

Sittna Hajar and the Sacred House

Zahiye Kundos



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Distillation

Feeling the imminence of death, whether caused by internal forces in one's body (say, a dysfunction of the placenta, a fatal immune disease), a life threat to a beloved (some mothers believe they carry their children inside them, forever), or externally imposed on a group (say, slavery, genocide), an embodied manual is automatically activated. When death is smelled, tasted, al-rūḥ makes the first move. Seeing al-'aql, the mind, in a state of great confusion, unable to grasp or respond to the alerts of acute danger, the spirit withdraws from the body, remaining at a measured distance. Though Prophet Muhammad was advised to answer those curious about it to let it go, "Say, 'The Spirit is part of my Lord's domain. You have only been given a little knowledge'" (Q, 17:85), it seems that thinkers like Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali have a good basis to speculate that it is made of a subtle vapor that takes the flesh of al-qalb as its seat. Bearing no weight whatsoever, this withdrawal allows the heart to lead on its own, reducing all activities to the minimum necessary circulation of heating and cooling. It is this kind of distillation, to rework a concept used by Audre Lorde in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury", manifest, once again, through the suspension of the mind, the temporary dislocation of the spirit, and the realization of the heart's practical knowledge, which prevents the body from initiating an autolysis, or the process of self-dissolving. At the event of survival, little of this experience reaches the tongue, yet its effect is transparent: the shutdown of the I.

On The Monotheist Epic

In the midst of the desert in Mecca's barren land, at the ruins of the ancient house, Hagar's skin of water lost weight and sound. Tight to her chest, skin-to-skin, was Ismael, her baby son. Laying the waterskin off her shoulder, Hagar fastened her paces, one-two-three-four-five-six-seven times, circling the two hills that engulfed her, looking for water or people with water. Feeling the heat and sweat of his mother, Ismael has slipped from her chest and settled on her belly; he could still hear the echo of his mother's whispers, but had become too weak to cling to her dried breasts. With a disturbed mind, Ibrahim was already a few kilometres away, walking beside his donkey on their long, long journey back to the green lands of Can'ān. Sara, his old companion and the mother of his second son, Ishaq, was sitting at the entrance to their household, waiting for his return; she smelled of fresh bread. In the meantime, a black stone had suddenly shone between the rubble; there stood the angel, a spark in his eyes. Hearing the birds' excitement, local nomads ran to the place to find the miracle of all miracles: a spring of cold water bursting forth, and a mother and her baby, cooling.

It is easy for all to recognize that the features of these spectacular scenes attest to two traditions at the same time, a mixture of the Muslim and the Judaic, a sequence of events that takes part in the monotheist epic which has been breathing, constantly in motion, ever since, knocking at the gates of each new generation of living Muslims and of ahl al-kitab, the heirs of 'the people of the Book', Jews and Christians, demanding from all active re-feeling and relearning. For Hajar (or Hagar), the valiant woman and nursing mother, her frail, near-death baby, and her exhaustive, insistent circling between the two hills; Ibrahim, the loving, worried father who follows a divine plan, leaving his son

and wife at the ruins at the Sacred House of God, the Ka'ba; and the heavenly black stone — uphold essential elements in the story of these ancestors in the Islamic tradition. Abraham's donkey, the object that Hajar carried with her, khamat mayim or waterskin, Sarah's strong character, and the household's rich cuisine are based on the story's extended version in Genesis. The angel, the revelation of the well, and the birth of Sarah's son, Ishaq, are approved in both traditions.

The stone that shone, the spark in the angel's eyes, and the skin-to-skin position are extensions of my imagination. For it seems to me unrealistic that a mother in this acute situation would separate from her baby, as Genesis and the appropriated version in Sahih al-Bukhari suggest. Many centuries stand between Hajar and me, yet I tend to believe that when death was tasted on her dry tongue, she went through a process of distillation; her heart took the lead, not her mind. Staying tight to each other is more likely what most mothers would intuitively do under these extreme circumstances.

Hajar's part in Genesis marks an exit from the main plot. Her story begins as a slave-girl of Sarah, through whom Sarah chooses to have children, for she was old and had lost hope of bearing children of her own. As argued by Gil Anidjar in his recent book *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal*, Hajar is interesting insofar as she serves, literally and practically, the lives of the main family members, her masters. The Islamic version maintains that Hajar was a slave until she married; however, the point of departure is who she had become after her liberation. And reasonably, where the story begins makes a lot of difference between the two Hajars, defining its repercussions to this day.

