Gender Norms and Perceptions in Islamic World: A Study of the Travel Account of al-Sirafi

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Abstract: Religion has been a factor that greatly influences the formation and shaping of traditions. Through analyzing the Travel Account of al-Sirafi, this paper draws a correlation between Islam and the perception of foreign female figures in the view of Islamic believers. This insight sheds light on the hidden gender inequalities behind the portrayal of the seemingly harmonious gender ideas in Islamic doctrines. The intention of this article is not to criticize the plausible religious oppression of women, but to apply the nautical text to discover the cultural collision throughout the Indian Ocean maritime trade between the 9th and 10th centuries.

Keywords: Islam, Travel Account of al-Sirafi, Gender, Muslim

1. Introduction

The 9th and 10th centuries witnessed the development of a huge ocean network across the Indian Ocean, covering the largest ocean space in the world. However, the network has never been just a trade route, but a bridge for cultural exchange and collision. Specifically, maritime trade played an important role in spreading Islam between merchants and courts [1]. Muslims living in Arab and Persian lands will travel to Southeast Asia to establish communities in Malay ports. The Islamization of Southeast Asia began with the localization of foreign Muslims and the existence of Muslim communities in these areas, because businessmen married local women and gave birth to the next generation. The teachings of Islam have profoundly influenced the lifestyle of businessmen, because its teachings can be practiced in navigation. In fact, the religion itself does not condemn capital accumulation, as long as wealth is redistributed to society through charity or religious foundations [1]. Therefore, Islam was highly valued by maritime businessmen, which helped it spread through maritime trade in the ninth and tenth centuries.

This paper aims to illustrate the controversy and religious influence on women's images outside the Arab world with al-Sirafi's travel records (hereinafter referred to as "travel records") as the main source. "In 303/915-916, a sailor who moved to Basra from the Persian port city of Siraf wrote the second half of China and India, supplementing the first one written by an unknown sailor and businessman 50 years ago." The accounts of China and India, composed of various reports and anecdotes, provide a detailed description of the scattered territories from the Horn of Africa to the far east coast of China and North Korea. This article explores the historical significance of the ancient world, with a specific focus on the relationship between China and India. It provides insights into the cultural customs and ceremonies of these two countries, showcasing their rich heritage and traditions. Although the previous section mentioned that the successful spread of Islam was partly due to maritime trade, this narrative shows that India and China have not been greatly influenced by Islam, because both regions show considerable differences from the Arab world. Therefore, the collision and friction between cultures are inevitable. Focusing on women, this paper analyzes the influence of Islam on seafarers' attitudes towards foreign customs and manners.

The paper can give a general answer to gender norms and concepts, especially in the Islamic world. In Islamic culture and society, gender norms and concepts are influenced by religious beliefs, traditional values and regional culture. Although Islam’s view of gender emphasizes the equality and complementarity between men and women, and holds that men and women are equally important parts and have their own responsibilities and rights, there are also some specific gender norms and concepts in Islamic society, such as: (1) division of gender roles: in Islamic culture, there
is usually an expectation that men and women will play different roles in family, social and religious activities. For example, men are usually expected to assume economic responsibilities and leadership roles, while women are expected to take care of their families, raise children and maintain social harmony in the family and society. (2) Social taboos and behavioral norms: In some Islamic societies, there are some specific behavioral norms and social taboos, which involve the interaction and contact between men and women. The purpose of these norms and taboos is to safeguard the moral values and ethical standards of the family and society. (3) Religious ceremonies and space separation: In some Islamic societies, there is a separation between male and female ceremonies and space. For example, a mosque may have separate worship areas for men and women to maintain gender separation. The first section of the essay examines the views of different scholars regarding the role and social positions of women in the Islamic world. This prepares the ground for analysis of the perception in the Travel Account of al-Sirafi in terms of female figures in exotic cultures (China and India). Behaviors and prostitution as the two elements this article focuses on as they represent women in public areas in the aforementioned regions. Finally, this essay attempts to demonstrate the relationship between Islamic religion and its influence on Muslim gender ideologies, culminating in the explanation of the subjectivities toward gender norms in the Travel Account of al-Sirafi.

