9 In the ‘Land of Wonders’: Bint al-Shāṭi’s pilgrimage

The hajj and the construction of reformist religiosity

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The intellectual debates in Egypt, and the Middle East more generally, in the 20th century have been shaped largely by the period that is usually indicated as the *nahḍa*, or ‘renaissance’, which began halfway through the 19th century. The *nahḍa* can perhaps best be characterized as a phase of discussion and re-orientation to harmonize culture, politics and society with the intensifying processes of globalization and modernization. Administrative, legal, economic and social reform measures in the Ottoman Empire and its Arabic provinces were accompanied by debates about cultural and political orientation, ‘modern’ scientific world-views, the significance of the cultural tradition and the tension between authenticity and renewal. This far-reaching self-reflection and cultural re-orientation was facilitated by new media and means of communication in the form of the printed press, translations and transnational contacts, and in the form of transport, enlarging the possibilities for interaction with the non-Arab world. Evidently, the debates were partly inspired by the necessity to confront the growing pressures of Western influence and dominance in all relevant fields and to formulate strategies for emancipation from Western hegemony. More generally, they were intended to regulate the incorporation of the Arab/Muslim world into the globalized system of Western capitalism.

The period of the *nahḍa* provided the framework for the life and work of the prominent Egyptian scholar and intellectual Bint al-Shāṭi’ (1913–1998), who dedicated her life to scholarly and socio-political issues, such as the development of modern methods of Qur’anic interpretation, the emancipation of women and new literary forms to explore the religious tradition. Bint al-Shāṭi’ profited from the results of educational reform during the *nahḍa*, which enabled her, as a woman, to pursue advanced studies in the fields of literature and religion, and to be accepted as a learned publicist in the Egyptian press and as an academic at several universities, both within and outside Egypt. It was the increasing participation of women in the field of publishing and intellectual debates at the close of the 19th century, and the emergence of the feminist movement in Egypt, which paved the way for her intellectual pursuits, while the work of reformist thinkers such as

Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905), who looked for 'modern' views of religion and its relation to society, enabled her to develop her methodology of Qur'anic interpretation. Still, within these intellectual strands – religious reformism and feminism – Bint al-Shāṭi' marked out her own very specific position, which, as we will see, defines her in a rather paradoxical way, in the words of Mervat Hatem, as a 'traditionalist modernist' or a 'conservative feminist' (Hatem 2011, 2–3).

In this contribution, we will focus our attention on a specific work published by Bint al-Shāṭi' in 1952 and in a second augmented edition in 1972, in which her various interests converge. The book contains an account of two journeys to the Arabian Peninsula undertaken by Bint al-Shāṭi' to perform the umra (the informal, short pilgrimage to Mecca) and the hajj (the formal, extended and obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca) in, respectively, 1951 and 1972. For citizens of rural lower-class backgrounds like Bint al-Shāṭi', it was quite extraordinary to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, particularly for women. Therefore, the text, which has only appeared in Arabic, represents a unique document within the field of female writing in Egypt in the 20th century. Below, the Arabic text will be analyzed, focusing on the main issues in Bint al-Shāṭi's thought. But before turning to a discussion of the text of her travel account, it is convenient to give a brief overview of Bint al-Shāṭi's life and work as a framework for analyzing the ideas and attitudes expressed in the book.

Bint al-Shāṭi's life and work

ʿĀ'isha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, who later adopted the pseudonym Bint al-Shāṭi', was born in 1913 into a lower-class family in a village in the Egyptian Nile Delta. As a girl from a non-privileged social background, she encountered some difficulty to continue her education, but in 1936 she succeeded as one of the first women in enrolling in the Arabic Department of the Fouad University in Cairo, later transformed into the Cairo University. During her studies, she not only immersed herself in her main passion, Arabic language and literature; she also met the prominent scholar and intellectual Amīn al-Khūlī (1895–1966), who became her husband and her great intellectual inspiration. She also met the important modernist thinker Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889–1973), who was her supervisor; the reformist thinker ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889–1964); and the Islamist political ideologue Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966). In 1952 she graduated on a doctoral thesis about the important text *Risālat al-ghufrān* (*Epistle of Forgiveness*) by the classical poet ʿAbd al-ʿAlā al-Maʿarrī (d. 1057). She became Professor of Arabic at ʿAyn Shams University in Cairo (1962–1970) and the Qarawiyyīn University in Morocco. She was the first woman to be invited to give a lecture at the prestigious al-Azhar University, which, as a traditional religious academy, had always been a male patriarchal institution. Bint al-Shāṭi' has thus gone through an enormous social mobility which enabled her to move

