
The Queen of Sheba in Contemporary Arabic and English Literary Writings by Women

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ABSTRACT

The paper studies the parable of the Queen of Sheba and her image in Arabic and English cultures as a motif in contemporary writings by women. The paper takes the sacred scriptures of the three Abrahamic religions as a springboard towards tracing the parable to the cultures to which the women-poets relate. The texts selected here show a diversity of themes; but, the resurrection of Sheba in women's writing has other aims, manifestations and connotations that can be both self-empowering mechanism and identity boosting process. For the women writers, the Queen of Sheba is a source of inspiration and a force to reclaim their vital and vigorous role in making history, and in crystallizing the spiritual and religious traditions. Sheba's role in the famous story of faith behoove them to compare her with her man and to highlight her character.

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A fair land and an oft-

"بلدة طيبة ورب غفور"

Forgiving Lord"

(Qur'an, Saba', 15)

The heathen queen of Sheba is one of the very few female figures who appear in the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Jewish and many Christian traditions, Sheba is known by her land's name, or the queen of the South (which is Yemen) is also known as Bilqīs.⁽¹⁾ In Coptic Ethiopian legends, she is Makeda. The Hebrew Bible recounts: "When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind" (1 Kings 10:2-3). In the New Testament, she is the woman who Jesus foretells will rise up and condemn the unbelievers: "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:42).⁽²⁾ In Islam, she is the wise, democratic queen who searches for truth, finds it with Solomon, and abandons sun-worshipping in favor of the One God. In the Qur'anic chapter "The Ants," (*sūrat an-naml*), the hoopoe, who is a member of the Conference of Birds subject to King Solomon's power, informs the King of

(¹) Bilqīs is derived from *balmaqa*, which means the moon-worshipper. The moon was connected with the ibex. Classical Arabic traditions held that Bilqīs's mother was a jinni who had appeared in the form of an ibex. Archeological discoveries have indicated that people in the land of Sheba worshipped a trinity of sun, moon, and Venus. See Zaid Mona, *Bilqīs: Emra'atul alghāz wa Shayṭanatul Jins* (Bilqīs: A Story of Riddles and Satanism) (Beirut: Riadh el-Rayyes Books, 1997), 65-66.

(²) This quote is repeated in Luke 11:31.

the rich and prosperous land of Saba (Arabic for Sheba) whose Queen and her people worship the sun instead of God. Solomon sends her a message with the hoopoe that reads: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful; be not against me, but come in submission to the true religion" (Qur'an 27:30-31). In response, the Queen sets out on a long trip from Yemen north to Jerusalem, where the sovereign King rules. Her caravans carry with them all kinds of precious gifts: gold, gems, spices, myrrh, and frankincense. She comes to test Solomon with riddles, and he is to answer them wisely.

All three religions agree that the Queen converts to the "true" religion of Solomon's; she is a pious convert. Nevertheless, they differ in which part of her encounter with Solomon they emphasize, as well as in certain other details.

Folktales and apocryphal accounts from the Rabbinic tradition, the Coptic Christian tradition (i.e. the Ethiopian Book *Glory of Kings* (*Kebrā Nagast*)), and from Arab, Yemeni traditions have elaborated on the scriptural tales to give Sheba a jinni mother, goat or donkey hooves, and hairy legs.⁽³⁾ In the Bible, hair is associated with physical and intellectual strength, as Samson's story reveals. Upon the insistence of his wife, Delilah, Samson discloses the secret behind his physical prowess and his capabilities as a judge, telling her: "No razor has ever been used on my head . . . because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man" (Judg. 16:17). Because in the Bible hair symbolizes physical strength and intellectual excellence, depilation of women's legs could be seen as depriving her of power. Male tellers of traditional tales associated woman's hairy legs with the devil or with lesbianism to limit women's access to political power and legitimate physical strength. Ibn 'Arabi, a great mystic author wrote a powerful poem on the Qur'anic Bilqīs calling her

⁽³⁾ Mona, 83.

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“Rome’s Bishop” and describes her as an icon of knowledge and honorable hard work as well as a person in whom both jinni and human qualities mix.⁽⁴⁾ However, the Arabic account and fairy tales details had their own fantasy of Bilqīs, which lies out of the scope of this paper.

The symbols surrounding Bilqīs are given different emphases by different narrators of her story, depending on which message they wish to convey. Three animals play significant roles in weaving disparate threads of the plot: the hoopoe, who plays an emissary role between Solomon and the queen, and who is a symbol of loyalty as well as a good omen. The hoopoe, in Arabic, *Hud hud*, has a central role in the Sheba story. In Yemen which is the land of Sheba, the bird is associated with the awaited spring and rains and its presence is an inspiration for the farmers to begin plowing;⁽⁵⁾ besides the ibex, which is associated with the worship of the Mother Moon, the prime deity of South Arabia; and the ass, which connects Bilqīs with the devil and hence demonizing her.⁽⁶⁾ Some Arab belletrists, wishing to revise the presentation of Bilqīs as empowered, invented another “Bilqīs:” a queen who worshipped the moon rather than the sun. These narrators associated the moon with Sheba’s lesbianism and unmarried status, and added that Solomon rectified this unacceptable situation by marrying her off to another king so that Solomon could usurp her kingdom. This story was supposed to drive home the lesson that marriage is necessary for every daughter of Adam.⁽⁷⁾ The Biblical narration of Sheba’s conversion shows her a woman of materialism and in love of wealth, which downplay the image of the legendary woman figure.

