A critique of “Was Imam `Ali a Misogynist? The Portrayal of Women in Nahj al-Balaghah and Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays”

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Before launching into the critique, some disclaimers are in order, due to the nature of these discussions. The aim is not to defend sexism or misogyny. I also do not necessarily believe in any of the narrations mentioned in this paper. The critique is also not comprehensive, nor was every point that could have been made written below, nor was a comprehensive investigation of the narrations, commentary, and points undertaken.
Methodological flaws concerned with authenticity, relevance, and limitation

The author wishes to challenge the authenticity of passages in Nahj al-Balaghah (henceforth, NB) that describe women unfavourably. As noted in the paper, the authenticity of NB is rarely challenged in Imami Shi`i circles, partly due to issues of objectivity. Although the author quotes Tabataba’i and alludes to objections to NB’s authenticity from unnamed Western academics and Sunni individuals, she does not quote or address any positions, or lack thereof, of the leading or prominent Imami scholars involved in the field of hadith authenticity, such Khu’i, Muhsini, or others.

Hossein Modarressi, however, is quoted as saying that the number of sermons attributed to `Ali b. Abi Talib [a] had increased by forty. It is not clear that Modarressi intended to demonstrate an increase in the material attributed to `Ali [a]; the discrepancy is more likely to be different counts, based on what the two writers knew of. In the footnote, however, Inloes presents the unlikely possibility that “reliable material” was unknown, effectively lost, until it was later discovered. This suggests the conflicted approach of the author. On the one hand, she is eager to find fault with the reliability of material she considers objectionable in NB; but, on the other hand, she does not wish to write it off entirely. In her brief history of NB, the author cites reasons as to why the idea that Radhy originated the contents himself is false. First, due to the presence of portions of NB in other sources. However, this does not rule out Radhy mixing in what was already attributed to `Ali b. Abi Talib [a] with his own writings; it is said that some liars would take reliable, accepted narrations, and mix in their own forgeries. Second, a supposed different writing style in other works. However, writers can write in different styles in different places. As will be noted later, the author goes by far less to cast doubt on disliked material.

Although the author intends to challenge the reliability of objectionable material from NB, her standards with Kitab Sulaym differ, even though she intends to compare them. The author states that if the portrayal of women in Kitab Sulaym differs with the portrayal of women in those passages from NB, then those passages may well originate (or, “reflect”) from later ideas about women which were then attributed to `Ali b. Abi Talib [a]. However, she does not consider the authenticity of the Kitab Sulaym to be of importance. But, if there are serious questions over the authenticity of those passages in NB, they only go so far as to discredit the attribution of those passages to `Ali b. Abi Talib [a], and do not establish whether the historical, authentic view of `Ali b. Abi Talib was “good” or “bad”. The author’s basis for comparing the texts is presented in the context of one being a late attribution, while the other is an early attribute. However, just because something is genuinely ancient, it does not mean it is genuinely authentic; forgeries and distortions can originate even within the lifetimes of individuals to whom things are attributed.

Inloes does attempt to answer this. She writes, “Whether or not Kitab Sulaym is authentic in whole, in part, or even not at all; and whether or not Kitab Sulaym actually traces all the way back to the first century hijri, Kitab Sulaym, at the very least, reflects the social mores and worldview of pre-`Abbasid Shi’a, and therefore stands in contrast to most other Shi`i works, including Nahj al–Balaghah, which were compiled later.”

The Kitab Sulaym may indeed represent the polemic regarding the early controversial events and figures, but it has to be proven to be representative of the social view of the Shi`a in that time. Furthermore, the work seems to have been written before the Imamiyya became a significantly large, demarcated group, following teachings of al-Baqir and al-Sadiq. Thus, the author may well have been a general, early Shi`i, rather than an Imami Shi`i whose views serve as a representation of the views of the Imamiyya at that time. Indeed, even if the author was an Imami Shi`i (such as if the naming of the first five Imams is not an interpolation), there is no reason why his views should necessarily be representative of his sect, let alone be authoritative, and even more so when the Imami scholars have even debated whether the ruling or words of a scholarly companion of an Imam should be authoritative if he does not explicitly state that the Imam is the source of it.
In addition to that, the author seems to lack the crucial understanding that even if a later text, such as NB, is not necessarily authentic in its origin (e.g. tracing back all the way to `Ali b. Abi Talib from the early 1st century AH), it does not mean that the material in a book does not originate from centuries before it. It would not be sufficient to dismiss material on the NB as simply not proven to be reliable while Kitab Sulaym may very well be an early fabrication, if the material NB is similarly old in its origin. The author may need to actually demonstrate that dismissed material was either a late invention, or not necessarily representative of the views of the early Shi`a.