2. Literature Review

It is evident that gender inequality, despite the doctrine illustrated in the Qur'an, exists in Arabian communities and generates negative effects on women's social status. The role of Muslim women in the Arabian world has been explored by various scholars, with some holding relatively positive views and others taking a skeptical stance. Jane I. Smith proclaimed that the concept of women being inferior is not supported in Islam, as Muslims recognize the natural differences between men and women and assign them different but complementary roles in society on the basis of distinctive innate qualities and characteristics [3]. Islam treats both genders equally on some issues and differently on others, but this does not mean that men are treated favorably or necessarily privileged. Asma Barlas outlined the idea that most of the provisions of the Qur'an seem to be directed at protecting women's interests. For example, The Qur'an limits the number of times a man can divorce his wife to two, in order to prevent the abuse of divorce as a means of control or manipulation [4]. Additionally, Asma Barlas also argues for the controversial practice of polygamy as an action only permitted in certain circumstances and aims to protect orphaned girls, rather than a pernicious practice to cater to men's sexual needs [4]. Thus, the conclusion of analyzing the status of Muslim women from verses in the Qur'an 'is that both genders are fairly treated by God in Islam. The above view is generally accepted by scholars and is often linked to the notion that gender inequality is rejected by this typical religion. On the other hand, Nadia Maria el Cheikh has raised the examples of certain Muslim feminist interventionists, such as Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi who provided alternative interpretations that questioned the patriarchal nature of the Qur'anic discourse and advocated for women's rights, as violence towards a wife is tacit consent by the teachings [5]. A social gender hierarchy formed, in which men possess the guardianship of women and they are spontaneously granted the right to correct their wives in their marriage with the support of the Islamic God. Thus, any challenge to this hierarchy was seen as insubordination and disobedience [5]. This essay demonstrates that although the teachings of Islam emphasize the importance of treating both genders with kindness and love and recognizing the individuality of women as a social group, the problem of Islamic gender inequality and the idealization of the doctrine of the Qur'an 'itself is absolutely present.

Gender norms and conceptual theories in the Islamic world are complex and extensive, involving religion, culture, society, and history. However, the use of deep learning in this field is limited due to its focus on patterns and associations from data, which may not fully capture the complexities of cultural and social issues. To gain a comprehensive understanding, a multidimensional approach
that combines deep learning with qualitative research and interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial. This integrated approach will help researchers explore the evolving nature of gender dynamics within the Islamic world, considering the intricate interplay between religion, culture, society, and history. Yet, some data and corpus related to gender norms and concepts in the Islamic world can be analyzed and explored through deep learning methods to gain some insights and trends. For example, deep learning techniques such as natural language processing and emotional analysis can be used to study Islamic classic texts and social media data to understand the gender concepts and attitudes contained therein.

3. Women & Image

This essay intends to analyze the portrayal of women in the Travel Account through two principal aspects – behaviors and prostitution. In particular, this essay examines the author’s remarks and observations on women in China and India regarding their quotidian behaviors and the phenomenon of prostitution, and how such perceptions might be influenced by Islam with reference to the Qur’an.

al-Sirafi’s upbringing in a religious environment shaped his worldview and influenced his perception of others; Dwelling in the Persian port city of Siraf, located in Iran, al-Sirafi was educated and surrounded by local Muslims; While, as Bandar Siraf developed, al-Sirafi witnessed the establishment of what is latter known as the commercial hub of Africa, India and China [8].