freely in circles and places that remained shut for most women, particularly those of her own rural background.

Before and during her academic studies, Bint al-Shāṭi' began publishing articles and short stories in such general mainstream newspapers and cultural/political journals as *al-Hilāl* and *al-Ahrām*. However, her main outlet was the periodical *al-Majallat al-nahḍa al-nisā'iyya al-Miṣriyya* (*Journal of the renaissance of Egyptian women*) founded by the formidable religious publicist and advocate of women's rights Labība Aḥmad (1870s–1951),² who became one of Bint al-Shāṭi's mentors. In 1934 Bint al-Shāṭi' became editor-in-chief of the journal, which advocated the emancipation of women within the confines of Islamic doctrines, following the emancipatory discourses of the *nahḍa*. In this period, Bint al-Shāṭi's publications – which included short stories and novels – were intended to ventilate her social criticism, initially about the condition of the Egyptian peasants and later about the position of women, moral corruption and social hypocrisy. In 1952 her shorter pieces were collected under the title *Sirr al-Shāṭi'* (McLarney 2015, 42; Naguib 2015, 49–50; Hatem 2011, 5, 6, 9).

After her graduation from the university in 1951, Bint al-Shāṭi' dedicated herself more to synthesizing her main scholarly fields of interest, language, literature and religion. In the period between 1956 and 1961 she wrote a series of biographies of the Prophet's family, that is, the daughters of the Prophet, his mother and Zaynab and his other wives. These works fitted into a trend which had become popular in the 1930s and 1940s, which produced several 'literary' or 'humanist' descriptions of the life of Muhammad, mainly inspired by Ernest Renan's biography of Jesus. In these texts a revisualization of the religious tradition was combined with new, modern, views of life and religion. For Bint al-Shāṭi', this genre provided her with the opportunity to reflect on her main fields of interest, the position of women, religion and politics. Her rendition of the lives of the female members of the Prophet's family – based on a free interpretation of religious-historical sources and orientalist biographies of Muhammad – enabled her to formulate her thoughts about the human aspects of prophecy, the dignity and rights of women, the manifestations of religion in the family sphere and the Prophet's family as a 'model of idealized domesticity'. It also enabled her to reflect upon the duties, rights and virtues of women more generally within the domain of religious doctrine, but beyond the restricted framework of Islamic law (McLarney 2015, 40, 43–52; Naguib 2015, 51 ff; Hatem 2011, 15–20).

In the 1960s Bint al-Shāṭi' published her most important works in the field of Qur'anic exegesis, or *tafsīr*. The discipline of *tafsīr* was opened up to new ideas and methods mainly by the aforementioned reformist scholar Muhammad 'Abduh, who aimed at a revitalization of Islam and a redefinition of the relationship between religion and society. To achieve this, Islamic thought should be reconciled with a modern view of the world based on the recent progress in the fields of science and technology.

This was possible, according to 'Abduh, because Islam was inherently rational and therefore naturally compatible with scientific principles. This rationality would also apply to the domain of textual interpretation. 'Abduh advocated, on the one hand, a thorough inspection of the basic sources of the faith, as interpreted by the early generations of Muslims (*salaf*), and, on the other hand, to create space for a reinterpretation of the sources to make the faith relevant for the modern conditions of the believers (Naguib 2015, 46, 49, 51, 64).³

This combination of reformism and fundamentalism in the sense of going back to the sources in order to mobilize the potential of the religious tradition for the sake of transforming society was adopted by later scholars, intellectuals and political activists. Among them was Amīn al-Khūlī, whose 'literary' approach to the Qur'an, in which the text was not only studied for its linguistic and aesthetic properties, but also in its historical and social contexts, became the foundation of Bint al-Shāṭi's methodology in her books on *tafsīr* (Naguib 2015, 46–47, 50).