Additionally, the material in Kitab Sulaym or NB must be established as representative of the perspective of `Ali b. Abi Talib [a], as per the respective authors of these two works. Otherwise, what the authors choose to include may happen to be things that are “good” or “bad” that would actually be in the minority of such material, and be subject to reinterpretation in the light of a majority of different material. This becomes an even more pertinent question to consider when it is remembered that Kitab Sulaym is a history book describing the coup that seized authority that should have rightfully passed to `Ali b. Abi Talib [a], and NB intends to quote words attributed to `Ali b. Abi Talib with excellent literary features and eloquence. In other words, these books were never intended to include a “conception of women”, and what may be in them may be exceptions due to the volatile circumstances or the nature of the selection of material for inclusion, instead of general norms for behaviour. Even if the author’s work was representative of views of the early Shi`a or the Imami Shi`a, it needs to be established to be dependable as a source of social conventions that would be correct as per the Shi`a.

Furthermore, the author focuses on her paper on `Ali b. Abi Talib [a] in particular, whereas the Imami belief is that all of the Imams taught the same religion that the Prophet [s] had been given and legislated. No explanation at all is given in the paper for this, even though such an explanation would need to justify the necessity of taking what else was said by the Imams regarding women in order to get a more holistic picture. However, later, she quotes a one-off action by Umm Ayman, and even an order from Mu`awiyah, amongst other things, as evidence for her argument. “Umm Ayman argues publicly with Abu Bakr in the mosque; this is in contrast to the exhortation that women’s views are weak, and that women should not leave the house.”. What weight should this historical occurrence, that may be a one-off, from a non-Imami, non-Infallible have for the Imami Shi`a? If the paper’s focus is on `Ali b. Abi Talib, then why does Kitab Sulaym’s account regarding the incident of Umm Ayman matter? Either Kitab Sulaym is historically useful, because of its supposed value in demonstrating the views and behaviour of the Shi`ah, or it is useful because it is an early work quoting `Ali’s [a] words and actions.

She does also use the example of Fatimah [a], (which may be an inconsistency), but the polemical motivation of the author of Kitab Sulaym to have Fatima [a], the daughter of the Prophet, one of the four particularly distinguished women of paradise, and a woman of undeniable importance, going “on a mule with Imam `Ali to visit the houses of the companions to remind them of their allegiance to `Ali”, as an example, cannot be ignored. It can be hardly be considered that the author necessarily cared what the normal social conventions were in such matters, when creating a polemical narrative. The norms in that history may have been considered irrelevant in those circumstances, or the author of Kitab Sulaym may have intended to show Fatima [a] flouting them due to emphasis on the rightful succession of `Ali [a].

References are also made to incidents that are not shown to be the norm, or even in contradiction to the norm. For example, she writes, “[t]here is also an emphasis on the inclusion of Fatimah al-Zahra’ in sacred narrative – such as in the story of the mubahilah (hadith 11, 26) and hadith al-kisa’ (hadith 11) – and the wives of the Prophet are included in and aware of contemporaneous events as opposed to being silent, hidden, or invisible.” How the incident in the narration of the cloak which happened in a wife of the Prophet’s house, and involved the divine, demonstrates “inclusion” is not clear. Similarly, the incident of mubahilah, which has been repeatedly cited in history to demonstrate the importance of Fatimah, `Ali, and their two sons [a], another one-off, also involving
the divine, and also involving minimal input from Fatimah [a], is an example that does not seem to
evidence “inclusion”. There is also an irony in mentioning that from Kitab Sulaym, there are “several
narrations describe Fatimah al-Zahra’ as being in the same room as male companions, and some
narrations about her are related by men, thus implying that they saw or at least heard her (hadith 1,
21, 48, 49, 61)", when she again seems to have little involvement, and appears to be silent in much
of the history that she lived in.

Inloes does later present another reason for the use of Kitab Sulaym: it mentions ‘A’ishah’s rebellion
in the form of the Battle of the Camel, and she wishes to “see” whether ‘A’ishah is condemned for
being a woman or a rebel. However, this does not escape the aforementioned methodological
issues.

Despite the lax approach to Kitab Sulaym’s authenticity, her analysis of the reliability of particular
narrations is uncommonly “strict” (which is a good thing, though seemingly inconsistent). In one
instance, Inloes attacks Muhammad ibn Sinan, although she admits, in footnote 26, the acceptance
of Ibn Sinan by many modern scholars. She calls him a ghali, and cites Tustari’s work, which is ironic,
since Tustari there argues for Ibn Sinan being fine, and that even if he was not, his narrations were
filtered. She then claims that Ibn Sinan’s ghuluww is “in line with an association noticed between
misogynistic narrations and some narrators described as being among the ghulat.” This is an
astonishing claim, and no source is given for it. Ibn Sinan’s ghuluww was to do with his creeds, just
as ghuluww itself, by its very name and definition, was. Tustari himself briefly discusses the meaning
of ghuluww in Ibn Sinan’s profile, and mentions the type of material ascribed to him, which has
nothing to do with misogyny. In her footnote, she also cites Ardabili describing Ibn Sinan as “very
weak”, but, as a late scholar, he would have just been repeating the words found in the classical
books of rijal.

