

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF MUSLIM AND JEWISH  
WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL IBERIAN PENINSULA:  
THE POETESS QASMUNA BAT ISMA`IL\*

Planteamientos metodológicos en el estudio de las mujeres  
musulmanas y judías en la Edad Media hispana:  
La poetisa Qasmuna bat Isma`il.

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**Resumen:** Este artículo ofrece, en primer lugar, un panorama general sobre la metodología utilizada en el estudio de mujeres musulmanas y judías en la España medieval, para centrarse, finalmente, en el caso de la poetisa hispano-hebrea Qasmuna bat Isma`il.

**Abstract:** This article gives a general overview of the various methodological approaches which have been employed in the study of Muslim and Jewish women in Medieval Spain. Then discussion will turn to the Spanish Jewish woman poet Qasmuna bat Isma`il.

**Palabras clave:** Mujeres judías. Mujeres musulmanas. España medieval. Qasmuna bat Isma`il.

**Key Words:** Jewish women. Muslim women. Medieval Spain. Qasmuna bat Isma`il.

The last few decades have witnessed an increased interest in the study of women in medieval Iberian Peninsula. Such an interest could be interpreted as part of the current trends of historiographic research and, more specifically, of the relatively modern interest in the study and re-evaluation of the role played by those groups of population which, for different reasons, have been excluded from the records of the *official history*. Research on the specific field of Jewish and Muslim women in al-Andalus has now produced a considerable number of studies, but few of these integrate information about women of both

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religious traditions<sup>1</sup>. It is obvious that the research carried out in this field is in a much more advanced stage in the case of Muslim women. The present study aims to summarise and analyse the various methodological approaches which have been employed in these works in general, as well as pointing out the possible sources of information for the study of Jewish women. Then discussion will turn to the only known “woman-protagonist” whom we know of in al-Andalus: the poetess Qasmuna bat Isma`il.

The first distinction that may be made among the different approaches in this field is the emphasis on religious tradition as opposed to specific social and geographic environments. When religious norms and their accompanying social structures are considered to be the main, determinant factor in Jewish and Muslim women's lives, nothing really specific is to be noticed about the Andalusian Medieval society. This is how E. Cantera and P. Guichard, for instance, interpret the situation of Jewish and Muslim women, respectively<sup>2</sup>. What is more, in this particular aspect, many features are shared by the two communities, given that Islam and Judaism stem from the same Semitic and monotheistic stock, and their social canons are in both cases those characteristic of a patriarchal society.

When the situation of Andalusian females is contemplated in their more specific historical context, it is interesting to notice the ongoing debate on the Islamic side<sup>3</sup>: for certain researchers such as Hoenerbach, H. Pérès, or M. Sobh, Muslim women in Spain enjoyed an unusual level of freedom, generally explained as resulting from the influence of the more liberal Christian environment<sup>4</sup>. The support for this theory comes from some anecdotal data found in anthologies and historical works, which would presumably reflect liberal uses in al-Andalus. The other argument is the laxity of custom reflected in the verses of some famous women-poets, who show in their compositions a quite emancipated way of life. Those verses can be as daring as those of famous princess Wallada (11th century C.E.):

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1. Among the few studies of this kind, we find M. Rivera, 1995:131-146, and also C. Segura, 1991:51-62.

2. E. Cantera, 1989:37-64: «Con carácter general conviene recordar que, aun cuando lógicamente existen matices diferenciadores, las condiciones de vida de la mujer judía hispana son muy similares a las de la mujer judía de las comunidades hebreas de los restantes reinos europeos, ya que la religión, auténtico motor y guía de la vida del judío medieval, impone unos mismos condicionantes» (p. 38). P. Guichard, 1977:164-74.

3. For a summary of the polemic, see M. J. Viguera, 1992:709-724, especially pp. 711-713.

4. See W. Hoenerbach, 1971:467-473 and M. Sobh, 1985:136.

Worthy am I, by God, of the highest, and  
proudly I walk, with head aloft.  
My cheek I give to my lover and, to those who wish them,  
I yield my kisses<sup>5</sup>.

Or those of Nazhun (12th century C.E.):

I paid a poem with another: tell me, by my soul, who is the better poet?  
If woman be my nature, man is my poetry<sup>6</sup>.

