

Gender Representation in Arabian *Sirahs*¹: An Analysis of the Narrations of “*Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah*”² in Egypt

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Abstract

Arabian *Sirahs* provide vivid depictions of medieval Arab customs and events. Nevertheless, within gender-oriented research, relatively few studies examine Arabian *Sirahs*, which can be regarded as cultural phenomena. “*Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah* (hereinafter ‘*Sīrat Delhemma*’)” is the longest of all Arabian *Sirah*, and its main hero is a woman. The present study addresses this research gap by examining the Status of Arabian *Sirah* in Egypt and the position of women in these epics. Additionally, this study appraises the prevailing gender relations of medieval Arab society with a focus on “*Sīrat Delhemma*”, along with historical and social background which made it possible for women to take the role of leaders. Significantly, this study finds that Arabian *Sirahs* portray women as having an active social role. However, this role has faded in the modern narrative. Lastly, this study found that despite the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society, the influence of Islam played a major role in empowering women. This study has found that the Gender discrimination in Arab societies has deeper and more complex causes than those stated in the current global discourse on feminism, which uses the concept of patriarchy to criticise the overall structure of discrimination against women by men.

¹The term *Sirah* refers to heroic Arabic stories. It has been translated into English as “Epic”, “Saga”, and “Romance” (Magidow, 2018, 2021). Arabic scholars have debated whether to use the word “story” instead of *Sirah*. According to Al-Hajjaji, “*Sirah* had already grown, developed and risen before the [word] story appeared” (Al-Hajjaji, 1991: p. 28). In this Study, the more common term, *Sirah*, has been used.

²In “*Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah*”, the term *Amīrah*, or “princess”, refers to the head of a tribe. The head of the tribe in this story is called *Amir* (“prince”) or *Amirah* (“princess”) and those who lead more than one tribe are called *Al-Malek* (“kings”). Magidow translated *Amīrah* as “commander” in English (Magidow, 2018). In “*Dhāt al-Himmah*”, Fātima became known as a princess because she led her tribe. *Dhāt al-Himmah* means courageous, so after gaining independence and leading her own tribe, Fatima was called *Delhemma* or *Dhāt al-Himmah*.

Keywords

Arabian Epic, Arabian Sirahs, Arabian Nights, Discourse, Matriarchy, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Since the 18th century, *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment* (often known simply as *Arabian Nights*) has been translated into many languages and read by readers across the globe. However, as a particularly vibrant genre, Arab storytelling is by no means limited to *The Arabian Nights*. *Sirah*³ are also example of Arabic storytelling, and depict the customs and events of each medieval Arab. Unlike literary works controlled by a dominant intellectual logic, *Sirah* are like a mirror held up to society; they naturalistically present blood relations, marital relations, gender relations. Although the narrator in these works may add many fictional details, advance or delay the order of historical events, and revive historical figures from a previous era to entertain the audience, *Sirah* can be considered realist literature because of their intersection with many actual historical events. Indeed, *Sirah* such as “*Sirat Delhemma*” discuss historical events—such as the “Barmakids catastrophe” during the Abbasid Caliphate⁴ (Nakbat Al-Baramika *تكتبة البرامكة*)—in more detail than history books of the time. Therefore, the *Sirah* can help to unearth the foundations of gender differences, not only in the era covered by this study but also in today’s society. Indeed, exploring this unique cultural phenomenon along with its historical and sociological background reveals how images of women have developed over time.

This study aims to examine how women are portrayed in Arabian *Sirah*, focusing on “*Sirat Delhemma*” and its narratives in Egypt. Additionally, this study seeks to assess the relationship between the selected *Sirah* and its cultural and historical context, to reflect on gender relations in Arab culture and history. Arabian *Sirah* enjoys a great place in Arab culture, and some of their stories are still told in Egypt. Unfortunately, however, the narration of “*Sirat Delhemma*” have disappeared, despite the *Sirah*’ uniqueness in dealing with important historical events, and as an interpretation of gender representation. The contribution of this study stems from how the Arabian *Sirah*, as a cultural phenomenon, accompanied the emergence of Islam and the sweeping changes it brought about

³Lyons (2008) was responsible for introducing the printed versions of most of the famous *Sirah*.

⁴The Barmakids, a noble Persian family, were highly influential during the Abbasid Caliphate, and maintained a hold over national politics for many years. The fifth Abbasid caliph, Hārūn al-Rashid, decided to remove them; yet this was not an easy task, as the Barmakids pervaded every part of society and had many allies and supporters. In the end, al-Rashid caught them by surprise and had them arrested. He declared that the people who protected them were unsafe and seized their money and property. Their tragic end came to be known as the “Barmakids Catastrophe”. This event had a major impact on Persian nationalism, which distorted the image of al-Rashid, portraying him as a reckless and unjust leader who spent his time drinking alcohol. This negated what is known about al-Rashid’s righteousness.

at the social and political level. Nevertheless, gender-oriented studies of the *Sirah* are limited, and the literature has so far not addressed the gender issues within “*Sīrat Delhemma*” or the influence of contemporaneous social transitions on the status of women. In this study, a collaborative of socio-historical and anthropological approach will be used to analyse the text and its broader context and its current situation in the modern era. Its depictions of women will be assessed through a consideration of the most famous female protagonist in the text “*Sīrat Delhemma*”. This will be accompanied by an exploration of the historical and cultural factors that led to the emergence of this portrayal. In addition to “*Sīrat Delhemma*”, historical sources such as al-Ṭabari and the autobiography of Usāmah ibn Munqidh will be referred to.

“*Sīrat Delhemma*” is the longest of all Arabian *Sirah*, and its main hero is a woman. The original text consists of 23,000 pages and is the longest *Sirah* in history (Abdul Hakim, 1996: p. 7). Only a few studies have so far considered the role of women in Arab *Sirah*. While Yūnus (1959) briefly touched on the role of women in these *Sirahs*, Al-Najjār (1976) explored women in Arab folklore more comprehensively. Additionally, in 1966, the Egyptian researcher Ibrahim published in German “A Comparative Study of the Story of Princess Dhāt al-Himmah”, which compared Arab and Byzantine folk literature. The study was later translated into Arabic (Ibrahim, 1990). Kruk (2014) provided synopses of some of the most popular *Sirah*, including “*Sīrat Delhemma*” and other stories featuring women.

This study will first focus on the position of Arabian *Sirah* as a cultural phenomenon in Egypt. It will then discuss the position of women in these epics and, subsequently, their historical and social background. This will clarify the origins of gender relations in “*Sīrat Delhemma*”.

2. Status of Arabian *Sirah* in Egypt

Although Ibrahim (1990) claims that the advent of Islam facilitated Arabian *Sirah* (26). However, the titular protagonist of the oldest *Sirah*, “*Sīrat Antarah*”, died before the Islam. Nonetheless, many *Sirah* influenced by it are likely to have been written after Islam (Horshid, 1964: pp. 34-35). Described by Horshid (1964) as “the first artistic cry of human conscience in a major literary work on slavery and racism” (39), “*Sīrat Antarah*” became a model for subsequent Arabian *Sirah* in its portrayal of a hero subjected to racism. The epic is centred on the love story of Abla and Antarah. Abla comes from an elite background but insists on marrying Antarah, a black slave subjected racial discrimination. This story has been interpreted many times in drama and films. For example, Antarah’s bravery inspired a famous Egyptian film produced in 1961, titled *Antar Ibn Shaddad*. Other Arabian heroes are often likened to Antarah (e.g., in “*Sīrat Delhemma*”). Indeed, Antarah has been used as an analogy of bravery on many occasions (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 204, 212, 262), and he remains a model of heroism to this day. While Antarah depended on swordsmanship and extraordinary physical strength, his younger brother Shayboub, who accompanied him, relied on intelligence, tricks and agility. “*Sīrat Antarah*” thus has both a strong

hero with amazing physical strength as well as another hero with a role called *Ayyār* عيار (i.e., good at tricks instead of physical strength). The heroic duo of Antarah and Shayboub influenced subsequent *Sirahs*. Notably, *Ayyār* became an indispensable element in many of the *Sirahs* that followed. Given the influence of “Sirat Antarah”, it can be argued that Arabian *Sirah* is a product of cultural accumulation that predates Islam. Hence, the genre not only reflects the social transition of Islam but also customs and beliefs that were strongly rooted in society before the religion’s birth.