As for material in NB, the author presents two “common” methods for determining its authenticity.
One is to consider the reliability of the contents based on the alternative references and chains
available today, and the other is comparison with the Quran. I will not comment on the latter here,
except in passing. Names of scholars, who consider the sermon suspect on the basis of a supposed
thematic “conflict” with the Quran, are given. Of course, a natural condition for this method of
comparison is to note effective irreconcilability. It is not sufficient to note an apparent contradiction,
and not determine whether the contradiction does not exist if a narration should actually be
interpreted in another way that is not at odds with the Quran. In this case, what the sermon quotes
are technical true: women do not pray and fast while menstruating, etcetera. The only potential
negatives are the description of these as shortcomings or deficiencies, which does not hold much
water as noted previously, or using these to prove that women are inferior to men, and hence that
`A’ishah should not have been followed, which does not hold much water either.

For example, she states that “no limitations or restrictions for men are outlined in this sermon”.
However, the sermon is intended to be about `A’ishah, and also presupposes that what is mentioned
is literally a deficiency that would render women inferior to men. As stated before, even if this was
accepted, these deficiencies would not satisfactorily explain why `A’ishah should not have been followed.

As for the use of Sunni material, although she earlier states that “[w]hile 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.” However, when it comes to a narration in Sahih al-
Bukhari, she simply dismisses it on grounds of not being a Shi’i narration without any investigation,
and also since it was attributed to the Prophet [s]. It is perfectly plausible that the Prophet [s]
uttered these words, which `Ali [a] then used to his advantage during a sermon.

Unfortunately, she then states in a footnote that, “[o]ne 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.” This comment, being so brief and absurd, suggests that the author has very little appreciation of the work done by Sunni scholars in establishing the reliability of Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, and in establishing their respective authors as experts whose opinions cannot be easily overturned. Although the author does well to note this Sunni narration as having similar words to a sermon in question in NB, she does not mention that a similar narration is also found in Sahih Muslim, with a completely different chain to that in Sahih al-Bukhari:

Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 6:

حديثنا سعيد بن أبي مريح، قال أخبرنا محمد بن جعفر، قال أبو بكر بن زيد - هو ابن أسلم - عن عياض بن عبد الله، عن أبي سعيد الخدري، قال خرج رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم في أضحية أو فطر إلى المصلية، فمر على النساء فقال: "يا مغشوش النساء، أسدف، فإني أريد أكثر أهل النار". فقلن وبي رسول الله قال: تكفرون اللعن، وتكفرون العشير، ما رأيت من نافسات عقل، ودين أذهب للب الرجل الحازم من إخناكم! "قلن وما نفصان بيننا وعلوكم يا رسول الله قال: "أليس شهادة المرأة مثل نصف شهادة الرجل". فلن يلي. قال: "فذلك من نفصان عقلها، أليس إذا حاضرت لم تشفع ولم تنصم". فلن يلي. قال: "فذلك من نفصان بينها".

Sahih Muslim, Book 1:

حديثنا محمد بن زمخ بن المهاجر المصري، أخبرنا الليث، عن ابن الهاد، عن عبد الله بن بدير، عن عبد الله بن عمر، عن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أجمعان قال: "يا مغشوش النساء، أسدف، فإني أريد أكثر أهل النار". فقالت المرأة منهن جزء، وما لنا يا رسول الله أكثر أهل النار. فقلت يا رسول الله، تكفرون اللعن وتكفرون العشير، وما رأيت من نافسات عقل، ودين أذهب إلى الأشك. "قلن يا رسول الله وما نفصان العلم، والذين قال: "أليس نفصان العلم، فشهادة أمّر أثين، تعدد، شهادة رجل". فذلك نفصان العلم، ومتكلل الليالي ما تشفع، وتفطر في رمضان، وفدها نفصان الدين.

With that said, I would probably agree that the only narration in the paper that seems to hold any real weight is the one from Sahih al-Bukhari.

Unfortunately, the issues do not end here. Having undermined the credibility of specific material in NB, Inloes then posits an origin for it. She makes a barrage of claims about similarities between the material in NB and the words of Aristotle, going so far as to claim 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.” It is unclear whether this acceptance would be by the laypeople who cannot even understand Arabic and can be frequently noted as posting dubious quotations of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib on social media, or by the experts of hadith authenticity.

She puts forward that Aristotle viewed women as incomplete copies of men, amongst other details. “Although the idea that women are intellectually deficient has persisted in Shi’i discourse, this idea mimics Aristotle’s views of women. This leads to the possibility that these ideas emerged after the Prophetic era due to the importation of ancient Greek ideas into Islamic thought, as well as pre-Islamic cultural interchange. This does leave open the question of why Aristotle would be the more influential ancient Greek thinker in the Islamic world – as opposed to, say, Plato, who expressed much more gender-egalitarian views; perhaps the answer lies in the harmony between Aristotle’s views and the cultural reality of mediaeval Mesopotamia.”

