



FROM SLAVERY TO BECOMING A LADY IN THE ABBASID ERA

Khulkar Ostanakulova

Student, Department of Eastern Civilization and History of

Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, 4th year

astanaqulovahulkar@gmail.com

(+99899)6635522

ABSTRACT

In this article, the wife and mother of the Abbasid caliphs, the person who manipulated the existing power economically, politically and religiously, using her feminine intelligence, the slave from captivity and later the beloved wife and mother of the caliph, Princess Khayzuran and her daughter-in-law, Princess Zubaidah, and another example that proved the importance of the queen's role in this dynasty is the socio-economic and religious reforms of the mother of Caliph al-Muqtadir, Princess Shaghab.

KEYWORDS

The Abbasid era, al-Mahdi, Khayzuran, al-Hadi, Harun al-Rashid, Zubaidah, al-Amin, al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tadid, Shaghab, al-Muqtafiy, al-Muqtadir, al-Qahir.

Introduction

Khayzuran was the wife of caliph Mahdi from 775/776 until his death in 785 and mother of caliphs al-Hadi (b.761 AD) and al-Rashid (b. 763 AD), died in 789 AD. During the period of her husband Caliph Mahdi and her sons, she was actively involved in domestic and foreign policy of the state and allocated funds for charity. After her death, her daughter-in-law and niece, Queen Zubaidah, the wife of Harun al-Rashid, continued her work and had a son from a caliph. She spent most of her income on charitable works for pilgrims and building caravanserais for tourists. After them, the mother of al-Muqtadir, who proved the significance of women in the caliphate, is Queen Shaghab. She also, had a great influence in the state administration and carried out important reforms in the bureaucracy and charity work.

MAIN PART

Motherhood represented a significant time in woman's life that defined her place in Middle Eastern society in the Middle Ages. One of the most important opportunities that regulated the social position of women in the harem of the Abbasid caliphate was to give birth to a son for the caliph. The born son was called the successor of the caliph, and his mother received the title of the Queen. In addition, there were some political privileges, and the position of the Queen mother was defined by the rights granted by the caliph. Mothers within the harem took groomed their sons in order for them to be chosen as the next caliph. In the internal politics of the harem, it was a competition for the caliphate for the mothers,

and they competed for this rank in order to establish their socio-political status. Moreover, they lived a luxurious life by relying on their sons. As the Head of the Harem, the Queen mother had the highest position and was interested in the organization of the state economy. They received an income from landed estates and subsidies from the public purse. Queen Khayzuran served as an excellent example of the status of the role of a mother. At first, Khayzuran who was bought from slavery and came to the place as a concubine, later using her feminine charm, became the favorite concubine of the caliph. In the place, women were distinguished by their singing and dancing skills. In order to win Caliph's attention Khayzuran won the Caliph's praise by competing against other Arabic women and skilled singers. Khayzuran spent most of her time in the Harem studying the Qur'an and hadiths¹, and her telling of life events in the form of jokes attracted Caliph Mahdi. She often mocked Caliph Mansur's cruelty. She quickly became Mahdi's love. According to Tabari², in 775 AD Caliph al-Mahdi married the concubine Khayzuran, the mother of his sons, and declared her two sons as heir apparent. After that, he gave Khayzuran the title of Queen of caliph. Historian Abbott writes that in 159AH, the caliph freed her from the harem, and married her, after Khayzuran performed the pilgrimage of Hajj.

Khayzuran had a daughter named Al-Banuka with Caliph Mahdi. Al-Banuka rode a horse with his father, dressed as a boy and went hunting in black cloak with a sword on her waist. When Al-Banuka died at young age, Caliph al-Mahdi grieved deeply for his daughter.

Al-Masudi stated that "Khayzuran was the only woman in the history of Islam who was raised two caliphs"³. She became active in solving political issues while her husband, Caliph al-Mahdi was still alive. An example of this is that she asked her husband to release Yahya (Khalid Barmaki's son), the caliph's vizier, who was imprisoned for abusing the administration of the Persian province. Yahya's release led to the bond of friendship between her son Harun and Al-Fazl. This ensured that she was active in foreign political matters from the harem. Al-Mahdi also, allowed her to meet with foreign ambassadors and sign contracts. She had a place on the outskirts of the capital, where she managed several trade organizations. The management of many foreign trade associations was in her control. The queen had hundreds of slaves and female servants. Her annual income made up one-third of the total income of the caliphate, and it doubled during the reign of her sons. As al-Mahdi's age passed, the queen's impact in the palace increased, and later she awarded her relatives with various positions in court cases. When her husband was not in the capital of Baghdad, she managed the palace alone. Furthermore, she appointed her mother's two sisters and two brothers as assistants in court cases. She made her sister Salsal to get married with Prince Jafar, elected her brother Ghatrif as the governor of Yemen. After the death of al-Mahdi, her son Musa al-Hadi took power. As a queen mother, Khayzuran began to exert a great influence on the lives of other women in the harem. For other women, in order to improve their social conditions, it was crucial to be recognized by the Queen. Even after her husband's death, her son al-Hadi at the beginning of his short reign, gave his mother the same political privileges as during his father's time. She began to be more active in foreign policy than before and exercised control over judicial affairs again. According to Tabari (historian), al-Hadi did not like his mother's actions and warned her from getting involved in political affairs. Khayzuran assured that she would respect and obey all her son's decisions. Caliph al-Hadi initially never refused his mother's requests. Taking advantages of this, the queen mother asked her son for the wishes of her friends as

