

DRAFT NOT FOR CITATION

`A mouth as round as a signet- ring`; A gendered reading of jewelry in the medieval Islamicate society and culture.

Miriam Frenkel

“So why in our world has it (=gemstones) been associated so constantly with woman, with her powers and her evil spells? It is because the husband very quickly delegated to his wife the job of showing off his own wealth the wife provides poetic proof of the wealth and power of the husband. Except that, as always with human society, a simple pattern is quickly invested with unexpected meanings, symbols and effects. Thus the primitive showing-off of wealth has been invaded by a whole mythology of woman: this mythology remains infernal, because woman would give everything to own gemstones, and man would give everything to own that very woman who wears the gemstones that she has sold herself for; with gemstones as the link, woman gives herself up to the Devil, the husband to the woman, who has herself become a precious, hard stone”¹

This is how Roland Barthes` interpreted the mythology of gemstones and jewelries in modern western societies. The present article is an initial attempt to study the gendered perspectives of jewelry in the medieval Islamicate society, mainly through the lens of the rich documentation on jewels offered by the Cairo Geniza.

Coined by Marshall Hodgson in his seminal work *The Venture of Islam* (1974), the term “Islamicate” refers to the areas and societies ruled by Muslims, those that may have included a Muslim majority, but that also included other significant minority communities, who were full participants in the social, economic, cultural and intellectual activity and discourse in spite of their seeming second-class status (“protected peoples,” Ahl al-Dhimma). The term represents the important truth that all of these communities, Muslims, Jews and Christians, shared many cultural traits, from the Islamic West in Andalus and the Maghreb to Central Asia. I assume that in spite of probable minor differences, the

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. 56

overall discourse on jewels and women in the Islamicate civilization transcended ethnical and religious boundaries, and that the Geniza finds can therefore reflect not only Jewish medieval perceptions but also ideologies shared by all these communities living in the orbit of Islamic civilization.

Jewels, carrying a longstanding tradition, seem to offer a suitable perspective for the study of Islamicate societies. Due to their high mobility, jewels, gems and minerals were long traded and exchanged as gifts over the vast Muslim territories, as testified by the abundant information preserved in the Geniza.² Jewelers, most of whom belonged to religious minorities,³ maintained close relations with their coreligionists in other distant communities through social, mercantile and professional networks, and exchanged professional information and technical knowledge. Many were themselves itinerant, moving from one place to another as refugees or as immigrants.⁴ Even jewelers' working tools, which could be traded and pawned, traveled considerably. The following case is just one example out of many others attesting to the mobility of jewelers' working tools: In a court deed from 11th-century Fustat, David ibn al-Tarablusi claims that he had deposited with the local judge in al-Mahdiyya a set of goldsmith's working tools, which belonged to his brother in Tripoli, but when his brother arrived in al-Mahdiyya from Tripoli and asked for them, the judge maintained that the tools had been stolen and gave him back only a single hammer for which he charged him ten dinars.⁵

It is probably this mobility that enabled the formation of a homogenous, longstanding tradition of jewelry in the medieval Islamicate world. The raw material of jewels and the techniques of working them were constant and continued earlier traditions known from

² See the rich vocabulary of jewels and gems collected from Geniza documents in the glossary appended to Moshe Gil's series. Moshe Gil, *In the Kingdom*, Tel Aviv 1997, [Heb.] vol. IV, pp. 933-934. Perhaps the most famous Jewish traders in jewels and gems were the Tustari brothers, who imported fancy and tremendously luxurious pieces of jewelry for the Fatimid caliphs. W. J. Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Medieval Islam*, London 1968, pp. 72-78. In a Geniza letter from 1045 two bales of colorful beads (kharaz): black, yellow, blue, red and white are ordered for them. Mosseri IV I, translated in S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, Princeton 1973, pp. 146-147.

³ This could be because of the basic denunciation by all Muslim schools of law of wearing and manufacturing jewels. Ahmad Ghabin, "Jewelry and Goldsmithing in Medieval Islam: The Religious Point of View", in: Na'ama Brosh (ed.), *Jewelry and Goldsmithing in the Islamic World: International Symposium the Israel Museum, Jerusalem*, 1987, Jerusalem 1991, pp. 83-92.

⁴ Jewelers are mentioned in charity lists from the Geniza as needy foreigners. Goitein, *Society I*, p. 51.

⁵ ULC Add 3416, Gil, *Kingdom*, vol. IV, no. 625, p. 73.

Greco-Roman times, although their styles could vary from region to region and over the centuries.⁶ We may therefore consider jewels as carriers of tradition. My claim is that not only were styles, materials and techniques preserved in Islamic jewelry, but also their symbolism and social function.