According to Bint al-Shāṭi, the hermeneutical enquiry of the Qur'an should be firmly rooted not only in the exegetical tradition but also in the lexicographical tradition, preserving the Qur'an itself as the highest authoritative instance. She stressed the importance of searching for coherence in the different uses of words throughout the text, to find meanings that were less connected to specific situations, but rather revealed some deeper essence. More than al-Khūlī, Bint al-Shāṭi emphasized the predominance of the linguistic component of Qur'anic interpretation which should provide an 'objective', 'general' understanding of the text in harmony with its overall intentions (*maqāṣid*). Therefore, she systematically built her procedures on the traditions of *tafsīr* and linguistics, to produce potentially new, more objective interpretations, which were relevant for the Muslims of her time. Her *tafsīr* should not yield conclusive interpretations, but rather serve as a guidance with regard to contemporary issues (Naguib 2015, 51ff.).

Bint al-Shāṭi founded her exegetic methodology on the inherited traditions to make her interpretations more convincing, but also as a strategy to be more authoritative as a woman in a field of male-dominated studies. In the domain of scholarship she struggled for the acceptance of female authority, being the first modern female exegete of the Qur'an. Conversely, her expertise in religious studies was also used to support her views on the emancipation of women. Bint al-Shāṭi argued that the Qur'an allows men and women the same freedom of will and the same religious and moral responsibilities. Before God only piety is a measure to distinguish between people. Still, she does not adopt the Western conception of equality between the sexes, but rather emphasized equity within the framework of the religious doctrines, laws and morality. Men and women have different tasks in life and concomitant virtues, which harmonize with 'natural' and 'social' differences. Moreover, on the social and political level, the form of emancipation of women that she advocated should also be related to

the nationalist cause, linking the position of women more generally for the struggle for national emancipation, political independence and the construction of a modern society (McLarney 2015, 63, 69; Naguib 2015, 60; Hatem 2011, 14; Marcotte 2001; Bint al-Shāṭi' 1999).

This brief overview of Bint al-Shāṭi''s main ideas and pursuits shows how her fields of interest – literature, language, women, religion – were intertwined and mutually reinforcing. They reveal a strong personality who succeeds in constructing a coherent vision of life from various components, which are integrated through the mechanisms provided by the faith and scholarship. However, it is less easy to coherently categorize her ideas in one of the different domains, that is, her views on women's rights and the emancipation of women. Bint al-Shāṭi' advocated social equality between women and men, retaining the conventional roles for women prescribed by religion as spouse and mother. The main concerns in Bint al-Shāṭi''s work, mentioned above, are reflected in the book *Arḍ al-Mu'jizāt; riḥla fī jazīrat al-'Arab*, which will be analyzed below, and which appeared shortly after her graduation in 1952, before she published her major works on the lives of the Prophet's family and Qur'anic exegesis. A later edition (1973) contained an account of her second visit to the Arabian Peninsula in 1972 to perform the hajj (McLarney 2015, 42–43; Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973).

In the Land of Wonders: Bint al-Shāṭi''s pilgrimages

The book *Arḍ al-mu'jizāt* is dedicated first to the unique history and geographical peculiarities of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the 'holy ground which through God's will has written a new history for the world' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 5, 7). It is here that the Arabic language 'emerged from the night of the Jāhiliyya [the pre-Islamic period of 'ignorance'] to impose its vitality on time and took care that the Qur'an was revealed in it' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 7). Thus broke 'the truthful dawn, by the miracle of prophecy and the book of the Shari'a, which by its light liberated mankind from the darkness of the Jāhiliyya, to bring truth, goodness, beauty' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 7). The revelation disclosed the secrets of life in a barren wadi. The two journeys to the Arabian Peninsula recounted in the book, in 1951 and 1972, represent an encounter between this ancient history and the present; the journeys were saturated with 'goodness and emotions', and 'pureness of heart and conscience' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 8). The account is dedicated to this land that has presented us with the language that gives expression to the 'distinct essence' of humanity, the mission of the Prophet, the direction of prayer (*qibla*) of the community (umma), the destination of the hajj, the object of our heart's desire (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 8).