Other authors, however, consider that the situation of Muslim women in the Iberian Peninsula was similar to that which was obtained in the rest of the Islamic world. In addition to that, the number of poetesses can not be considered so high if we compare al-Andalus with the East and, more specifically, the 'Abbasid courts (Schippers, 1993:139-152). Therefore, these exceptional cases do not represent any specificity or mark of the "Occidentalization" of Andalusian society. This is how such scholars as M. Marín, M. J. Rubiera, A. Schippers, M. J. Viguera, and others interpret the evidence<sup>7</sup>.

Given the scarce information available about Jewish women, the latter view, *i. e.* the non-specificity of Andalusian society regarding women's status, is merely reinforced for the Jewish case. It is very revealing to note that we only know of one poetess in the region where Hebrew poetry experienced one of its most brilliant efflorescences. Moreover, the influence of the Islamic milieu becomes obvious and differentiates Spanish Jews from Jews in other European/Christian communities for the widely extended practise of polygamy and concubinage until a very late epoch<sup>8</sup>. These and other typical Muslim customs, which were especially common among the upper classes of Jewish community, lead Y. Tov Assis to assert that «Despite the fact that family affairs and sexual relations could be an area almost entirely controlled by Jewish law and traditions, sexual behaviour among the Jews was much

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5. Al-Maqqari, ed. I. 'Abbas, 1968, IV: 205. I quote the English translation of M. J. Viguera, 1992:709.

6. Al-Maqqari, 1968, IV:192-93. I quote the English translation of M. J. Viguera, 1992:710.

7. M. Marín, 1992:552-553; M. J. Rubiera, 1989:14. After reviewing the different theories, Viguera, 1992:713, concludes: «...the true facts concerning women's poetry in al-Andalus can, I think, be inferred [...], that these facts do not admit the existence of a genuine freedom for women in the country».

8. Even after the Reconquista, these practises persisted among the Jews in the Christian Kingdoms. See Y.T. Assis, 1988:25-59.

influenced by the standars which prevailed in the society at large» (Y. T. Assis, 1988:51). According to Assis's conclusions regarding Jewish sexual mores in Christian Spain, it seems more likely that Islamic social patterns deeply influenced those of Christian and Jewish communities and not the other way round.

#### SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

Before turning to the various sources of information regarding Jewish women in medieval Iberia, a few reflections should be made about the use of this information, which would apply equally to Muslim and Jewish documentation. One of them is the exceptional character of the women who appear in those records. Surveys on the condition of women based on them, has been criticised by feminist historiography and dubbed "compensatory history" (G. Lerner, 1979; M. Shoub, 1982). It is argued that although that kind of documentation provides interesting and valuable information, it fails to describe the experience and history of the mass of women<sup>9</sup>. Such exceptional women appear in historical records because they were famous poetesses, wives or mothers of kings or happened to be present during unusual circumstances, as what M. J. Rubiera (1989:71-76) has termed the "absence of man" (*ausencia de varón*). This latter would be the case of cultivated women who were able to have access to a high level of education because there were no men in the family to follow the familial tradition. The only case I have found of a cultivated Jewish woman mentioned in literary sources, is the so-called *al-Mu'allima*. She was the wife of a Castilian Jew, Abu'l-Taras, who went to Jerusalem around 1050 and was converted to Karaism by the renowned Karaite legalist and commentator Abu'l Faraj Furqan. After Abu'l Taras' death, his followers elected his widow as their teacher, as we learn from Abraham ibn Daud's (XII) account of this episode in his *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*<sup>10</sup>:

«Among those [heretics] living in the Holy Land there was *al-Sheikh* Abu'l-Faraj, may his bones be committed to hell. It happened that a certain fool from Castile, named Cid Abu'l-Taras, went over there and met the wicked *al-Sheikh* Abu'l-Faraj, who seduced him into heresy. Under the

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9. This is why C. Segura, dealing specifically with medieval Spain, considers of great importance any information about two specific types of women: First, married women who appear as protagonists without their husbands and, second, women who do not belong to the upper strata (Segura, 1984:3-57).

10. Edited and translated into English by Gerson D. Cohen, 1967.

guidance of the latter, Abu'l-Taras composed a work animated by seduction and perversion, which he introduced into Castile and [by means of which] he led many astray. When Abu'l-Taras passed on to hell, he was survived by his accursed wife, whom [his adherents] used to address as *al-Mu'allima* and on whom they relied for authoritative tradition. They would ask each other what *Mu'allima*'s usage was, and they would follow suit» (Cohen, 1967:94-95).