⁽⁴⁾ Ibn Arabi, *Tarjuman el-Ashwāq* cited by Mona, 95.

⁽⁵⁾ *From the Land of Sheba: Yemeni Folk Takes*, Retold by Carolyn Han, trans. by Kamal Ali al-Hegri (MA: Interlink Books, 2005), p.91.

⁽⁶⁾ Mona.

⁽⁷⁾ Mona, 91.

In the Bible, Sheba converts for three reasons: Solomon's wealth, his wisdom, and God's love for the people of Israel; the recount runs from her own mouth and as follows:

In wisdom and wealth you have exceeded the report I heard. How many your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness" (I Kings 1:7-10).

In the Qur'an, her conversion has a different story. Both Solomon and Bilqīs are presented as being on equal footing in wealth and wisdom. Each of them behaves wisely, courteously and respectfully towards the other; they address each other in kingly terms. Both are given an "abundance of everything" (Qur'an 27:18-23). But Solomon has been given another abundance of a Divine sort. In the Islamic tradition, the Stories of the Prophets (*Qisas al-Anbiya'*) tell of how God gives each Prophet the ability to perform miracles in an aspect of life at which his people excel. For instance, Moses was given special magical powers so that he could effectively convince the magically gifted Egyptians of the truth of his message; Jesus was given the ability to heal the incurable and revive the dead to show the divine truth to his people, who excelled at medicine; likewise, Solomon was given wondrous power over the winds, the animals, and the jinn as well as a divine kind of knowledge so that he could impress the equally insightful and wealthy Bilqīs in the ways of the True God. The Qur'an, moreover, chronicles other details in the logical conversion of Bilqīs, showing her as more thoughtful and dignified than the Bible could.

Solomon sends Bilqīs a message via the hoopoe and waits for her response. She replies with another message and an

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abundance of gifts and waits for his reaction, implicitly testing his message: if he were to accept her extraordinary gifts, he would be no more than a king in pursuit of additional wealth. In such a case, she would be justified in fighting him, as she had enough power to defeat him. But if he were to reject the gifts, then he would be a real messenger of God and she would be powerless against a King with such divine backing. Solomon does indeed reject the gifts, and moreover becomes angry that Bilqīs would presume to equate his faith with materialism. He then threatens to invade Bilqīs's kingdom:

So when (the envoy) came unto Solomon, (the King) said: What! Would ye help me with wealth? But that which Allah hath given me is better than that which He hath given you. Nay it is ye (and not I) who exult in your gift. Return unto them. We verily shall come unto them with hosts that they cannot resist, and we shall drive them out from thence with shame, and they will be abased (Qur'an 27:35-36).

This threat prompts Bilqīs, out of wisdom and long-sightedness, to decide to pre-empt an attack by visiting Solomon in person. Once there, she witnesses his divinely bestowed powers, which convince her to willingly believe in his message. Solomon's performance of God-inspired miracles delights and enlightens Bilqīs. However, classical sources, whether Arabic, Hebrew, or others, differed in the details of this confrontation between Solomon and Sheba. In rabbinic accounts, Solomon is said to have tricked the Queen to lift up her skirts upon entering Solomon's palace hall. In the Qur'an, however, the story of baring her legs has quite a different connotation from those of previous sources. She does so after she becomes confused by the nature of the ground in the kingly hall where she is received by Solomon. She mistakenly thinks that it is made of water, but after lifting her skirts and cautiously trying to dip her legs in what she thinks to be a

pool, she realizes it is actually a glass floor. Moreover, Solomon presents to Bilqīs a disguised version of her throne in order to test her readiness to believe in his divine message or to deny it as a fake version—a sign of her disbelief. The throne is even more resplendent than the one in her own court, and she immediately recognizes it as a likeness. Bilqīs's readiness to believe in Solomon's message has made her a respected and highly dignified woman in the Islamic tradition. The Qur'anic account ends with her and Solomon becoming two dignitaries of the history of belief in God.

In the Bible, however, Solomon turns away from God in his old age to worship the gods of his wives and concubines, although God has warned him against falling prey to them. The Bible tells us:

As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his god, as the heart of David his father. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. . . On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods" (I Kings 11:4-8).

In the Arab Pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions, the Prophet David was said to have had several sons, but he bequeathed his throne to Solomon because he was more confident in Solomon's ability to convey the message of monotheism. Solomon thus became the last king of the united Israel. The Qur'an describes how God gave Solomon the miraculous gifts of directing the wind, conversing with animals, and understanding the language of such tiny creatures as the worms and ants. He was also given jinn as soldiers and servants according to the accounts of the two chapters of the Qur'an , Ants (an-Naml) and The Land of Sheba (Saba'). The latter Chapter shows how Solomon's establishment of an overt

bond with the land of Sheba becomes a very significant event in the history of his divine message.