Of course, this dedication, combining history and religion to construct powerful sacred space, defines the discursive framework of Bint al-Shāṭi''s pilgrimage accounts. Although this predominantly religious framework is preserved throughout the text, mainly through quotations from the Qur'an,

the first journey is to a large extent of a secular nature. The Egyptian delegation, consisting of teachers and students, was hosted by the Saudi family, which at that time was eager to exhibit their commitment to modernization and economic development. The delegation visited the main Arabian towns, oilfields and harbours, and was invited to dinner parties and literary *soirées*, attended by Saudi intellectuals and poets. Apart from religious references, the text is strewn with quotations from well-known ancient Arabian poets, which convey the *genius loci* of the relentless desert. Within this packed programme, the actual umra occupies only a small place. The combination of secular and sacred components of the journey provides Bint al-Shāṭi' with the opportunity to focus on her main concern, the confrontation between tradition and modernity, or, in her words, between 'history' and the 'present', between 'rootedness' (*iṣāla*; *irāqa*) and the 'new' (hadith) (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 12–15, 21, 41, 166).

In the first chapter, Bint al-Shāṭi' reflects upon the mysterious nature of the desert, which, as an intimidating, empty space, has self-evidently produced myths and legends, illusions and visions of apparitions, jinns and demons throughout the ages. These myths and legends were recorded in poetry and stories, such as the accounts of the tribes of 'Ād and Thāmūd, who rejected the call to subject to God's authority and were subsequently punished. In this way, the desert imposed its explanations for all strange phenomena upon the nomad population and determined their view of life and the universe. Their imagination and emotions were filled with its secrets, in the form of illusions, visions, poetic inspiration and dreams, and tales of many kinds of fabulous creatures, which were transmitted from one generation to another by storytellers and poets. Within this inhospitable realm, Mecca became the centre of heathen pilgrimage for the Bedouin tribes, who protected it as their sacred domain (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 18–25).

Bint al-Shāṭi' continues to explain that the budding literary imagination of the Arabs contributed to the development and gradual refinement of the Arabic language. Rules for grammar and style were shaped and the language adapted itself, both in structure and aesthetics, to the requirements of life in the desert, by defining symbolical and metaphorical uses, metonymy, poetic formulation, rhythm, clarity of expression and internal consistency. It became the common language of the Arabian tribes and – partly because of the pilgrimage – of the Quraysh and Mecca. When the Arabic language was sufficiently developed, it made possible the revelation of the Qur'an as a miracle of linguistic clarity, ending the 'night' of the Jahiliyya and the interference of polytheist beliefs. In this way, the mechanism of language served to liberate mankind from obscurity and ignorance. Arabic became the common language of Islam as a religious community, but also of a scholarly and scientific tradition based on rationality and the essential harmony between faith and reason. Especially the natural sciences were studied, achieving a transition from observational to experimental scientific

methods, which laid the basis for the era of modern European science from the Renaissance onwards (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 28–45).

This last observation touches upon another issue discussed in the text, the confrontation between the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula and Western modernity. Bint al-Shāṭi' explains that, for a long time, the peninsula succeeded in remaining isolated from historical developments in spite of its central role in the Islamic tradition. The Bedouin were able to sustain their age-old customs and values. The hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who travelled to Arabia on ships or in trains continued their journey to the Ḥijāz on camels and donkeys. Bint al-Shāṭi' describes how, inevitably, the new technologies that were gradually introduced met with fierce resistance from the Arabian ulama, who considered the telegraph a work of the devil. She also notes that in the beginning of the 20th century the first monumental clock was destroyed as *bid'a* by what she characterizes as 'fanatical Ikhwān', the Wahhābī core troops of the Sa'ūds:

The Bedouin of the peninsula live with their mentalities and opinions in strongholds behind walls, brandishing their weapons against every new development and protecting protesters against its innovations with the sword.

(Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 57)

And:

They called automobiles and bicycles "Satan's wagon" and "devil's horse". Until recently cars were considered sinful, because it is *bid'a* to move by magical power and the help of the devil, which is proven by the fact that cars continue moving after the driver has descended.

(Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 56)

For years the royal family struggled against the conservative ulama and the rebellious Ikhwān, who obstructed all technological innovations. In 1927 a conference was organized to discuss these matters, but the controversies almost ended in a civil war, until in 1930 resistance was subdued, and King 'Abd al-'Azīz could announce the beginning of a new era (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 53, 56–57, 59, 62).

Bint al-Shāṭi' points out that the 'new life' in the modern Saudi kingdom was built on the premise that science and technology belonged to the 'wondrous gifts of God' (*āyāt al-khāliq*) (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 59) to the service of mankind. In education, this implied the establishment of new schools and colleges, presenting a partly Western curriculum. She dwells on the opposition in 1930 by Najdī ulama to the foundation of colleges whose curriculum included drawing ('forbidden in Islam'), foreign languages ('introducing unbelievers' ideas') and geography ('claiming that the world is a globe') (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 63). A more visible innovation was the rapid introduction

of modern means of transport and communication (telegraph, telephone, automobiles, aeroplanes). It is these latter tokens of modernity which particularly fascinate Bint al-Shāṭi'. She is astonished by the compression of distances from camel journeys of several days or weeks through burning deserts to comfortable aeroplane flights of a few hours. She observes the fear among Saudi women for the new means of transport, which are seen as the miraculous acts of jinns. She compares the modern lifestyle with the traditional Arabian world of hardship, myths, poverty and isolation:

Like that, from a camel to an aeroplane; from a palanquin to the salon of a Dakota or a Bristol aeroplane; from water from wells and pits to pineapple juice and Coca Cola. What a rapid transition across a deep chasm.

(Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 75–77, 164)

The spread of modernity naturally evokes the issue of Western penetration of the Arabian Peninsula, which had been warded off for many centuries and which was the main worry of the Wahhābī ulama. The Western intervention is linked to the development of the oil industry set up by the American Standard Oil company in co-operation with the Royal Saudi family. Bint al-Shāṭi' presents the search for oil, from 1930 onwards, as an epic story of the struggle between two giants, the refractory nature of the desert and modern science. After much effort, sacrifice and determination, the struggle was finally won by science, resulting in the expanding exploitation of oil fields in various parts of Arabia. This is the basis of the 'new life' declared by King 'Abd al-'Azīz, and it is justified by Bint al-Shāṭi' by referring to the Qur'anic verse stating that God put all things on earth to the disposal of mankind as His miraculous signs (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 65–72). The foreign workers live in compounds and are not allowed to have priests or churches, alcohol or pork. No penetration of thought is admitted which might affect traditions and the faith. This attitude clearly appeals to Bint al-Shāṭi', who on the one hand welcomes modern science but is anxious to preserve cultural authenticity on the other (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 73–74).

Bint al-Shāṭi' supplements her reflections on the presence of Western companies and workers on Arabia with a brief account of foreign women, who have accompanied their husbands from all parts of the world. She is impressed by the fact that they left their comfortable lives behind to follow their husbands who toil in the heat of the desert and the noise of enormous machines:

'I met them in al-Dahnā': American, European and Asian women, modern and well-educated, satisfied with life in the isolated desert and with their lean fingers wiping the sweat from the foreheads of their men, who work in the blazing heat' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 83).