In Islam, Hajar is the mother of all mothers. In the year 570 in the Christian calendar, another baby was born, Hajar's great-grandson, the Prophet Muhammad. Prophet Muhammad was raised and shaped by the environment in which his great-grandmother settled to bring the good news: the renewal of the prophecy of his forefathers, Ismael and Ibrahim, in the center of the Arabian lands, in a Scripture revealed in the Arabic language.

The Qur'ānic exegete Aysha Abd al-Rahman considered Hajar not only as the first female model in Islamic history for her "maternal function," but also, or mainly, for her "crucial role of leadership" ("Islam and the New Woman"). Sittna Hajar appears warmly in the Hadith, the oral tradition of the Prophet, admirably in the Qur'ān in the contexts of Ibrahim's stories, and is a vivid role model across diverse Muslim communities. The Revelation of the Qur'ān begins in 610 CE; but the Muslim calendar, the Hijri, begins in 622 CE. This date marks the Hijra, the migration, of the first Muslim community to the city of Yathrib, later named Medina, when they sought refuge from persecution in Mecca. Retrospectively, the meaning of Hajar's name alludes to her action, her migration from Canaan to Mecca, which, like the migration to Medina, was ordered by God.

Before we demonstrate the literary manifestation of this position by focusing on a single segment of the Qur'ān, it is important not to bypass an enigmatic fact at the outset. "Nearly all the female figures mentioned in the Qur'an appear in conjunction with a family member," argues Celene Ibrahim in *Women and Gender in the Qur'an*, and Sittna Hajar is not one of them. Her name is omitted, and the Qur'ānic references about her are coded. Riffat Hassan finds Sahih al-Bukhari's account sufficient to reconstruct Hajar's story and to present her as a

heroine (“Islamic Hagar and her Family” in *Hagar, Sara, and their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*). Hajar’s voice and agency are made clear, as we shall note. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this account fails to grasp the immense potential of this foundational story and is insufficient to counter what Fethi Benslama claims Hajar’s “absence” and “removal from the founding text” (*Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*).

Now, if I immediately argue otherwise, for example, that Hajar has “a right to opacity,” lending the poetics of Édouard Glissant, I might risk losing my readers, or worse. I’m afraid I might lose myself by deliberately walking within the confines of the claustrophobic corridor of thought that for the last 200 years or so — meaning since the age of European colonialism or modernity — have held many intelligent Arabs and Muslims, intellectuals and ordinary alike, consciously and unconsciously, captive in the discourse of apologetics, over-celebrating Islam and by doing so ridiculing themselves and Islam, pleading innocence (say, ‘we don’t believe in Islam anymore’), or taking the charge altogether (say, ‘Islam is a misogynist religion’).

But here is what I think: we cannot take this anymore. We are sick of wrestling against the language of ministers of war, we are exhausted of carrying orientalist’s exhaustive paranoias, of looking at ourselves in other people’s mirrors. Such positions have incapacitated us from the need that Asad Q. Ahmed argues for: the need to “reread our traditions in our Eastern languages and within our indigenous systems of thought” (a lecture at Lahore University; my emphasis). Ahmed is right. We have been distracted from ourselves for so long, and from the many things we should be doing: e.g., rebuild the infrastructure of our cities, fix the roads to our destroyed neighbourhoods, reconstruct our demolished houses, draw the plans to our gardens, heal our

stuttering tongues, take back all that is ours. For wherever we live, we are homeless. No matter how rich our natural resources are, and how high our towers rise in the deserts, our Islamic past looks exactly like the towers of debris that have been accumulating in Gaza.

Now, bearing in mind the time, energy, and resources we have been investing in resisting stubborn colonial policies, we need to ensure that anything we do serves our agenda. Our attention is especially needed when we pose sensitive, primary questions, such as 'Where is Sittna Hajar in the Qur'ān?' If this inquiry serves us, and it certainly does, then we should attend to it without hesitation, without suspicion or dismay, without fear of not finding her in the Qur'ān or of getting lost with her. We shall leave everything else in our hands and summon it with confidence, tranquillity, and curiosity — I mean, positive curiosity.