Apparently, a view that women are inferior to men is sufficient for her to link to the presentation of women in some selected sayings about women in NB. Even if the similarities are truly greater than that, then how much significance should two authors both considering women to be deficient in intelligence, or in some other aspect, be given to the extent that it is concluded that one inspired the other, when these are generic ideas? The links drawn by the author between Aristotle and at least some of the selected material in NB seem to be quite dependent upon her interpretations and deductions from that material.
She uses her different understanding of the “conception of women” in Kitab Sulaym to argue that Kitab Sulaym was free of Greek influences, due to its dating: “In contrast, Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays is attributed to the era before the adoption of Greek thought in the Islamic Empire, and to a region and time in which women were more visible in public society.” However, as noted previously, the material in NB, even if inauthentic, is not ruled out as tracing back to a time before Greek thought had significantly influenced some groups of Muslims. In addition, Greek thought entered into the Muslim world largely through the translation of Greek texts, and had more to do with the subject of philosophy than anything else, even if it discussed other matters due to the nature of that subject. Thus, perhaps the most influenced groups were Muslim philosophers, such as al-Kindi, and apparently the rationalists, a.k.a. the Mu’tazila. How some ideas by Aristotle mentioned in some of his texts affected the social conventions and gender roles of entire societies of Muslims, especially in Iraq, is not explained. The mere entrance of Greek ideas into the Muslim world in the second and third centuries also does not mean that it had a widespread, significant influence until later, after which the material in NB (compiled at the end of the fourth century AH) would already have been in existence. (http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H011 notes that a number of works of Aristotle were translated by Hunayn b. Ishaq, who died in 264AH).

Interestingly, the same web-article also mentions, “all the works of Aristotle were translated into Arabic with the exception of the Politics, which for some obscure reason remained unknown to the Arabs”. This is particularly significant since the main quotation of Aristotle that Inloes bases her argument on is from Aristotle’s Politics, which the Arabs did not have access to, and hence could not have been influenced by it. There are only two other mentions of Aristotle’s words. The first is a passing sentence that “[t]he female is, as it were, a mutilated male”, and the second is an indirect quotation that “Aristotle maintained that because men are naturally superior to women in terms of intellect, men are the rulers and women are the ruled.35” It is not abundantly clear what the source of this latter quote is, but it is probably from the same as the first. The source is “Generation of Animals”, which apparently is a zoological text. The influence of a passage or two from a Greek zoological text on early Muslim culture is questionable.

In addition to spurious links of Greek influence on Muslims that distorted or fabricated narrations, she also postulates that, “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”. Although a reference is given to a work in the respective footnote, there is no elaboration on this claim, which is less implausible. Nevertheless, the rationale given appears to be flawed: just because the local culture may have been incorporated, or carried over, into the social norms and religious views of the Muslims living in such an area, it does not mean that the culture of the Greeks could have been similarly influential.
Denial of meaning and context

Of course, all of this boils down to whether the material in NB really presents women in a negative light. This also begs the unmentioned question of standards. What is to be done if seemingly problematic material, of any nature, is attributed to the Prophet [s] or one of his Ahl al-Bayt [a]? It can probably be said that the standard approach is to identify it as problematic as per one interpretation, and then either note that the narration is not reliable anyway and/or reinterpret the narration to be in-line with what is already established as the truth per what is in the Qur’an, reliable narrations, and the accepted positions in the sect. The standards are not taken from the influence of a subjective, Western, modernist, very recent culture.

Are the selected sermons, sayings, and other narrations in NB and elsewhere actually necessarily problematic? Does the author prove that they present women in an unfavourable light, or do the discussions of these passages suffice to interpret them in a different light? This is even more important considering the teaching of the Imams themselves to be careful with the interpretation of their words.

The first of the material to be discussed is an excerpt of a particular sermon in NB, which is apparently one of the most controversial Shi’i texts. It is not clear what the author bases this on. Although it is true that this sermon has been discussed before with regard to women, there is no evidence presented that such (possibly pre-emptive) discussions have failed to end any uncited controversy over the text.

The sermon, apparently delivered after the Battle of the Camel, says that women possess deficiencies, or shortcomings, in three matters. At first, it appears that this is indeed an attack on women. However, the first explanation in the sermon quickly clarifies this. Deficiency in the first thing, faith, is that women do not pray or fast during menstruation. This is not because of a deficiency, but rather, the non-prayer and non-fasting is the “deficiency” itself. In other words, the meaning of this word is not really a shortcoming in the negative sense of the word that we would usually understand, but more of a technicality. Similarly, the “deficiency in their intellects” is nothing more than the halving of the weight of their testimony. Also similarly, the “deficiency in their shares” is the halving of their mandatory inheritance. All of these are technically true: women do not pray or fast in menstruation, their testimony may be halved in cases, and their entitlement to inheritance may also be halved. These are referred to, in this sermon and in the words of the Prophet [s] in the two Sahihs, as “deficiencies” in faith, intellect, and shares. It does not mean that they are actually deficient in their faith, unable to possess an equal, or greater, faith than a man, or that they are actually deficient in intelligence.