That women are protagonists as a consequence of the so-called “absence of man” is attested for Spanish Jewish women in a very different context: a woman could become the heir of the family patrimony after the male members of the family had converted to Christianity<sup>11</sup>. This is the case of Fermosa's granddaughter in the Christian Kingdom of Aragon in the fifteenth century. The “absence” of a Jewish male heir made Fermosa give preference to a female descendant, in an attempt to keep the patrimony within the Jewish family. We also learn from this and other examples that women in charge of the family's economic affairs were usually widows. It was the absence of their husbands that let them take charge of these duties.

Another important consideration to be made regarding written sources is that they have all been the work of men and addressed to a male public. This is the reason for the repeatedly suggested need to re-read texts in order to extract information they were not intended to convey. This is the case of compilations of judicial decisions, which, as in the case of Muslim women<sup>12</sup>, have proved to be a rich source of information about social habits, the socioeconomic situation of women, their sexual life and many other of their circumstances. The study of Alfasi's (1013-1103) legal opinions, for instance, leads Y. T. Assis (1988:30) to some interesting conclusions such as the prevalence of bigamy among Iberian Jews. We may know of this situation because of the financial problem that it posed to the husband when one of the wives refused to live with the other and he therefore had to maintain two households. Bigamy also appears in judicial decisions where the husband deprives one of his wives of her sexual marital rights. The *responsa* of Hanokh

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11. See A. Blasco Martínez, 1991:77-120. From her study of five testaments of five Jewish women in Aragon, A. Blasco gets other interesting information such as the different way of expressing their religious feelings in their last will: Contrary to men, they do not bequeath part of their patrimony to the synagogue but to charity associations. The reason for it could well be that they did not feel specially attached to that entity. See too E. Marin Padilla, 1985:497-512.

12. Studies on juridical records regarding Muslim women include: H. R. Idris, 1972:45-62; M. J. Viguera, 1985:596-611, M. Shatzmiller, 1994:367-381.

ben Moses (d. 1014), analysed and translated by H. Von Mutius (1990), inform us as well about women's social condition. In one case, a six-year-old girl whose father died was given in marriage by her mother to a man who was 40. Her story is reported to us because she claims a payment as compensation after her husband's death three years later (H. Mutius, 1990:110-111).

Another source of information about Jewish women in al-Andalus are literary works (*belles lettres*). Tova Rosen (1988:67-87) has made a first attempt at giving a different reading of Andalusian Hebrew literature, looking for the representation of women and not aesthetic or formalist principles. Rosen defines the two opposite images of women as given in this literature with respect to a very specific aspect: the faculty of speech. According to this analysis, there are two main models of women: a woman portrayed in male poetry who always keeps silent and distant, increasing thus her lover's suffering by her cruel attitude (an inversion of the truth of social conditions). The other model of woman is not silent at all: she talks but she does not merely talk: she becomes an unbearable, loose-tongued wife as she is described in the genre of *maqamat* (rhymed narratives).

The only manifestation of what has been considered to be a female voice in Spanish Hebrew literature are the *kharjas*<sup>13</sup>: the final couplets inserted in a longer strophic poem (*muwashshaha*) which usually were written in Romance or Andalusian dialect<sup>14</sup>. These final verses have been interpreted by some scholars as "quotations" of female songs, as shown by their content and different sensibility.

Significant data about the activities of Jewish women in medieval Spain may be found by studying the role played by midwives as reflected in treatises on obstetrics and gynecology, both in the written text and in the miniature illustrations which usually appear in these works<sup>15</sup>. Some parts of these treatises seem essential for midwives, but it remains unclear whether those women read them directly or they knew of them through a doctor. There are references of at least six Jewish midwives working in the Kingdom of Aragon

13. See M. J. Rubiera Mata, 1992:65-70. Apart from the *kharjas*, T. Rosen (1996:5-13) shows that a poem by Ibn Khalfun could in fact reflect a feminine literary style, *i. e.* a feminine voice.

14. For a summary of different theories about the *kharjas*, and dealing specifically with Hebrew *kharjas*, see I. Levin and A. Sáenz-Badillos, 1992, as well as the classical study by S. M. Stern, 1974.

15. See R. Barkai, 1988:96-119.

in the fourteenth century, two of them coming from Valencia. We learn from the Royal records that they were paid for their work<sup>16</sup>.