They live in beautiful modern houses, equipped with electricity, air-conditioning, telephone, radio and refrigerator, but even this luxury cannot

compensate for the loneliness they suffer far away from their homes. It is remarkable that these women came from all parts of the world, but not from Egypt, says Bint al-Shāṭi'. She attributes this to the reluctance of Egyptian women to move even from a house in Cairo to another in Giza (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 83–86).

The account of the first journey is concluded by two remarkable life stories of Arabian women. First, during her visit to the tomb of the Prophet in Medina, Bint al-Shāṭi', steeped in the presence of 'spirits and apparitions' of the Prophet's companions (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 89), has a conversation with a weeping young lady sitting next to her, who tells the story of her life. She was born in North Africa but, because of her extraordinary beauty was shunned by her tribe, who suspected her of having a jinn (demon)-lover. After the death of her first husband – an old shaykh – a passing pilgrim took her with him to Mecca and married her. Now, living in exile in Medina, she is neglected by her husband, but unable to return to her tribe (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 90–98). On another occasion, Bint al-Shāṭi' has the opportunity to talk to a concubine in a harem, who tells her of her tragic life behind the confines of several women's compounds, to end up free, but lonely and divorced, in the household of a rich Arab. It was the first time Bint al-Shāṭi', to her amazement, heard that women were actually bought and sold (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 112–125).

These stories clearly appeal to Bint al-Shāṭi's sense of injustice with regard to women in traditional Muslim societies. Although she refrains from commenting, it is obvious that Bint al-Shāṭi' inserted the stories with the intention of criticizing the social treatment of women. In contrast, during her umra, she envisions the figure of Hagar (Hājar in the Qur'an, RvL), after whose search for water for her infant Ismā'īl the ritual of *sa'y* (the running between Safā and Marwa) is modelled (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 101–107, 148–150). Bint al-Shāṭi' stresses the significance of the fact that Hagar – originally a female slave – has come to serve as the epitome of a courageous, free and persevering woman in the history of Mecca and Islam.

Bint al-Shāṭi's second journey: encounters with history

In 1972, Bint al-Shāṭi' was attached to the Qarawiyyīn University in Morocco when she suddenly had the opportunity to go on hajj as a guest of the poet-prince 'Abdallāh Fayṣal. This time her journey was not a 'tour' of the Saudi kingdom, to inspect its version of modernity, but exclusively dedicated to the hajj and a visit to the Prophet's tomb in Medina. She promises herself to observe asceticism, piety and contemplation, avoiding profane matters and limiting her excursions to the holy places, absorbed by the millions of pilgrims. Consequently, the religious dimension of the account is much more prominent than in the account of the 1951 journey. To her, the hajj represents the unity of the umma and values such as humility, tranquillity, non-materialism and the absence of hierarchical differentiation among

mankind It is connected with a natural passion (*hayām fīṭrī*) in man, spurring him on to experience justice, goodness and beauty. All distinctions are erased and only the measure of piety (*taqwā*) differentiates between the believers (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 145–146, 166–167).

As during her first journey, Bint al-Shāṭi' is again struck by the convergence of ancient history and modernity. Cars, aeroplanes and buses have replaced camels as means of transport; electricity, marble pavements and modern buildings have 'transformed the exterior aspect of the city, but the spirit of the place remains unaffected' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 146). However, she considers these changes to be superficial only; the essence and identity of the place, radiating the light of its sanctity and shining with authenticity and deep-rootedness, have been preserved according to Bint al-Shāṭi' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 146). She notes that although people change generation after generation, the ritual ceremonies of the hajj remain the same, allowing us to experience them just like our forefathers. Therefore, besides being a religious obligation, she presents the hajj above all as an historical experience, affording the pilgrim to experience the presence of Muhammad and the way in which his life-story is impregnated in the landscape and the buildings. Bint al-Shāṭi's excursions are, consequently, exclusively directed at ancient monuments and historical sites evoking the proximity of the Prophet. However, rather than elaborating on her feelings and experiences during these visits, in her text she presents episodes from the life of Muhammad connected to the various sites (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 166–167).