Research on jewelry has been so far conducted mainly by scholars of art and archaeology, and as such it is basically descriptive. Jewels are normally comprehended as decorative or magical artefacts and as a universal phenomenon. The traditional stance towards jewels is exemplified by Joan Evans in her 1951 *History of Jewelry*:

Jewelry... answers to the deep human love of intrinsically beautiful materials, to the deep human wish for bodily beautification and to the superstitious need for reinforcing human powers by things that seem to a savage more lasting and more mysterious than man... We still find that a jewel that has been worn long, often seems to become the expression of the personality of its wearer.⁷

Very few historians have studied jewels' cultural and ontological role in history. Goitein, the great scholar of the Geniza society, was exceptional when, in the fourth volume of his *Mediterranean Society*, he dedicated a sub-chapter to the theme of jewelry as a factor in history.⁸ These 26 pages are actually the only historical research done so far on jewelry in the medieval Islamicate world. But even Goitein's research is mainly descriptive and informed by a naïve conception of jewels as decorative items intended "to enhance [the wife's] charms in the intimacy of matrimonial life".⁹

In spite of this scanty research, jewels in fact constituted a major factor in the medieval Islamicate world, as attested by archaeological finds from the Fatimid, Ayyubid and

⁶ For the changing fashions over time, see Goitein, *Society IV*, p. 205, and note 389 therein. For the enduring techniques and materials, see: Ayala Lester, "Byzantine Influence in the Consolidation of Fatimid Jewelry", *Proceedings, 9th ICAANE, Basel 2014*, Vol. 2, pp. 397–411; Naama Brosh, "Some Remarks on the Islamic Jewelry Exhibition held in the Israel Museum in 1987", in: Naama Brosh (ed.), *Jewelry and Goldsmithing in the Islamic World: International Symposium the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1987*, Jerusalem 1991, pp.1-8; R. Ettinghausen, "Kufesque in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West and the Muslim World", in: *A Colloquium in Memory of George Carpenter Miles, American Numismatic Society*, NY 1976, 28-47.

⁷ Joan Evans, *A History of jewelry 1100-1870*, London 1951.

⁸ Goitein, *Society*, vol. IV, pp. 200-226.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 226.

Mamluk times, mainly in Tunisia, Egypt and Israel,¹⁰ and by the major place they occupy in various types of documents from the Geniza: dowries, deathbed declarations, endowments and traders' letters as well as in family and personal correspondence. They also play a central role in contemporary poetry and *belles lettres*.

Jewels occupied significant roles in contemporary economics, trade, art, and also in constructing gender relations, as I hope to demonstrate in this article.

Jewels concerned most of the population, of all classes and of both sexes. They were not designed exclusively for women, but were used by men as well. Men were involved in the production of jewels as well as in their consumption. They were jewelers, traders in jewels and purchasers of jewels. Few of them, mainly members of the royal courts, wore them. This is evident from the Arabic "gifts literature", which provides detailed descriptions of the jewelries kept in the royal treasures of the Fatimid caliphs.¹¹

Prominent Jewish leaders too used to wear jewels, as attested in a 12th century letter to Aden, in which the leader of the Jewish community of Aden, is advised to send the head of the Jewish communities in Egypt some presents, including "a beautiful stone of exquisite quality", which was probably intended for a signet ring.¹² Signet or regular rings were the kind of jewels normally worn by men, mainly by very high dignitaries.

On the other side, most women, in both Islamic and Jewish societies owned a variety of jewels, which constituted a major part of their dowry and of their personal property.

¹⁰ Naama Brosh, "Some Remarks on the Islamic Jewelry Exhibition held in the Israel Museum in 1987", in: Naama Brosh (ed.), *Jewelry and Goldsmithing in the Islamic World: International Symposium the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1987*, Jerusalem 1991, pp.1-8; M. Jenkins, *Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum: The al-Sabah Collection*, London 1983. Idem, "Fatimid Jewelry, Its Subtypes and Influences". *Ars Orientalis* 18, pp. 39–58; M. Jenkins and M. Keene, *Islamic Jewelry in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 1982; R. Hasson, *Early Islamic Jewellery*. Jerusalem 1987; Ayala Lester, "A Fatimid Hoard from Tiberias", *Jewellery and Goldsmithing in the Islamic World* (1991) 21-29; idem, *From Fustat to Palestine: Identifying Fatimid Jewellery Using the Geniza Documents from the Ben Ezra Synagogue*, in: Tasha Vorderstrasse and Tanya Treptow (eds.), *A Cosmopolitan City: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Old Cairo*, Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 201 (2015), pp. 69-76; Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, *The Islamic Jewellery from Ashkelon*, in: Na'ama Brosh (ed.), *Jewellery and Goldsmithing in the Islamic World: International Symposium, the Israel Museum, 1987*, Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1991, pp. 9-19.