The same Arab traditions describe Bilqīs as the daughter of the Arab King of Ḥimyar in Yemen, Hudhad, who ruled during the eighth-century BCE. He was believed to have once saved an ibex from a wolf; after his act of bravery, the animal turned into a beautiful jinni woman, whose father gave her to Hudhad in marriage out of deep gratitude. From this union, Bilqīs was born.⁽⁸⁾ Bilqīs inherited her father's Kingdom after his passing. But a neighboring tyrant King, 'Amr bin al-A'dhar, raised an army to invade her country out of contempt for her autonomy and independence as a woman ruler. Yet the wise Bilqīs saw a way out of this looming war: she knew that 'Amr had married many women, only to abandon them, leaving them helpless; she also knew that among them were queens whose kingdoms he had usurped after the wedding. So she proposed marriage to him, and 'Amr agreed. On the night of consummation, however, she slew him in bed and declared herself the queen of both his and her kingdoms.⁽⁹⁾ The Arab tradition doesn't agree about whether or not Bilqīs married Solomon (their marriage is not mentioned in the Qur'an), but she certainly is believed to have had no former husbands. She is also celebrated as the patron who commissioned the great Ma'rib Dam in Yemen.

The story of Bilqīs's jinni mother was later used to demonize her. The classical Arabic sources also claimed that Bilqīs had donkey hooves and hairy legs (the donkey was culturally associated with the Devil). She was even said to have used the help of the jinn to build her great dams, including the Ma'rib, an account which only deflated her capabilities and achievements as a woman. Not only that, but the hairy legs, which are distasteful to men, needed to be depilated, a symbol of overpowering the queen and seizing her kingdom. Sheba was also described as lesbian with hundreds

⁽⁸⁾ Mona, 65-66.

⁽⁹⁾ Mona, 67.

of women among her entourage. Arab historians distinguished their Bilqīs from the queen mentioned in the Qur'an.⁽¹⁰⁾

Further, comparing the image of both Solomon and Sheba in both scriptures, Sheba is mentioned till the end as a permanent sincere believer who will rise again, Christ foretells, to condemn the unbelievers, whereas Solomon dies eternally cursed. In the Arab tradition, the Yemeni queen who worshipped the moon was not the same who worshipped the sun, the latter being the Qur'anic figure. In the Qur'an, Solomon, like all other prophets and messengers of God, is blessed till the end: "And verily, for him is a near access to Us, and a good (final) return (Paradise)" (Ṣād, 39). Every time he is mentioned, his father, David is associated with him. However, Saba is mentioned again in the chapter titled after its name, but neither Solomon nor Sheba is mentioned as those who turned away from God; eventually, though Saba was drowned in punishment after turning away from God:

Indeed there was for Saba' (Sheba) a sign in their dwelling place, - two gardens on the right hand and on the left (and it was said to them) "Eat of the provision of your Lord, and be grateful to Him, A fair land and an Oft-Forgiving Lord! (15) But they turned away (from the obedience of Allāh), so We sent against them Sail Al-'Arim (flood released from the dam), and We converted their two gardens into gardens producing bitter bad fruit, and tamarisks, and some few lote-trees. (16) Like this We requited them because they were ungrateful disbelievers. And never do We requite in such a way

⁽¹⁰⁾ Mona, 86. Interestingly, Mona, investigates four versions of the story of Sheba, including the claim of being a half jinni woman and traces that to deliberate anti-woman narrations, though some dropped this claim and insisted on the 'hairy legs' to nurture scorn on her femininity and to emphasize Solomon's demand to depilate them to marry her, a symbol of overpowering women and seize her dominion.

except those who are ungrateful, (disbelievers). (17) And We placed between them and the towns which We had blessed, towns easy to be seen, and We made the stages (of journey) between them easy (saying): "Travel in them safely both by night and day." (18) But they said: "Our Lord! Make the stages between our journey longer," and they wronged themselves, so We made them as tales (in the land), and We dispersed them all, totally. Verily, in this are indeed signs for every steadfast grateful (person). (19) And indeed Iblīs (Satan) did prove true his thought about them, and they followed him, all except a group of true believers (in the Oneness of Allāh). (20) And he (Iblīs Satan) had no authority over them, except that We might test him, who believes in the Hereafter from him who is in doubt about it. And your Lord is a Hafiz (watchful) over everything. (All-Knower of everything i.e. He keeps record of every person as regards deeds, and then He will reward them accordingly) (Saba, 15-20).

To sum up, the pivot in the Biblical Solomon-Sheba story is Solomon's greatness and the magnificence of his state in comparison to the tiny one of Saba, which is also reported by eye-witness in the queen's direct speech in the Bible. In the Islamic and Arab traditions, quite differently, the story emphasizes the greatness of Saba and the wisdom of the queen that resonates with it. The final wrath that inflicted on the Land of Sheba, in the Qur'an, is associated neither with Solomon nor with Sheba.