¹ The homily of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W)

² Abbasid historian

³ Al-Masudi *The meadows of gold; The Abbasids* 6.268-70

her own needs and began to fulfill them secretly from him. This caused a number of complainants to line up at the queen's door. The growing political power of his mother strained the patience of Caliph al-Hadi and gradually limited his mother's political freedom. Another reason for Caliph al-Hadi's dissatisfaction was his mother's appointment of his brother as governor of Yemen province. Al-Hadi defied his mother, removed his brother from this position in the palace and decided to divorce his mother's niece Ubaydah. Additionally, he disinherited his brother Harun and declared his son Jafar as the heir to the throne instead. All these actions of al-Hadi led to Khayzuran's disagreement. William Muir (historian) stated "After these actions, Khayzuran participated in the murder of his son al-Hadi, she contacted Yahya Barmaki who was released from prison, and prepared the necessary will to appoint her other son Harun as the heir to the throne"⁴. The death of Musa al-Hadi allowed Khayzuran to become participate in inner politics, and she declared her favorite son Harun al-Rashid as caliph. Caliph Harun al-Rashid's reign was successful. Khayzuran as mother of the caliph regained her high position in the harem. She as mother of the caliph received an annual income of 16,000,000 silver dirhams, about its half was made from taxes on lands. Coins were minted in the name of the queen. She also controlled the social status of women in the harem, how they interacted with each other. They had religious duties. These duties included Hajj, pilgrimage to Mecca and giving various donation. Their religious obligations contributed to the formation of the harem economic division. Khayzuran spent a large amount of this income on charitable works, and made several pilgrimages. Every time she made pilgrimage, she organized charity work, allocated money for the use of land in the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammed and established the Nasib Mosque there. In addition, she founded the construction of several water fountains in the city of Makkah. In 789, when al-Khayzuran died, her annual income accounted for half of the annual income of the entire caliphate. After her death, Harun al-Rashid carried his mother on his shoulder to show his loyalty to her and passed through the mud. After the death of Queen Khayzuran, the influence of Harun's wife, Zubaidah increased in the harem. According to her origin, Queen Zubaidah was the niece of al-Khayzuran, that was the daughter of her sister Salsal and prince Jafar. During Caliph Mahdi's time, she served as a concubine in the palace. The wedding of Harun and Zubaidah took place in Baghdad in 165AH. This wedding was recognized as the most luxurious wedding of its era. On that day, Zubaidah accepted the badana⁵ of the Umayyad, which previously belonged to Khayzuran. Zubaidah became the only beloved wife of Harun al-Rashid throughout his life and constantly she competed with other women in the harem for status. Immediately after their marriage, Zubaidah became a wealthy woman, owning large tracts of land, gardens, and several palaces in western Baghdad and Iraq. Zubaidah employed secretaries and servants to manage her property. At the same time, she spent a large amount of her wealth on charity, like Queen Khayzuran. Most of this income was spent primarily on pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina. Zubaidah performed Hajj pilgrimage five times during her entire life. According to Ibn Abd Rabbih⁶, Harun al-Rashid visited Mecca on foot with Queen Zubaidah. In the fall of 806AD, during pilgrimage Zubaidah was told that there was a serious shortage of water on the road and that the pilgrims were suffering. According to Zubaidah's order, the Zam-Zam well was deepened by 4-5 meters and amount of water was increased. After that, Zubaidah built the Ain al-Mushash aqueduct in Hunain valley, 10-

⁴ William Muir *The Caliphate; Its Rise, Decline and Fall, from original Sources* (London: Religious Tract society, 1892)

⁵ It was belonged to the beloved women of the caliphate during Umayyad era.

⁶ Arabic writer and poet

12 arab⁷ miles far away from Mecca. In total, Zubaidah spent seven hundred and fifty thousand one million seven hundred thousand dinars from her own funds to organize water supply for pilgrims. The bay in Arafat valley, where pilgrims gather to perpetuate her works is named “Zubaidah Bay”. In addition, she ordered to build pilgrim roads and caravansary through the Iraqi desert and established water stations. This road is still preserved in the archeological site of “Darb Zubaidah” (The way of Zubaidah).