Apart from the religious ruminations in the account, Bint al-Shāṭi' addresses two more issues. The first is, characteristically, the issue of women's education. During her first trip she had been invited to visit the Mālik 'Abd al-'Azīz University in Riyadh, which did not allow female students. When she asked her guide about it, she was told that 'the shaykhs' feared that education for women would lead to moral corruption. Bint al-Shāṭi' embarks upon an appeal for women's education, arguing that 'moral decency' (*iffa*) is in the hands of women themselves and cannot be imposed from outside. Moreover, she asserts that women are as accountable for their acts as men are and carry their own freedom and responsibility. Thus, she considers it a mistake to deprive women of education with a reference to *fiqh* or *jihad*, or the struggle against innovation (*bid'a*) and for the purity of doctrine. Fortunately, on her second trip she finds out that in the meantime girls and women have been admitted to schools and universities, thanks to the efforts of King Fayṣal. Some of the women have even acquired the degree of *shaykha* in Arabic and Islamic disciplines (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 178–181).

The second issue is of an even more political nature: the lamented appropriation of Palestine and the al-Aqṣā mosque by Israel. During her first journey Bint al-Shāṭi' had already mentioned Israel as a 'disgrace' for the umma, because of its incursions against 'one of our most holy places' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 15). Shedding a mournful tear, she calls for the unity of the umma and the sacrifice of lives to save the honour of the Muslim

community. During her second trip, she again refers to the threats to the al-Aqṣā mosque and the call for jihad by the ruler of Arabia. She adds a militant poem centred around the hajj formula *Labbayka*, ('I present myself to You') pronounced by pilgrims when they enter the sacred precincts to declare their intention to perform the pilgrimage before God. Also the final circumambulation of the Ka'ba (*ṭawāf al-wadā'*) is accompanied by a poem inciting to the struggle: 'We are the soldiers of God, the generation of the struggle' (Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 185, 193). It is clear that for Bint al-Shāṭi' the emotional experience of the hajj is mingled with political fervour, and that the emancipation of women covers the field of social relationships, religion and politics.

Conclusion

Bint al-Shāṭi's book *Arḍ al-mu'jizāt* is not a conventional account of a pilgrimage to Mecca but a unique testimony of the trajectory of an Egyptian woman who ventures into the intellectual and religious domains of her time. The text is not so much focused on the experience of the hajj or even on the devout and religious aspects of the pilgrimage. It is rather an attempt to incorporate the idea and experience of pilgrimage into a discursive framework that reflects not only her particular intellectual concerns, but also the main cultural-political issues of her time. The rituals of the hajj are only casually referred to; the occasion of the hajj is, rather, used to shape an intellectual notion of the Holy Land as a privileged space, the territory in which religion and culture are firmly rooted. The hajj is the core not so much of a religious experience, but rather of a process of signification, which brings together Bint al-Shāṭi's efforts to mark off a cultural and intellectual domain for herself.

The summary above reflects Bint al-Shāṭi's scholarly and intellectual concerns at the stage of her life and career when the journey took place, just after her graduation from the university. First, it shows the importance she attached to the Arabic language, as an instrument to construct a tradition and a religion, but also to determine the main specificities of this tradition, by enabling the formulation of refined concepts and rational ideas in an exquisite style. The Arabic language is also the source of an identity, since it not only represents the strong material from which the tradition is crafted, it also protects this tradition from outside interference and thus preserves a sense of authenticity:

The Muslim world, in the East and in the West, was exposed to various waves of invasions, doctrinal, intellectual, linguistic, military, and economic, but the Arabic language survived all the efforts to repress or obliterate it, and imposed its vital existence on the world.

(Bint al-Shāṭi' 1973, 45)

In this way, language becomes the repository of a past which has to be rearticulated in the present, and a mechanism to preserve, develop and

renew ideas, doctrines and concepts. Finally, it is also the main vehicle to convey a sense of beauty, an aestheticism linked to the past, to identity and to the particular 'secrets' of the Arabian Peninsula in the form of poetry and narrative imagination.