The remainder of the excerpted sermon warns people to beware of the “evils” of women, something which is not linked to the technical “deficiencies” in an obviously clear and rational way. The excerpted sermon’s beginning seems to be of a general description of women that shows that they are not “perfect” or “complete” in a more technical sense of the word, and hence we should be aware of what is evil from them. In other words, since women are not infallible by way of their inability to do certain things that would usually be expected, then their behaviour is not beyond scrutiny either, and, thus, we should be careful of them. Of course, as an analogy, the similarities are limited; in reality, there is no blame or shortcoming in women, for example, not praying or fasting during menstruation. Why should such words necessarily be interpreted so absolutely, when language is usually figurative? In this light, the sermon is ultimately about ʿA’ishah, rather than some being some random, unexplained attack on women. This is supported by Radhy’s brief description of the context and contents of the sermon: “from his speech after the Battle of the Camel in condemnation of women”. The “common” view that this sermon was an indirect attack on ʿA’ishah brings more sense into the picture. However, Inloes seems to ignore Radhy’s explicit description of the sermon, and instead says that the only source to support this is much later than NB and needs to be demonstrated to be reliable.
She also later argues that since a part of the sermon was repeated in attribution to `Ali b. Abi Talib elsewhere, the context of the Battle of the Camel is suspect, even though actually it is possible that he said the shared words more than once, which is supported, not only by Radhy’s explicit description, but also by the apparently different accompanying text. She notes the possibility of the words having been uttered on more than occasion, saying, “[a]lthough, 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.” However, the possibility that these words were used in part of the sermon to disparage `A’ishah is not difficult just because the author says it is.

In any case, Inloes argues that it is problematic because “it still reflects a very negative view of women”, and that that this sets a precedent of “demonizing `A’ishah for her gender”. She says, “rather than being criticised for leading a rebellion, she is being criticised for stepping out of her place as a woman”. However, there is no such clear meaning in the text.

The mere mention of menstruation vis-à-vis their not praying and fasting is then weakly linked to a narration that says that some women, such as Fatimah [a], did not menstruate. She says, “[t]his is not dissimilar to a (presumably, spurious) narration in another book which denigrates `A’ishah on the grounds that she menstruated”. The actual narration in question (referenced in the footnote) says:

...from `Ali [a] that the Prophet [s] was asked, what is a batul? For we have you heard you, O Messenger of Allah, saying, Maryam was batul and Fatimah was batul. So he said: A batul is one who does not see redness at all, that is, she does not menstruate. For menstruation is disliked for the daughters of the prophets.

The other, unreferenced narration in the same chapter, partially quoted in the footnote states:

...the Messenger of Allah [s] was asked, what is a batul? He said: One who does not see redness at all, and does not menstruate. For menstruation is disliked for the daughters of the prophets. And he [a] said to `A’ishah, O Humayra, Fatimah is not like human women. She does not get sick like other women get sick.

Inloes does not examine the reliability of either narration (both of which end at the Prophet [s], not `Ali b. Abi Talib), nor the others with the same essential purport. The author concludes that women are denigrated for undergoing menstruation. However, these narrations are about Fatimah [a] not menstruating due to her station, not due to other women being inferior creatures to men. Also, the mention of Humayra is not linked in any clear way to menstruation. The author does not engage in analysis of the word, and narrations explaining it, to defend that the Prophet [s] used this word to insult her. Speaking anecdotally, the claim that is heard that “Humayra” was actually in connection to her menstruation alleges that it is a reference to her apparently menstruating frequently and/or very heavily, not that she merely underwent menstruation. These narrations might be understood to be less concerned with menstruation, and more with showing that Fatima [a] as otherworldly, just as, for example, the narration of her scent being the scent of Paradise may do. In other words, nothing is present where women are clearly attacked for regularly undergoing menstruation.

Later, Inloes raises the issue of menstruation again in a section dedicated to the mention of menstruation or evil. However, the only relevant thing she adds therein is “a logical problem, in that menstruating women do not actually fast less since they are expected to make up missed fasts during the year”, except that it is more likely that “deficiency” is that women cannot fast when they are ordinarily obliged to (especially during the month of Ramadan), just they cannot pray when they are ordinarily obliged to. The rest of the text related to menstruation to quote two modern scholars words pertaining to women having to undergo menstruation, which are irrelevant, and at least one of which she seems to have interpreted unfairly, as will be discussed later.

Inloes also decides to vaguely discuss historical narrative. She makes the point, more than once in her paper, that men were not criticised, like `A’isha was criticised for disobeying particular Qur’anic
injunction. She says that, “[t]raditionally, 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, she quotes no material from NB, or any other material attributed to `Ali b. Abi Talib, in evidence of this. Indeed, it seems that the only time any evidence is given for this is when she states that in Kitab Sulaym, “Talha and Zubayr are criticized for encouraging A’ishah to leave her house and thereby to violate the Qur’an (hadith 29).” This is particularly problematic when her main argument here is simply that A’ishah was “condemned” for disobeying a Qur’anic injunction, while the “over ten thousand men...reported to have joined” her were not. She also appears to contradict herself with statements such as, “[t]he 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.” Why can it not be both?