Some famous medieval Islamic scholars, such as Ibn-Taymiyyah (1904: p. 12) and Ibn-Kathir (1989: p. 347), criticised *Sirah* as they considered its tales to be vulgar and riddled with religious errors and fictitious elements. However, given the wide circulation of the Arabian *Sirah*, it is difficult to ascertain whether their position affected the reproduction of *Sirah* texts. Such criticism of the epics was evident not only among Arab medieval scholars but also medieval Europeans (Kruk, 2014: p. 8). Indeed, until recent years, linguists and literary figures have generally found little merit in *Sirahs* (Horshid, 1964: pp. 16-18).

Although the Arabian *Sirah* comprises many elements that do not match with the teachings of Islam, there are various scenes that are linked to the Prophet Muhammad. For instance, in “Sirat Delhemma”, there is a man who comes to steal a mare from one of the main characters, Jundaba. The man presents himself as a devout man to deceive Jundaba, saying “Prophet Muhammad recommended that we should not do *Rukiya* (demon dispelling) without taking a bribe” (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 84). In reality, bribery violates Prophet Muhammad’s teachings. Since the *Sirah* is literature not a religious text, it naturally reflects the aspirations, hopes and attitudes of people mixed with imagination, as evidenced by the diversity of Arabian *Sirah* and the continuity of their telling throughout the ages. The religious position on *Sirah* did not, therefore, stop people from enjoying them. Al-Hajjaji (1991) observed that the genre was “ignored because it was not considered a literary form of Arab literature. Arabian and foreign researchers alike participated in this ignorance, and so many texts were lost after the death of the narrators” (5). Thus, until recently, *Sirah* were not considered part of Arabic literature. Ultimately, then, it was contempt for *Sirah* among literary and linguistic circles, rather than from religious scholars, that undermined the reputation of the tales.

“Al-*Sirah* al-Hilaliyyah”, also known as “the Sirat Banū Hilal”, is still narrated to this day at festivals and annual events in Egypt, especially in Upper (southern) Egypt. It is a long *Sirah* about the history of the Banū Hilal Tribe and their move to Tunisia. The tale centres on the life of the main character, Abu Zayd al-Hilali, and the struggles for survival of the Banū Hilal Tribe. Abu Zayd al-Hilali and the other protagonists of “Al-*Sirah* al-Hilaliyyah” are known across Egypt. Many proverbs in the country are related to the hero of the tale and his mother, Hadra (Omar, 2022). In 1997, an Egyptian drama series based on the *Sirah* was released, with Magdy Abu Emera as the director.

“Sirat Delhemma” is the longest story of the Arabian *Sirah*. The main charac-

ter, Dhāt al-Himmah, is both a courageous knight and a woman, which makes the story distinct not only among other Arabian *Sirah* but also in international literature. After her birth, Dhāt al-Himmah is excluded from her tribe because she is a girl. Later, she is kidnapped and raised as a slave, but her tenacity and faith transform her into a strong warrior worthy of her native tribe's recognition and respect. She eventually becomes a politician and the leader of the Islamic army. The printed version of "Sīrat Delhemma" constitutes 70 parts spread across seven volumes. Dhāt al-Himmah is active from the sixth part (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 503) until her death in the last part (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 1013). Despite its uniqueness, this *Sirah* has not received as much attention in Egyptian society.

3. Position of Women in Arabian *Sirah*

Arabian *Sirah* expresses the collective conscience of the people along with a contemporary outlook on historical facts. They also describe the values, ideals and social problems. The genre is centred on two areas of tension. The first relates to conflict with foreign enemies, while the second concerns social issues such as gender discrimination and racism. This study considers Arabian *Sirah* as not only a clue to understanding the image of women in the Middle Ages, but also as a clue to understand the basis of today's gender relations. To understand the culture that informed the *Sirah*, their historical and social background will be explored.

In the known Arabian *Sirah*, women are not only mothers, lovers and wives, but also leaders and heroines. Examples of heroic women in the *Sirah* include El Djazia in "Al-*Sirah* al-Hilaliyyah" and Dhāt al-Himmah in "Sīrat Delhemma". Additionally, as mothers, women are integral to raising heroes based on Arabian cultural ethics. Thus, in Arabian *Sirah*, the mother symbolises the collective conscience of the people. It is also notable that motherhood does not prevent women from adopting leading or heroic roles.

In the case of Dhāt al-Himmah, she heroically addresses two particular challenges: overcoming the discrimination that she initially faces and defying an external enemy. The composition of "Sīrat Delhemma" is the same as many other Arabian *Sirah*, wherein the birth of a hero is associated with alienation. For example, Dhāt al-Himmah is at risk of death shortly after her birth because she is a girl. The fact that Dhāt al-Himmah's son, Abdel-Wahhāb, is born black also causes alienation for the mother and the child, which is similar to what happens with Abu Zayd al-Hilali's mother in "Al-*Sirah* al-Hilaliyyah". The latter *Sirah* presents many women as active, and the female leader, El Djazia or Jaziya, has a particularly significant role. Due to her wisdom and intellect, her vote represents one-third of all votes cast by the tribe's men when voting on tribal issues. In addition, faced with oncoming danger, El Djazia secretly gathers children and pregnant women and leads them out of the country. She thus leaves her family to protect the Banū Hilal Tribe. Subsequently, El Djazia works hard in a foreign land to educate and protect the children of the tribe (El-Abnudi, 2002).

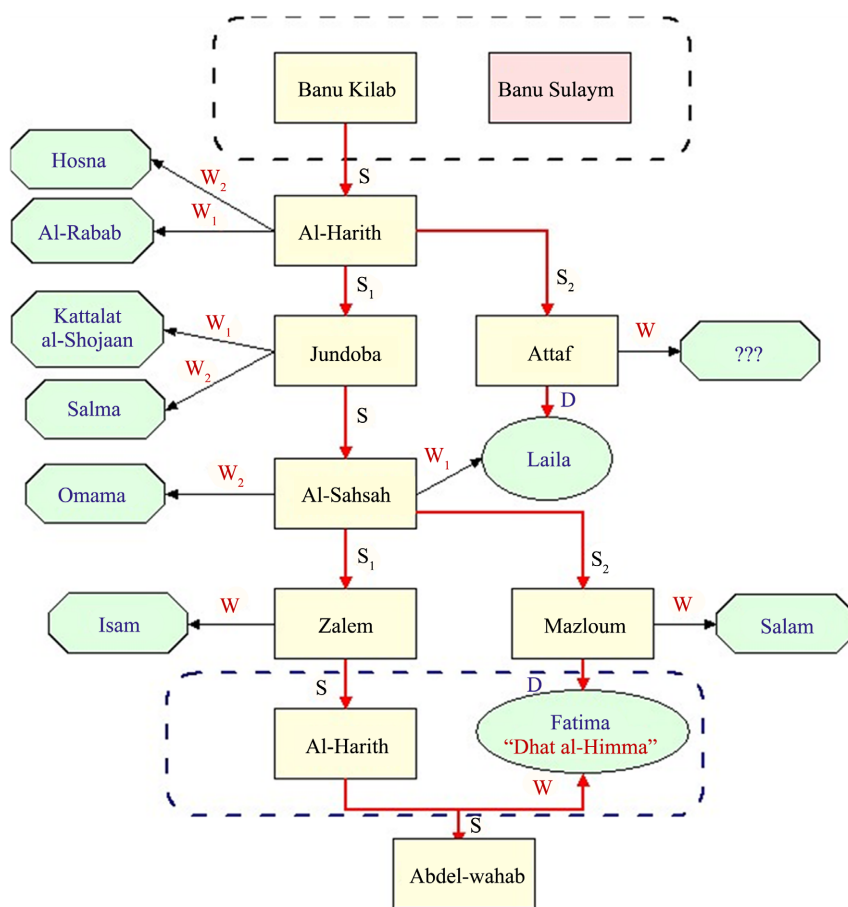
Regarding “*Sīrat Delhemma*”, the title of the epic, the leadership of the Islamic army and the central role are all given to a woman. Additionally, there is a strong female knight called Al-Shamtā who is feared by men (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 20). Another female warrior is Jundaba’s wife, Kattalat Al-Shoju’ān (i.e., the killer of the braves). She is a beautiful and strong knight who decides that her marriage partner must be an even stronger knight than her. Not only is the central role given to a female warrior but also the role of *Ayyār* is played by a woman. Therefore, women are actively involved in the cultural phenomena related to Arabian *Sīrah*—a role largely overlooked by many scholars. Al-Hajjaji (1991), for example, claims that the main components of Arabian *Sīrah* consist of “the prophecy and destiny of the hero (47), the companion of the hero (63) hero lineage (73), birth (85), alienation (95) and recognition (131)”. However, along with the elements highlighted by Al-Hajjaji, it is clear that the relationship between women and heroism is a vital part of the *Sīrah*.