Second, the book heralds Bint al-Shāṭi's future preoccupation with the family of the Prophet, which found expression in several biographies in which historical and religious evidence were combined. In *Arḍ al-mu'jizāt* the reader gets a foretaste of this interest, since she takes the opportunity of her visits to several holy sites to commemorate the early life of Muhammad in a predominantly literary way. It is remarkable that the book reveals little of what became Bint al-Shāṭi's main interest, that is, Qur'anic exegesis. Although the text is framed in a large number of Qur'anic quotations, these are only inserted as a general religious framework and are not subjected to scrutiny. There is no effort, for example, to link the Qur'anic verses (or hadiths) to the phenomenon of the hajj. They are not linked to the rituals of the hajj nor discussed for their relevance for the spiritual dimension of the pilgrimage as a whole. Apparently, at this stage Bint al-Shāṭi was not yet prepared to take such a significant step into the realm of religious scholarship.

In spite of the prominent place of history, language and poetry in the text, the book is an unambiguously religious work. All components have been vital for the shaping of a tradition which enabled man to come out of darkness into the light of the revelation, and to acquire insight in the secrets of existence. They represent what connects contemporary man with the historical event of the Prophet's life. Here we encounter another fundamental concern of Bint al-Shāṭi: the effort to connect this historical heritage with modern circumstances, or even 'modernity' as a vision of life and society. Bint al-Shāṭi clearly admires and advocates modern reforms, the implementation of new technology and the pursuit of modern science as a means to uncover the 'secrets' of God's creation and put them at the service of mankind. Both emotionally and politically, she seems to relish the blessings of modern life, at the same time warning against the danger of too much foreign interference and the loss of identity. Conversely, religious conservatism should never obstruct the employment of useful new scientific discoveries, which are, after all, a gift from God. These ideas clearly echo the debates of the *nahḍa*, both in its notion of historical progress and social development, and in its call for religious reform. Although Muhammad 'Abduh is not mentioned explicitly, his ideas resonate throughout the text.

As far as its interest in the affairs of women is concerned, the book is a unique document for its interesting glimpses of women in the Arabian Peninsula. This is not only because it contains two accounts of women's lives, which could only have been collected by a fellow woman, but also because of the systematic references to the advantages of education for women and the harm of religiously motivated obstacles to achieve it. Still, the apparent paradox with regard to the relationship between feminism

and conservatism is visible here as well. Whereas religious and social conservatism is criticized as harmful for the emancipation of women, in her description of the foreign colony of workers in the oil industry, she praises the women who are prepared to sacrifice themselves to support their husbands who bravely toil in the merciless heat of the desert. Here, religion is referred to not only for a doctrinal purpose, but rather for an ethical purpose: it should not serve as a pretext for repressing women in any way; it should provide women with a moral code for her conduct in her specific role as support for her husband. Symbolically, the ideal role of women is personified by Hagar, the quintessential ‘mother’ of the Muslim tradition.

To conclude, it is of course significant that all these strands in Bint al-Shāṭi’s thought and work are associated with the phenomenon of the hajj. It is the hajj in which all the different components meet; the particularity of the Arabian Peninsula as a desert-space and a sacred space; the predominance of language as an instrument to preserve the past and shape the future; the doctrinal, historical, textual and moral aspects of religion; and, finally, the pilgrimage as the symbol of Muslim unity, the solidarity within the Muslim community worldwide, which is needed to protect its integrity against all kinds of encroachments from outside. As often in pilgrimage accounts, the hajj is presented as the cornerstone and the integrative element in the religious tradition, the ritual securing historical continuity. It is also the concept engendering and structuring the author’s discursive exploration of her world-view and intellectual efforts. The journey is, ultimately, an opportunity to formulate and express a coherent vision of the author’s relationship to culture and society.

Notes

- 1 The research on which this chapter is based was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (grant number: 360-25-150).
- 2 See about Labība Aḥmad: Baron (2005); she also performed the hajj, but I was unable to find her account.
- 3 About ‘Abduh, see: Hourani (1983).

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