For even when mothers are apparently absent or quiet, either in their private houses or in the Scriptures, their presence is determined. If you don't find your mother in the living room, you need to look elsewhere, to follow her wherever she happens to be, whether on the roof or on the terrace, in her desk, in the kitchen, or in your dreams; you should accompany her in whatever activity she thinks is important for her to be doing — reading, cooking, or praying. If it happens and you don't find her at her house, knock on your neighbours' houses. It would be best if you just sit attentively and patiently on the stairs at the entrance to her house. Once you recognize her from afar, you must stand and call out loud: ana hon Yamma, ana hon Yamma, so she hears you and knows you are there, waiting for her. Then you must run towards her, release the heavy bags from her swollen fingers, take out each product and place it in its designated place, in the fridge, on the cupboards, on the dining table. You

must tidy up exactly as she likes, leave all surfaces clean, and gently close the door before you leave. Just like all houses, all Scriptures bear the portrait of the founding mothers.

On the enigma of Hajar's omitted name from the Qur'ān

Names and naming are of great value to the Qur'ān's Teller, who Himself has one hundred names: "Call on God, or on the Lord of Mercy — whatever names you call Him, the best names belong to him" (Q17: 110). A few of the objectives of the Qur'an is to explain in detail, "We have explained everything in detail" (Q17: 12), to convey what hasn't been conveyed, "There are the verses of the Scripture that make things clear" (Q12: 1), and tell the best of stories, "We tell you the best of stories in revealing this Qur'an to you" (Q12: 3). It is then an intelligible Scripture, a revelation that comes to reveal, to say everything about the present, the many pasts and many futures to come. How can one write about Muslim Hajar from her "point of view" as Benslama points out, if she hasn't been viewed in the first place? Is it really the case that her figure is "intransmissible" in the Qur'ān?

The Qur'ān is very emphatic about the human nature of prophets and their family members, restricting worship to the One God: "There is no God but Me, so serve Me" (Q21:25). For one, it may be that withholding Hajar's name from the Qur'ān could be to prevent her from becoming what Mariam/Maria has become in Christianity, namely, a worshiped divine figure rather than an honoured woman who received divine guidance. But such a direction isn't convincing enough since Mariam is comfortably present in the Text.

For another, it may concern the relationships the Islamic Scripture establishes with other Scriptures. Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ended the chain of prophethood among Abraham's offspring, and the Qur'ān is conceived as a whole and stands on its own. At the same time, it realizes and confirms its precedents:

“So [you believers] say, ‘We believe in God and in what was sent down to us and what was sent down to Abraham, Ismael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to him” (Q2: 136)

In this sense, Archangel Gabriel's command to Prophet Muhammad to “read”, known as the first word of revelation, has been extended in practice to read the Bible and the New Testament. In matters of dispute, Muslims' commitment is, of course, to their Book; nonetheless, to reach a comprehensive understanding of it, they realize they need to consult the other two Books. At any rate, what I am trying to say is that what seems like a “lack” of details and background in the Qur'ān is a decision made by God for theological, hermeneutical, and perhaps also political reasons. In this sense, Muslim Hajar's story could not be imagined without Jewish Hajar, despite the huge difference in representation.

The eleventh-century renowned literary theorist and scholar of the Qur'ān Abd al-Qaḥer al-Jurjani argued for the “subtle” and “magical” element in ḥadhf “omission”. According to al-Jurjani, rather than a lack or deficiency, omission enacts the force to pursue meaning:

“It is a path of subtle nuance, gentle in approach, wondrous in effect, and akin to magic; for through it you see that omitting a word is more eloquent than uttering it, and that remaining silent is more instructive than speaking; and you find yourself most articulate when you say nothing, and your meaning is most fully conveyed when you do not make it explicit.”
(Dalā’l al-’ijaz [The Proofs of Inimitability]).

The Qur’ān forges societal and communal ties as well as speech (“Talk about the blessings of your Lord,” Q 93:11). Yet in certain circumstances, refraining from speech or social contact can be a sign of divine transformation. For example, when Sittna Mariam learned about her soon miraculous pregnancy, she was instructed to withdraw to a far place and not to speak to anyone (Q19:22); Zecharia was also instructed to maintain silence for three days as a sign of having a child at his and his wife’s old age (Q19:10). Like silence, omission may say more, not less.