¹¹ J. Sadan, "Some Written Sources Concerning Goldsmithing and Jewellery", in Brosh, *Jewelry*, pp. 93-99. Sadan mentions three works of this Arabic genre devoted to gifts, treasures and exclusive collections gathered in caliphal palaces: 1. Al-Khālidiyān, *Kitāb al-Tuḥaf wal-Hadāyā*, ed. S. Dahan, Cairo 1956, 2. Ibn al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al Dhakhā'ir wal-Tuḥaf*, Kuwait 1959. 3. Ibn marzubān, *Kitāb al-Hadāyā*, unpublished manuscript.

¹² TS Ar. 54.39v, ll. 51-56-57

Typically, the father or the groom-to-be would invest part of the dowry in the acquisition of jewels on behalf of the bride, or would have jewellery especially made for her. Almost all women, even those belonging to the lower classes, possessed some jewellery received as part of their dowry.¹³ Jewels constituted women's main financial security. In times of need they could sell or pawn them.¹⁴ Moreover, it seems that women themselves displayed keen interest in jewels and used to buy and to order them for themselves. In a Geniza commercial letter from 1051, Yusha' ben Nathan urges his correspondent, Nahrāy ben Nissīm, to send him as soon as possible the merchandise that has been stuck at the goldsmith (al-Sā'igh) because he is embarrassed and ashamed (daqqa wajhi= my face is crushed) that he keeps having to put off "the women" (al-nisā'). In this case, as in so many others, it seems that it was the women in the family who ordered the purchase of jewels and displayed an impatient desire to receive them.¹⁵

Hence, while jewels concerned almost all segments of the population, it was mainly women who actually wore them.

Indeed, Moses Maimonides, when discussing the laws of purity in his exegesis to the *Mishna*, differentiated clearly between women's and men's jewellery, but whereas women's jewellery is discussed with no further explanation, Maimonides finds it necessary to add a short elucidation when he introduces his discussion of men's jewellery: "men's jewels, like those which kings put around their necks".¹⁶ It seems that men wearing jewels were an exception and that men's jewelry was mainly confined to men in ruling positions.

Jewels as Signifiers

¹³ Goitein, *Society*, vol. IV, pp. 310-332, where he brings five *trousseau* lists of women from different socio-economic classes, all of them include an assortment of jewels.

¹⁴ See for example ULC Or 1080 J 48v. Notes of a pawnbroker along the years 1049-1052, in which the same woman pawns articles from her trousseaux including a golden bracelet (dumulj) and a gold ting "of full weight" (Goitein, vol. IV, App. D VI)

¹⁵ ENA NS 22, f. 13, published by Gil, *Kingdom*, vol. III, no. 579, p. 930.

¹⁶ משנה עם פירוש רבינו משה בן מימון מהדורת דוד קאפח, ירושלים מוסד הרב קוק תשכ"ח
'סדר טהרות, עמ' קכ

Moreover, women did not only wear, own and desire jewels. They were categorically associated with jewels, which were an emblem of the female sex.

The association between women and jewels was rooted in Muslim law, since most Islamic jurists forbade men from wearing jewels and permitted them for women alone. Their position is mainly based on a well-known Ḥadīth (tradition ascribed to the prophet Muhammad), which goes back to the prophet Muhammad, and states: “Gold and silk is permitted to the women of my nation, while it is forbidden for its men”.¹⁷

No wonder, then, that when the Ismaʿili missionary (dāʿi) Aflaḥ b. Harūn al-Malūsī (922) tried to attract women to his weekly sermons he chose to speak about “feminine topics”, such as jewels, clothing, spinning and hairstyles so as “to suit their natural disposition”.¹⁸

The unambiguous association between jewels and women enabled the patriarchal order to use jewels as signifiers of women in order to maintain a definite division between the sexes.