“Men are in charge (or are the protectors) of women, because God has given preference to the one over the other, and because men provided support for women for their means. Therefore, righteous women are obedient” (Qur’an 4:34). This quote in the Quran shows male guardianship can be understood as a factor that inherently fosters the oppression or subjugation of women in the Muslim world, as this phenomenon has been divinely sanctioned by God. Some may argue with the belief that both genders are equal in the sight of God, highlighting the reciprocal nature of rights and responsibilities. Though granted spiritual roles, Muslim women are encouraged to be loyal, compassionate, and understanding toward their spouses; Moreover, it is also emphasized that women should fulfill their responsibility as mothers with dedication and love. This is an indication of the loss of formal position and power for female figures in Islam, thus reflecting the inferiority of Muslim women’s social status. al-Sirafi’s thoughts towards women first appeared to be affected by Islamic ideology in the section of his remarks on women’s behavior in China and India:

“Sexual immorality is rife in this place, among both women and men and is not prohibited. It even happens that one of the seagoing merchants will sometimes invite a daughter of the king of these people to an assignation, and she will come to him in the forests, with the full knowledge of her father. The religious scholars in Siraf used to forbid their people from going on trading voyages to this region, particularly the young men [7].” al-Sirafi proclaimed women in the island of Serendib and of the region of al-Aghbab as being “sexually immoral”, as they were allowed to meet strangers in public areas. This behavior strongly contradicts the Islamic teachings of males being the guardian figure of females. With the establishment of the affiliation, the freedom of Muslim women belongs naturally to their male family members, and meeting other men privately would be seen as an indecent act. Additionally, it is again emphasized in the Qur’an that women should be faithful to their husbands and kind to their children. This situation arguably gives rise to concealed social and gender hierarchies. The concept of loyalty within marital relationships was predominantly emphasized for women, as women risked facing violent treatment if they disobeyed their husbands or were perceived as disloyal. Conversely, men were allowed to practice polygamy. It can be argued that the existence of this type of attachment is what underlies al-Sirafi’s negative stance towards individuals who travel to this region, especially young men. [7].”

Chinese clothes, in the Travel Account of al-Sirafi, were compared to the appearance of the Muslims. “Women in China go bare-headed, revealing their hair, while the men cover their heads [7].” This description is in stark contrast to the way men and women should dress as taught by
Islam. In fact, Muslim women are required to wear hijabs that represent their modesty and eventually fulfill the commandments of Allah in Islam. Though wearing a hijab should not be generalized as a reflection of male guardianship or gender inferiority, there is clear punishment in the afterlife for women who refuse to cover themselves properly. Further discussion of the topic was yielded later in the source, as al-Sirafi describes manhood. This paper focuses on the portrayal of women in the travel account, however, the comparison of gender can also create insightful information for the argument.

“The reason they let their hair grow on their heads—I mean the men—is the fact that they do not believe in “rounding” the heads of new-born babies and letting them harden, as is practiced by the Arabs. They say that the practice is one of the causes of the brain becoming displaced from the position in which it was created and that it interferes with the normal faculties of sensation. As a result, their heads are covered in bumps, which their hair covers up and hides from view.”

It can be inferred from the quotation that al-Sirafi showed his confusion as he saw, in his view, indeed a peculiar behavior among males. Islam allows men to grow their hair, as long as they are not imitating the Kuffârs, dissolute persons, and women, it is recommended for them to “follow the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessing be upon him)” [11]. The remark that men should avoid appearing like typical feminine figures is emphasized and highlights the importance for people to identify gender differences in Islamic culture. “Long hair”, in itself, is a concept that is inextricably and stereotypically connected to female figures; Yet, when men are related to the practice, it contrasts with their conventional projection of gender in the public sphere. In fact, Muslim men can lose a sense of masculinity as femininity could be detrimental to their overall construction of manhood. The consequence of such a phenomenon is the loss of hidden privilege for men. Therefore, it is inferred that men who grow their hair without proper reasons are likely to be seen by al-Sirafi as abandoning their male power.