“In the interpretation that the sermon on ‘women’s deficiencies’ in Nahj al-Balaghah is directed at A’ishah, A’ishah is criticized through her femininity – through deficiencies in her essential nature and intellect, and because she left the house; while, at the same time, the other perpetrators of the civil war are not criticized for violating the Qur’an. Here, the portrayal is the opposite: Talha and Zubayr are criticized for encouraging A’ishah to leave her house and thereby to violate the Qur’an (hadith 29).”

A problem is, as was stated before, that Radhy never intended to present a (w)holistic conception of women as per `Ali b. Abi Talib, and so what is quoted in NB may be only part of the picture. As Radhy did not have this aim, he may have quoted a text that suggests one attitude/perspective, and quote another which presents another. In any case, the author seems to have missed sermon 172 in NB, which also criticizes Talha and al-Zubayr for their roles in almost forcing A’ishah to leave her house for war: They (Talhah, az-Zubayr and their supporters) came out dragging the wife of the Messenger of Allah (the peace and blessing of Allah be upon him and his descendants) just as a maidslave is dragged for sale. They took her to Basrah where those two (Talhah and az-Zubayr) put their own women in their houses but exposed the wife of the Messenger of Allah to themselves and to others in the army in which there was not a single individual who had not offered me his obedience and sworn to me allegiance quite obediently, without any compulsion.

Furthermore, criticisms of A’ishah vis-à-vis the Battle of the Camel were made because of her role in it: she was effectively the origin, and the leader of the entire sedition, culminating in a bloody battle, in which she became the standard-bearer, which resulted in, amongst others, the deaths of many. It should not be then unexpected, or even disliked, that due attention and responsibility is placed on A’ishah considering this. In addition to this, men were criticised for following her. An example is the sermon of deficiencies itself, which tells them to be more careful of mindlessly obeying women, even if it involves following good because they enjoin it (rather than doing so for being good, or recommended by Allah and His Prophet [s]).

She repeats this style of argumentation else on page 342, challenging the attributed sermon to `Ali [a] where he apparently says that A’ishah holds boiling malice in her bosom. Just because other people may harbour malice, this is apparently sufficient for there to be a problem for A’ishah to have been described as harbouring malice. Even if the text were condemning A’ishah for harbouring malice while going to war, this is not really a problem as wars in Islam should be “just”, not inspired out of malice.
Selective attacking and forced problematic readings

When it comes to the only narration that appears to have any weight in reliability, Inloes ignores it and moves on, instead of deliberating over whether it makes the Prophet [s] a misogynist. Of course, the paper is presented as solely to dedicated to ‘Ali b. Abi Talib [a], which is problematic as explained earlier. Nevertheless, there are multiple instances of her being uncharitable with some texts, but finding no problem with others. Some examples follow here and in a later section.

Instead of saying that women are likened to children when writing that “Mu’awiyah orders that false hadith against Imam ‘Ali be taught to women and children (hadith 26)”, Inloes uses this as somehow showing a different “conception” of women. This is in contrast to sermon 153, where the mention of women as well as beasts and carnivores must mean that women are wholly likened to them. In that sermon, what is clearly a generalised statement about women is turned into an absolute by the author in order to find fault with it. Obviously, not all women even care about men; nor is the sole concern of women men; nor does this rule out that men’s concern is even worse; etcetera. For example, the Qur’an (3:14) states: “Beautiful for people is the love of that which they desire - of women and sons, heaped-up sums of gold and silver, fine branded horses, and cattle and tilled land.”

The mention of beasts and carnivorous creatures is interpreted by the author to mean that they are classified together, even though the text only allows one to draw comparisons between them based on what they can be concerned with, rather than on their levels. Inloes also interprets the text as demarcating between women and believers, although she herself earlier notes that the Quran can include both males and females with the term “believers”. Why then should there be any separation if the speaker is indeed ‘Ali b. Abi Talib [a], who was well-versed in the Quran? Why can the reference to women not be a generalised reference to unbelieving women, and thus implicate ‘A’ishah in that way, if the sermon is partly about her? However, the author forcedly derives juxtaposition between women and believers. Are all carnivores, which may include human beings in this text, concerned with assaulting others? No, so it is a generalised statement about some. She then draws a non-existent contrast between her misinterpretation, and the probably polemical description of ‘Ali [a] in Kitab Sulaym: “Imam ‘Ali is described as the Imam of every male and female believer (mu’min and mu’minah), whereas the sermons in Nahj al-Balaghah distinguish between women and believers”. It is not clear whether she intended to pluralise the word ‘sermons’.

Some of her rejections are rather forced. For example, she writes: “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.”

Just because ‘Ali b. Abi Talib was a man whose wisdom “transcended his era” (a phrase which is devoid of any real meaning and application), it does not mean that he always spoke universally. He certainly did speak in the context of his era at times. A more serious issue with this alternative view (if it also applies to the sermon by those who advocate it) is that the explained deficiencies are not bound to a woman’s age after puberty. No source is given for this suggested explanation.