II

English and Arabic contemporary adaptations by women of Sheba's story differ widely in visions, revisions, re-creations of the parable, as well as in their rendition of this legendary female character and her shrewd matriarchy, though the female monarchy strikes at the core and empowering her as an icon of a historical woman is the highlighting theme. For Alicia Ostriker, both mythical and historical figures like Sheba, Sappho or Napoleon have "a double power;" they exist objectively in the "high culture" and privately or subjectively in the psyche.⁽¹¹⁾ Ostriker, as both critic and poet, has a special contribution to the study of myth. She explores women-poets' revisionist mythmaking, and maintains that by re-creating such legends or myths, the women poets try to subvert male discourse and lead men's ears to listen to their language that destroys "the male hegemony" over language; hence, they redefine both woman and culture.⁽¹²⁾

The literary corpus for this story in both languages is one of contrasts, diversity and richness. Owing to the Qur'an's respectful and solemn image of Sheba, Arab Muslim women writers at large wrote positively of her in admiration, glorification, and imitation, treating her as a source of inspiration, even seeking in her a maternal lineage, or passively seeing in her a submission of a huge male threat. Like their Jewish, Christian, and English peers, Arab Muslim women writers revived her to identify with her rational thinking to highlight Solomon's hegemony and slash him out and take on what they see as "his bullying masculinity" which they work on ridiculing. The paper strives to fathom some newer retellings of Sheba's mythic-religious story giving the ancient tale a decidedly modern twist and in the process present challenges to gender and identity politics, including

⁽¹¹⁾ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 213.

⁽¹²⁾ Ostriker, 211.

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questions of women's natural roles and functions. The texts selected for study are of different genres, poetry and prose.

Alicia Ostriker, seeing that the Jewish tradition has disempowered Sheba, gives her a strong voice by creating a powerful conversation between her and Solomon, who appears love smitten by Sheba's charms, mind, and grace. Sheba speaks politically, creating her own "Proverbs" that matches those of the Bible. In "Wisdom of Solomon,"⁽¹³⁾ which can be read as the genesis of a Biblical Scheherazade, Ostriker puts Sheba at the center in a highly erotic scene where her speech prevails; hence destroying Solomon's "Song of Songs", re-writes it in a female language transforming his linguistic domination, into a feminine one. "Sheba's Proverbs" are aphoristic discourse criticizing masculinity and sneering at what she sees as its folly; she concludes with a call for creating peace and playing sports, and condemns prisons, saying:

Some people don't have the brain God gave a pigeon.

.....

A confident man is unafraid of an intelligent woman.

Are you nostalgic for matriarchy?

A woman ruler can be crueller.

.....

A ruler cannot feed his people invents a holy war.

.....

Join the army, travel to exotic places, meet interesting new people and kill them.

.....

No joy is like the joy when a tyrant falls.

(¹³)Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* ((New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994), 205.

Make trade not war.

....

Damn prisons! Bless playgrounds!⁽¹⁴⁾

Solomon's speech is more biographical, and seems more mournful and reflective as he "lets [his suffering] come up from his feet to his eyes" and broods on his parents whom he hates. But, Sheba "is bored. She is not so fond of being lectured to." (212). Elaborating on what the Hebrew Bible recounts, Solomon emerges as skeptic about his God and questions the meaning of his message as a whole including the building of the temple which he starts to see as a fuss. Sheba asks the polygamist Solomon to give his one thousand wives and concubines a freedom of faith. He seems to have already believed in pluralism and polytheism as enriching his kingdom.

In sum, the woman-narrator of the myth, whether the poet herself or the female speaker keeps "the name but change[s] the game, and here is where revisionist mythology comes in."⁽¹⁵⁾

Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni envision Sheba an African woman that unifies them beyond borders. Nikki Giovanni's "Poem for Flora"⁽¹⁶⁾ hinges on the Ethiopian-Coptic version of the parable, Africanizing Sheba. In this way she maintains that Sheba was both "black and comely," and that she wants "to be like that." In her whole-book poem, Angelou's *Now Sheba Sings the Song*, each stanza faces a drawing of black Sheba in different times of her life from childhood to old age by Tom Feelings.⁽¹⁷⁾ The poem and the drawings present the shameful history of slavery. The

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ostriker, *The Nakedness*, 210.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Ostriker, *Stealing the language*, 215.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Nikki Giovanni, *Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc, 1994), 94.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Maya Angelou, *Now Sheba Sings the Song, with art by Tom Feelings* (New York: Dial Books, 1978), p.22.

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violation of the black woman in body and soul is ever scratched on Sheba's memory:

Centuries have recorded my features, in Cafes and
Cathedrals, along the water's edge.
I awaited the arrival of the ship of freedom
on the selling stage as men proved their power in a
handful of my thigh.

Ruth Fainlight in her 18-stanza poem, "Sheba and Solomon"⁽¹⁸⁾ re-narrates the story from a woman's viewpoint using all kinds of versions available to her, Biblical, Qur'anic, rabbinic, and Ethiopian. Fainlight gives her synopsis of the experience with sex and getting over it after becoming a mother. Sheba ponders depilation as a past experience she had to undergo to appeal to her man sexually, which she now no longer feels necessary since it is not a preoccupation for her any more. The poem starts with a modern young woman who is reading the *Song of Songs* and identifies with Sheba as she encounters her own sexuality. Arriving in Jerusalem, Sheba coming close to the bridge across the river, realizing that it was made of the wood upon which Jesus will be crucified, she bows, weeps and worships. The poet says: "They say that Sheba was the link between/Adam and Jesus."⁽¹⁹⁾ Hence comes Fainlight's weaving of the story from a diversity of sources.