Indeed, the rationale provided for the legal prohibition on wearing jewels by men was to avoid any resemblance to women (al-tashabuh biʾl-nisā).¹⁹

The prominent Ismaʿili jurist, Al Qādi al- Nuʿman, ordered women to always wear ornaments and jewels while praying. The more jewelry worn, he maintained, the greater the merit. At the very least, a woman ought to wear a necklace or a leather belt around her neck, so that men can be distinguished from women. Women should also always dye their hands with henna, so that “Never shall women leave their palms like those of men.”²⁰

Jewels marked women not only visually but also through other senses. Their anklets were designed to produce rattling sounds with every step. Archaeologist Ayala Lester describes two pairs of silver anklets found in excavations in Jerusalem and Ramla, each

¹⁷ Muḥammad b. Ismaʿil al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, n.d, vol. VII, p. 51. Ghabin, p. 87, and note 26.

¹⁸ Ibn al-Haytham, *Munazarāt*, pp. 169-170 quoted in Cortese-Calderini, pp. 30 -34

¹⁹ Op. cit.

²⁰ Cortese-Calderini, p. 211

containing a grain of silver that rattles when shaken. Lester identifies this type of anklet with the pair of anklets depicted in an eleventh-century illustration and states that “this type of anklet was known within the eastern Islamic lands and the Fatimid domain during the 11th century”.²¹ Because of the noise produced by these anklets women were inevitably heard, and thus marked audibly.

Women were also marked by smell. Ibn Zubair’s *Book of Gifts* mentions odorous jewels in the form of rings, headdresses, or sandals, filled with absorbent material imbued with fragrant substance (ambergris or camphor).²² Special shoes with odorous ingredients in them produced fragrance whenever they were stepped on, as described in a love poem by R. Solomon ibn Gabirol:

Who is the delicate one, who stamps her feet, dripping, throwing fragrances out of her shoes?

The beads of her jewels are like stars and the shapes of moon and sun are on the knot of her headdress.²³

Interestingly, a similar item is mentioned in a Jewish Midrash (exegetical homily) from late antiquity. The Midrash interprets the biblical verse from Isaiah: “Haughty eyes, from the daughters of Zion” [Isaiah 3: 16] as follows:

‘Because the daughters of Zion were so haughty, and their posture was upright as lances, and they were walking brazenly; “and walk with stretched-forth necks” [ibid.], each one of them was wearing her jewellery and was stretching her neck to show off her jewellery; “and wanton eyes” [ibid.], Rabbi Nissi of Caesarea said that they were painting their eyes with kohl. Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish said: with red collyrium; “with a mincing gait” [ibid.]. If one of them was tall she would bring two short ones, one on this side, one on the other so that she would seem as she was soaring above them. If one of them was short she would wear thick high heels to look taller; “making a tinkling with their feet”. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said that she was making the shape of a dragon in

²¹ Lester, *From Fustat*, p. 72.

²² Ibn Zubair.

²³ מי העדינה אשר תרקע ברגליה תטיף ותזרוק בשמים מנעליה עד די חרוזיה ככוכבים ומראה דמות סהר וחמה עלי קשר כליליה

her shoe. And the rabbis said: She would bring the bladder of a rooster and fill it with balsam and put it under her heel inside her shoe and when she would see a group of young men she would trample it and the smell would ooze from them like a serpent's poison.`.²⁴

The use of jewels, seen, heard and smelled, had an impact similar to that of the discriminatory dress imposed on religious minorities. They signified women as different and enabled a clear distinction and separation between the sexes.

Jewels as a means of control

Jewels were also an efficient way to limit and control women's movements.

Testimonies to the heavy weight of jewels can be readily found in *trousseau* lists from the Geniza, which indicate the weight of each piece of jewelry. Goitein calculated that a single *siwār* bracelet could weight 230 grams (half an American pound). Since *siwārs* were regularly worn in pairs, the bracelets would weight about one pound. "Indeed a heavy burden on the arms of a gazelle", he remarks.²⁵ A pair of golden wrist bands (*dumulj*) would also have weighed approximately a pound. Anklets classified as "Breast of Falcon" contained, without fittings, about 280 grams, also a substantial weight. This is only a partial list of the ornaments worn by a middle class woman. It must have been heavy enough to keep her almost motionless.²⁶

Judah Ha-Levi described in one of his celebrated poems the heavy-loaded jeweled young women he watched near the Nile:

²⁴ Leviticus Rabbah 16:1:14. I would like to thank Galit Hasan-Rokem for informing me about this Midrash. The English translation is also hers. See Galit Hasan Rokem, "Leviticus Rabbah 16:1: Odysseus and the Sirens in the Beit Leontis Mosaic in Beit She'an", in: Steven Fine and Aaron Koller (eds.), *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel; Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2014, pp. 159-189.

²⁵ Goitein, *Society*, vol. IV, pp. 200-201.