4. Composition of “*Sīrat Delhemma*”

“*Sīrat Delhemma*” consists of rhymed and unrhymed poetry and prose. Manuscripts of the epic are kept at the British Library. Unfortunately, the manuscripts in storage have not been printed or translated, nor have they been digitised. The events of “*Sīrat Delhemma*” occur in the late seventh and ninth centuries, although some of the events described occur after the 10th century (Abdul Hakim, 1996: p. 7). While the exact date of its composition is unknown, the manuscript was completed around 1150 AD. Al-Samaw’ al ibn Yahyā al-Maghribī (1130-1180 AD), a Jewish who converted to Islam in 558 AH/1163 AD, stated that he enjoyed reading this *Sīrah* when he was 10 - 13 years old (Ibrahim, 1990: p. 60; Ott, 2003; Magidow, 2018). The oldest manuscript dates back to 1430 AD (c.f., Magidow, 2018: p. 4). In 1909, unknown man called Ali al-Maqanibi wrote the *Sīrah* again with the help of nine narrators. The version published in Cairo was the first printed edition of the epic. This version was later reprinted in 1980 by Al-Maktaba Al Sha’biyya in Beirut. Scholars depend on the printed version (Magidow, 2018: p. 4).

5. Synopsis of “*Sīrat Delhemma*”

In “*Sīrat Delhemma*”, Al-Hārith Al-Kilabi is the head of the Banū Kilab tribe, and Marwān bin Al-Haytham is the chief of the Banū Sulaym tribe (Figure 1). According to historical records, actual power at the time was held by the Banū Sulaym, but in the story, the Banū Kilab are singled out for attention (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 6). Many tribes are pleased with the death of Al-Hārith, the head of the Banū Kilab, as he repeatedly attacked other tribes. Al-Hārith’s wife, Al-Rabāb, who is about to give birth, decides to flee because she fears her husband’s enemies will take revenge on her child (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 9). At night, she begins her escape under the care of a trusted servant, Salem. However, the servant attempts to rape her during the journey (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 10-11). She tries



W: refers to wives.
 S: refers to sons.
 D: refers to daughters.

Figure 1. Fātima (Dhāt al-Himma) Family Tree (Maqānibī et al., 1981: Vol. 1-7).

hard to protect herself, but in doing so, she hastens her child's birth. Seeing Al-Rabāb soaked in blood, the servant becomes afraid and kills her. At this moment, a prince named Dārim is out for a walk. He finds Al-Rabāb with a screaming newborn boy beside her. Pitying the child, he takes him and raises him in place of his own son, who had died. Prince Dārim gives the child his dead son's name, Jundaba (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 17). Jundaba grows up and inherits the heroism of his late father, Al-Hārith. Prince Dārim is concerned by his behaviour and begins to hold a grudge against Jundaba. As the distance between the two grows, Prince Dārim decides to tell Jundaba the truth about his lineage (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 25). Jundaba is pleased to learn of his ancestry and decides to return to the Banū Kīlab tribe.

Reunited with his people, Jundaba takes responsibility for protecting them from hostile tribes. He is killed in battle, leaving his brother Aṭṭāf to assume the role of tribal leader. Shortly after his death, Jundaba's wife gives birth to a son named Al-Ṣahṣāh. Simultaneously, Aṭṭāf's wife gives birth to a daughter called Lailā. Raised in the same house, Al-Ṣahṣāh and Lailā love each other as they

grow up. Al-Şahşāh eventually asks his uncle Aţţāf to marry Lailā. However, Aţţāf, who is wary of Al-Şahşāh, comes out against this idea. Fortunately, Al-Şahşāh is able to overcome this obstacle and marry Lailā. Later, he dreams that he will have two sons, and one will oppress the other. This prophecy is fulfilled, the two brothers, Zālim and Maţlūm, who ultimately clash over the leadership of the Banū Kīlab. To settle matters, one of the brothers, Maţlūm, seeks tribal judgment. The tribe decides that leadership will be split between the two siblings and that in the future, the person whose wife gives birth to a boy will be the leader. Zālim's wife bears a son named Al-Hārith, and Maţlūm's wife has a daughter named Fātima (Dhāt al-Himmah) (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 503). Maţlūm is concerned by Zālim's insults and duplicity and considers killing his newborn daughter. However, he eventually accepts the proposal of leaving the child with someone who can raise her. To his brother, he says that the child was a boy who died shortly after being born.

Raised by her nanny, Fātima grows up fast and is loved by those around her for her beauty and ingenuity. She is named "Pious Shariha" but later becomes known as Dhāt al-Himmah or Delhemma (i.e., the courageous owner). Eventually, she learns about her ancestry and why she was exiled from the Banū Kīlab, but decides to forgive her father, Maţlūm. After their reunion, Maţlūm feels guilty and pledges not to mistreat Fātima again. In addition, her cousin, Al-Hārith, loves her and wants to marry her, but she refuses and decides not to marry at all. However, with the help of other members of the Banū Kīlab, Al-Hārith is able to conclude a marriage contract with Dhāt al-Himmah through deception. Although Dhāt al-Himmah tries to avoid the marriage being consummated, Al-Hārith sneaks into her private room while she is sleeping and pays her servants to drug her. After she wakes up, Dhāt al-Himmah feels nauseous and shocked, but continues to fulfil her marital duties as best as she can. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, she is dismayed and tries to have the child aborted, but ultimately fails to do so.

Dhāt al-Himmah later gives birth to a son, Abdel-Wahhāb. She eventually decides to move with him to Al-Thughūr, where the battle between the Arabs and Byzantine Empire is presently raging. Since Dhāt al-Himmah refuses to live with him, Al-Hārith attempts to take revenge on her before she leaves. Based on the dark skin colour of their son, he spreads the rumour that he is not the child's father. Dhāt al-Himmah postpones her trip to Al-Thughūr to resolve the issue. After a range of successes and further difficulties, she becomes the leader of the Islamic army and raises her son to be a brave hero.

