A muwashshah from the Genizah

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The literary genre called *muwashshah* is a specific form of Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian poetry with striking rhyme and metrics. It originated in the tenth century and has five strophes and a rhyme scheme [ZZ]/aaaZZ/bbbZZ/-eeeZZ, thus deviating from the normal Arabic ode, which has only one metre and no strophes. At the linguistic level, different poetic languages can coexist, especially the refrain part (ZZ) of the fifth and last strophe (eeeZZ) can be in a language other than Classical Arabic or Hebrew, such as Colloquial Andalusian Arabic or even a Romance language. This last refrain part of the *muwashshah* is called *kharjah* ('exit'). Especially *muwashshahs* with a love theme or a wine theme can have a Romance or vernacular Arabic *kharjah*: a girl who is suffering from love passion speaking to her beloved or her mother, or a drunkard asking for the way to the tavern.

In the *love-kharjahs* in Romance, the Romance-speaking girl obviously belongs to the non-Arabised groups of the population of Muslim Spain. From the Hebrew *muwashshahs* we can gather that these women were Christian, thus symbolising to the Muslim lover an alien and foreign element. There has been much speculation about the real position in society of these women, but the motive of the ‘otherness’ of the beloved object in Abbasid drinking and love poetry is a well-known phenomenon: in the Arabic tavern, the lads and maidens, who serve the wine and are love objects, are often Christians or Jews. In later poetry even non-Arabic Muslims such as Turks occur in this role. We see this phenomenon in, for example, the poetry by the early Abbasid poet from Iraq, Abu Nuwas

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(768-815). Nevertheless, some historians have found it necessary to explain the phenomenon of the Romance girls thinking that they served as slaves to the Muslim conquerors, who supposedly lived without a family, especially when they were on war expeditions. But the historian Guichard recently has argued that Arabic armies took their families with them and therefore did not necessarily need foreign slave girls to establish a ‘family life’.³

However, it is attested by historical sources that in Spain there were many Andalusian women – slave girls of Christian origin – who held a job in the courtly pleasure and entertainment industry. Also from the east of the Arab world singing girls and female musicians and dancers were imported. The orchestras are called sitara (cf. Hebrew: seter), because they were hidden behind a curtain to protect them from the glances of the invitees. There is mention of this practice not only in Arabic historical sources and in Arabic poetry, but also in Hebrew Andalusian poetry.⁴ Moreover, as Arab historians indicate, in Cordoba there seem to have been singing and music academies where these slave girls received their education.⁵

This essay will try to explain the presence of the foreign woman in the kharajat of muwashshahs as a literary phenomenon and discuss some difficulties one encounters while dealing with an anonymous muwashshah, which has been edited by Schirmann together with other poetic fragments from the Genizah.⁶ I will try to explain the literary phenomenon also in the framework of religious plurality in Muslim and ex-Muslim Christian Spain.

The words in Romance uttered by the girl in the refrain part of the fifth strophe of several muwashshahs often express her amorous feelings for her beloved who did not come to the love tryst. Her beloved is often designated habibi – Arabic for ‘my love’ – which implies that he is Arabic-speaking in contrast to her speaking Romance. The beloved sometimes is also called filyolo alyeno, which some scholars have trans-

⁵ Péres, Ibid.
lated as 'bastard', but literally means 'foreign son' or 'foreigner', which could also indicate that her beloved is not Christian and Romance-speaking. The insertion of a kharjah sometimes means that the poet creates in his poem a kind of disunity: many a love or wine poem suddenly comes to an end with a quotation which sometimes has nothing to do with, and is in disharmony with, the rest of the poem; for instance, a poem in which the poet suffers from his passion for a young boy ends with a kharjah in which the poet compares his suffering to that of a young woman who is desperately in love with a foreign beloved;7 or Judah ha-Levi composes a poem on the death of the four brothers of Moses ibn Ezra and describes the sadness of Moses weeping on his deceased brothers, and compares Moses' sadness with that of the girl who is weeping because her beloved did not come to the tryst.8 Sometimes there is harmony between the first part of the poem and its kharjah: the poet loves a girl, and at the end the girl loves him too. This apparently is the case in the following kharjah, whose introductory lines in Arabic at the beginning of the fifth strophe I have translated into English:

With her eyes she attacks continuously
And because she knows everything of love
She has sung my passion weeping.9

Then follows the kharjah in Romance:

Komo si filyolo alyeno,
Non mash adormesh a mew seno.