²⁶ The inconvenience of jewelry could signify not only gender, but also class. In Arabic poetry, restriction in movement signified that the woman did no hard labor, and hence was of noble origin. Yedida Stillman has shown how inconvenient female dress could signify nobility in her discussion on the '*Aqbiyya*, a long robe with the train on the ground, which is mentioned frequently in many Geniza *trousseau* lists of rich women. See Yedidah Kalfon Stillman, *Arab Dress a Short History; From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times*, Leiden, Brill, 2003, pp.159-189. This does not contradict the misogynic aspect of women's jewels.

Oh those girls on the banks of the Nile
 [Light as] gazelles, but heavy,
 For heavy are the bracelets on their arms
 And their steps are narrowed by anklets.²⁷

The conception of jewels as a means of limiting women's free movement is sometimes embedded in their terminology. Whereas nowadays scholarly terminology tends to rely on names that correspond to the modern symbolic order, such as heart shape, violin shape, basket shape etc., these do not necessarily conform with medieval symbolism. As a matter of fact, most goldsmith terms found in the Geniza are rather derived from objects of daily life: hoops, spoons, trays, tambourines, pincers, arrows, cups, etc. The shape called by modern scholars "drop", for instance, which is very frequently mentioned and was probably very popular, is called "pear"-like. Some of the Arabic names given to jewels betray a hidden conception of their function as an instrument for taming women.

A collar necklace, closely adhered to the throat, is called *Mihbas* = prison. The verbal root *ḥ,b,s* means to block, to confine, to jail.²⁸

A necklace with pendants decorating the upper chest is called *Lāzam* = something incumbent upon, a bridle of a horse.²⁹

A bracelet designed for holding the ends of the sleeves tightly together is called *Ḥadida*. *Ḥadid* as an adjective means adjacent, bordering on, but also sharp, pungent.³⁰

A finger ring is called *Dabla*, which also means a tumor, a lump.³¹

²⁷ Judah ha-Levi, *Dīwan des Abu-l-Hasān Jehuda ha-Levi*, 4 vols, ed. Heinrich Brody, Berlin, Mekizei Nirdamim, 1894-1930, p. English translation in Goitein, Society, vol. IV, p. 200.

ושדה על שפת היאור ושדות,
 צבאות הן, אבל שהן כבדות:
 ידיהן כבדו מן הצמידים
 וצרו צעדיהן בצעדות.

²⁸ Goitein Society IV, p. 216, notes 434, 483.

²⁹ Op. cit., p. 217, note 488, App. D, note.142.

³⁰ Op. cit., p. 219, notes 507-508.

³¹ Op. cit., p.221, note 525.

Ḥanak is a choker. The verb *ḥ,n,k* also means bridling a horse.³²

Mikhnaqa, which is a necklace, is derived from the verbal root *kh,n,q*, which means to smother, to strangle.³³

Labbah, a gala pendant, is also a breast girth of a horse.

Qilada is a necklace composed of several long strings, but the verb *Qalada* means to put a rope on the neck of a beast.³⁴

Mijarr is a chain used for hanging pendants or decorative amulets, but it also denotes the tether of an animal.³⁵

Bracelettes are called *siwār*, from the radical *s,r,a* meaning to assail, to wall.³⁶

Bracelets with pointed edges are called “Scorpion’s Venom”.³⁷

Jewels in general are sometimes called *ḥaly* = ornaments, but more frequently the term *a’lāq* is used. Goitein translated *a’lāq* as “objects to which the heart is attached”, but it seems that a more suitable translation would be: *things that are hanged on*, which corresponds to the basic conception of jewels as trimmings, superficial add-ons to the real essence, as will be explained below.

The Mysoginic Discourse of Jewellery

The accumulation of terms with negative connotations of coercion and restriction is paralleled by even more explicit expressions of manifested misogyny in contemporary poetry.

Tova Rosen, in a fascinating book entitled “Unveiling Eve”, shows that one of the most common representations of women in medieval Hebrew and Arabic poetry is that of *Tevel* in Hebrew, or *al-Dunya* in Arabic, meaning world, earth. Women were equated with the terrestrial corrupted world. They were believed to be the cause as well as the

³² Op. cit., p. 216 and note 479 there

³³ Op. cit., notes 480-481.

³⁴ Op. cit., p. 218, notes 493-495.

³⁵ Op. cit., p. 218, note 502.

³⁶ Op. cit., p. 219, notes 509-512.