In the rabbinic version of the story, the first riddle Sheba poses to Solomon asks what water comes from neither earth nor sky. Solomon answers the sweat of horses. Fainlight gives another answer: "The tears of women."⁽²⁰⁾ By saying, "Sheba never wept for Solomon," Fainlight shows that the Queen refuses to be a commodity for Solomon. Moreover, in this

⁽¹⁸⁾ Ruth Fainlight, *Burning Fire* (UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), 67-80.

⁽¹⁹⁾ *ibid.*, 72.

⁽²⁰⁾ *ibid.*, 74.

poem, Solomon tricks Sheba into lifting the hem of her skirts confirming the rumor of her hairy legs. Upon seeing them, he corrects her saying: ““this is wrong. Here in my kingdom/ women and men must be different.”” Sheba, the poet says, is the link that connects the three faiths: “A pagan, yet she foretold/ Islam’s triumph. She acknowledged/ Solomon’s true wisdom.”⁽²¹⁾

Fainlight voices her own black nationalism as she weaves it with another version of the story, the Ethiopian one. Menelik, the son of Solomon and Sheba is to revive Solomon’s kingdom establishing the second Kingdom of Judah in Ethiopia, in a Rastafarian knitting of the story. Solomon now is a “devious king” and Sheba has come to Solomon’s court with her son, Menelik “his replica and image.”⁽²²⁾ Menelik steals:

the Ark of the Covenant
from the Sanctuary of Solomon’s temple,
then persuaded twelve young Israelites
from the oldest priestly families
to follow him across the desert and
beyond the mountains to Ethiopia:
a rebellious farewell. His kingdom
would become the second Zion,
and he, Makeda’s cub, be Judah’s lion.

The Rastafarian emperor of Ethiopia prohibited the cutting of hair and stressed the culture and identity of the black race. In her poem, Fainlight confirms it saying that in Ethiopia therefore “She preferred her legs like this.”⁽²³⁾

⁽²¹⁾ *ibid*, 78.

⁽²²⁾ *ibid*, 79.

⁽²³⁾ *Ibid*, 80.

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In her poem, “From King’s Solomon’s Journal: Fragments of an Unsent Letter (Date Unknown),”⁽²⁴⁾ Yerra Sugarman presents Solomon as a grieving lover looking nostalgically and in mourning to a time when Sheba visited him and tested him with questions. Solomon adores Sheba and is baring his soul to her, now that she has returned home. It is a poem on the impermanence of things, in which Solomon contemplates the vanity of life and the worthiness of his message as a whole. The temple he has built turned out to be one of words: “Stroke my words, my queen, / the heavy paint of them, their gild and cedar / rafters. Must everything dissolve in aloneness?” / You and God not visible? You and I holding / moving shadows – ink stains on sea?”

Solomon also compares the destruction of his temple with the dissolution of his relationship with Sheba:

“My God came to me after
destruction. “If and then . . . If and then,” says he.
Everything conditional pains me
as if between some brightness and disaster
berries in a cistern. Asters in a well.”

He compares his relationship with her to “a fir tree” whose needles could not hold him to her tightly: “Before you both, my God and distant / Sheba, I am defenseless. Nest me in your branches, / the brittle thingness of your arms, my dear.”

In her short story collection, *The Mermaids in the Basement*,⁽²⁵⁾ the British writer Marina Warner retells Sheba’s story from diverse sources using hyperbole, irony,

⁽²⁴⁾ Yerra Sugarman, *Feminist Studies in Religion*, 23:1(Spring 2007), 49.

⁽²⁵⁾ Marina Warner, *The Mermaids in the Basement* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 137-160.

understatement, and other tools which entice laughter at one time and contempt at another. She recreates the images of Solomon and Sheba in a secular light imaging them as flawed and vulnerable human beings. She identifies with Sheba as an overpowered woman in the face of male domination. But her demythicization of both Solomon and Sheba is no less political than the other retellings, since she connects Sheba's visit with her own visit to Jerusalem and makes reference to what she calls a "terrorist" act of a Palestinian's in Jerusalem. She tackles some of the dynamism of men-women relationships urging women of her time not to succumb to such men like Solomon saying: "Fight back, I said to myself. Resist the longing. Ass's hooves are fine. Hairy legs are fine. Don't let yourself hear the song. And don't listen, when you do" (160). She brings the reality of a contemporary scene in Jerusalem where security is tight. She highlights the absurdity of Israeli security measures in a scene where the Queen of Sheba's children attendants are taken aside to be frisked by Solomon's security agents.