Zubaidah’s charitable activities were not limited to the holy cities, but also were carried out in different regions of the caliphate. Hospice houses⁸ were constructed along the western border of the Caliphate. In Bagros, she organized free caravanserais for visitors and also, gave gifts to the needy. Zubaidah showed financial activity in the restoration of destroyed cities. The reconstruction of Tabriz, Varsan and Kashan is associated with the name of Zubaidah. Moreover, Harun al-Rashid minted coins in the cities of al-Muhammadiyah and Madin Bajinaus where the title of Zubaidah was stamped. During the al-Amin period, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Zubaidah, dirham coins were minted in her honor in 195AH⁹. The queen kept a hundred slaves in her palace who knew the Qur’an and each of them had to read a tenth part of it every day. She organized poetry readings and various musical events and regularly invited famous poets and singers to the castle. She wrote three literary works, of which were written in the form of a poetic appeal to al-Mamun after the death of her son Amin and two of them were devoted for her son’s death. Zubaidah had a son with Harun al-Rashid who was called Muhammad al-Amin. Harun had another son with his other wife who named Abdullah (future caliph Ma’mun), who was raised as the heir to the throne. This put Zubaidah in danger, and the two heirs gradually became antagonistic. After the death of Caliph Harun, the struggle for the throne between Amin and Ma’mun escalated, and al-Amin sat on the throne of the caliph for a short time. After Amin’s murdering, Caliph Ma’mun allowed Zubaidah to stay in the palace and keep all her property with herself. She gave famous Umayyad badana to Buran bint Hasan, Ma’mun’s wife at Ma’mun’s wedding in 826AD. She performed the pilgrimage for the last time in 831AD and on the way she spent one million dinars on road expenses and another two million dinars on the construction of scholars and water facilities in holy cities. After returning from Hajj, she died in July and was buried in Baghdad.

Another example of the importance of the queen’s role in the second Abbasid dynasty is Queen Shaghab, the mother of the eighteenth Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (908-932). During the reign of her son, she exerted considerable influence in the affairs of the state, and she was called “Umm al-Muqtadir” (mother of al-Muqtadir) or “al-Sayyida” (The woman). It was known that Shaghab was a Greek from the Byzantine Empire, and she was originally a slave of Umm Qasim, the daughter of Muhammed ibn Abdullah ibn Tahir, who was the governor of the Tahiri province in 851-867. She was initially called “Naima” (gentle) and was brought to the harem of Caliph al-Mu’tadid in 892, as soon as al-Muqtadir was born in 895, Shaghab was freed from concubines and received the nickname “Shaghab” (storm). After the death of al-Mu’tadid, his sick son from another wife, caliph al-Muqtafi (902-902) took over the throne and he died in 908. Then, 13-year-old al-Muqtadir took the throne. The full administration of the caliphate was subordinated to Shaghab’s control. Although she was not

⁷ Length measurement in Arabic countries in the Middle Ages 1 arab=39,9 m

⁸ A shelter for dervishes to spend the night

⁹ In 1927, dirham coins stamped with Zubaidah’s name were found among Shumilov’s treasury in Novgorod and in 1960, Zubaidah’s memorial dirhams were transferred to the Hermitage Museum for permanent preservation.

engaged in any state affairs during the reign of her husband Caliph al-Mu'tadid, her glory increased with accession of her son to the throne. Al-Muqtadir was the only minor ruler in the history of the Abbasid Caliphate. Due to his young age, he relied entirely on his mother and officials for administrative tasks, spending most of his time in his mother's room and as a result, bureaucratic meetings were held in Shaghab's residence rather than in the palace, as the caliph's seal, a symbol of government and official documentaries were kept there. As a queen mother, Shaghab became one of the most influential and powerful figures during her son's reign, appointing and dismissing officials, executing and pardoning sinners, deciding important events, contracting government investigations and conducting utilitarian relations with powerful officials and officers. She enriched treasury finances and carried out charity work. It was said that her annual income was twice as much as the annual income of the caliphate. The modern historian al-Masudi condemns the era of al-Muqtadir and describes that "In the period, the role of women and servants in the government increased, and the caliph paid no attention to state affairs." Similarly, Ibn al-Tiqtaqa (chronicler of the 14th century) also considered al-Muqtadir as "an extravagant who was busy with satisfying own ego and pleasure as a consequence this led to women and servant participating in governmental duties". Shaghab had female secretaries who played a major role in mediating between the court and the harem, and who were even able to influence the minister. According to the sources, Shaghab's secretary Fatima drowned while sailing across the river of Tigris. One of the reasons why Shaghab's popularity among the population increased was her extensive charity work. Shaghab spent one million gold dinars from her income for pilgrims every year. She appointed doctors on the roads for the pilgrims and ordered to build water reservoirs. And gave valuable donations during her pilgrimage.

Queen Shaghab's life ended tragically, her son was executed by the commander of his slave army, and she died under torture at the hands of Caliph al-Qahir, the half-brother of the caliph al-Muqtadir, in 933AD. All her possessions were confiscated, her jewelry alone accounted to one hundred and thirty thousand dinars, and the value of her clothes and cloths was estimated at eighty thousand dinars at that time.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that according to Islamic traditions, the main duty of harem women in the caliphate was to give birth to the future caliphs and take care of their education, the above-mentioned queens during the Abbasid era recognized as the most influential women in the Caliphate history by their reforms related to the state power in terms of socio-economic and political aspects. The fact that they had a wide impact and power in the bureaucracy proved the significance of the role of women in the history of Islam.

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