6. Portrayal of Women in "Sīrat Delhemma"

This section focuses on the female characters who play a significant role in "Sīrat Delhemma", considering the portrayal of these women to analyse the representation of gender in the *Sīrah*. This analysis uses the classifications below, which are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, a female character could be included in more

than one classification. Dhāt al-Himmah, for instance, is relevant to the section on chastity due to this concept appearing in two incidents in her story. First, she kills Al-Hārith, who sexually harasses her. Second, she thinks of killing herself when her husband and cousin, Al-Hārith, falsely questions her honour by denying paternity of their son, on account of the child's dark skin. Dhāt al-Himmah can also be placed in the category of mother, as she shows maternal care to her son by fighting to confirm his lineage, enabling him to live with honour. She also takes it upon herself to raise him as a hero and teach him to be a warrior. However, due to limited space, each female character will only be categorised according to their most prominent function in the *Sirah*.

6.1. Women Representing the Concept of Chastity in Arab Culture

Al-Rabāb

In the story that appears in the first chapter of “*Sīrat Delhemma*”, Al-Hārith raids some Arab villages and takes control of the men, women and resources. He sees a girl among the people captured, Al-Rabāb, and is drawn to her. He seizes the girl, which causes her father, a sheikh (i.e., an old man), to cry. Al-Hārith asks, “What are you crying about, Sheikh?” The latter responds: “I cry because you took my daughter by force. If you have a purpose in here, go about it with Halal (the lawful), by the Sunnah of God and His Messenger, that would be better”. When Al-Hārith hears these words, he releases the sheikh, his daughter and the people of his tribe. He then brings to the sheikh a thousand camels and a thousand dinars of gold. The sheikh brings the elders of his tribe together and they allow Al-Hārith to marry Al-Rabāb. Al-Hārith takes Al-Rabāb away and she becomes pregnant. There is no mention of Al-Rabāb's opinion of the marriage, but subsequent events indicate that she was loyal to Al-Hārith, who clearly loves her. After Al-Hārith dies, Al-Rabāb mourns him with great feeling, suggesting she loved him as well (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 7-14).

After the death of Al-Hārith, Al-Rabāb is afraid that the Arab tribes Al-Hārith invaded will take revenge on her. All her slaves flee, except for one slave who has been with her since his childhood, Sallam. She asks him to protect her while she escapes at night, for fear of the Arab tribes. However, he betrays her and, during the escape journey, attempts to sexually assault her. Al-Rabāb resists him, but the shock causes her to go into labour. She gives birth to a baby; upon seeing this, Sallam panics and kills her. The story shows and confirms the value and importance of chastity for Arab woman. Even though Al-Rabāb is in a dangerous situation and isolated from her people, she risks—and ultimately pays with—her life to defend her chastity.

Marwā, the daughter of the Caliph

On his journey to get Lailā's dowry, Al-Ṣahṣāh encounters a convoy of pilgrims who have been captured by bandits. Among them are women. Al-Ṣahṣāh hears the wailing and crying of the women and decides to save them. His slave Najāh tries to stop him due to the large number of bandits and the danger they

represent. Al-Şahşāh became angry with him and says, only a scoundrel stops supporting and protecting the harem (women) (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 153). One of the girls from the sanctuary of the pilgrims promises Al-Şahşāh reward for saving the women, but Al-Şahşāh responds, “I did not do this for the sake of gold and silver, but rather a desire for God’s reward and your salvation, the best gain”. He adds that he will protect the pilgrims and the women in obedience to God (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 156; Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 168-175). Al-Şahşāh does not know that among the captured is Marwā, the daughter of the Caliph. She is captivating and renowned for her piety, chastity and alms to the poor and needy. The Caliph has ten children but loves her most of all. He was waiting for Marwā to return from the pilgrimage when he learned that thieves had intercepted her. He pledges to rescue her and sends out a search party of soldiers. What most saddens the Caliph and his sons is thinking about Marwā’s modesty and chastity, which is now at the mercy of bandits. This concern is also the reason why the Caliph generously rewards Al-Şahşāh following Marwā’s rescue. Another meaning of “chastity” emerges in this story, as it is seen to be associated with the pride of Arab women. Indeed, alongside what her father and brothers give him; Marwā presents Al-Şahşāh with gifts and rewards to express her gratitude to him for preserving her chastity and honour (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 176-189).

6.2. Female Warriors and Knights

Among the diverse range of female protagonists in “Sīrat Delhemma”, it is notable that several female warriors are featured. These warriors are not only Arab, but also Roman or Byzantine women. The female warriors can be divided into two types. The first type is idealised female warriors who are endowed with beauty and goodness, and in many cases choose to marry a man who could defeat them in a fight (exceptions include Dhāt al-Himmah and Queen Alūf, as discussed below). The second type is evil female warriors. These women are given bad qualities regarding their character and appearance.

Al-Shamṭā

In “Sīrat Delhemma”, the nomadic Bedouin people are depicted as feuding tribes who often raid one another. In line with their traditional custom, the Prince Dārim goes out in the world to earn money. He settles in the land of a woman called Al-Shamṭā, who has a lot of money and livestock. Not knowing her strength, Dārim, supported by a hundred horsemen, steals her money. When Al-Shamṭā learns this, she pursues them, kills many of the horsemen and captures Prince Dārim. The rest of his men flee. Prince Dārim has ten male sons, and when they learn of their father’s captivity, they set off to fight Al-Shamṭā and rescue their father. Al-Shamṭā manages to capture them all. When their mother hears this, she calls on others to help. Eventually, Jundaba goes to fight Al-Shamṭā to liberate Dārim and his sons. Jundaba triumphs over Al-Shamṭā and kills her. Al-Shamṭā’s followers try to fight Jundaba, but he says to them, “why do you serve an old useless woman when you are brave lions?” Note that

despite her bravery, Al-Shamṭā's name means "the hag", which in part justifies Jundaba killing her in the tale (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 19-24).

Kattalat Al-Shoju'ān (the killer of the braves)

Jundaba encounters a masked knight, who suddenly approaches him and begins to fight without speaking. Jundaba is surprised but fights fiercely with the knight. Eventually, Jundaba manages to force the knight to the ground and is poised to kill him. Unexpectedly, he hears a soft voice calling to him. Jundaba does not understand and asks, "Are you a man or a woman?" The knight—a veiled Kattalat Al-Shoju'ān—replies, "I am a virgin girl". She then reveals her face, showing herself to be extremely beautiful. Jundaba falls in love at first sight. He says, "Tell me your story." She tells him that many men have proposed to her, but that when they duel, she always defeats them. She had therefore decided that her marriage partner must be stronger than her. As she lost a fight against Jundaba, she says to him, "You are the best for me", and agrees to marry him (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 29-32).

Jundaba and Kattalat Al-Shoju'ān love each other very much. However, Hisham, the son of Caliph Marawan Ibn Abd al-Malik, also falls in love with Kattalat Al-Shoju'ān and tries to take her for himself. He expresses his desire to his father, saying, "My heart is fascinated by the Bedouin's [Jundaba's] wife. If I cannot reach her, I will die". His father rebukes him and says that his mind is corrupted; how can he think of taking another man's wife? He tells his father that he wants to exchange her for money. His father gets angry and leaves him. However, Hisham does not back down and tries to seduce Kattalat Al-Shoju'ān. She rejects him angrily, so Hisham decides to kidnap her. Once he has her with him, he tries for two months to win her over while she curses and insults him. He becomes afraid that his reputation among the people will suffer, so has his captive killed her and orders the maidservants to bury her at night (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 33-48). This story is an affirmation of chastity and shows that its value in Arab culture exceeds money and power.