³⁷ Op. cit., p. 219.

embodiment of the world's evil, while the corrupted world was perceived as essentially feminine. The material world and its temptations were imagined as a woman whose outwardly attractive appearance, decorated by jewels, hides her true nature as an ugly prostitute.³⁸ Rosen relates this image of "Mother Earth" to a conceptual binary of spirit versus matter, soul versus body, and male versus female, inherited from Greek philosophy and preserved in the common Latin etymology of matter and mater. The terrestrial world, its matter, and the human body were conceived as the female element in creation, while the intellect, the Logos, was conceived as male. This ancient ontological tradition assumed practical dimensions in the middle-ages, with the rise of ascetic movements. The hatred of everything worldly, preached by religious and philosophical ascetic movements, states Rosen, was profoundly entangled in deep aversion to women. Medieval moralists, physicians, philosophers and poets started to demand actual separation between the sexes, advising men to distance themselves from the evil material world and from the dangerous temptations of women, and urging men to exclude women and to restrict and tame them.³⁹

In this battle, women's jewels were apprehended as their strongest weapon, by which they bewitch and seduce men. Moshe ibn Ezra (1055-1140), in his *Secular Poems*, gave this apprehension a poetical expression:

In vain does Earth don her jewels
 Only fools will covet her looks
 She lures the boors with her riches;
 She tempts them with fine silks,
 Then she upsets them with much grief and pain.⁴⁰
 Tevel, pay heed, open your eyes and lend your ears

³⁸ Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Hebrew Literature*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. pp. 14-18.

³⁹ Op. cit., p. 23.

⁴⁰ Moses Ibn Ezra, *Secular Poems*, ed. Hayyim Brody and Hayyim Schirman, Jerusalem, Schoken Institute, 1935, vol. I, p.86. English translation by Rosen, p. 14.

...

How long will you tempt the fools with your smooth speech?

...

You allure them with your golden jewels, your make-up,

You put on embroideries for them; in vain do you wear scarlet skirts.⁴¹

The identification of women with the terrestrial corrupted world is paralleled by another world view in which women are considered innately deficient creatures, who need many jewels to hide their deficient femininity.

Ron Barkai has already demonstrated how misogynic conceptions about woman's innate physical and mental weakness were transmitted in a chain of translations and adaptations of medical treatises about gynecology from Greek Suranus via Muscio's *Gynaecia* in Latin (6th century) to Jewish gynecological treatises in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic in 13-14th century Spain.⁴² We see, then, how early medical Greek perceptions of women's defective physicality circulated around the Mediterranean and were preserved for many centuries through copying, translation and adaptation, to create misogynic perceptions.

According to interpreters of the Quran, the enigmatic Quranic verse from Sura 43: "(Liken they then to Allah) that which is bred up in jewellery (*hilya*) and in dispute cannot make itself plain?",⁴³ refers to the habit of the Arabs in pre-Islamic times (*Jāhiliyya*) to adorn female newborn babies with jewellery in order to conceal the defect of their femininity. The Quran interpreters opposed the *Jāhili* custom because by practicing it people likened themselves to God, but did not reject the basic notion of femininity being

⁴¹ Op. cit., p.15.

⁴² Ron Barkai, *A History of Jewish Gynecological Texts in the Middle Ages*, Leiden, Brill, 1998.

⁴³ Quran, Sura 43, Al-Zukhruf "Ornaments of Gold"/verse 18.

an inborn imperfection.⁴⁴ Femaleness, then, was apprehended in Muslim worldview as an innate defect and jewels were considered an artificial way to conceal that basic deficiency.

A similar approach is manifested in medieval Hebrew poetry, in which jewels are designed to conceal women's true defective physicality and nature. They "protect" the shameful feminine body from being exposed and revealed.

Samuel ha-Nagid puts it explicitly:

Walls and castles were erected for woman –
Her glory lies in bedspreads and spinning.
Her face is pudendum displayed on the main road
That has to be covered by shawls and veils.⁴⁵

But it is not only "shawls and veils", jewels as well are designed for woman's "protection" in the same way, as phrased by Joseph ibn Ḥasdai in a poem in which he likens his poetry to a bride:

She is enveloped in her attire as a bride/ secured in her jewels as a maiden.⁴⁶

Jewels, like clothing and veils, are hence designed for concealing women's real shameful appearance. They are a superficial illusory device to mask the "naked" truth.⁴⁷ Women themselves, with their bewitching physical beauty, are also only deceptive ornaments, an external cover of the essential truth. This perception is rooted in the basic dualism of beauty versus truth inherited from ancient Mediterranean mythologies.

⁴⁴ Abu al-Fiḍā' Isma'il Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurān al- 'Aẓīm*, Cairo, Dār al-Turāth, 1980, vol. IV, pp. 124-125; Ghabin, p. 85.