A detailed analysis of these sources may provide us important information such as the kind of education received by these women. Gynaecological treatises also inform us about the medieval views on the differences between men and women, such as the topic that the male foetus occupied the right side of the uterus and that mothers of male foetuses generally appeared more healthy than those of females.

Other remarks can be made regarding sources of information of Jewish women, in comparison to Muslim women. First, it has to be noted that the documents we have about Jewish women are usually dated in the high Middle Ages and come from the Christian Kingdoms rather than Muslim Spain<sup>17</sup>. It has to be discerned, therefore, if the data we get from them reflects previous Jewish usages of Muslim Spain. Finally, there are other differences in the kind of documentation, such as the availability of bio-biographical records for the study of Muslim women<sup>18</sup>, a typical Islamic genre. On the other hand, the Geniza manuscripts represent an original and unique source of information about Jewish communities in the Middle Ages and, thus, about Jewish Spanish women of this period<sup>19</sup>.

#### QASMUNA BAT ISMA'IL AL-YAHUDI:

Qasmuna's name is probably an Arabic diminutive<sup>20</sup> of the Hebrew root *qsm*, which means to be seductive, charming, a sorceress. There could also be another possibility: it could be the feminine of the Arabic name Qasmun, which means somebody with a beautiful, pretty face. Qasmuna thus could either mean the little charming one or the one with a beautiful face.

The only record we have of her in the medieval sources come from two Muslim authors, who quote her poetic compositions and give some information about her. One of them is al-Suyuti<sup>21</sup> (d. 1505) and the other al-Maqqari<sup>22</sup> (d. 1632), although they both could have taken their data from Ibn

16. See A. Cardoner, 1949:441-445.

17. They can offer, nevertheless, information about older usage. See, for instance, the study about Jewish families in Gandía (Valencia) in the fourteenth and fifteenth century by F. García-Oliver, 1993:207-226.

18. See, for instance, M. L. Ávila, 1989:105-127, and also M. I. Fierro, 1983:139-184.

19. See Sh. D. Goitein, 1967-1988.

20. See E. García Gómez, 1954:9-13. For general data about this Jewish poetess, see M. Steinschneider, 1902:270.

21. See Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, S. Munajjid (ed.), 1958:86-87.

22. al-Maqqari, I. 'Abbas (ed.), 1968, 3:530.

Sa' id's *Kitab al-Mughrib* or at least that is what al-Suyuti states (*«qala fi l-Mughrib...»*)<sup>23</sup>. We only have two poems extant written by this Jewish poetess:

I see a garden with ripe fruit; yet the gardener, it seems,  
will not stretch out his hands to it.  
How pitiful!, youth fleets by and is lost, and something I will not  
name remains lonely<sup>24</sup>.

O gazelle, which always grazes in a garden. I am comparable  
to you in loneliness and despair.

We are both alone, without companion, but let us wait  
patiently for the decision of the Almighty Providence<sup>25</sup>.

The information that al-Suyuti and al-Maqqari provide about Qasmuna is more or less the same: they both say that her father was Jewish and it was he who instructed her in the composition of verse. We also know that he gave her in marriage after he heard one of her poems in which she expresses her yearning for a lover, comparing herself with a garden whose time has come to be plucked of its fruits. Al-Suyuti, however, is more explicit and gives the complete name of her father, Isma' il ibn Bagdala al-Yahudi (al-Maqqari just calls him Isma' il al-Yahudi) and specifies that Qasmuna lived in the sixth century of the Hijra (=twelfth century C.E.).

Although the information is quite scanty, her figure has given way to several interpretations in modern times. On the one hand, she has been seen as an Arabic poetess and, as such, included along with her Muslim counterparts in different studies and compilations about women poets in al-Andalus<sup>26</sup>. The analysis of her verses in this context does not reveal anything outrageous or unusual, moreover, we can say that in comparison with other Andalusian poetesses she shows a less emancipated way of life.

Qasmuna has also been seen from a different perspective: some scholars have established a link between her and one of the most famous and influential Jews of Muslim Spain: Samuel ibn Naghrilah (993-1055 A.D.). Known in the Hebrew tradition as Samuel ha-Nagid, he was head of the Jewish community, Hebrew poet, and vizier of the Zirids in Granada. The possible kinship

23. Her biography, however, is missing in the printed editions of this book.

24. al-Maqqari, 1968, 3:530; I quote the English translation of Viguera, 1992:711.