Dhāt al-Himmah

After Fātima (Dhāt al-Himmah) is born, her father considers killing her because she is a girl; but in the end, he allows a servant to raise her and claims that his wife gave birth to a boy who died (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 503-504). Fātima is later captured but hates to be a servant, insisting on covering her face with a burqa like a free woman (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 505-506). She is also confronted by Al-Hārith, who tries to sexually harass her more than once. Al-Hārith is one of the leaders of his people and is fascinated by Fātima's beauty. However, she is determined to preserve her chastity and eventually kills Al-Hārith (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 509). Her master rebukes her for this because he has to pay a large amount of blood money to Al-Hārith's family, and all the money he has is not enough. Fātima decides to raise the blood money herself and succeeds in collecting a large sum of money. Her master admires her courage and secretly wishes he could marry her (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 514). When they learn of Fātima's strength and courage, the Banū Tayy tribe ask her to exact revenge on

the Banū Kīlab, who killed their masters. She agrees to do so. When fighting the Banū Kīlab, she defeats her father, Mazlūm, who she does not know, and takes him prisoner. This sets the scene for an important part of the *Sirah*, in which the father and daughter are reunited. Mazlūm is set to be killed, but Su‘da, who raised Fātima, tells her that he (Mazlūm) is her father. Fātima is pleased with her lineage because it means she is a freewoman rather than a slave. She kisses her father, who embraces her and asks her to forgive him (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 510-520).

Fātima’s uncles, along with his son Al-Hārith, come to see Mazlūm after learning about his release and his reconciliation with his daughter. After obtaining permission to see Fātima, her uncle and his son greet her and her uncle extends his hand and removes her turban and veil. Up to this point, Fātima had preferred to wear men’s garments. As soon as Al-Hārith sees her, he falls in love with her and asks for her hand in marriage. However, she refuses to accept this proposal, despite Al-Hārith repeating it on several occasions (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 521-527). Even after she agrees to the marriage for fear of upsetting the Caliph who married Fātima and Al-Hārith, she refuses to be approached by Al-Hārith (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 562-563). In response, Al-Hārith pays her servants to drug her and sneaks into her room. After she wakes up, Fātima feels sickened and shocked, but goes about her marital duties as best as she can. Al-Hārith who was afraid of Fātima escaped. She was shocked when she knewed that she is pregnant. Eventually, she had a son named Abdel-Wahhāb who was Black. Al-Hārith denies the lineage of the boy to him in retaliation for Fātima, who rejected him as a husband. Fātima’s honour is thus called into question. Her father supports her, and ultimately she is able to prove Al-Hārith’s paternity of her son (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 515-516). Due to her great horsemanship, Fātima goes on to lead the Muslim armies. As for her son, her love and support enable him to become a great leader himself.

Carrying the title of the *Sirah*, Fātima (Dhāt al-Himmah) is considered the main character of the epic. Moreover, she exemplifies the social problems that Arab women faced in the past, some of which remain today. Her role begins in the sixth part of the *Sirah*, which documents her birth, and continues throughout the rest of the work. Dhāt al-Himmah is portrayed as an ideal Arab woman, representing beauty, chastity and strength of character. Although some oppose her independence, she is well admired for her courage and soundness of mind. The *Sirah* presents her as more admirable than her father, who abandons her, and much more than Al-Hārith. After overcoming various difficulties, she finally attains a position of power in a society that mainly recognises force.

Queen Bakhtooos of the Byzantine

“Sirat Delhemma” depicts Queen Bakhtooos as the ugliest of people. She kills men and destroys heroes, raiding the countries of the Turks and even Christian lands, spreading her evil far and wide. At one point, she has a close relationship with a great pastor. When he hears of her fighting the people of her own religion, and tells her to invade an Islamic country instead, she screams at him and orders her servants to arrest him. After they hand him over to her, she cuts off

his face and hangs it on the door. She warns that anyone who disagrees with her or tries to advise her will meet the same fate, which ensures nobody ever does. She is said to be 163 years old, and she eats a whole pig for lunch and a whole pig for dinner every day. She is addicted to drinking wine and has sex with men from night until morning. This latter vice enables the knight Midlāj to finally eliminate her. He spends the night with her and kills her while she sleeps (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 412). She is similar to Al-Shamṭā on the Arabic side. Therefore, it can be observed that the *Sirah* portrays women who are hostile to its heroes as having reprehensible qualities.

Queen Alūf of the Byzantine

In the country of the Byzantine, Al-Ṣahṣāh meets ten beautiful young Byzantine women, beautiful as moons. Among them is a girl of the most exquisite beauty. The girls are playing at wrestling. Al-Ṣahṣāh advances towards the most beautiful one and starts to wrestle her. He is weak in front of her beauty, and she defeats him twice. He is taken to her castle, where she treats him kindly, despite him being the enemy. He learns that the girl is Queen Alūf. He is deeply impressed not only by her beauty but also by her intelligence and knowledge. She likes him in return. However, Al-Ṣahṣāh does not wish to marry someone other than Lailā. He eventually introduces Queen Alūf to his friend Maslama, the son of the Caliph. They get married and the Christian queen converts to Islam. Perhaps the narrator's and the audience's admiration for the character of Queen Alūf make it desirable that she will convert to Islam and marry Maslama, the son of the Caliph, who is famous for having good morals (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 297-341). Some characters of the Byzantine warriors are less straightforwardly sympathetic. For example, the *Sirah* depicts Queen Malatya and her sister Bhaḡa as less tolerant than Queen Alūf (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 580-586).

6.3. Women Who Have Lost Their Independence and Ability to Represent Themselves: Salma, the Daughter of Al-Ghatrīf

Junduba has a mare called Muzna, a wonderful mare that he loves. Muzna's reputation has spread and many tribal leaders wish to own her. They send men out to steal the horse, so Junduba always keeps a careful watch. Al-Ghatrīf, the leader of the Ṭayy Tribe, is fascinated when he hears about Muzna and seeks to possess the mare at all costs. Therefore, he announces Muzna as a dowry for his daughter, Salma. She is strikingly beautiful and many tribal leaders wish to marry her. However, Al-Ghatrīf announces that he will marry his daughter to the man who brings him Muzna, even if this man happens to be a slave. In Bani Ṭayy, there is a man called Jaffāl who has a terrible reputation and is called a fraudster. After Jaffāl hears Al-Ghatrīf's announcement, he desires to marry the beautiful Salma (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 50-51). Salma is terrified to learn this, and she prays to God that her father's wish will not be fulfilled. Jaffāl, who is described as "this immoral, fraudulent devil who has sloughed off in the form of a human with horrible moustaches and a foul odour, and a crooked nose and a paralyzed jaw". She swears that if Jaffāl arrives with Muzna, "I will kill myself".

Nevertheless, Jaffāl disguises himself as a hermit and enters Bani Kalab with the intention of stealing Muzna. He is killed while fighting a person who had also come to steal Muzna.

Al-Ghatrīf is annoyed by Jaffāl's death and continues to want Muzna. One of the sheikhs advises him to exchange his daughter for Muzna directly; that is, allow Junduba to marry Salma in return for the mare. However, Junduba refuses this offer. A slave called Maimūn (nicknamed Al-Hayej), who is ugly but eloquent, asks Al-Ghatrīf to promise him that he will marry Salma if he brings back Muzna. Al-Ghatrīf agrees to make the promise (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 51-65). Maimūn disguises himself as a poet and goes to Banū Kīlab. Although they sympathise with him, Junduba is suspicious, so he ties Maimūn's leg to Muzna's leg. However, Maimūn, who has driven himself crazy thinking about Salma, cuts off his leg and escapes with the mare (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 68-73). Maimūn arrives back with Muzna, causing Al-Ghatrīf to rejoice. Maimūn has lost a lot of blood since losing his leg. He feels he is going to die and asks Al-Ghatrīf to bring forward his marriage with Salma. Al-Ghatrīf calls to his daughter; she attends and he hands Salma over to Maimūn. Salma denounces the marriage and says to Al-Ghatrīf: "Father, are you not ashamed that you marry me into slaves and leave the heroes and strongmen?" Al-Ghatrīf replies, "O my daughter, as for you saying that he is a slave, he is one of Adam's children, and a woman is obedient to her husband. So be obedient to him and do not respond to me in words, or I will cut off your head with this sword". As soon as Maimūn is alone with Salma he kisses her. He then places his head on her lap, takes one last gasp and dies. Salma is pleased by this turn of events (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 78-79).