On the other hand, it was authentically echoed by the Prophet, sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam, the behavior of women to shave their head should be prohibited. (It is only not disliked when there is a medical reason like ulcers. [11] )There is an evident emphasis on how women should maintain their “identity” of their gender, showing deprivation of individual rights as well as avoiding the gender group to possess male privilege in their respective religious doctrines. Gender hierarchy is thus strengthened in this very typical practice with the strong attempting sentiment of Muslim male figures to stress on gender differences, as a method to materialize political and economic ascendency under Arabian societies.

The second and last part that showed subjective perceptions towards exotic women is the section on prostitution. Unlike the above sections, al-Sirafi wrote a long paragraph about Chinese women and their register of harlot. “Among the Chinese, there are certain women who do not wish to be virtuously married but prefer a life of sexual promiscuity [7].” The line above shows al-Sirafi’s positive portrayal of marriage, as according to him only married women would be considered ‘virtuous’, yet the others (typically the harlots) should be condemned for ‘promiscuity’.

Ironically, in the Arabian world, women’s prostitution exists in a seemingly more unethical way. In the 7th to 8th century, as Muslims conquered the Sassanian empire, the Persian way of life began to blend into the Arab way of life. The practices and attitudes of Sassanian nobility were adopted by Abbasid nobles. The Arab society thus began to emphasize the concepts of female fidelity and chastity and abhorred the idea of female remarriage; The ideology emphasized by Zoroastrianism is highly similar to the claim above: a woman's first marriage makes her the property of her husband. In order to get divorced and enter the next marriage, the woman must become an inferior wife, compared to their first marriage, in order to marry. Furthermore, it has become the norm for elite Arab men to have large numbers of female slaves as a harem; Even middle-class men can afford to have a concubine. In other words, women were objectified and traded on the market by men as if they were private property. While aristocratic women still had the right to control their own marriages, with the popularization of female slaves in the market, Arab men no longer preferred marriage, but took concubines and expanded their harem [6].
Despite the evident misogynist attitudes and practices such as “licensing polygamy, concubinage, and easy divorce for men, originally allowed under different circumstances in a different society”, some argue that Islam was never a religion advocating for gender inequality, as the occurrence of such phenomenon was purely the result of religious fusion in the Middle East regions [6]. While this explanation might seem tenable, the evidence in certain religious texts has led the notion to another conclusion. In Islam, prostitution and illegal sexual intercourse are forbidden and are considered to be one sins resulting in severe punishments Hereafter, regarding the claim in the Qur’an: “They are those who do not invoke any other god besides Allah, nor take a human life—made sacred by Allah—except with ‘legal’ right, nor commit fornication. And whoever does any of this will face the penalty. Their punishment will be multiplied on the Day of Judgment, and they will remain in it forever, in disgrace”(Qur’an 25:68-69). The verses emphasized the scrupulousness of committing adultery or fornication. Nonetheless, this idea of Islam being an anti-courtesan religion never existed, as “Allah provided a cover in the Qur’an for sex-on-demand”, in particular, the term was defined as “Nakah Mut’a” or temporary marriage [9]. In fact, “Nakah Mut’a” is generally a spouse relationship that expires in a fixed time range so that “it is nothing but a form of prostitution legalized by Allah in the Qur’an [9].” The allowance of such marriage tradition was presented Qur’an by Abdullah (b. Mas’ud) when he reported this to the believers,

“We were on an expedition with Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) and we had no women with us. We said: Should we not have ourselves castrated? He (the Holy Prophet) forbade us to do so He then granted us permission that we should contract temporary marriage for a stipulated period giving her a garment, and ‘Abdullah then recited this verse: Those who believe do not make unlawful the good things which Allah has made lawful for you, and do not transgress. Allah does not like transgressors” (al-Qur’an 5:87).