⁴⁵ Dov Jarden (ed.), *Divan Shemuel Hanagid: Ben Mishle*, Jerusalem, Hebrew Union College Press, p. 283. Translation by Tova Rosen, *Unveiling Eve: Reading Gender in Medieval Hebrew Literature*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2003, p. 12.

⁴⁶ The poem was preserved in *Diwan Samuel ha Nagid*, see: Dov Jarden (ed.), *Divan Shemuel Hanagid: Ben Tehilim*, Jerusalem, Hebrew Union College Press, 1966, p. 163. Translation by Rosen, p. 67.

⁴⁷ *mu'alaqāt* as a general term for jewels probably implies this connotation of add-ons, superficial trappings hanged from the body.

Women as ornaments must be, according to this conceptualization, the enemies of truth.

Yet, side by side with these misogynic manifestations, medieval Hebrew and Arabic poetry contain plenty of expressions of ardent love and admiration for women, which apparently contradict the misogynic discourse. As a matter of fact, these expressions do not really contrast with misogyny, but rather complement it. Fatna Sabbah showed how the concept of Eros in medieval Islamic literature is actually the direct outcome of Islamic misogyny reifying women and reducing them to abstract qualities or objects of desire.⁴⁸ Women in Hebrew medieval poetry are admired for their physical beauty in a very similar way. The poet in love expresses his adoration for the corporeal attributes of his beloved lady, naming a whole repertoire of her superb body parts: shoulders, arms, forearms, mouth, lips, cheeks, face, eyebrows, forehead, hair, neck, breasts, waist, belly, hands, feet, “in a robot like portrait”, to use Fatna Sabbah’s words.⁴⁹ The list of praised body parts sometimes includes the woman’s jewels as well, as if they were indispensable parts of her. In many other cases, her body parts themselves are depicted as marvelous jewels, as in the following lines by an anonymous 12th-century Egyptian poet:

[...] A mouth as round as a signet ring,
Fit for royal hand to seal with;
Teeth that are like crystals,
Or like the pellets of hail as they fall to earth.⁵⁰

Woman herself is an artefact, a jewel. Women and jewels become synonyms and substitutes for each other. This is clearly reflected in a poem by Samuel ha-Nagid (993-1056), in which the poet beseeches the lady for just a glance of her, or even a glance of just a single bead of her necklace:

⁴⁸ For a parallel phenomenon in medieval Europe, see Howard Bloch, especially chapters 5, 6.

⁴⁹ Fatna Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, London, Pergamon Press, 1984, p. 24. See also I. Levin, *The Embroidered Coat: The Genres of Hebrew Poetry in Spain*, Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995 [in Hebrew], vol. II, pp. 292-293; 318-322.

⁵⁰ T. Carmi (ed. And trans.), *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, New York, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 360.

My heart pierced by both your eyes will rise from the dead

With your necklace – or even with one bead.⁵¹

Woman and her jewels are hence inseparable, even exchangeable.

To sum up: contemporary literature displays a typically misogynic discourse which treats women as an essence deprived of any individuality or historicity. In this discourse women are inherently deficient creatures. They are reified and equated with jewels. Both, women and jewels, complementing and concealing each other, embody the terrestrial corrupted world. ⁵²

Women`s Voice

Women's own voices remain silent in this discourse, just as the medieval male poet intended them to be. Women in the medieval Islamicate world remained cached under their abundant jewelry and no female response to the chorus of male voice accusing her of using jewels to seduce men has ever reached us. As stated above, women probably collaborated with the male hegemonic order. They normally possessed, wore and even purchased jewels by and for themselves. We may even assume that they were emotionally attached to their jewelry and could not possibly remain indifferent to their indisputable, breath-taking beauty, still evident in those pieces of jewelry which have reached us through archaeological finds. A rare feminine voice may be heard in a unique poem written by a woman of this society. This is a poem attributed to the wife of the celebrated Hebrew poet, Dunash ben Labrat (920-990).

Will her love remember his graceful doe,

her only son in her arms as he parted?

On her left hand he placed a ring from his right,

on his wrist she placed her bracelet.

⁵¹ Samuel ha- Nagid, Diwan, p. 297.

⁵² Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 1-11.

As a keepsake she took his mantle from him,
 and he in turn took hers from her.
 He won't settle in the land of Spain,
 though its prince give him half his kingdom.⁵³

In this lyrical and intimate poem, which depicts a farewell scene between two lovers, jewels occupy a central role. In a symbolic act, the lovers exchange their personal jewels: "on her left hand he placed a ring from his right/on his wrist she placed a bracelet". The ring and the bracelet are conceived to be expressions of their owner's personality. If it is indeed Dunash's wife who composed this outstanding poem, it certainly attests to both, the centrality of jewels in her life and their high emotional value for her.