Maimūn has a brother named Zaytūn. When Maimūn dies, Zaytūn wishes to marry Salma and says to Al-Ghatrīf, "My brother died after cutting off his leg for the sake of Muzna, and now I am the most deserving of Salma after his death". Al-Ghatrīf rejects this idea and threatens to kill Zaytūn. The latter becomes angry and decides to steal Muzna and send it back to Banū Kīlab. When the mare disappears, Al-Ghatrīf is overcome by grief. One day, a man comes to him; his name is Jamra Al-Haddād (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 82). He says, "O King, I will come to you with Muzna", so Al-Ghatrīf promises to allow him to marry Salma. Jamra is one-eyed, paralysed and dirty. When Salma learns that his father has promised her to this man, she cries and prays to God that Jamra and her father fail in their mission. Her mother encourages her, saying, "O daughter, may God give Jamra the cup of death, as he did with Maimūn" (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 83). Nonetheless, Jamra goes to Banū Kīlab, pretending to be an astrologer (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 83). After many life-threatening struggles, he returns to Bani Tayy with Muzna. He asks Al-Ghatrīf to speed up his marriage to Salma, fearing that he might die soon. Al-Ghatrīf agrees, but Jamra quickly meets the same fate as Maimūn (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 92-93). Salma is once again happy. In a comic scene, her father asks her, "What is wrong with you, Salma?" She replies that her husband has just died. Her father laughs and says to her, "You are not a blessed wife". Salma responds, "O my father, you have disappointed me, but God

has not forsaken me and my kinship” (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 93).

6.4. Fictional Female Characters: The Daughter of the Genie King

In some parts of “*Sīrat Delhemma*”, the narrative suddenly deviates from a realistic style and tells fictional stories. These parts of the *Sīrah* are similar to *Ara-bian Nights*. In one of the fictional stories, Al-Ṣahṣāh begins a second marriage with a woman other than Lailā. When he hears that Lailā has learnt about the marriage, he feels ashamed and walks in the desert, not knowing what to do. While he is in this forlorn state, he finds a meadow with springs, flowers and deer. Here he sees a monastery where monks are performing their prayers. He rejoices and decides to approach the monks, thinking that they might be able to provide some comforting advice. While he is on his way, he encounters a very beautiful gazelle. He follows the animal, but suddenly, a full-grown lion and two cubs intercept him. He kills the two cubs but is unable to kill the adult lion. His life is now in grave danger. At this moment, the gazelle turns into a beautiful young woman appears and screams at the lion, causing it to move away. Al-Ṣahṣāh greatly admires the girl’s beauty and asks her if she is human or genie. He also inquires if she is married or not. She rebuffs him, saying, “What’s your business with me? You followed gazelle in the past and on your way you met a girl whom you married, and you forgot Lailā. And this time you saw a gazelle and followed it, and if I had not saved you from the lion, you would have lost your life. Then you ask me whether I am married or not. Who do you think you are? If you are arrogant with your money, we also have money. And if you were arrogant with your strength, your strength did not help you when the lion attacked you. If you are conceited with your eloquence, I am more eloquent than you” (Maqānibī et al., 1981: pp. 478-460). Al-Ṣahṣāh learns from the girl that she is the daughter of the genie king, who won the honour of praising the Prophet Muhammad more than a hundred years ago. Al-Ṣahṣāh’s admiration for the eloquence and beauty of the girl intensifies. Eventually the girl disappears, then Al-Ṣahṣāh sings poetry that expresses his sorrows, and he hears someone respond to him in poetry, blaming him for harming Lailā when he married another woman, and stating that the days have harmed him as he hurt Lailā. The tale thus depicts the intervention of supernatural forces in support of women.

As mentioned above, women occupy a significant part of the *Sīrah*, with the motif of female chastity being a particularly common theme. Moreover, female warriors and knights, whether from the Arab or Byzantine side, are some of the most prominent characters in the genre. The section below will consider these motifs and characters in more detail by exploring the context that informed their depiction in the *Sīrah*.

7. Socio-Historical Background

This section discusses “*Sīrat Delhemma*” in terms of the social and historical factors that shaped it. The *Sīrah* covers the end of the Umayyad Caliphate, focusing on the fifth Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān. It also discusses

the fifth Abbasid Caliph, Hārūn al-Rashid, and the "Barmakids catastrophe" (i.e., Nakbat Al-Baramika), which occurred during his reign. Additionally, the *Sirah* refers to the centuries-long continental war between Arabs and the European-Byzantine alliance (referred to in the epic as "the Roman alliance").

It is unknown when "Sīrat Delhemma" was completed. However, the narrator of the epic addresses it to the ninth caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, al-Wāthiq (812-847 AD). It is therefore possible that the *Sirah* was completed during his reign. From the praise given to the Banū Kīlab tribe, it can be inferred that the "Sīrat Delhemma" was created in Al-Thughūr in the Levant region, where the Banū Kīlab had moved. Ibrahim supports this theory based on the use in the *Sirah* of a dialect from the Levant region; some Greek words and phrases are also present (Ibrahim, 1990: pp. 62-63). According to Al-Qalqashandī (القلقشندی), Banū Kīlab claimed to be the descendants of Abd al-Wahhāb Ibn Bukht (whose name matches that of the Son of Fātima or Delhemma) and raided the nations of Rome from their base in the Levant (Al-Qalqashandi, 1913: p. 340).

With some notable exceptions (e.g., Dhāt al-Himmah and Okuba), most of the main characters in "Sīrat Delhemma" can be found in history books. The historian Al-Ṭabarī (الطبري), who lived from 838 to 923 AD, confirmed the real-life existence of characters such as Abdel-Wahhāb and Al-Battal. Al-Ṭabarī describes the bravery of Abdel-Wahhāb (or Abdel-Wahhāb bin Bukht, as Al-Ṭabarī refers to him) and details his death in 731-732 AD (113 AH) (Al-Ṭabarī, 1965: p. 88). Al-Ṭabarī also described the death of Al-Battal (Al-Ṭabarī, 1965: 191). However, while the history books say that these heroes died during the Umayyad dynasty (662-750 AD), the *Sirah* makes them live until the subsequent Abbasid Caliphate.

Many of the events depicted in "Sīrat Delhemma" are also grounded in historical reality. Indeed, it contains most of the historical events surrounding the transition of the Umayyad-Abbasid caliphate and the struggle between Al-Amin and Al-Ma'mun, from the time of the fifth Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (reign: 685-705 AD) to the ninth Abbasid caliphate, Al-Wāthiq (reign: 812-847 AD). Certain historical events are described in more detail in the *Sirah* than in the history books, such as the "Barmakids catastrophe" (i.e., Nakbat Al-Baramika) during the Abbasid Caliphate. However, in some parts of this *Sirah*, the story suddenly departs from historical reality and narrates fictional stories whose style differs from the rest of the epic. In addition, it contains many distortions in terms of the hadiths attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. These examples of artistic embellishment suggest that the text is closer to a literary work than a historical record.

