

EUNUCHS IN ISLAMIC SOCIETY

Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society by Shaun Marmon. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995. xii + 162 pp. ISBN 0-10-507101-8. \$42 (Cloth).

This well researched text is a good contribution to the study of gender and eunuchs in general, and the eunuchs of the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina in particular. Marmon draws on various published and archival medieval Arabic sources as well as the accounts of Muslim *ḥājjīs*, and European travelers who in disguise performed the *ḥajj* in Mecca and visited the Prophet's tomb at Medina.

Using structuralism in analyzing her data Marmon gives a very interesting and intellectually stimulating study of the eunuchs in the Mamluk Cairo and Medina. Her study then is not a chronological study; it 'explores an important aspect of mediation in premodern *Islamic* society [and] focus[es] on the representation of eunuchs in the context of the *sacred*' (p. ix, my italics; A.N.). As such, Marmon does not distinguish between the Islamic society and the Muslim society. The first society is the one presented in the Qur'ān and the Sunna which Muslim societies aspire to.¹ By ignoring or not being aware of this distinction some Western scholars consciously or unconsciously convey to their non-Muslim readers grave misconceptions about Islam and inform them that the concepts of harem, eunuch and even homosexuality, for example, are

1 *From Muslim to Islamic: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Convention of the Association of Muslim Sociological Scientists*. Rabī' II 1396/April 1976, 2 vols., Plainfield, Indiana: The Association of Muslim Sociological Scientists, 1976.

Islamic.²

The word 'sacred' is connected with religion; it refers to what is considered holy. In this sense the Holy mosque (*al-Masjid al-ḥarām*) in Mecca, the Further mosque (*al-Masjid al-aqṣā*) in Jerusalem and the Prophet's mosque in Medina are sacred. But Marmon extends the meaning of this word to include the boundary of *ḥarīm* (harem) and the sultans and their tombs in Mamluk Cairo. In case of the first she does this by considering the root from which this and other words are derived. *Ḥarīm* like *ḥaram* (religious sanctuary), *ḥarām* (forbidden by God), *ḥarāmī* (thief: violator of Gods' boundaries) and *maḥram* (unmarriagable because of consanguinity), for example, come from the same root *ḥ-r-m* meaning 'sacred', 'inviolable', 'forbidden'. Though derived from the same root, a harem's boundary is not considered sacred in Islam. The concept of harem, like the concept of veil, is not Islamic. Literally, *ḥarīm* (from *ḥurma*) refers to the wives and children the housemaster is supposed to protect and defend because they constitute part of his *ḥurma* (honour).³ Marmon notes that *al-ḥujra al-sharīfa* (the noble chamber) 'was both the Prophet's tomb and in his lifetime the most intimate area of his household, the residence of his favourite wife' (31). But this does not make the harem's boundary sacred. It is noteworthy that the Prophet was not buried in the Medina graveyard because his best friend and the first *khalīfa* Abū Bakr heard him say in his lifetime, 'A prophet is buried where he dies.'

Marmon also argues that Cairo Citadel, part of which forms the residence of the sultan and his family, is sacred. The Citadel and the religious sanctuary are similar in that both consist of two concentric circles. The inner circle in case of

2 See, for example, Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature*, New York & London: New York University Press 1997.

3 Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr, *Kitāb Lisān al-‘arab*, Cairo: Al-Dār al-Maṣriyya li'l ta'līf wa'l-nashr, n.d., 12.

Mecca and Medina, for example, includes the 'shrine', that is, the Ka'ba (House of God) and the Prophet's tomb respectively, whereas the outer circle consists of a specified area around the Holy Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's mosque in Medina. Marmon considers the sultan himself as the 'shrine' and the Citadel, which is like a city, the outer circle. In addition, she quotes the words of a Mamluk topographer who draws a striking comparison, according to her, between Cairo Citadel and the noble Jerusalem, the third holiest sanctuary in Islam. But neither the sultan nor his tomb is considered sacred in Islam.

Marmon's attempt to include the boundaries of the harem, the sultan and his tomb under the sacred is, in my view, due to the structural technique she adopts. Like structuralists she looks for data which can be interpreted to support her argument and ignores what contradicts it. For example, she argues that the eunuchs guard the religious sanctuary from the danger of *fitna* (sexual temptation or political disorder). But the eunuchs themselves were involved in two *fitnas* causing political unrest, and in one of them took refuge in the sanctuary they were supposed to guard, and fought their enemies with firearms.⁴

As said earlier Marmon focuses on the study of eunuchs as mediators. Since the Mamluk sultanate witnessed the emergence of the eunuchs of the Prophet's tomb, Marmon begins her study by examining their role in Mamluk Cairo, where they, being neither men nor women acted as supervisors and guardians of the harem and mediated between them and the master of the house, and could therefore cross the harem boundary. They also played the same role of mediation between the sultan and his subordinates including the emirs and between his tomb and strangers except reciters of the Qur'ān. Here Marmon could have argued that the

4 °Abd al-Bāsiṭ Badr, *al-Ta'rikh al-shāmil li'l-Madīna al-munawwara*, 3 vols., Al-Madīna al-munawwara: °Abd al-Bāsiṭ Badr 1993, II, 384-8 & III, 21-3.

eunuchs are well suited for the job because they are 'dead' since they are biologically incapable of reproduction and alive at the same time. But she does not, probably because such an argument does not go in line with her next argument. (See below.) In Medina they guard the tomb of the Messenger of God, himself an intercessor, and mediate between him and his suppliants.