Kathleen Jamie, the Scottish poet, in her title poem, "The Queen of Sheba,"⁽²⁶⁾ uses Sheba to invoke a contrast between her fantasy of Arabia as an exotic land and Scotland as a shabby, dim land, a place of poverty, and a land in trash. She describes Sheba as the indelible epitome of elegance and privileged upbringing, while the Scottish are boorish and uncultured. Sheba comes to visit Scotland with her caravan. The poet gives her neighbor animal features traditionally attached to Sheba, tails and hooves, but with affection. Unlike the dignified, wealthy, warm, vivacious, momentous Sheba, her people and their country are dismal and unenlightened. She gives examples of elements of contemporary life, like cars, prostitutes, police, chlorinated swimming pools, and cheap housing projects, which she contrasts with Sheba's affluent procession, including camels, spices, etc. The poet says Sheba is scouring "Scotland for a Solomon!" so that she

⁽²⁶⁾ Kathleen Jamie, *the Queen of Sheba: Poems* (London: Bloodaxe, 1995), 9-12.

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may ask him some difficult questions. The Scottish men, too ignorant to recognize her splendor, growl, “Whae do you think y’ur?” In jubilation, the Scottish women, as well as Sheba’s female attendants, shout in a collective voice, “THE QUEEN OF SHEBA!” Women understand who she is and feel proud of her.

Jacqueline Osherow weaves the story of Solomon’s wisdom and his flocks of “gold-crested hoopoes” with a personal view of life she dismisses as empty, showy and meaningless. She contends that Solomon’s verdict of dividing the baby disputed upon by two women as “a fairly hollow thing.” In her poem “The Hoopoe’s Crown”⁽²⁷⁾, Osherow bitterly sneers at both God’s wisdom and Solomon’s, the latter “finishing his life worshipping idols” according to the Bible. She pronounces her view on Solomon’s judgments that “leave [her] cold” and focuses on God’s “frivolous” creation of the feathered crown of the hoopoe and calls her contemplation “a treatise /on suffering and human limitation.” She says that God is “a thorough devotee of pure rococo” and his creation of such “empty” beauty in nature, like that of the gold-crested hoopoes, as no more than “a fussing over a hoopoe’s crown” and “a product of sheer artifice.” She says that God has bestowed upon Solomon all kinds of riches and graces only to turn away from faith and be idolater:

And isn’t it, itself, a kind of idolatry—
all that god, ivory, cedar, acacia wood—

or, at the very least, the height of folly?
The heaven’s my throne, the earth’s my footstool
(this is God’s talking) *what house can you build me?*

⁽²⁷⁾ Jacqueline Osherow, *Hoopoe’s Crown* (NY: BOA Editions Ltd, 2005), 89-94.

I'm sorry. But Solomon's fool.

Unless—he was wise, wasn't he?—he always knew
that all that admittedly absurd detail

was, frankly, the best that he could do.

Poor guy. It was faith he should have asked for ;(92)

Osherow blends “headcase Solomon”'s story of faith and “heartache” and “charade” to “manufacture/ a vast and necessarily empty place” in “rumor-driven place” (this was the land of Israel, just north of Akko) with her “own lostness, without explaining/ even a single miserable detail.” She recalls her husband's sharing her pleasure in a hoopoe's sitting on the grass of her yard. But, she was skeptic that her husband wanted more than leaving him alone. She resembles her family life with “that colossal fuck up Solomon/and his vainglorious bird” and goes on reviewing her personal misery saying:

My family

has been—a bit too much—my golden crown

and it was spectacular ,if only briefly.

No feather to replace it, only pain,
which I, like an idiot, thought poetry
might be able to help me undermine.

No luck. But I have learned something;
it's a bankrupt business, ornamentation,
idolatrous, at worst; at best, an aching
absence of whatever it is that matters.

A little wisdom is a relentless thing;

everywhere I look, something shatters.

And as for that protective flock of stunning birds,
I don't envy Solomon when it scatters. (94)

Like a dethroned queen, she is vanquished by disillusionment upon realizing that she was not in tune neither with her tradition, nor with her family or with life as a whole. Neither love nor faith can save her. Like the Solomon of her poem, she

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lacks wisdom, or wisdom has no place in life as a whole. Family shade, like Solomon's shade of birds' wings won't last as disintegration looms large in the horizons of every family life. The truth she sees around her depresses her seeing everything shattering and in disarray. In sum, like Solomon's story, her life, dear ones, even poetry writing are unable to help her deal with her problems or soothe her pains as they are not more than ornamentation, bankrupt business, and idolatry.

The Pakistani British writer Shahrukh Husain assembles a panoply of eight mythical, fiendish women, among them Lilith, Lamia, and Sheba, in her collection, *the Temptresses: The Virago Book of Evil Women*,⁽²⁸⁾ in which she retells their stories with a focus on the power struggles between these women and the men who rule over them, trying to reduce their roles to wives and mothers. She calls Sheba, a Biblical denizen, "the greatest *femme fatale* of all time" (x). However, her vision of Sheba as a matriarchal figure is a musing on an image of a female monarch that is synonymous with peace, plenty, progress, equality between all her people, and all kinds of well being, as opposed to the bully Solomon's "blustery, bombastic" manner. Solomon yells in the hoopoe informer's face: "How can a mere woman achieve what you claim? It's fantasy! A fabrication! A glamour to deceive and enchant us." (58)

Husain analyzes Solomon through the eyes of a psychotherapist. She presents Solomon as a person who has developed complexes because of his mother's (Bathsheba's) adultery. He develops distrust, bitterness, and finally indifference towards her, and, by extension, all women. Meanwhile David, his father, loved his other sons better than Solomon because they were more similar to him. Hence, Solomon was cut off "from the love of both parents." (57)

⁽²⁸⁾ Shahrukh Husain, *the Temptresses: The Virago Book of Evil Women* (London: The Virago P, 2000), 49-91.