Although most of the pivotal female characters in the *Sirah* do not appear in history records, many female characters similar to this *Sirah*'s female characters appear to have existed in the Arabian history. After the birth of Islam in the middle Ages, women of all classes were active socially and politically; some also fought as warriors. Usama Ibn Munqidh (1905-1188) (Ibn Khallikan, 1842: p. 179), an Islamic warrior and historian who wrote *Kitab al-ʿIṭibar* (الإعتبار) (i.e., *The Book of Learning by Example* or *The Book of Contemplation*), dedicated a

section of the book to the bravery and wisdom of women (Ibn Munqidh, 1930: pp. 118-131). Ibn Munqidh's respect for women is evident in the gratitude that he expresses to his mother and grandmother, as well as to his servants. He says that he listens to his grandmother's advice, and when he sees her, he immediately kisses her hand (Ibn Munqidh, 1930: p. 126). Ibn Munqidh also refers to an elderly servant woman who is assigned to work in his house. He calls her "Ommy" (i.e., my mother), which indicates respect and holiness towards women (Ibn Munqidh, 1930: p. 168). Women's direct participation in warfare is confirmed by the historian Al-Ṭabarī, who refers to women fighting in the Battle of the Yarmuk in 636 AD (8, 636). The historian Ibn Al-Athīr (ابن الأثير) (1160-1233 AD) also mentions the participation of women in combat. Meanwhile, *The Book of Contemplation* discusses Byzantine female knights.

During the pre-Islamic era of *Jahiliyyah* ("ignorance"), many names of women depicted their social and political roles, like the poet Al-Khansa, the brave and wealthy merchant woman Khadija bint Khuwaylid prophet's Mohamed wife, and Hind bint 'Utbah. However, pre-Islamic women's independence was associated with their class, with ordinary women doing household chores, raising children, bringing water from wells and springs, taking care of animals, manufacturing tents and rugs, and collecting firewood. Therefore, most women essentially supported men and did not have a high social status (Mubarakpuri, 2003: p. 414).

Islam introduced novel social values that equated masters with their slaves, which affected the genre of *Sirah* as many heroes were previously enslaved or marginalised (e.g., Antarah and Dhāt al-Himmah). *sirahs* also reflected, pre-Islamic customs, such as the marginalisation of blacks and women, Arab tribes raiding each other, which did not completely disappear from society. For example, in "Sīrat Delhemma", Mazlūm, the father of the heroine Fātima (Dhāt al-Himmah) considers killing her immediately after her birth because she is a girl. In response, the midwife says, "Do not sin and kill this child. Accept my opinion and give money to one of your servants to raise the child for you" (Maqānibī et al., 1981: p. 503). Killing children, especially young girls, was prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula before the birth of Islam. Tribes killed children to avoid the burden of raising them. Many tribes—especially larger ones such as the Rabi, the Kinda and the Ṭayy—were particularly hostile to girls, in part for religious reasons. Before Islam, Arabs separated humans into two broad types. The first type included creations attributed to their gods (Goddess Al-Latt اللات, Goddess Al-Uzza العزة, Goddess Manat مناة etc.), which were uncontaminated and pure. The second type, which included all other creations, was believed to be contaminated and abominable. The first type were required to remove the second type from their midst, or to offer them as a tribute to their gods. According to this belief system, men were a pure type of divine creation, whereas girls were created by Satan. Therefore, as a religious obligation, girls were banished or decimated. In the case of the latter, they were buried shortly after birth to prevent the spread of "dirty" blood (Wafi, 1948: pp. 118-120). However, after Islam, killing a child became a crime. Therefore, in the *Sirah* under discussion, Fātima's father

listens to her midwife and decides not to kill Fātima.

The Quran affirms the principle of gender equality, stating, “And their Lord responded to them, ‘Never will I allow to be lost the work of [any] worker among you, whether male or female; you are of one another [3: 195]’”. Additionally, when the Quran discusses the origins of clans, tribes and ethnic groups, it stresses that there is no distinction between men and women: “O mankind, fear Your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women [4: 1]”. In the seventh century, a woman named Al-Khansaa bint Khodam Al-Ansariyya discussed family building and marriage with the Prophet Muhammad. She wanted people to know about the importance of women’s opinions concerning marriage in sharia (Islamic Law). She told the Prophet Muhammad that her father had arranged her marriage without her permission. Going against her father, the Prophet Muhammad advised her to marry the person she wants. She responded, “I accept what my father did. However, I want people to know that the father does not have the right to force his daughter”. Prophet Muhammad did not deny her statement (Al-Sarakhsi, 1090-1091: p. 2). During the same period, a Muslim woman called Umm Hani was asked for help by an enemy. As written in Quran, Muslims should protect enemies when they seek protection (“And if any one of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection” [9: 6]). Therefore, Umm Hani helped this person. However, Ali Ibn Abi Talib⁵, Prophet Muhammad’s cousin, wanted to kill the enemy. Um Hani objected to this and complained to the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet Muhammad said, “O Um Hani! We will shelter those whom you have sheltered⁶”. Thus, Prophet Muhammad supported her claim against his beloved cousin Ali Ibn Abi Talib. In addition, the second Rashidun caliph, Omar ibn Al-Khattab (634-644 AD)—who is known as one of the most powerful and influential Muslim caliphs in history—listened to women’s opinion about the dowry. He was preaching about dowries one day and it is suggested that he intended to limit them. One of the women listening to his sermon suddenly stood up and said to Omar: “In Quran’s Surah An Nisā, Allah said, ‘But if you want to replace one wife with another and you have given one of them kantaran (a great amount) [in gifts], do not take [back] from it anything’” (4: 20). She further stated, “Kantaran means a great amount, and although Allah did not limit the dowry, are you willing to limit it, Omar?” Omar responded, “The woman is right and Omar has made a mistake”, and he abided what the woman Says.

Islamic texts contain many teachings that support women and that encourage compliance with general laws that enable them to play an active role in society. However, from the social environment depicted by the *Sirah*, it is clear that early Islamic society had not completely rid itself of pre-Islamic customs such as fe-

⁵Ali Ibn Abi Talib (13 September 601-28 January 661) was a cousin, son-in-law, and companion of Prophet Muhammad. He ruled as the fourth Rashidun (“rightly-guided”) Caliph from 656 until his assassination in 661 and is one of the central figures in Shia Islam. Shia Muslims regard him as the rightful immediate successor to Prophet Muhammad and the first Imam.

⁶Sahih Bukhari: Volume 8, Book 73, Number 179.

male infanticide, honour killings, and women's inability to represent themselves. Indeed, the *Sirah* shows that the distinction between male and female children continued, with Fātima's father thinking to kill her because she is a girl. The *Sirah* also shows women being married off against their will and exploited, as is the case with Hosna, or being isolated from social and political life. This suggests that customs oppressing women, and other traditionally marginalised groups, continued after they were forbidden by Islam.

8. Narrative of the *Sirah* and Gender Representation

In the nineteenth century, before *Sirah* were printed, the place where people usually told them in Egypt were coffee shops. The narrator (*Sha'er or rawi*) provided daily episodes of *Sirah*, sat on a large wooden sofa surrounded by their audience (Lane, 2003: pp. 391-394). *Sha'er* deliberately stopped on the cusp of the most dramatic scenes, creating a "cliff-hanger" effect (Figure 2). The audience thus looked forward to the following day's episode. In the Arab world, Scheherazade is the only famous female narrator. The male milieu that this suggests perhaps means *Sirah* were only shared among men.



Figure 2. Narrative scene depicted by 19th century lane (Lane, 2003: p. 393).