When there is partial corroboration found for the sermon of “deficiencies” in al-Kafi, Saduq’s al-Amali, and al-Ikhhtias, the paper seems to suggest that the author attempts to dismiss the apparently problematic nature of the text: “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.” Whether or not this is actually the case, more problematic is her imposed interpretation on the text as supposedly implying “that men are normative in humanity, and women are exceptions”, even though the narration is innocently reporting advice allegedly given
by `Ali [a] to fellow men, including loving one’s brother (the use of brother emphasising closeness and comradery in Islam), while warning them to be on their guard from women (instead of mindlessly following them as explained earlier). The use of “women”, instead, for example “sister”, may have even been a deliberate linguistic feature, as they would probably less inclined to be on guard from their “sisters”.

When alternative readings may exist for a text, Inloes chooses the unfavourable one. “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.” Just because a potential sign of end-times is that ruler-ship will be through women’s counsel, it does not mean that they are inferior to men. It could simply be a sign. Or, for example, the issue may be with the loss of men also giving counsel, or that those women are of a particular ideology and corruption, or that they are not believing women, etc.

Inloes does not examine the sources for this narration. A similar hadith is found in al-Kafi, volume 8, page 69:

She also writes that: “It also says that Mu`awiyah ordered the Arabs to marry non-Arab women, but not to let Arab women to marry non-Arabs; and to disallow inheritance from leaving the Arabs, and not to give non-Arab women property or gifts. This is to keep money in the hands of the Arab tribes (hadith 23). While the intent may not have been to marginalize or restrict women, it nonetheless does that; and the idea that a woman should not marry outside of her culture is still prevalent today.”

Actually, hadith 23 mentions how `Umar and Mu`awiyah did not follow the ways of the Prophet [s], and how their practices humiliated and degraded certain peoples like the non-Arabs. In any case, the supposed order that Arab women could not marry non-Arab men was because, in that patriarchal society, lineage mainly continued through men. As for the idea of women being prohibited from marrying outside of their culture, this is a cultural idea, and its relevance in a religious discussion that is not concerned with attacking culture conflicting religion is unclear. This is, of course, separate to the common ruling that non-Shia Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Shi`a Muslim men.

Inloes then draws a link between this and a narration in al-Faqih: “Ironically, although the inclusion of Mu`awiyah’s directive is intended to discredit him, a narration is included in al-Faqih equating ‘women’ with ‘fools’ and explaining that the point of that is to indicate that it is abhorrent (makruh) to leave inheritance to women.” The link between Mu`awiyah’s order, and women being foolish is tenuous at best.
Sheer speculation

Perhaps the biggest issue with the paper is not the methodological failings, or the uncharitable interpretations, but the guesswork used.

For example, when it comes to the partial corroboration of the sermon of “deficiencies” in Sahih Bukhari, she attempts to remove any due credibility, by pre-emptively saying, “[a]dditionally, 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.” She states even though she had effectively argued that the sermon in NB is late, possibly due to its Greek influence, and its absence from Kitab Sulaym is significant. Sheer speculation that it was a polemical fabrication does not hold any weight. Nor is any explanation as to why this would be a polemical fabrication. The narration in Sahih al-Bukhari has nothing that would suggest polemical undertones.

Later, Inloes notes the issues with the flowing of the text of the sermon. However, in contradiction to Radhy’s explicit words that these are from the same sermon, she divides the text into three, based not on analysis of the language, but based on it being possible to categorise the three sections as different things: a brief, apparently eloquent statement, a detailed explanation, and a conclusive exhortation. It would have been simpler and more likely for her to have alternatively suggested the possibility that the words were taken from different parts of the sermon – all of the chosen words being about women in general, just as narrators and compilers used to excise phrases and paragraphs from narrations that they did not want to quote, due to things such as irrelevance.

It is very possible that whoever authored this sermon, ‘Ali [a] or not, made a general statement, explained it, and then concluded. However, suddenly the explanation about the known phenomenon in the science of hadith where a narrator’s own words become incorporated into a narration, and are presumed as part of the narration, is randomly invoked without any evidence or systematic method behind it. Just because ‘Ali b. Abi Talib [a] apparently explained his statement, it does not mean that it comes across as “explanatory gloss”. Nothing whatsoever supports this speculation.

Furthermore, whose commentary are they? Radhy’s? It may be very unlikely considering the excellent, widespread transmission of NB. Nor is it consistent with his style, if he does not insert poorly-distinguished, out-of-place commentary halfway through a text in other places. Is it from a narrator who narrated this sermon? But, this phenomenon is really about the incorporation of a few words, not entire paragraphs, and it is an exception, not a general thing, since narrators usually clearly indicated what was the words of the source and what was commentary.

She also arbitrarily decides that the first part is eloquent, and the second is not, without as much as a reference to the Arabic. She then claims that the third one is a separate narration attributed to “various people in different circumstances”, which does not do away with its attribution to ‘Ali [a] in multiple sources, or the arguably strong attribution to the Prophet [s].

Similarly, she claims that “the tone of the book with respect to women” shows that “it is distinctly different from in Nahj al-Balaghah as well as some other later narrations, and is more similar to the style of narrations attributed to the Prophetic era.” This is despite the Prophetic narration in Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim partially corroborating the sermon of “deficiencies”.