Given that the general framework of prominent prophets’ stories is already established in earlier Scriptures, the stories narrated in the Qur’ān are not linear but rather circular. This movement intensifies the learning process, prompting recipients to contemplate what hasn’t been said, to notice who is missing from the scene, and to develop their own assumptions. Little by little, they come to understand how Hajar’s suffering explains the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and how Joseph’s hardships explain the life of Moses. Hajar had to gain power in Mecca, and Joseph had to hold high positions in Egypt. Like the spectators of Greek drama, recipients of the Qur’ān know more about the proceedings of the plots than the protagonists themselves. Hajar probably didn’t realize her significant role in the emergence of Islam as a world religion, and Joseph

probably did not dream of how his people would fall into slavery and the spectacular miracles God employed to set them free.

Hajar as a symbol of God

In a fragment from Surat al-Baqara, God shares with Prophet Muhammad, the first addressee of the Qur'ān, what his great-grandmother means to Him.

Sittna's name is not mentioned in the Qur'ān, and rocks do not speak (surely not in a human language). Yet, having been ordinary hills until she stood there, the encounter granted al-Safa wa-al-Marwa, and herself, holy status; the three of them are symbols of God Himself:

“We shall certainly test you with a certain degree of fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops. But [Prophet], give good news to those who are patiently steadfast, those who say, when afflicted with a calamity, ‘we belong to God and to Him we shall return’. These will be given blessings and mercy from their Lord, and it is they who receive My guidance. Behold! Safa and Marwa are among the symbols of God, so for those who make major or minor pilgrimage to the House, it is no offence to circulate between the two. Anyone who does good of his own accord will be rewarded, for God rewards good deeds, and knows everything.” (Q2: 154-157)¹

Sincere faith does not spare believers from experiencing “a certain degree” of calamity, and true believers must be able to bear all kinds of genuine losses and dispossession. Certainly, Hajar lived through the test of all tests: a mother

¹ The translation of these verses is a combination of two versions of translations, Ali Yousef, M.A.S Abdel Haleem, and myself.

losing her child, almost, a mother killing her child, almost. We can feel God's warmth and admiration towards her, as she genuinely achieved the fine, hard-to-reach theological balance of accepting one's destiny while making it at the same time. During the Hajj and throughout the year during the minor pilgrimage (the umra), Muslims become Hajar by walking in her footsteps. Hassan is correct, Hajar's "shadow looms large over the valley where she once stood alone, and her spirit is as inextricably embodied in the Ka'ba as that of her husband Abraham and her son Ismael."

Ibrahim — the imam of all prophets, the one who enjoyed a "sound heart" (Q37:84) and whose relationship with God is based on friendship (Q 4:125) — was absent from that fearful event. Surat Ibrahim spots his anxiety at the moment he was walking away from his wife and child, confident of salvation, yet so scared to look back:

"O my Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley, close to Your Sacred House so that they keep up the prayer. Make people's hearts turn to them, and provide them with produce, so that they may be thankful." (Q14:37)

Addressing God, Ibrahim was trying to calm his own distress by reminding himself of the greater cause: to keep up the prayer at the Sacred House. Hajar settles in Mecca, and the hearts indeed turn to the foreign woman in possession of the greatest produce in the desert, an overflowing well of water, supervising its maintenance and fair distribution by herself:

[...] The Prophet added, "Ismael's mother was sitting near the water. They [the Jurhum people] asked her, 'Do you allow us to stay with you?' She replied, "Yes,

but you will have no right to possess the water.' They agreed to do that. The Prophet further said, "Ismael's mother was pleased with the whole situation as she used to love to enjoy the company of the people." (Sahih al-Bukhari)

A few years later, the more renowned, successful father-son experience of sacrifice occurs, rewarding Ibrahim and Ismael with the gift of rebuilding the Sacred House. It is important to keep this sequence in mind. Hajar's esteemed position in Mecca is what enables Ibrahim (who was probably known among the native community as Hajar's husband) to pursue the reconstruction plan in a foreign land without resistance.

On the age difference of Ismael in Genesis and the Qurān and what that makes us see

In Genesis, the final expulsion of Hajar and Ismael from the family's household seems especially dramatic. The evening before, they were all busy preparing mishte gadol, a great feast, which Ibrahim initiated to celebrate Ishaq's weaning (gmila; about 2-3 years old). A few years earlier, on the angels' way to Lot in Sodom, they stopped by the household to bring the very good news: the soon-to-be conception of Sarah; Sarah's own miracle, her turn of soft skin, and flowerly, pinky chicks. The distinguished treat offered to the angels at this event inspires us to imagine what was served at Ishaq's celebration.