However, after meeting a woman in 1996 who had memorised “Al-Sirah al-Hilaliyyah”, Hafez (2014) conducted a study based on the multiplicity of women’s voices in this *Sirah*. He advanced the theory that ancient cultures, including ancient Egypt, symbolised females as the creators of life and males as servants of life (28-29). Meanwhile, Abdel Hafez points out that written narration are full of female characters that are not mentioned in oral narratives, suggesting a level of incongruence between the old and updated version of oral written texts (Hafez, 2014: p. 31). He concludes that women occupy central scenes in “Al-Sirah al-Hilaliyyah” in a way that is unparalleled in Arab folklore, except for *Arabian Nights*. However, this importance of female characters has been lost in the largely male art of narration (Hafez, 2014: p. 30). Notably, Kruk (2014) assumes that *Sirah* represent the tastes of men rather than the ambitions of women. Nonetheless, female protagonists are undeniably present in *Sirah*, which suggests they are likely to have been involved in the creation and telling of these epics. However, no fieldwork studies have yet examined whether *Sirah* were told only among men.

In Egypt, The narration of *Sirah* continued until the beginning of the 20th century. It gradually disappeared with the introduction of television and radio. “Al-Sirah al-Hilaliyyah” is still told in Egypt, and versions can be found on cassette tapes and YouTube. By contrast, “Sīrat Delhemma” faded from the Society even before the age of television and radio. Lane (2003), the British orientalist, who stayed in Egypt in the first half of the 19th century, stated that the story of “Sīrat Delhemma” was uncommon and that some parts of the text were very difficult to obtain (415). Nonetheless, in Iraq, a drama series called “Dhāt al-Himmah”, directed by Ali Al-Ansari, was broadcast in 1993. Moreover, Kruk discussed the unusual narrative case of “Sīrat Delhemma” took place in Morocco (Kruk, 2014: p. 11). In 2020, an Egyptian anthropologist, El Omda, used a YouTube video to narrate “Sīrat Delhemma”, which can be interpreted as an attempt at reviving heritage. Yet very few Arabs now know “Sīrat Delhemma”, even though many would be aware of *Sirah* such as “Al-Sirah al-Hilaliyyah” and “Sīrat Antarah.” Sīrat Delhemma Therefore, it is perhaps the case that the marginalisation of women has been greater in the modern era than in the Medieval Ages, with women being stripped of leading roles and silenced in many Arab Societies.

9. Results and Discussion

Many think that literature is just fiction. On the other hand, literature is considered a mirror of life that has the power to express social problems through literary texts. The writer creates a story to reflect human life and circumstances with creativity and imagination, through story settings and characters’ words and actions that reflect the values and deficiencies of society. Especially by reading historical stories such as those in “Sīrat Delhemma”, the question of what past life was like comes to the reader’s mind. By examining the historical background of

the work, in fact, the content of the literary work becomes even deeper, and various facets and events in society can be better understood. However, using a Socio-historical approach and analysing the text itself through highlighted female characters as well as the text's social and historical background, it was found that, when analysing the gender representations or social problems embedded in the literature, it is necessary not only to analyse the text, but also "human relations in the era when the work was written", the "historical background and transition of era", and so on, to enable readers to see the events of the era through the lens of that era, not through those of the current era.

"*Sīrat Delhemma*" covers some important historical events and describes some of them in more detail than the history books. Its original text certainly has had a realistic pattern, which made Al-Samaw' al ibn Yahyā al-Maghribī think that it was a work of history. However, some parts of this *Sīrah* unexpectedly deviate from this realistic style and tell fictional stories. The epic contains colloquial words—for example, in the story of the daughter of the genie king—and many religious mistakes. This makes it likely that the last version of "*Sīrat Delhemma*" by Al-Maqānibī may differ from the original version in certain respects. However, it remains unclear which of the existing texts is the original. This suggests the need for comparative studies of the existing versions of "*Sīrat Delhemma*".

This study has explored many of the pivotal female characters in "*Sīrat Delhemma*", as well as analysing the historical and social background of the *Sīrah*. Although some of the female characters do not appear in actual historical sources, this study makes it clear that they broadly reflected the reality of women in the mediaeval Arab world. In addition, this study has argued that women play critical roles in *Sīrah*, and are therefore an indispensable aspect of the genre. As Arab women are not separated from the social and political life described in the *Sīrah*, it can also be inferred that they were actively involved in the formation and narration of folklore at a certain time.

While *Sīrah* came to fruition through a "narrative" of historical facts, rather than a recording of them, the combination of rich literary character and historical facts can illuminate the moral truth that power structures obscure. Thus, *Sīrah* could be a clue of how to overcome gender disparities in contemporary Arab society.

Among the Arabian *Sīrahs*, "*Sīrat Delhemma*" depicts women's oppression. However, in "*Sīrat Delhemma*", the faith of the heroine supports her in her struggle against slavery and deportation, regardless of her social class. This tale seems to be a reflection of the religious discourse that supported women after the advent of Islam and in the era of the Rashidun Caliphs. As mentioned above, some Arab women enjoyed independence before Islam, but this depended on the social class to which they belonged.

Mainly, historical sources are dominated by men perspective that overlooks the role and importance of women role. Yet it is perhaps true that "*Sīrat Delhemma*" occasionally overstates what women at the time could achieve. For ex-

ample, it is unlikely that the eponymous heroine would have become leader of the Islamic armies. Perhaps the narrator of the *Sirah* gives the leadership position to a woman to indirectly criticise the actual rulers of the time, delivering political messages wrapped in the cloak of imagination. There is also the possibility that the writing of the *Sirah* involved hidden female participation, which could explain the prevalence and number of female characters in the epic (c.f., Al-Najjār, 1976).

“*Sirat Delhemma*” vividly presents the social problems faced by women on the Arabian Peninsula, even after their position had been recognised and respected in the teachings of Islam. For instance, “*Sirat Delhemma*” mentions the practice of killing newborn girls, which was often carried out in pre-Islamic society but was banned by Islam. During the second half of the middle ages, Arab women were generally able to speak more freely about their problems, which confirms that the historical origins of patriarchy are not the same in every society. However, in Arab societies, the introduction of Islam did not bring about the end of ancient customs that had taken root over thousands of years. Indeed, it can be argued that androcentricism influenced the narration of the *Sirah*. Despite the fact that many *Sirah* continued up to the 20th century continued to be told—and that “*Al-Sirah al-Hilaliyyah*” is still narrated today—“*Sirat Delhemma*” largely disappeared in the first half of the 19th century. Thus, it is insufficient to attribute the oppression of women in modern Arab society to the middle ages, nor is there necessarily a correlation between patriarchy and Islam and between motherhood and women’s freedom.

Approaching *Sirah* as cultural phenomena that engage with women’s social problems, this study has found that the oppression of women in Arab societies has deeper and more complex causes than those stated in the current global discourse of feminism, which uses the concept of patriarchy to criticise the overall structure of discrimination against women by men. Starting from the cultural anthropological work of Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887), numerous studies have argued that patriarchy is the cause of gender discrimination and domestic violence. Millett (1970), who had a great influence on second-wave feminism, particularly focused her criticism on the patriarchal system. There is also a tendency to link patriarchal violence and gender disparities to religion.

10. Conclusion

As a clue to understand one aspect of gender relation of Arab society, this study has evaluated Arabian *Sirah* as cultural phenomena, focusing in particular on An Analysis of the Narrations of “*Sirat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah*” in Egypt. First, this study has emphasised the role and importance of women in Arabian *Sirah*. Second, it has explored the social and historical context of “*Sirat Delhemma*,” a *Sirah* with a female main character. Third, it has explored how the narration of *Sirah* in Egypt can be seen to reflect prevailing gender relations over time. Most importantly, this paper makes the case that women have always had a central

role in the Arabian *Sirah*, and were actively involved in the social and political life that they describe. Indeed, the society that produced *Sirah* made it possible to depict women such as *Sirat Delhemma*, a powerful and independent heroine. This suggests that the Androcentric nature of Arab society is not necessarily rooted in the birth of Islam during the Middle Ages, which offers a different perspective on the matter than the current global discourse on feminism.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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