Nevertheless, Shahrukh, encroaching on the Arabic folk tales once and on the Qur'anic narration another, tells that Sheba, the daughter of a demoness and a Sabaean king, was "schooled in the ways of sovereignty" (68), and hence "Bilqīs became the mistress of immense wisdom" (67). Both Solomon and Sheba test each other with riddles, which both answer correctly. They impress each other and exchange compliments. Solomon brings up Sheba's hairy legs, saying they puzzle him. He connects hairy legs to the burden of crown and country, a burden he considers unnatural for women to bear. He asks if she "is adapting [her body] to the maleness of the task," and asks her to depilate in order to "restore the manhood to [her] men" (83).

Shahrukh presents Sheba, as "the royal virgin, the widow-queen", worshipper of "Mother Moon"; Bilqīs was "Unselfconscious of her disfigured foot," in a full bloom lavish femininity and youth, as the queen of a lush, green, fabulous kingdom, "the land of peace and plenty" that knew "no war" where men and women, "are highly skilled on arts and science" (57). The queen is in "monthly meeting with her friends" musing on love of men, virility, dating when hoots of laughter filled the court; they were almost in tears with laughter. Sabaean women were "too sophisticated, too urbane, too scientifically aware of this day and age in Sheba, to let themselves undergo [housewife's] drudgery" (50). Most of the women lost their virginity years ago, but for Sheba, she won't give in to a man:

until the moment when desire was at its peak and her wisdom in full flower and her power at its height. And this would only happen when she had the perfect partner standing before her, who reciprocated her yearning with his mind and body and soul (52).

Meeting with a flock of her lovely "hoopoes"—who are like her children, they tell her about a message they received from King Solomon brought by the west wind. She wonders "Why

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does he always make wars?” in “love of his God. What kind of a god was he. . . who constantly wanted him to fight and kill and then fight some more?” (54). Bilqīs finds Solomon’s message insulting and wonders why. Her hoopoe traced it to “man’s attitude to women.” and that for him, “women were unreliable, immoral and inferior” (72). Upon consulting her counselors, they leave the decision making to her though they express all readiness to fight. She reflects:

‘When kings attack countries, they leave behind a trail of destruction and death. War releases the lowest instincts in the noblest men. Worse of all, no one wins a war—the cost of both winning and losing is too high. So instead of fighting, I’ll send envoys with gifts of peace and friendship. My next decision will depend on Solomon’s response.’ (73)

The encounter mounts to a marriage-like consummation, conceiving Solomon’s child, and eventually, Sheba chooses to leave for her country. She believes that, if she were to stay with Solomon, “there can only be war” (91). She criticizes him for his failure to take any of his hundreds of wives as equal partners. At the end of the story, she reveals her purpose for coming to Solomon: she has been looking for a man to father her child. Solomon, for his part, accuses her of exploiting his love and casting him aside “like a useless shell” (90). She finally declares, “We were never meant to remain together, only to transform each other by exchanging wisdom” (91).

III

In Arab women's writing, Sheba/ Bilqīs is a no less a political tool. They identify with her resistance against abuses of power and violation of dignity. Joumana Ḥaddad⁽²⁹⁾, the Lebanese poet, passionately demolishes the traditional image of the Queen as vanquished by Solomon and insists that Sheba return to give Solomon "his ring/and take back my throne." In this she equates her with Lilith, Adam's original wife, who refused to acknowledge his mastery and insisted on equality -- including sexual equality. Another Lebanese poet, Houda al-Na'mani, in her highly mystical poem, "Insight-inspired Kingship,"⁽³⁰⁾ portrays al-Ma'rib Dam, which was built by Bilqīs in Yemen, as a mirror reflecting not only wisdom and knowledge, but also the divine intellect. The poet identifies mystically with Bilqīs, saying:

If the waters' path is the birds,
the horse reins follow them.
But the Ma'rib is a mirror,
on which gardens and vines fix their gaze. (76)

In a highly sufi language, the poet mulls over the conflict on land on this earth. She blames it on the extremism of the three faiths and on each part's claiming the right to carry God's message and be its sole and true devouts. She struggles to find interfaith links of reconciliation to save humanity of the time from killing each other. Al- Na'mani quite innovatively merges mysticism with politics.⁽³¹⁾ She takes the story of

⁽²⁹⁾ Joumana Ḥaddad, *Al-Nimra al-Makhbū'ā 'Enda Masqat el-Kaffain: A Selection* (The panther hidden at the base of her shoulders) (Beirut: al-Dār el-'arabiya, 2007), 20.

⁽³⁰⁾ Houda al-Na'māni, *Liman el-Ardh Limanellah(Whose Earth is it? Whose God is?)* (Beirut: Dār Huda al- Na'māni, 2006), pp.74-78.