As if a foreign son
Does not sleep anymore at my bosom.10

The genre of *muwashshahs* is also interesting because of its Hebrew imitation of the originally Arabic forms and themes. The *kharjahs* with a love theme which we find at the end of the Arabic and Hebrew strophic poems reflect the spirit of inter-ethnicity connected with the three cultures which were represented in Spain, viz. Arabic, Jewish and Romance. Especially in the Hebrew *muwashshahs* the words the Romance girl is about to utter in the *kharjah* are preceded by lines of Hebrew, which anticipate them. It is interesting to notice that the thirteenth century poet Todros Abulafia informs us before arriving at the *kharjah* that the words of the infatuated woman are in the Christian language (the Hebrew word for Christian language or Christian woman is *edomit*).\(^{11}\) The woman in love is clearly indicated as belonging to another group.

In another *muwashshah* by Todros, addressed to Don Todros, consists of a panegyric followed by a comparison of the poet’s love for his Maecenas to his love for a Christian girl.\(^{12}\) The poet says as an introduction to the *kharjah* (my translation):

> I would like to give my life for him and for the girl who likes his beautiful face
> She knows that his heart loves another, and knows his indifference towards her.
> She sings a love song in the splendour of his face:

Then follows the *kharjah* in Romance mixed with some Arabic, because she wants to please her addressee who is Arabic-speaking:

\[ \text{Al-sabah bono garme dond bash} \]
\[ \text{Ya lo she k’ otri amash/ a mibi non qarash} \]

Good morning, tell me where you come from,
I know already that you have loved another and that you do not like me.

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The woman who is addressed by Judah ha-Levi is also a Christian. We find in the last strophe of a love poem:

One day he [the male beloved one] gives us life, another day he makes us die
With his glance he gives us back our heart which is struck by grief
As a gazelle who sings in the language of the Christians:13

Here the poet suffers from his male beloved who kills him and at the same time revives him by means of his glances. The suffering poet compares himself to a lovesick girl who speaks to her lover, who also kills and revives her by means of the same glances. The poem contains only one Arabic word, viz. the word for love, because her lover apparently is Arabic-speaking:

Asi ke shanashad be-had
berdad
meush wahshe, meush enfermad

Thus you have healed me in one moment,
truly,
from the sickness of my heart and my illness.

In order to explain the link of the literary situation with reality I wish to stress the inter-ethnic aspect of Arabic wine and love poetry in general. As said, the beloved boy or girl in the wine and love scene belongs to another religious group. Therefore in Arabic poetry the boys and girls are Jews and Christians, while in Hebrew poetry they are Arabs and Christians. The reason for this different ethnicity may be the desire of lovers and drinkers to remain relatively anonymous within their own group: their sins – such as drinking too much wine or having homo-erotic love affairs – are made possible by people of another religious group. Thus they are ‘less guilty’. The Arabic custom of sharing the pleasure with boys and girls from another religion was not well received in Christian Spain during the time of the Hebrew poet Todros Abulafia, who lived during the reign of Alphonse the Wise.14 The Christian authorities censured the

13 Stern, Hispano-Arabic Poetry, 141-142; Corriente, Poesia dialectal arabe, 313 (H 9); Judah ha-Levi, Diwan II, 321-322.

dissolute behaviour of Todros with Christian women. Because of his behaviour many Jews were expelled or imprisoned. Todros has many poems on Christian women: he seemed to put the themes of his poetry into practice.

The following anonymous poem apparently written by a Levite\(^\text{15}\) concerns a red-haired woman, who normally should be considered a Christian not only because of her physical appearance but also because adumma\(\text{h}\) (‘red’) is from the same root as Edom, a biblical name which refers in later contexts to the Christians who are considered ‘sons of Edom’. On the basis of the text we may conclude that the woman who speaks in the kharjah is the same woman who speaks Romance as Christian women normally are portrayed. But the strange thing is that the name of the woman which we see in the beginning of the muwashshah belongs to the poet’s own tribe, Levi. In the first four strophes, the beloved woman is one of those women who reject the advances of their lover. Her bitter character reflected in the Levitic name Merari. The suffering poet speaks (I arranged the lines in a slightly different order than they appear in the manuscript):

1. I keep silent and make my cheeks damp, weeping out of grief
   I bow to the woman who has sent to me
   Illness and has set a trap and a snare for my heart
   A reddish gazelle belonging to the source of the daughters of Mushi
   (Ex. 6:19).\(^\text{16}\)
   She has been created from bitter, rebellious and hard grasses.

2. She is arrogant when I pray her to hear my prayers, high as the Great Bear in heaven


\(^\text{16}\) In the translation of the first strophe I followed some corrections suggested to me by Joseph Yahalom (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem). However, according to Yahalom the girl does not necessarily belong to tribe of Levi, but the expression ‘daughters of Mushi’ only refers to the stubbornness of the women. Schirmann concluded that the expression in the literary sense implies that the girl belongs to the tribe of Levi (note 1). He has a special remark about the unusual red-hairedness instead of black-hairedness of the woman.
She is far away and she laid a snare with her eyes.
Her eyes came nearby and she sent my soul amidst the fire and the water
How the alga was wrapped around my head (Jona 2:6)!
Because of me she has forgotten the Rock that has engendered her. (Deut. 32:18).