Placed under the shadow of the household's tree, just like where the angels were invited to refresh, the delicious buffet must have had Sarah's bread and cakes made of choice flour, Ibrahim's specialty, curds and milk, and the main dish, a soft calf, which I imagine Ismael had insisted on sacrificing and cooking by himself for his little beloved brother. This leads me to further assume that

the loaf of bread Ibrahim gave Hajar the morning he sent her and his elder son away was leftovers from the party the night before.

Now, considering the timing of that celebration and the 14 years difference between the brothers, Ismael was not a child nor a lad at that time, as alternately described by Genesis' narrator, but about 16-18 years old. Learning from the characteristics of the family members among whom Ismael was raised, the young man was not only strong-bodied as described, but also stubborn-minded, soft-hearted, and yet hot-tempered, and enjoyed an indispensable degree of self-pride.

This reconstruction suggests a reversal of the events that unfolded for Hajar and Ismael after they were dispossessed of all their belongings. Wandering confused in the wilderness, Hajar must have recalled the radical contrast between the loud, happy evening and the sad, quiet morning, failing to understand how Ibrahim could do this to her, how Sarah could stand there, silent, letting her go after all they had gone through together. We can imagine Ismael, furious, hitting the wind right and left with his stick, cannot believe how his father could do this to him, to him, his right hand, eldest son.

If we go against the narrator's logic, we see Hajar growing weak, lying down under a bush, and Ismael losing his mind seeing his mother dying from thirst, and not the other way around. All this is still overwhelmingly dramatic. Yet it cancels the basic elements that constitute the Islamic tragedy: No nursing mother, no dying child, no rebuilding of the Ka'ba, no Muhammad, no Islam. There is no bearable age for losing one's mother, yet it is a kind of loss that goes along with the laws of nature; the young bury the old. It is the killing of children that breaks even hearts made of stone.

Turning to Islamic sources, Sarah is released from any accountability for Hajar's sufferings or for the split in the household. Just like Moses with Haron, Muslim Ibrahim does not work alone. He shares his revelations and seeks collaboration. According to al-Bukhari, Hajar knew what was at stake. She asked Ibrahim whose decision it was to leave her in the barren valley all alone, his or God's, and when she understood it was God's, she fully submitted to her destiny. No surprise her son would do the same a few years later at the event of the sacrifice.

Despite the agency on Hajar's behalf, I confess that I have some doubts regarding this dialogue. As mentioned in Genesis, Hajar had already begun communicating with the angel of God in Canaan soon after she conceived and ran away from the household the first time. We are told that at this event, when God named her son Ismael "the God who Hears," she, in turn, named Him El Roi, "The God who sees me." The moving intimate exchange of names suggests that Hajar may have received direct divine inspiration about her migration, which her husband later may have confirmed.

At any rate, as a woman and mother myself, I am concerned about the duration, of how long things take, because time is all that matters when it comes to our pains, all kinds of pain that only we women know. A rough calculation I made with my friend Gideon shows that it takes about 30-40 days to travel from Canaan to Mecca, either walking or on a donkey. Considering this distance, the long days Hajar and Ibrahim walked together on each side of the donkey, crossing eyes here and there, the many nights they spent observing the stars, she had endless opportunities to withdraw, to change her mind, to plead to Ibrahim to take the baby with him, to tell him to tell Sarah to look after him,

to make him promise her to bring him back to her if she survives, or otherwise, return alone, and give her a proper burial, build her a tomb so her son knows he had a mother who loved him.

But she didn't. Sittna's story is written in her distillation, in the cracks on her tongue, the scars on her knees. Her story is not read; it is drunk from her overflowing milk, the eternal waters of her well.

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Each monotheist religion is like a vessel, and "Every vessel drips that which it contains," as the 12th-century Arabic proverb goes. For you see, it is not the vessel's mere fullness that makes the difference between life and death, but rather the substance of the liquid each generation pours into it: blood or water, poison or medicine. Hajar's real power does not stem from ownership over something precious that no one else could have. It is not a patriarchal sovereignty that Islamic political thought brings to light through her story. Her sovereignty suggests that people's worth is measured by their offerings to others.