Though the Prophet passed away it is believed that his body is not corrupted by worms and that he lives in this tomb a *barzakhī* life (a life in which time is suspended). The eunuchs, Marmon argues, are also well suited for serving the Prophet's tomb for they, being castrated before adolescence, never go through the changes of puberty and of course never reproduce. In other words, they live a life in which time is suspended. No wonder then that in a legend about the Prophet's tomb their roles and the role of a prepubescent child are exchanged. Thus Marmon gives another reason in addition to the ones already enumerated for the appointment of eunuchs to serve the Prophet's tomb, such as their concentration in their professions and lack of *shahwa* (sexual desire) and therefore their freedom from major ritual impurity.

In the preface Marmon states that 'All observes of the eunuchs, medieval and modern, Muslim and non-Muslim, were outside the category of eunuchs. Many Muslim authors endow the eunuchs of my story with a voice, but it is one informed by a long tradition of hagiography. *The eunuchs themselves maintain a dignified silence*' (p. x, my italics; A.N.). In the epilogue she summaries an interview with the officer in charge of the affairs of the eunuchs of Mecca published in *al-Yamāma*, a Saudi magazine, in 1990, in which he speaks for them and for their counterparts in Medina. She concludes her summary by saying that the eunuchs themselves, the subject of the article, 'remain silent...[T]hey continue to maintain their dignified silence' (112). But the present reviewer had interviewed them in Mecca and Medina in 1984. The data of the interviews, together with other data, was analysed and published in a

book, which, incidentally, Marmon does not refer to.⁵

Regarding the persistence of the eunuchs in Mecca and Medina, Marmon, referring to the above interview in *al-Yamāma* magazine, notes that they still exist. In this respect she comments that, ‘Eldon Rutter would appear to have been a better prophet than Lady Cobbold’ (112). Rutter, a British traveler who visited the Prophet’s tomb in disguise in 1925 thought that in spite of the suppression of the slave trade and their diminishing number the eunuchs would persist because of the active policy of recruitment. Lady Cobbold, a British lady who embraced Islam and performed the *ḥajj* in 1935 as a guest of the Saudi Government, opined that the eunuchs would cease to exist in a few years for their existence was a *bid‘a* (innovation) neither Arab nor Islamic. Her silence on the eunuchs’ cult is interpreted by Marmon as reflecting the ideology of the state—an ideology which condemns the cult of the Prophet and consequently the eunuchs. In connection with Lady Cobbold’s view and to show that even Meccan intellectuals do not disapprove of the eunuchs Marmon quotes a Meccan historian, Ḥusayn ‘Abd Allāh Bā Salāma [Baslamah], who speaks about the eunuchs of Mecca ‘with no trace of disapproval’ (107). But she does not refer to another Meccan historian and a contemporary of Bā Salāma, namely, Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir b. ‘Abd al-Qādir b. Maḥmūd al-Kurdī who urged the Saudi Government to give them retirement, honour them and replace them by free honourable individuals. Why? Because ‘most of them are of the common illiterate people and some are extremely stupid and mentally weak’. If the government does so, it will, in his view, start a good custom, ‘*sannat sunnat^{am} ḥasanat^{am}*’.⁶ Personally, I think

5 Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Naṣr, *al-Aghawāt: Dirāsa ta’rīkhiyya muqārīna li-aghawāt al-masjid al-ḥarām bi-Makka wa’l-masjid al-nabawī bi’l-Madīna*, Khartoum: Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum 1986. For the availability of the book in the U.S.A., consult <<http://www.melvyl.ucop.edu>>.

6 Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir b. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Kurdī, *al-Ta’rīkh al-qawīm li-Makka wa-bayt Allāh al-karīm*. IV, n.p., n.d., 241.

that the eunuchs would not persist, but not disappear as quickly as Lady Cabbold thought. They will gradually become extinct as did their counterparts in Jerusalem and Najaf of Iraq, and the harem quarters in Muslim kingdoms and sultanates. Their number, which was at one time so big, especially in Medina, that a whole quarter was named after them (Ḥārat al-Aghawāt), has greatly diminished. There were sixteen *āghās* in Medina and fourteen in Mecca in 1984 when I interviewed them (incidentally Marmon gives their number in Medina as seventeen). When I performed the *ḥajj* in Mecca and visited Medina, where I interviewed one of them, last March 2001, I found that their number diminished to thirteen in Medina. Three passed away in 1986, 1996 and 1998 respectively. Their roles including the role of sexual police has also greatly diminished. No eunuch has been appointed since 1984, and in my view none will be in future.

I conclude with some suggestions for directions for future research on the eunuchs of the religious sanctuaries. Such line of research may deal with the eunuchs in al-Masjid al-Aqṣā in Jerusalem and in the tomb of ʿAlī, the Prophet's son-in-law, in Najaf, Iraq, and investigate the dates of their appointment, ranks, functions and how they ceased to exist. A comparison between these eunuchs and those of the two Holy Mosques may be drawn. The comparison may be extended to include the eunuchs of the Roman Catholic church. The impact of the Mamlūk closed society on the closed society of the eunuchs of the two Holy Mosques is another area of research. Such impact is seen, for example, in the inheritance system. A eunuch's heirs are the other eunuchs even when his relatives are alive, thus the case of the present day eunuchs, all of whom are Saudis of either Sudanese or Ethiopian origin. Such future research would complement what has so far been done in this almost virgin field.

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