25. al-Maqqari, 1968, 3:530; I quote the English translation of Schippers, 1993:151.

26. See, for instance: T. Garulo, 1986:121-123; J. M. Nichols, 1981:155-158; M. al-Raysuni, 104-105; M. J. Rubiera Mata, 1986:149-151; M. Sobh, 1994:133-135.



between the two has been pointed out by James A. Bellamy<sup>27</sup>, who has identified Qasmuna's father Isma'il ibn Bagdala with Samuel ibn Naghrilah.

Bellamy argues that Isma'il is the Arab form of Samuel and that Bagdala could be a mistaken form of Nagdala, a variant of Naghrilah, which was also used in some Arabic sources to refer to the Nagid (in Arabic script, of course, the only difference would be the pointing of one letter).

The fact that Samuel ibn Naghrilah died in 1055-56 and al-Suyuti's statement that Qasmuna lived in the twelfth century does not represent a problem for Bellamy, who believes it possible that she was born in the eleventh century and lived a part of her life in the following century. To justify this distance in time, another scholar, Teresa Garulo (1986:121), thinks that she was not the daughter of Samuel ibn Naghrilah himself but of one of his descendants.

Another of Bellamy's arguments is that «It is not likely that a liberal-minded man of such poetic talents as Ibn Naghrilla would instruct only his sons in the art and neglect the education of his daughter»(Bellamy, 1983:424). However, it has been made clear in the previous paragraphs that the consideration of women's role in Andalusian society was far from progressive. Samuel ibn Naghrilah himself wrote in one of his poems: «Hit your wife every day, so that she does not govern/ over you like a man and then raise her head/ Do not be, my son, the wife of your wife and/ do not permit her to be the husband of her husband»<sup>28</sup>.

It is quite revealing to read the only poem in which Ibn Naghrilah mentions one of his daughters, who has just died (he actually never mentions her as his daughter but rather as his son's sister). In this poem, Samuel tries to give comfort to his son Yehosef for the loss of the young child but nowhere in the poem does he express his own grief or make any reference to his daughter's qualities. On the other hand, his focus of attention is his son's feelings. He tries to cheer him up, asking him in one occasion to worry rather about the battle in which he (Samuel) is just about to take part and to pray God for his safety<sup>29</sup>.

It seems quite unlikely that Qasmuna was the daughter to whom Samuel ibn Naghrilah makes reference in that poem as some authors have intended. We learn from the introduction to the poem –dated 1044– and from some of

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27. J. A. Bellamy, 1983:423-424.

28. Hebrew edition and translation into Spanish by A. Sáenz-Badillos and J. Targarona, 1990.

29. See A. Sáenz-Badillos and J. Targarona, 1990:64-66.

its verses that Ibn Naghrilah's daughter died when being still a very young child, whereas according to the information we have about Qasmuna, she lived long enough time to learn the art of writing poetry and to get married.

Nevertheless, other researchers are virtually certain of this kinship between the two. David Wasserstein has drawn new conclusions from this fact. Wasserstein posits a stronger immersion of the Nagid in Arabic culture taking into consideration the fact that Qasmuna was probably his daughter<sup>30</sup>, along with other factors such as his involvement in Muslim military affairs. However, in Wasserstein's analysis we find no discussion of the figure of Qasmuna as an independent entity but only in relation to Samuel ibn Naghrilah.

We can observe then two different perspectives in the analysis of Qasmuna bat Isma'il: she has been seen either as an Arabic poetess or as a possible daughter of Samuel ibn Naghrilah. Within the former perspective it is only her Arabic verses which have aroused attention, whereas within the latter the actual focus of research has been Samuel and not Qasmuna herself. It is hence understandable that the image we get of this poetess is fairly incomplete and even distorted because only partial aspects have been examined but not her figure in the context of the situation of Andalusian women and, more specifically, Jewish women. This sample of Jewish female reminds us again of the kind of work which still remains to be done, to get a more comprehensive idea of medieval Andalusian society.

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30. «To find the daughter of such a man as the Nagid among those writing in Arabic is particularly striking, for it implies a crossing of linguistic, cultural and social boundaries which, while far from impossible for a man, was not easy, and will have been of vastly greater difficulty for a woman» (D. Wasserstein, 1993:120).

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