Through the Hadith above, the Qur’an stresses to authorization of the practice of Mut’a by transforming the “unlawful thing” to “lawful” and admonishing the followers to avoid any query toward the announcement. Just like the description, Islam can exchange for temporary sexual services by “giving her a garment” or “a handful of grain” [9].” Indeed, this is an alternative form of prostitution, by the rest of the civilized world. Yet, even neglecting the fact that it’s a sinful action, it was never fair for women in a strictly patriarchal Arabian society where females were required to be fully faithful and take care of their husbands well. From this peculiar relationship, men are clearly the only beneficiaries as they can never be condemned for their lewd thoughts since they were able to legitimize their sexual urges with the claim of Jabir b. ‘Abdullah and Salama b. al-Akwa’, the proclaimer of Allah’s Messenger (pbuh), that men are grated with permission to contract temporary marriage with women [9]. By using the term “benefit”, Muhammad considered Mut’a as a “benefit” only for Muslim men. In the case of “Nakah Mut’a”, however, it was not an optional matter but a compulsory act that had to be committed by Muslim male figures since Muhammad never aimed to abrogate the practice; thus “any concession by Muhammad would then be understood merely as a conciliatory gesture on his part [9].”

This Hadith also sheds light on the problem of women in the workplace since they have to be dependent on men in exchange for clothing and food. Although the basic principles and teachings emphasized the idea of the male as the “guardian” and the “protector” of women, this has put women's employment in a trap, as displayed in one of The Prophet’s (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) proclamations.

“Woman is ‘awrah, and if she goes out, the shaytaan raises his hopes (of misleading her). She is never closer to Allaah than when she stays in her house.” Narrated by Ibn Hibbaan and Ibn Khuzaymah; classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in al-Silsilah al-Shaheehah, no. 2688.

From this extreme discouragement to female outings, working women have naturally become an unconventional entity. While the proclamation was not a direct ban for working females, still it is permissible for women to work in typical conditions; However, it should be noted that Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih ibn Uthaymeen says that women should only work in certain fields and refrain from mixing with males, which is seen as a source of temptation and trouble [10]. Besides
criticizing the means that enables female to gain their money, al-Sirafi’s response to female prostitution in China can be thus inferred as a form of denial of independent women and sexism. Arguably, as a devout follower of Islam, al-Sirafi should disdain the idea of prostitution, regarding the quote of Prophet Sallallahu `alayhi wa sallam which depicts the wage of female prostitution as “the most evil earning” [11]. But, referring to the aforementioned, this demand is unreasonable in Arabian regions, where women already have few job options. Therefore, this paper argues that the teachings of Islam are to some extent biased in favor of men, and al-Sirafi's assessment of the images of women in foreign territories has profound religious influences.

A comparative approach will be used in this paper to analyze the conflicted attitude toward female prostitution, where Islam stresses a more excessive stance of women whoredom, whereas, Hinduism appears to be relatively moderate, with the reference to religious teachings and the Travel Account.

“The Indians have various sorts of religious practices by which they propitiate, or so they claim, their Creator—glorious is God, and exalted far beyond what the evildoers say! One of these practices is for someone to build a roadside shop for travelers and to install in it a shopkeeper from whom passers-by can buy what they need and to install in the same shop an Indian woman as a prostitute. The builder of the shop pays her expenses, and passing travelers can enjoy her favors. This “benefaction” they consider an act for which they will be divinely rewarded.”

“Although Hinduism does not condemn prostitutes, it does consider prostitution bad karma that creates suffering in lifetimes to come” [12]. Nonetheless, legal prostitution was never the result of the Hindu religion, as misconception was always raised among scholars that Hinduism supported female prostitution with the reference to The Kamasutra, an ancient Hindu book about sex (sex positions) [13]. It should be noted that sex is supported in Hinduism only for spouses and for pure reproduction purposes [15]. Though it is not advocated, al-Sirafi describes how travelers in India could receive sexual services in a “roadside shop”. Although it is not this paper’s intention to legitimize or justify prostitution, a career choice is considered to be a form of individual right that women should have as social citizens. The attitude expressed in Hinduism, thus, can be understood as a relatively open idea towards working women, compared to what Islamic culture perceives, but not modern practices. However, as aforementioned, Islam generally has more extreme and stringent regulations for females in public areas.