3. Make haste, o princess, for your own flesh (your closest relative) (Lev. 18:6)
And give recovery healing my grief, because
I fell terribly ill, and how shall I descend
To Hell in order to get your answer? And why do you keep silent and not say a word?
Deliver my flesh from Hell, and make haste.

4. Generous lass, behave yourself sweet, when you deal with me,
Because the time of repentance has come, and you will mumble towards me
On the way of a path, when one day you shall speak with me,
You have to act so that your breath comes back, when at the time of my passing away
You will remember your obstinate conduct, and you will be ashamed because of that.

The following kharjah shows us inter-ethnic love if we look at the shift of language, but in the framework of the whole poem it seems to be the reaction of the same woman who is described in the first four strophes and apparently belongs to the tribe of Levi, and who now reacts to the passion of the poet and calls the poet lover a beloved: a change of role!
Why is a red-haired or blond girl considered Jewish here, and why does she speak Romance? Already for Schirmann this was a problem.

17 According to Yahalom the expression ‘[your] flesh and blood’ does not necessarily indicate a relative; Schirmann, however, in a note says: ‘Therefore the lover belongs to her family’.
5. She was scared by my agitation because my departure terrified her. In my presence she hid her face in her shawl as if she were ashamed for a lad
And standing up she said of me to her mother:

Ke fareyo, mama, mew ahuv ya ba-she
Kor te bol fogore, layta an [layt] non lo amashe

Mama, what shall I do? My beloved, he is going away
With such a great flush. Would that I never had loved him!\(^{18}\)

Here we see that the girl calls her beloved *ahuv*, Hebrew for ‘beloved’. Normally we would have the Arabic *habib*, but since she considers her beloved a Jew, she speaks about him in Hebrew, although Hebrew is not used in daily conversation. We can speak here of a mere literary device. The only Arabic word used in this *kharjah* is *layta an*. Since the girl speaks mainly Romance, we would have considered her a Christian, but it is difficult to explain away her Jewishness, since three names from the Levi tribe are used, and it is even said that she belongs to the same family as the poet.\(^ {19}\)

In many poems by another Levite, Todros Abulafia, the inter-ethnic theme plays a prominent role: the poet sometimes loves Christian women, but at other times he says emphatically that he does not love them but prefers Arabic women\(^ {20}\) or those of the Saqalibah (Slavonians; Hebrew: *bene Kena'an*),\(^ {21}\) who were imported as slaves into the Iberian peninsula by the Muslim states. In one of his poems Todros says: ‘You must love an Arab girl, even when she is not beautiful and pure, but always avoid a Spanish one, she has no charms [...] and is totally ignorant about copulation.’

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\(^{18}\) Corriente, *Poesia dialectal arabe*, 322 (H 23).

\(^{19}\) I based this interpretation on Schirmann, but Joseph Yahalom interpreted the relevant passages differently, as we have seen in notes 16 and 17; Yahalom, *Love’s Labours Won*, 194-195, sees a different girl addressed to in the last strophes than the girl in the previous ones.


\(^{21}\) Todros Abulafia, *Gan ha-Meshalim* II:2, 42-43; Brann, *ibid.*
More than one relation with women of another religion and ethnic group leads to scandalous episodes. An incident which involved a Muslim girl brought about a poetic correspondence between Todros and Abu ‘Umar Yosef ibn al-Saraqusti (Joseph ben Ephraim). The poet explains his scandalous conduct in the following manner: ‘Is it incorrect to court a perfect beauty, who is a testimony of the marvels of God?’

In another poem Todros even makes for himself a woman composed of different ethnic parts:

Persons who have heard marvels about my force in love have asked me yesterday who is my gazelle.
I have answered them: ‘My beloved is a girl of the Arabs
But her cheeks are half Christian [i.e. red, a pun on Hebrew *adom* and *Edom*], and the other part is Aramaic.\(^{22}\)

All these examples show once more the clear-cut role ethnicity can play in Andalusian love poems. This makes it difficult to explain why the above-mentioned *muwashshah* by the Levite is directed to a girl from the poet’s own family, who has all the literary characteristics of a Christian girl, i.e. being red-haired with the appropriate allusion to Edom, the forefather of the Christians, and in the kharjah, to the Romance or Christian language. In the same kharjah, the illusion of a different ethnic origin of the beloved is maintained in the kharjah by means of the word *ahuv*.\(^{23}\)


\(^{23}\) Perhaps the easiest explanation of this contradiction is to take over the suggestions by Joseph Yahalom (see notes 16 and 17).