *fitna*, the dismemberment of community.[52] It shows that prominent women and mothers could be considered as repositories of the honor of complete political factions.

(reg. 888-912) and caliph ʿAbd ar- Rahmān III. (reg. 912-961); Abū-l-Faraj al-Isfahānī was himself an Umayyad; al-Qālī was also a client of the Umayyads and was invited to the court in Cordoba by caliph al-Hakam (reg. 961-976).

49. Spellberg, Denise A. *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*...: 61-100.

50. See Note 16.

51. Jacobi, Renate. "Portrait einer unsympathischen Frau...: 100-101. See also: Pellat, Charles. "Le culte de Muʿāwiya au IIIe siècle de l'hegire". *Studia Islamica*, 6 (1956): 53-66.

52. See note 43.

3. Conclusion and perspectives

The exemplary study of Hind's apologetic depiction in the Ibn ʿAbdrabbih has shown that to be a good mother meant, most of all, to be honorable and chaste, in order to save the respectability of her male offspring. In this case, the debate about the honor of a mother became a political debate, since her reputation touched also their metaphorical "sons."

However, the representation of motherly care and abnegated love was either not expected or simply considered as natural. It was not, at least, considered as an interesting subject of literature. The invisibility of motherly love in Medieval Arabic literature is a question which certainly requires much more research on a broader material basis. In order to open the discussion, I propose several hypotheses that might explain this phenomenon, in the hope of opening perspectives for further research:

1. One cause is surely related with the general marginality of the female in Medieval Arab literature, which was written by men for men. In *adab* encyclopedias, e.g., women are placed at the bottom of the social ladder, in the vicinity of socially marginal characters such as the insane, or beggars.[53] This invisibility also applies for writings dealing with child-care and education. As we have seen, there is extensive textual evidence depicting and recommending tender love and care of *fathers* for their children (the most emblematic archetype being the Prophet himself)[54] therein, while *mothers* are omitted or included tacitly under the label "parents." In this case, the absence of mothers would be a concomitant phenomenon of the invisibility of women. However, this would not explain the relative marginality of mothers in comparison with other female roles, especially as wives and erotic objects.

   Avner Giladi points to another interesting factor: the incidence of wet nursing in medieval Muslim societies, which was very common in the wealthy urban classes who were the addressees and the subjects of Medieval Arab literature. With reference to Vanessa Maher, Avner Giladi remarks that societies where non-maternal breastfeeding has been common tend to "emphasize marriage and having children as institutions for the confirmation of wealth and status rather than as means to parenthood and the extension of kin ties."[55] This circumstance could explain a relatively weak bond between the biological mothers and their children and therefore a lack of motherly love. Wet nursing was also a male method for restricting female power over their children —men were in charge of choosing and paying the nurse— and a means to extend the sexual disposability of their spouses, since intercourse with a nursing mother was prohibited. Although the Islamic manuals insisted that a nursing mother was better than a

53. Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word...*: 29 and following.

54. There are several hadith referring to his tenderness toward children; see also: Motzki, Harald. "Das Kind und seine Sozialisation in der islamische...": 396-399.

55. Giladi, Avner. *Infants, parents and Wet nurses...*: 4, with reference to: Maher, Vanessa. *The Anthropology of Breast-feeding: Natural Law or social construct*. Oxford: St Martin's Press, 1992: 25.

wet nurse for the child's health[56], the practice was very expanded[57] and had been sanctioned by the example of the Prophet. According to the *Sīra*, he had been nursed by a Bedouin woman called Ḥalīma.[58] Orphan of his father and having lost his mother at the age of six or eight, Muḥammad maintained a warm and long-lasting relationship to his nurse until her death[59]. The importance of breastfeeding (the norm was a lactation period of two years) for emotional bonding between the child and the nursing women is well attested and was reflected in Near Eastern societies by the strong conception of milk-kinship.[60]

The incidence of wet nursing and its possible negative emotional consequences for child-mother bonding is, without any doubt, quite a problematic argument. It relies on the basic assumption that there was a "real" weakness of motherly love in Medieval Arab society that led to an omission of its literary representation. That does not inevitably follow: although nurses were much in evidence in the Victorian higher classes, there was a significant idealization in literature of the mother as "Angel in the House."[61] Furthermore, to presume the non-existence or debility of motherly love in any given society is at least questionable, and has been proved to be erroneous in the European context. The famous thesis of Philippe Ariès, who argued that parental love is a late construction and that parents did not "love" their children before the 17th century, has been contested with very convincing arguments.[62] However, motherly love is not a biological given but the consequence of an early intimate relationship between the baby and the person caring for it, whoever that might be. A diffusion of wet-nursing in certain social groups most probably influenced the relationship between biological mothers and their offspring.

2. Finally, I would like to add another possible factor: the well-known Madonna/whore split.[63] It does not seem to be a Western specialty, since Fedwa Malti-Douglas states for Arab literature an opposition between the copulative female body and the procreative female body, which is a dichotomy going in the same direction.[64] Basically, we might sum up that there seems to be a common tendency in most cultures to separate both aspects of femininity into one sphere of sexuality and

56. This seems to be a legacy of Antiquity, for example Galenic medicine. Giladi, Avner. *Infants, parents and Wet nurses...*: 45-53.

57. Giladi, Avner. *Infants, parents and Wet nurses...*: 106-114. The incidence of mercenary wet-nursings seems to have been more a phenomenon of the Late Middle Ages.

58. Giladi, Avner. *Infants, parents and Wet nurses...*: 34-37.

59. Giladi, Avner. *Infants, parents and Wet nurses...*: 37.

60. Schacht, Joseph; Chelhod, Joseph. "Raḍāʿ or Riḍāʿ, also Raḍāʿa", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition...*

61. Klimaszowski, Melisa. "The Contested Site of Maternity in Charles Dickens's Dombey and Son", *The literary mother: essays on representations of maternity and child care*, Susan C. Staub, ed. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2007: 138-190.

62. Ariès, Philippe. *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*. Paris: Plon, 1960; see the critical remarks by: Wilson, Stephen. "The Myth of Motherhood a Myth: the Historical View of Child-Rearing". *Social History*, 9 (1984): 181-198.

63. Staub, Susan C. *The Literary Mother...*: 1-11.

64. Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word...*: 29.

one of procreation. This means that "good," caring mothers are seldom portrayed as erotic objects of manly desire and vice versa. Since medieval Arabic society seems to have been a society that tended to emphasize more the sexual aspect of the woman and her fascinating, menacing and sometimes destructive erotic attractiveness (i.e. the copulative body), [65] her emotional capacity as loving, self-abnegating mother became much less accentuated. It is remarkable that misogynous texts in Islam abound with wicked, sexually aggressive women such as Zulaikhā, the seductress of Joseph, but not with evil step-mothers, who are so common in European literature and reflect debates therein about maternity.

In spite of this invisibility of mothers, I have tried to show that the close reading of a *khabar* including its intertextual web can reveal much more discourse on maternity than expected at first sight. There is much work to do, but, in my opinion, the effort is worth the trouble, since motherly love is a very basic human relationship the study of which promises to give us most relevant insights into the study of past emotions and attitudes.

65. Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word...*: 29-53.