“In India there are also prostitutes known as “idol prostitutes.” The reason for this is that, if a woman who has made a vow gives birth to a pretty baby daughter, she takes it to the budd—that is, the idol that they worship—and dedicates her daughter to it. In time, she finds her daughter a room in the market, hangs a curtain over the door, and sits the girl on a chair in front of the curtain. This is so that Indians and others of all sects may call on her—those, that is, who allow themselves such license in their religion—and the girl will make herself available for a standard fee. Whenever her takings reach a certain amount, she hands them over to the idol’s sacristsans to be spent on the fabric of the temple. And God, glorious and mighty is He, we praise for the guidance He chose for us and by which He purified us from the sins of the unbelievers!”

Indeed, such tradition of so-called “sacred prostitution” or “idol prostitutes” can be traced to the past 6th century A.D, when the queen of the Keshari Dynasty decided that women trained in classical dancing should be married to the deities as a way to honor the gods [12]. The practice of Devadasi, which literally translates to the female slaves of God, “was highly revered”, and “literate women were considered to be devadasis of God and submit completely to the almighty [14].” Over time, the practice altered and subsequent sexual exploitation by temple patrons and higher caste individuals are provided with the dedication of lower class girls [12]. This article acknowledges that both Islam and Hinduism tried to justify prostitution by using other concepts to cover up the sinfulness of the act. However, in essence, there are evident differences between the two religions. Islamic doctrine was siding with female prostitution when it approves temporary marriages for male sexual urges, whereas Hinduism never approved female whoredom, and the subsequent alteration of the Devadasi system was not the original intention of the religion. Exploitation of women exists in
every society, regardless of the influences of religions. However, Islam did appear to have more profound influences, manifested through a more stringent attitude toward female behaviors.

4. Conclusion and prospect

In a word, prejudice against Indian and Chinese women exists in al-Sirafi’s travel account and can also be found in religious documents such as the Koran (Qur’an). This proves that Islam has a profound influence on the overall image of women among their followers. However, this does not mean that Islam and the teachings of the Koran are representatives of patriarchy; This article admits that Islam advocates equality between men and women, but some ideologies inevitably tend to be unequal between men and women. According to the Koran, a disobedient wife is mentioned in the Koran (4:34). This section points out that if a husband is afraid of his wife's nushuz, he should "warn them, banish them to different beds and whip them." [5]. In addition, it is worth noting that "disobedience" is defined as sexual refusal only when the wife refuses to join her husband's marriage bed [5]. In other words, men's sense of superiority and authority can be explained by giving men the right to punish their wives according to their own wishes, for simple and subtle reasons, such as sexual needs. Finally, considering these teachings, al-Sirafi's subjective view that foreign women are "unorthodox" seems to have emerged on the basis of religious teachings. Therefore, in al-Sirafi's travel account, the images of Chinese and Indian women are usually negative, and they are also described as "promiscuous" people and so on. This article focuses on the theme of renowned tourism reports, particularly highlighting the approaches used to depict the Islamic world, where the portrayal of female roles is intertwined with well-known religious scriptures. (文章是关注travel account是怎么depict外国的女人的，并结合古兰经解释为什么al-sirafi对外国女人会有这些偏见)

From a technical point of view, in addition, deep learning has certain application value in studying gender identity and gender roles. By analyzing large-scale social media data or questionnaires, we can explore the views and attitudes of people of different ages, regions, sects and cultural backgrounds on gender identity and gender roles in the Islamic world, which shed light to deeper understanding for the topic investigated. The application of deep learning methods to extract patterns and trends from large-scale data requires the integration of rich background knowledge and in-depth cultural understanding for proper interpretation. Moreover, when investigating sensitive topics like gender, researchers must uphold ethical considerations and comply with local laws and regulations. As the research on gender norms and conceptual theories in the Islamic world based on deep learning is still in its early stages, it necessitates the combination of interdisciplinary research methods and the theoretical framework of humanities and social sciences to comprehensively comprehend and elucidate this intricate and diverse subject matter.

Reference