When considering one of the five given alternative sources for the sermon, instead of focusing on it being a late source which vaguely cites biographical scholars, apparently without even naming them, which Inloes somewhat alludes to, she also feels the need to claim that “and sirah is a known area of hadith fabrication”, without establishing any relevance and likelihood here, nor giving a source.

She also speculates freely on things that are in no way implied in the text. “While the narration from Bukhari asserts that the majority of the dwellers in Hell are women, the description of the dwellers of
Hell here (hadith 7) is ungendered – and, given the number of male villains in the text, one gets the feeling that more men than women may be on their way to Hell.”
A thinly-veiled agenda

However, the most worrying thing in the paper is that Inloes makes passing, unnecessary, and even out-of-place, comments that reveal her bias. When she quotes some of Makarem Shirazi’s words on the sermon of “deficiencies”, she claims that he justifies an ideology of restricting women – something which she does not reference, explain, or evidence. Elsewhere, she reads his words uncharitably. For example: “Even in the twentieth century, menstruation was still mentioned as a ‘biological’ and ‘scientific’ reason for the need for male authority;47 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.’” Instead of reading this as Makarem Shirazi’s sympathy with women’s pain during menstruation – something which a number of women do complain about – his words become detestable. Interestingly, the “use of childbirth as a metaphor”, in Kitab Sulaym, “adds legitimacy to (and sympathy for) the female experience”. Why sympathy for childbirth should then be a display of the opposite of misogyny is unclear.

Instead of taking words, such as “‘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’, as being general sayings that have a specific context, they are taken as absolutes, and hence become offensive. Apparently women are now characterised as evil. Such sayings are, in a sense, no different to sayings like “women – can’t live with them, or without them”.

When discussing historical narrative vis-à-vis ‘A’isha’s actions, she writes that “[t]raditionally, 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”. But, even this first objection does not pose a problem with what she had written before it.

Much more clear however are passing comments, such as the author finishing a paragraph by stating that the supposed attack on menstruation “attacks her via her femininity, a common tactic for intimidating women into leaving male space”. Or, “[t]he tacit comparison between women and slaves here resembles an equivalency between marriage and slavery for women which underpins classical Islamic perceptions of marriage.” Or, “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)”. Again, the relevance of these in a paper discussing the stance of one particular Imam with women in general, rather than the treatment of women by men or the consideration of women in scholarly writings, is highly questionable, and probably reveal the author’s motivations.

Similarly: “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.)” Here, as is the case for a number of these statements, there is no specific reference to substantiate this apparent hatred of the treatment of women by men or orthodoxy. Even when a reference is given, the reference simply refers to an entire work. The best reference is probably that found in footnote 37, but aforementioned issues apply there too.

“Perhaps due to the early provenance of the text, there is less of an emphasis on hijab as the defining value for a woman.” It must be asked in which narration is a woman’s donning the headscarf made the “defining value” of a woman.
“Additionally, a narration specifically mentions the time before the wives of the Prophet (not women in general) were told to take on the hijab; this narration has the Prophet, ‘A’ishah, and Imam ‘Ali sleeping in one room and, out of need, sharing one blanket (with the Prophet in the middle) (hadith 36, 60).” A return to the relevant line in the two narrations (36: وذلك قبل أن يأمر نساءه بالحجاب and 60: ذلك قبل أن يأمر نساءه بالحجاب) suggests that the author has confused the word “hijab” with its more modern meaning of headscarf, rather than its meaning as a barrier in its original usage. Both narrations may be referencing a phrase in the Quran (33:53): And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a partition (hijab). Alternatively, even if the narration did intend headscarf, multiple obvious problems with the author’s use of this text remain.

However, most bizarre in the paper is when Inloes suddenly engages in a game where the reader is to guess which words belong to Aristotle and which to a modern Shi`i scholar. This is justified because “this exercise indicates the sharp relevance of these concepts to the Shi`i experience here and now”, even though NB was not written in the 20th century, and there is no tangible connection to `Ali b. Abi Talib [a]. Her uncharitable readings cast doubt on whether those quotations would actually represent the views of those men on women.

**Some noted errors**

The following list is not comprehensive, but errors that were noted when sometimes following up a reference or investigating something further.

The most serious of which is that what Inloes attributes to Makarem Shirazi as an explanation for the sermon of “deficiencies” actually appears to be words by the translator, Salim Bhimji, as is denoted by the earlier third person mention of Shirazi, as well as the footnote “Written by the Translator”. In any case, there is no contradiction there, in contrast to what she claims: it does not seem to be claimed that the words of the sermon were solely applicable to `A’isha; rather an indirect comparison with all women was being made.

Other errors:

“His father” in missed in the chain of the first narration on page 333.

Her reference of Bukhari’s narration is incorrect. She references a similar narration in book 24, whereas the narration she actually quotes is in book 6.

“27 The chain of narration in al-Amali (50th session) is: [unspecified] from Muhammad”. The full chain actually appears to be present in the text.

In footnote 14, the second narration is not referenced. In additionally, the Arabic reads “Humayra”, not “Hamra”.