On the other hand, a rare moment of feminine resistance to wearing jewels can be traced in one of Judah Ha-Levi's love poems. This is a *kharja*, namely a couplet incorporated into the love poem, which sounds the female voice. The female voice says:

I won't put on the necklace, mother, my dress is enough,
 My love will behold my fair white throat, and won't need a necklace.⁵⁴

Although mediated by the male poet, these words may echo a genuine female reluctance to fulfill the role of a beautiful object, to wear jewels and to become a jewel.

Another discreet protest may be discerned in women's last orders given in their wills concerning their burial outfit. The famous Al Wusha, a rich and stormy 12th century business woman, enumerated no less than six layers of clothing made of expensive textiles with which she wanted to be buried, but did not mention any piece of jewelry.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ezra Fleischer, "About Dunash ben Labrat, his wife and Son", *Mehqere Yerushalaim be-Sifrut Ivrit*, 5, 1984, pp. 189- English translation by Rosen, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Judah ha-Levi, *Diwan*, vol. II, p. 114. English translation by Rosen, p. 8.

⁵⁵ S. D. Goitein, "A Jewish business woman of the 11th century", *The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review* (1967) 22-42.

Another woman, Sitt al-Ahl gives, in a 1143 will, detailed instructions concerning the expensive clothing in which she wishes to be buried, and makes no mention of any jewels.⁵⁶

Conclusions

The Geniza people, men and women, were very conscious about the way they dressed, and displayed much concern about their clothing.

men who could afford it loved to demonstrate their wealth and good taste by exhibiting a personal and expensive wardrobe as is clearly manifested in the following letter, written by an 11th century merchant from Fustat to his cousin in Alexandria:

*When the Sicilian boat arrive, please buy me two narrow farkhas of excellent quality, costing about 2 ½ dinars, and two attractive thawbs worth about 1 ½ dinars, and bring them with you. And if you, my lord, depart before the arrival of the Sicilian boats, bring me two attractive robes, which have some elegance, and give 21/2 dinars to Joseph for the purchase and forwarding of two farkha, for I do not have anything to wear on week days.*⁵⁷

It seems then that upper and middle class men used to wear magnificent, colorful and extravagant clothing, just like women, and probably even more than them. Men used excessive and extravagant clothing to manifest their rank and power. Wearing superb garments was a prerogative of rich and powerful men and women. But, in no place could we find men, except very high ranking rulers, using jewels in the same way. Jewels were first and foremost associated with women. Was it indeed because “the wife provides poetic proof of the wealth and power of the husband” as claimed by Barthes? At this early stage of research, it is too early to know. We still have to find out when, how, and in what circumstances were such jewelries worn? Were they worn only in the confines of private domiciles” to enhance [the wife’s] charms in the intimacy of matrimonial life”, as suggested by Goitein? Or were there some public occasions in

⁵⁶ TS 13 J 3. 3 . Edited by Goitein, *Sefunot* 8 (1964), p. 22 [Hebrew].

⁵⁷ TS 13 J 18.8

which she could exhibit her jewels “showing off her husband’s own wealth”, as advocated by Barthes.

What certainly surfaces from our sources is that jewels were used to signify women as different, to define their femininity as deficient and demonic, and at the same time also to restrict and control their movement. The misogynic discourse, so it seems, cannot be separated from actual oppressive practices against women. The reification of women, their consideration as a dangerous primordial essence that should be restricted and tamed was not only a way of speaking about women, it was a form of action which legitimized their exclusion and control. Women’s Jewelry did not only symbolize women’s superficial beauty or their inability to walk far, they were also intended to actually and physically restrict and control their movements.

"There are," writes Jean-Marie Aubert, "two ways of placing woman outside of all public life or refusing her the rights monopolized by men: one to consider her as an imbecile and to place her squarely in tutelage ... the other to exalt her through a sublimation which renders her unworthy of all worldly tasks." It seems that jewelry combined both ways.⁵⁸

Further issues to be considered:

How, where, and when were jewels worn? (contextualization)

Were there any changes in taste and fashion in different periods and in different places?

Were there differences in style and taste between the different social classes (beside the different economic value of their jewelry)

Jewels as amulets.

⁵⁸ Jean Marie Aubert, *La Femme: Anti féminisme et Christianisme*. Paris: Cerf/Desclee, 1975, p. 110, as quoted by Bloch, p. 197.

“Popular” jewels (made of cheap materials).