⁽³¹⁾ See my paper "Poetics of Sufism and Politics: A Reading in al-N'aamani's Collection Whose Earth is it? Whose Gos is it?" *Journal of Ādāb arr-Rafīdain*, 56 (2010), 87-110.

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Solomon and Sheba as example of reconciliation and surrender to the one word of God, which is immune to difference or discord.

In her “Bilqīs’s Riches,”⁽³²⁾ the Saudi poet, ‘Anūd Arrudhan, replicates the Quranic text about Sheba and re-visions the narrative. She mysticizes Bilqīs so that she can more effectively resist the traditional view of woman as well as strive against the tribalism that smothers her femininity and curb her creativity and devours both her soul and the realm which she makes of “doves, grain, and prayers.” In self-recreation, Bilqīs, or the Saudi woman, yearns for a voice and a freedom, for a gender-marked language of her own that overwhelms the world, saying:

And Balqis was endowed with all riches...
and from my papers, a veil of feeling.
In the morning, I saw her... on her throne, building cities of
doves, grain and prayers,
offerings to those heading westward,
from the fear of departure
in the windows of her heart! (38)

The Iraqi poet Bushra al-Bustani, in her two poems “Bilqīs’s Sorrows”⁽³³⁾ and “Instincts of the Universe,” deconstructs the traditional interpretation of the Quranic narrative about Sheba. In the former, Bilqīs is an Iraqi woman and in the latter, she emerges as a passive queen. Al-Bustani identifies with the Queen and bestows upon her the features of a suffering Iraqi woman who grieves the loss of her country’s

⁽³²⁾ ‘Anud Arrudhan, *Wa’ūtiyat Bilqīs (Bilqīs’s Riches)* (Bilqīs’s Riches) (Beirut: Dār el-khayyal, 2008), 38-39.

⁽³³⁾ My translation of this poem into English is published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Winter/Spring 2010), 52-55.

glories and wealth under coercion, dictatorship, and a wholesale embargo. Bilqīs's voice roars:

Missiles, alas!

In the serenity of my heart,
the waters retreat.

Wheatfields burn their crops, the poem breaks its meters,
and the country's borders blur.

Let your eyes' tears tickle down into my healing wound.

Give the streams back their shade
and their jubilant secrets.

Take me to the sea, I will search
for my flowers in the rushes

and invite the bounty of your hands to rest on my
shoulders.(39)

In "The Universe's Instincts,"⁽³⁴⁾ Al-Bustani believes that the Queen did, in fact, has capitulated to Solomon, who was attempting to neutralize the power of a rival and to dominate her as a man. Al-Bustani calls for the truth to come out and addresses historically acclaimed women from to stage a revolution against hiding it; the poet commends Zulaykha for treading a no-woman-zone in her love for Yusuf, saying:

The historical women revolutionaries wrestle with the ordeal,
chide Sheba for surrendering her throne to a huntsman.

They wave the Zulaykha flag.

It is the truth, bare, in the truth's enclosure.

It seems that the breakthrough truth she is in search for is woman's unbounded surrender to her feelings and desires, to trust her instincts: they are commendable instincts of the Universe.

⁽³⁴⁾ Bushra al-Bustani, *Ghara'iz al-Kawn* (Instincts of the Universe),
URL: <http://bbustani.wordpress.com/غرائز-الكون/>

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To conclude, the revisionist myth-making poems “are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival.”⁽³⁵⁾ Sheba for these writers has an allegorical presence, inspirational force, bestowing upon them the power of the Muse. For the black poets, she is the incarnation of the African race; for the Iraqi poet, she is the sufferer woman carrying the burden of the horrendous embargo and the atrocious dictatorship. She is the cultural icon, for the east and west, and is used to comment on national identity, gender and race.

⁽³⁵⁾ Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, 215.

ملكة سبأ

دراسة في صورة بلقيس في أدب المرأة العربية والإنكليزية

المعاصرة

وفاء عبد اللطيف *

المستخلص

البحث عبارة عن دراسة لصورة ملكة سبأ في الثقافتين العربية والإنكليزية كما تناولتها كاتبات معاصرات من كلا الثقافتين في كتاباتهن، شعراً أو نثراً. ويبدأ البحث باستعراض صورة ملكة سبأ في الأديان الحنيفية الثلاثة اليهودية والمسيحية والإسلام اعتماداً على ما ورد عنها في التوراة والإنجيل والقرآن وبعض النصوص الأخرى المتاحة التي تنتمي إليها كل من النصوص المختارة. ومن خلال التحليل النصي العميق لهذه النصوص توصل البحث إلى التنوع في الثيمات وتواشجها مع مواقع المرأة على الرغم من الاختلاف في الزمان والمكان والثقافة؛ حتى غدت الملكة بلقيس مصدر إلهام واستقراء للمرأة، بل وتعزيز لاستقلاليته هويتها بوصفها أنثى. وفي إعادة سرد قصة بلقيس، استطعن أولئك الكاتبات أن يؤكدن على قدرتهن على الانتماء إلى أولئك النسوة اللواتي صنعن جزءاً لا يُستهانُ به من تاريخ الإنسان، بل ومن أثره الروحي والديني.

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